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FALLEN LEAVES

RICKY'S DOG WAS AS BIG and as dumb as they come. A black Russian terrier, she was taller on all fours than any of us, and weighed more than the three of us boys put together. If ever Johnny or I rang Ricky's doorbell, we'd hear the dog run down the hallway with nails clicking against the tiles, barking like a banshee. When she reached the front door, the dog would jump up and hit her paws against it with so much force that you could see the thick steel move in its frame. But as soon as she recognized our scents she went back to her gentle ways, and when the door was opened she often begged to be scratched behind her ears or on the forehead. I wondered how she could see with all that shaggy hair over her eyes—maybe that's why she was so clumsy. On that fall day she ran alongside our bikes on a forest trail not far from our homes—we tried not to get knocked over by her galloping stride.

“So, what's this big surprise, Ricky?” Johnny asked him again.

“You'll see when we get there,” said Ricky, as he led the way. He'd rung both our doorbells early, for a Saturday morning. I was only half done my bowl of Cheerios, but scarfed down the rest when he promised a surprise. The last time Ricky said he had a surprise, he led us to a giant trampoline in his backyard—a friend of his father's had lent it to them. We jumped on that thing for two days straight. On the third day Johnny got double-bounced too high and broke his collar bone on the way down. We weren't allowed on the trampoline after that.

I squeezed my brakes gently as Ricky and Johnny came to a stop. I was riding Johnny's old bike and only the front brake worked so I had to be careful or I'd get thrown forward. Johnny had just gotten a new eighteen-speed at the start of the school year; only his tip-toes touched the ground if he took his feet off the pedals.

“Chaos! Where you going?” shouted Ricky after the dog. She had run off the path and into the forest. She stopped and shook her head. A few seconds passed before we realized that she had got hold of something. We

jumped off our bikes and ran and shouted at Chaos to put down whatever she had, but we arrived too late. She dropped a grey squirrel, completely crushed by her teeth. It was the first time I'd seen her be violent.

"Poor thing's finished," I said, and turned away from the small corpse with tuft hair and bite marks that had brought its insides out.

"Yeah, she mangled it," said Johnny. "Was probably just out hiding nuts before it gets cold."

"Bad girl! What got into ya?" Ricky shouted, and attached a leash to her collar. Chaos lowered her head and gave us an almost shameful look. "Something must have spooked her," Ricky said, spooking me at the same time. I wondered if Chaos sensed what I'd found out the night before about her from Ricky's father.

We left the squirrel lying there and walked our bikes the rest of the trail until we reached a clearing. We passed the baseball fields where Johnny pretended to crank a game-winning home run, and came to a small stall that sold candy and refreshments during the games. Ricky stopped again and stared at the refreshment stand. A moment later I noticed what he was staring at. The window had a locked metal covering, but the back door stood slightly ajar. I watched him tie Chaos to his bike and walk towards the door. He peeked inside, then swung the door wide open and walked inside. We followed him and saw what was likely every kid's dream: chocolate bars, chips, gum and candy—soft candy, hard candy, sweet, sour and salty candy.

"When did you find out about this?" asked Johnny.

"Right now. This isn't what I wanted to show you guys, but it's even better!" Ricky smiled, grabbed a fistful of gumball packets and put them in his jean pocket. Johnny and I looked at each other. I peeked out the door again to see if anyone was around; Chaos still sat upright, tied to Ricky's bike, but I saw no one else. Johnny popped a purple jawbreaker into his mouth. He held it on one side of his mouth, but it was too big and his cheek bulged out like a squirrel's. In my mind I saw the dead squirrel we'd left in the forest.

"I don't know, Ricky," I said.

