

The leaf that wouldn't fall

Autumn had well and truly arrived on Petros's lane. The leaves on the trees gradually changed colour from green to brown or to gold or to dark red. Then, one by one, they began to fall. What fun and games the leaves enjoyed as they fell! They jumped up and down, twirled around and flew about at the slightest breath of wind. They were having a wonderful time. But one little leaf at the top of a tree just would not fall.

To tell the truth, he made an enormous effort to detach himself from his twig and set himself free so as to fall downwards.

He stretched, twisted himself around, pushed forwards and backwards but nothing happened. He didn't fall. However, he was a proud leaf and unwilling to admit that he couldn't do it.

"How come you're still up there?" the other leaves called out as they relaxed on the ground. "Come on, jump down to us. We can play hide and seek."

"I'm fine up here," he said. "I don't want to fall on the ground and dirty my nice red clothes. Anyway, I have a wonderful view from up here. I can see you all perfectly well. In fact I can see as far as the lower neighbourhood but you can't, can you?"

The other leaves could certainly not see as far as the lower neighbourhood but they didn't care about that. They were so busy seeking and hiding, one on top of the other, and squealing with laughter.

As the last leaf on the tree watched them, inside he was choking with envy. He so wanted to fall down and start doing somersaults and jumps. In the evening when the other leaves were all huddled together asleep, one next to the other, the solitary leaf on the tree did everything he could to detach himself from his twig. All in vain. He was still there the next morning, alone and desperate. But he would not admit it.

"Aren't you tired of still being up there?" asked the other leaves down on the ground.

"Why should I be tired? I can jump down whenever I like but you can't re-attach yourselves to the branches can you?" replied the last leaf.

It was certainly true that, no matter how hard they had tried, the other leaves could not have gone back and stuck themselves on the branches of the trees. They knew very well that their short life on the trees was over. In spring, new, small, fresh green leaves would sprout. The last leaf on the tree also knew this and it only tormented him even more.

"Just think," he said to himself, "in a few months new leaves, green and tender, will be sprouting. They'll see me like this – red, dry and old – and they'll laugh at the state I'm in. Oh, why can't I fall down there with my brothers and sisters?"

And the poor leaf kept trying to pull himself from his stalk.

Meanwhile, Autumn was now gone. Grandfather Winter was getting ready to show his face. He put on his furs and his heavy boots, he put on his woolly scarf and hat and he thought he would carry out a test to see if everything was ready. He tried out his winds – fsssssss! – and his strong, heavy rains, he checked his

lightning and thunder and one or two thunderbolts and finally decided that it was time for him to spread himself, heavy and freezing, along the roads.

The little leaves down on the ground were ready to welcome him. They huddled together next to one another, the one on top of the other so as to keep warm and they fell into a deep sleep. That was when a gentle sobbing sound was heard from high up in the tree where the solitary leaf had remained.

Then one of the leaves said, "Am I hearing things? Is the last leaf crying or am I mistaken?"

"No, you're not mistaken," came the tiny voice of the solitary leaf. "You heard right. I can't stand being all alone up here any longer. Winter will be here any minute. It's all right for you, lying one on top of the other, next to one another and keeping warm. But I'm up here all alone and it's windy and cold and it's snowing..."

And the poor solitary leaf burst into tears.

The other leaves felt sorry for him. They forgot at once how he had acted clever with them and they thought that any one of them could have been in his place, alone and abandoned on the top of a tree.

"We have to do something," they said. "We have to help the poor leaf to fall."

At that moment, a little sparrow appeared, searching for seeds as he was hungry. He poked his beak under the leaves and tickled them. One or two of them woke up and burst out laughing.

"Oh, please excuse me," said the sparrow politely. "May I bother you for a moment? I'm looking for something to eat."

"Of course you may," said a deep yellow leaf. "Have we ever stopped you? But you must do us a favour."

"Anything at all, with pleasure," replied the little sparrow.

"Do you see that solitary leaf high up there in the tree?"

"Of course I see him. What's he doing up there all by himself?"

"He can't fall. Do you think you could help him?"

"Of course I can," said the little sparrow, pleased that he could be useful in some way. And frrrrrrrrrrr! Up he flew, high into the tree and in an instant he had pulled the leaf with his beak and sent him falling downwards.

"Oh! So it was that simple," said the solitary leaf, delighted as he whirled around in the air. "It was so simple to ask my friends for help and I was too proud to do so..." And he spun around and fell into the embrace of the other leaves.

That same evening, Old Man Winter made his first appearance. With a strong wind, thunder and lightning and plenty of rain, he reached Petros's narrow lane. But the leaves, all huddled together, were neither cold nor afraid. Among them was the solitary last leaf.

"Come on, come on Grandfather Winter," they said. "Bring your rain that the earth wants so much. We're going to sleep here all together in a huddle and we'll turn to food and drink for the trees so that they sprout tiny new leaves in spring. Come on Grandfather Winter!"

And their voices sounded like the murmuring of the wind or like drops of rain.