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### Tall Tales of Autumn

The wind continues mocking us, so maybe that's why the damp, dried leaves refuse to stop ricocheting off my nose, only to continue their onslaught on the autumn wind's next demand. I find the leaves slightly fascinating though, they're not only cold and wet, but also decaying and crumbling. Nature obviously has a strange sense of humor, and to think we thought we were doing her some good. We're slaving in the backyard of Dan's house; we're working to clear the emerald green grass of the various brown and yellow tree flakes that have afflicted it, so you'd think nature would at least give us a break for the time being. And, maybe I should correct an earlier lie, it's not really Dan's house. It's his grandmother's home, and we're visiting her for the weekend after his mother left us here to entertain her. Dan's mother said she had to return to her work in order to attend an emergency meeting with the rest of the IT staff at the local bank, and that apparently will take an entire weekend to manage. She'll be back in just enough time to pick us up, so until then we'll have to deal with Dan's grandmother and her unyielding passion to good old-fashioned hard work.

I stretched the rake outwards with what remains of my will and strength, letting the metal fingers bounce a few times over the grass before they finally engulfed a pile of leaves that had sought refuge under the shelter of a nearby bush. Attempting to drag the small load of prisoners back, a few of the leaves escaped through the rake's fingers, but I figured I'd get them on the next pass. Raking, at its core, is merely a very tedious and repetitive action done in particular

area of a yard until all, or most, of the leaves have been claimed and tossed into a pile for deportation. Imagine having a chalkboard in front of you, and to make things difficult, someone's wasted their time coloring the entirety of the board in white chalk. Now you have to wipe off all the chalk, and what you quickly realize is that with every eraser stroke, you're only managing to take off a small percentage of the chalk. That's essentially what it's like to rake. You're sweating, you're breathing heavily under the cold autumn air, and you're pushing yourself to exhaust all your energy in order to collect as many leaves as possible. But, in the end, it doesn't matter how much energy you have, how fit you are for the job. Those leaves know how to evade your grasp, you'll never collect them all, but if you're lucky you might get enough if you spend enough time in each area of the yard.

"I'll get around the big tree there if you can clear up the swing set Tom!" Dan shouts from the other end of the yard.

"Um" I respond, taking a moment to pause from my continuous and tedious actions to examine the backyard. The length of the porch expands entirely on one edge of the yard, and a vine-infested wooden fence surrounds the other three sections. Beyond that, we can see the tops of trees and distant roofs, but for the most part the fence is tall enough to prevent us from viewing the world around us. There's not much in the backyard besides a birdbath in the middle, a swing set on the left side, and a large pine tree in the upper right area. The tree's surrounded with brown and yellow, Dan'll have to rescue it before the leaves have a chance to overthrow its authority.

"Got it, but you're taking care of all your piles near that tree," I respond, returning back to my current progress cleaning up a set of bushes before the swing set. I'm not entirely sure what Dan's grandmother needs the swing set for, as it appears to be free from rusty patches and

squeaky chains. Dan is too old to fit on the swings, and I doubt she had any other grand children at the moment who would visit enough to make the swing set worth the purchase. But, then again, there's not much else in the backyard. I guess if I were in her position, I'd have bought a swing set too; there'd be nothing to hold me back and everything to look back upon.

Stretch, drag, bang, stretch, drag... The cycle continues, and with each turn of events I manage to snag a few more leaves. We've got piles of leaves all over the backyard, which is already going to lead to our eventual downfall. One by one the leaves are escaping, fleeing from their imprisonment and returning upon the wind to scold us by ramming into our heads. We didn't care at that moment though, not about securing the piles, they weren't escaping fast enough to be worth our time. We could handle a few sailing through the air, since they'd probably fall in unclaimed territory, grass that we had yet to overtake using our rakes. The few that landed in the sections that were already cleared were also not of our concern. Not only were they too few to bother with, but we had no intention of reacquiring any of the moral and effort that would become necessary to make a second sweep of the backyard.