"C'mon man, nothing's gonna happen. We gotta hurry up, though," said Ricky, as he stuffed chocolate bars into his pockets. I had never stolen something so big. The only thing I ever took was a bracelet at summer day camp, and that wasn't really stealing. My little sister and I were making bead bracelets, but didn't finish in time. We wanted to take some beads home, but didn't want to ask for them, so we poured handfuls of the tiny coloured

beads into our socks. The beads started off around our ankles, but soon leaked down beneath our feet. Our dad picked us up that day, and instead of going straight home he took us along to buy groceries. As Dad put items into the cart my sister and I tried to walk down the aisles normally, but we could feel the beads underneath our feet and between our toes. Dad didn't notice. When we got home we went to my room, put paper down on the carpet and carefully pulled off our socks so we wouldn't lose any beads. It took a while to knock them off our feet and from between our toes. We'd felt so smart that day, yet for some reason, taking candy felt different.

I picked up a box of Smarties and put it in my right pocket. After that it was easier to take more. We each grabbed one more bag of chips than our arms could carry and kept having to stop and pick them up on our way out the door. We folded our shirts up to hold everything, picked up our bikes with the other hand, and ran alongside them as best we could. I could feel the box of Smarties in my pocket rattle as I ran, but I joined my friends' laughter because we'd gotten away with it.

Johnny and I had been so busy opening packages and eating that we did not notice Ricky's surprise until we were right in front of it. He pointed ahead and we saw the leaves. Lots and lots of leaves—piled as high as a house and a mix of red, yellow and orange. In our neighbourhood, the townhouses didn't have many big trees. Our front yard only had a single skinny tree that sat alone like an upside-down broomstick. Mom always joked that "a witch must have crash-landed." She hated that tree. "No shade, no fruit, no flowers," she'd say. Dad was the only one who liked the tree because it was the first one he had bought in Canada. The leaves piled up here must have come from the houses by the lake. There they had giant houses with giant trees that no one sat under or climbed up.

We dropped our haul of stolen candy and climbed and jumped and pushed one another in the rich people's leaves. We laughed at the wealth they were unaware of having thrown away, and tossed their leaves in the air like lottery money. We were drunk off the cool air, fallen leaves and sugar, and kept sliding to the ground, eating more, moving past the edge of the pile to throw our wrappers in the rusted garbage can.

Ricky got Chaos to climb the leaf mountain and had the idea to set a trap for her. As much as Ricky loved his dog, he teased her mercilessly. Every time we'd take her out to do her business on the hill behind Ricky's house we'd play a trick on her. For some reason Chaos would only crap at the bottom of

the hill, right beside the creek. We'd wait until she started going down the hill and then run away as fast as we could and hide from her. After she was finished, she used her nose to find us, no matter where we hid.

We dug a hole in the leaf pile the size of a grave. The leaves on top were still dry, but they got damper the deeper we dug. When we finished the hole we laid branches across it, and then covered the branches over with leaves. Chaos had seen us dig the hole and cover it up, but when we called her over from the other side she still came barrelling over and fell right in. After Chaos jumped out, she ran back down the hill and straight into the woods. Ricky said she'd come back so we let her go, but I wasn't so sure.

The night before, I'd overheard Ricky's dad and my parents talk in our living room in a tone I noticed adults take when they're making tough decisions. Ricky's older sister had been home from school since she'd gotten pregnant a while back. I could tell my parents still didn't approve of Ricky's sister and her "situation," but they sent over a dish of butter chicken the day the baby girl, Serena, was born. Ricky's dad explained to my parents that "with the baby, our small house has suddenly become too small, and Chaos, suddenly too big." He told them how he'd tried to give her away, but that no one would take a dog her size. She wasn't always so large; they'd rescued her as a puppy, and she'd been growing ever since. She definitely stood out in the neighbourhood. Ricky tried to teach her tricks, but she only mastered a few. I often saw him in his backyard encouraging her, without success, to play dead or roll over. I wanted to tell Ricky what his father had told my parents, but hadn't been able to yet.

Johnny spotted him first—a man in the distance walking in our direction. His stride suggested that he had a purpose, but it wasn't until he looked into the garbage can that I knew he knew. He glanced up at us again and then went over to our bikes. He picked up Johnny's new bike by the handlebars and started to walk it away.

"Hey!" Johnny shouted loudly at him, but he continued to walk.

We ran down the mound of leaves and went after him.