I can hear Dan muttering to himself near the tree; evidently his choice was not as easy as he originally believed. Misty's still sleeping around the birdbath. The bath itself is void of water, and probably served more as a lawn ornament than an actual haven for the birds. Three angels surround its pillar, each one has its hands cupped and looking upwards at the sky. Well, they weren't really watching the heavens, because the base of the actual bath component of the object obstructed their vision. But, it was for that same reason that Misty remained curled around the pillar, preferring the shade of the pillar as a shelter against the wind. She's been asleep since we started, and unlike most cats that I've seen around the neighborhood, she's rather skinny for a cat that does nothing more than eat, sleep, and keep Dan's grandmother sane throughout the years.

She's grey, brown, white, and extremely shy when it comes to strangers. Thankfully she knows us enough to trust us with her care while she dozes off in the afternoon, but for most people she prefers to flee upstairs and hides underneath a bed until she becomes familiar enough with their presence and voice. She's usually just terrified by door-to-door salesmen and boy scouts, so I really can't blame her.

If anything, having the responsibility to clear the area around the swing set was rather motivating in itself now that I had begun gradually drawing near it with each stroke of the rake. It was more the fact that I had originally predicted, as did Dan, that gathering the leaves around the swing set would prove to be a burden. But, by hanging the swings up over the metal bar, I could foresee that I would probably have an easy time clawing my way around the four posts and then easily moving on beyond the area. Most of the leaves were stuck around the legs of the swing set anyhow, so I probably wouldn't have had to concern myself with much more than cleaning those few areas. I say 'had' specifically because I never actually got to that point. Dan never got to actually finish his piles around the pine tree, and Misty wound up having her relaxing afternoon nap interrupted by a turn of events that would probably discourage her from every trusting Dan's grandmother's backyard ever again. Even now, it still baffles me that life could so easily transition from tedious and boring to unbelievable and chaotic.

"Hey Tom, what's up with Misty there?" I heard Tom clearly, but I still took a few seconds to finish my next section in order to fulfill that aspect of the job before letting myself become distracted by Tom's curiosity.

But when I did look, I also took a bit of interest in Misty's actions. She was no longer sleeping, and she was now backing away slowly from the birdbath. Her blue eyes are filled with terror, much like the fear with which she greets strangers at Dan's grandmother's doors. Once

she reached a decent distance away, she spun around and began galloping toward the porch. She didn't make it though, a gust of wind carried a series of leaves in front of her, sweeping her up by her feet and tossing her lightly back toward the center of the backyard.

Our piles of leaves also began swirling, but now we realized that the wind was not the perpetrator. They were moving, swirling on their own accord. I don't know how many piles of leaves we had created, but they were scattered throughout the entirety of the backyard at this point and each one had a vortex of brown and yellow hovering above it. I could hear Dan shouting something to me, but I wasn't able to concentrate on his voice for the time being, I was still focused on the cat and how easily she had been tossed back from the porch.

With no immediate direction to run, she was standing on all fours in the middle of the yard as the nearest pile of leaves began to shake violently, discouraging her from trying to flee again. I could hear movement, shuffling feet, and a loud yell, but I was still too concentrated on the scene before me. The pile of leaves near Misty rose up, and the leaves were continuously flowing and spinning through the air in a connected group. The spectacle before me created an image of a being, a person without the lower parts of their legs and the outer halves of their arms. Its face, or at least what could have been a face, was completely blank, so it proved difficult to figure out which direction it must have been facing, if it could face a direction. Misty noticed it too, and was just as frozen as I was, but suddenly the swirling leaves that made up its arms shot forward towards the cat, each individual leaf speeding toward Misty on its own accord while still retaining some sense of a formation.

Dan's rake collided with the strength of the leaves, causing most of the leaves to smash into the metal fingers while only a few slipped by his defense. The few leaves that did surpass his barrier lost their intentions, without their driving force they began to slowly float towards the

ground. The vortex above the pile dispersed, causing some of the components of the top layer of the grouping of leaves to seemingly explode in all directions as the being disappeared. Dan stood near the pile of leaves, gripping his rake in self-defense, frantically looking in all directions for where the poltergeist had gone.

“You saw that, right Tom? Right, what the hell?”