"What are you doing?" Johnny asked when we got close. The man stopped and turned to us. He wore a red flannel shirt and blue jeans, his brown hair was slicked back and he had a thick moustache that didn't look right on his skinny face.

"What am *I* doing? I thought I'd take something that wasn't mine, just like you kids did," he said.

“What are you talking about? Give me back my bike, you asshole.” Johnny surprised me—he almost never swore.

“Not until you kids admit you broke into that stall and stole all that merchandise.”

I was already thinking of the whacks with the long wooden spoon I’d receive if my parents found out.

“What do you care if it’s not your store?” Johnny asked.

“And how do you even know it was us?” Ricky added. “You can’t prove anything.”

“Well, who’s to say I don’t call the police? Yes, call the cops and see what they have to say about your little theft.”

“You call the cops and we’ll tell them you tried to steal Johnny’s bike,” said Ricky.

I could tell the man was somewhat stumped. I hadn’t said anything, but he turned to me and said, “This was your idea, wasn’t it?”

I managed to shake my head, but it wasn’t enough. The man rolled the bike towards Johnny and Ricky and grabbed me by the back of my neck. I tried to slip free, but he squeezed harder and I froze. I wanted to tell him that he had it wrong, that Ricky had convinced me to do it, that I wouldn’t have taken anything if I were alone, but I couldn’t.

“What are you doing? Let him go!” Johnny and Ricky both shouted. The man wasn’t overly big, but he was strong. He must have been a chain-smoker; the filthy smell was in his shirt.

“You kids stay away from this boy, you hear?” the man said, pointing with his free hand. “These people, these people with permanent tans, they’re a bad influence on our kids. A bad influence. They shouldn’t be allowed in our country, but the government lets them in anyway. But that’s okay, once the courts hear what you did they’ll deport you, kid, you and your whole family.”

I was pretty sure they couldn’t deport us, but the thought of having to leave our home and *live* in India frightened me, nonetheless. I’d only been there once when I was younger, and had scary, flash memories of an overflowing country with a swollen ocean, strange toilets and a blur of people, animals and vehicles. A place where the people spoke languages I didn’t understand, yet shared my brown skin. It was the opposite at home—besides my cousins on the other side of town, mine was the only family a shade other than white.

“Okay, we get it. We did it, just let him go,” Ricky said, and walked closer to us.

“You tell me that this boy made you do what you did,” the man said with a grin, “and you can go on home.”

Ricky paused for what seemed a long time. He had an empty stare, almost as if he was looking straight through the man.

“Well kid, what’s it gonna be?”

“Fuck you.”

The back of the man’s free hand struck Ricky’s face like the first beat of a drum in a song. Ricky stayed on his feet, but brought his hand to his cheek and looked past us again. His eyes widened, but he didn’t have time to move.

Chaos hit the man like a sudden wave in shallow water. All three of us got knocked over. She clamped her teeth onto the man’s leg and shook him. It wasn’t until Chaos took aim at his throat that we shouted at her to stop. We tried to push and pull her off him, but were knocked back by the wall of dog with each attempt.

The man fought back, rolled and punched, kicked and cursed. Someone said, “Let’s go,” and we were on our bikes pedalling away. None of us wanted to leave Chaos, but we all wanted to escape.

Every so often, Johnny asks me if I remember that day. “Of course I remember,” I say to him, and we recount the events that led up to the fight, each time recalling another detail. I still remember the leaves, and the man and dog we left beside them. Our town paper said the man had a wife and son, but I can’t imagine him with either. I remember how he singled me out, how his eyes burned and his words cut. Ricky never talks about that day, of course. We still shoot hoops in the summer and play street hockey when it gets cold, but I have to be careful what I say to him. He seemed to grow up overnight when they put Chaos down. There was nothing else to do. I knew it wasn’t my fault, and yet I felt guilty—I’m still not certain why. But I do know how lucky I was, how lucky we all were, to be shown loyalty like that. I never thanked Ricky for standing up to that man for me. I think he knows though; sometimes things are just understood. But I remember that day well. I recall the colour of the leaves, and the soft crunching sound they made beneath our feet as we raced up the pile.