It took me a moment to regain my grasp on the world around me, but after a few seconds I responded, “Yea, I don’t know. We gotta get go-“

I couldn’t verbally state my desire to flee before it reappeared, now on top of one of the piles of leaves near the pine tree. It seemed to be mocking us, but then again, it seemed as though nature and her friends were enjoying the futility of efforts from the start of our work. Another gust of wind carrying leaves shot up from the pile near Dan and attempted to breeze through him, but he smacked against the chain of leaves with his rake again. It must have been only seconds after that my latest pile of leaves also betrayed me, and by using my own rake as a shield against it I managed to deter the majority of the damp leaves before they turned away and returned to the pile. Misty had fled away from the middle of the yard and had chosen my side in order to gain the most protection, but the wrath of the strange wind with an unknown source caused another series of two chains of leaves to shoot upwards from nearby piles and charge towards her. The first wave of leaves managed to strike her directly, causing the leaves to pile up against her until she was lifted off the ground and sent flying against the fence of the backyard. The second wave might’ve also smashed against her, but with a swift movement I dashed from out from underneath the swing set and swung against the grouping of leaves as if I was attempting to hit a stray softball flying towards a crowd.

The leaves, as they did beforehand, turned away and returned to the pile, beginning to rise up once more. Misty remained against the fence, cowering against the ground, more shocked than injured at the current moment. I could see Dan swiping against the alluding strings and waves of leaves around him as if he was swatting bugs. The illusion of the being had disappeared from the pile near the pine tree and now seemed to be watching me from one of the piles near the porch. There wasn't much we could do, the onslaughts kept coming, and although the leaves themselves didn't hurt very much, the force and ghostly pressure that followed along with each onslaught could threaten us if it managed to also send us sailing. I slapped down on the pile where the leaves were rising, causing the leaves to once more explode in all direction. But, then I had an idea to quell the chaos of the ghostly autumn leaves.

“Dan!” I shouted, slapping the pile of leaves on the side with my rake, “Get rid of the piles!”

He didn't verbally respond as another set of leaves slid against his back and caused him to stumble forward, but I knew he heard my message. I could see him begin to kick down some the piles he had created beneath the pine tree. The leaves exploded in an unnatural way, but then they became lifeless once more and drifted toward the ground in random directions, littering the grass once more with the brown and yellow colors. I also began following the procedure, distributing various stabs with my rake in order to push the leaves in random directions. The strange ethereal being remained on top of the pile near the porch, sending occasional buffets of wind from the piles we had yet to demolish. Soon I swung my rake downwards like a golf club and destroyed the last remaining group on my side of the backyard while Dan also began finishing his territory.

As I turned to confront the final pile where the poltergeist floated upon, Dan had also started to march toward it, determined to finish what we started. We both approached the final pile where the leaves continued to swirl around the strange being. For a moment we were sure it was going to lunge at us in a desperate survival reaction, but instead it managed to do something that caused us to hesitate before we destroyed the remaining pile of leaves. A gap in its head appeared, as if it was attempting to create a giant smile, as if it was still mocking us. It didn't matter though; we had to finish it off before it caused any more trouble. So, we both raised our rakes into the air and smacked the metal fingers down upon the piles, continuing to swipe the leaves away until they eventually dispersed around the yard once more.

And that's the reason we were unable to rake the backyard this past weekend. Misty spent the rest of the weekend sleeping, or perhaps hiding, inside the house on the second floor. Dan's grandmother didn't notice the lack of progress or the unchanged presence of leaves in her backyard, even when she went outside to pray by the birdbath. Apparently the birdbath was a monument to her late husband Keith, who was a florist and a prankster when he was alive. That's what she told us, but maybe she won't remember if you were to ask, because it seemed as though she only remembered when she saw that the birdbath had been knocked over. Dan's mother returned, from work, and obviously was very frustrated and disappointed with us that we couldn't complete one simple task in an entire weekend. We tried to explain to her, we told her this story. We weren't being lazy, we didn't spend the weekend inside playing games, biking around the neighborhood, or heading out to the local shops. Maybe Dan and I are known for telling tall tales to explain really bizarre situations and clear our names from certain events. But we didn't just not rake this past weekend because we were lazy, all of this happened. You believe it all, right, don't you?