



7. The Last Leaf

It is autumn. The wind is blowing hard and it is raining heavily. All the leaves on an ivy creeper have fallen, except one. Why doesn't the last leaf fall?

SUE and Johnsy, two young artists, shared a small flat. The flat was on the third storey of an old house.

Johnsy fell very seriously ill in November. She had pneumonia. She would lie in her bed without moving, just gazing out of the window. Sue, her friend, became very worried. She sent for the doctor. Although he came every day there was no change in Johnsy's condition.

One day the doctor took Sue aside and asked her, "Is anything worrying Johnsy?"

"No," replied Sue. "But why do you ask?"

The doctor said "Johnsy, it seems, has made up her mind that she is not going to get well. If she doesn't want to live, medicines will not help her."

Sue tried her best to make Johnsy take an interest in things around her. She talked about clothes and fashions, but Johnsy did not respond. Johnsy continued to lie still on her bed. Sue brought her drawing-board into Johnsy's room and started painting. To take Johnsy's mind off her illness, she whistled while working.

Suddenly Sue heard Johnsy whisper something. She quickly rushed to the bed and heard Johnsy counting backwards. She was looking out of the window and was saying, "Twelve!" After sometime she whispered "eleven", then "ten", then "nine", "eight", "seven". Sue anxiously looked out of the window. She saw an old ivy creeper climbing half-way up the brick wall opposite their window. In the strong wind outside, the creeper was shedding its leaves.

“What is it, dear?” Sue asked.

“Six,” whispered Johnsy. “They are falling faster now. Three days ago there were almost a hundred leaves. There are only five left now.”

“It is autumn,” said Sue, “and the leaves will fall.”

“When the last leaf falls, I will die,” said Johnsy with finality. “I have known this for the last three days.”

“Oh, that’s nonsense,” replied Sue. “What have old ivy leaves to do with your getting well? The doctor is confident that you will get better.”

Johnsy did not say anything. Sue went and brought her a bowl of soup.

“I don’t want any soup,” said Johnsy. “I am not hungry... Now there are only four leaves left. I want to see the last one fall before it gets dark. Then I will sleep forever.”

Sue sat on Johnsy’s bed, kissed her and said, “You are not going to die. I can’t draw the curtain for I need the light. I want to finish the painting and get some money for us. Please, my dear



friend,” she begged Johnsy, “promise not to look out of the window while I paint.”

“All right,” said Johnsy. “Finish your painting soon for I want to see the last leaf fall. I’m tired of waiting. I have to die, so let me go away peacefully like one of those poor, tired leaves.”

“Try to sleep,” said Sue. “I have to paint an old miner. I will call Behrman up to be my model.”

Sue rushed down. Behrman lived on the ground floor.

He was a sixty-year-old painter. His lifelong dream was to paint a masterpiece but that had remained a dream. Sue poured out her worries to Behrman. She told him how Johnsy was convinced that she would die when the last leaf fell.

“Is she stupid?” asked Behrman. “How can she be so foolish?”

“She is running a high temperature,” complained Sue. “She refuses to eat or drink and that worries me a lot.”

“I will come with you and see Johnsy,” Behrman said.

They tiptoed into the room. Johnsy was sleeping. Sue drew the curtains together and they went to the next room. She peeped out through the window. There was only one leaf on the creeper. It was raining heavily and an icy-cold wind was blowing. It seemed

as though the leaf would fall any minute now. Behrman did not say a word. He went back to his room.

Johnsy woke up next morning. In a feeble voice she asked Sue to draw the curtains. Sue was nervous. She drew back the curtains very reluctantly.

“Oh!” Sue exclaimed as she looked at the vine creeper. “Look, there is still one leaf



on the creeper. It looks quite green and healthy. In spite of the storm and the fierce winds, it didn't fall."

"I heard the wind last night," said Johnsy. "I thought it would have fallen. It will surely fall today. Then I'll die."

"You won't die," said Sue energetically. "You have to live for your friends. What would happen to me if you die?"

Johnsy smiled weakly and closed her eyes. After every hour or so she would look out of the window and find the leaf still there. It seemed to be clinging to the creeper.

In the evening, there was another storm but the leaf did not fall. Johnsy lay for a long time looking at the leaf. Then she called out to Sue.

"I have been a bad girl. You have looked after me so lovingly and I have not cooperated with you. I have been depressed and gloomy. The last leaf has shown me how wicked I have been. I have realised that it is a sin to want to die."

Sue hugged Johnsy. Then she gave her lots of hot soup and a mirror. Johnsy combed her hair and smiled brightly.

In the afternoon the doctor came. After examining his patient he told Sue, "Johnsy now has the will to live. I am confident she'll recover soon. Now I must go downstairs and see Behrman. He is also suffering from pneumonia. But I am afraid, there is no hope for him."

The next morning Sue came and sat on Johnsy's bed. Taking Johnsy's hand in hers she said, "I have something to tell you. Mr Behrman died of pneumonia this morning. He was ill for only two days. The first day the janitor found him on his bed. His clothes and shoes were wet and he was shivering. He had been out in that stormy night."



Then they found a ladder and a lantern still lighted lying near his bed. There were also some brushes and green and yellow paints on the floor near the ladder. "Johnsy dear," said Sue, "look out of the window. Look at that ivy leaf. Haven't you wondered why it doesn't flutter when the wind blows? That's Behrman's masterpiece. He painted it the night the last leaf fell."

O. HENRY

Glossary

janitor: a person whose job is to look after a building

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What is Johnsy's illness? What can cure her, the medicine or the willingness to live?
2. Do you think the feeling of depression Johnsy has is common among teenagers?
3. Behrman has a dream. What is it? Does it come true?
4. What is Behrman's masterpiece? What makes Sue say so?

TALK ABOUT IT

Have you ever felt depressed and rejected? How did you overcome such feelings? Share your experience with your classmates.

SUGGESTED READING

- 'The Gift of the Magi' by O. Henry
- 'Dusk' by Saki (H.H. Munro)
- *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul on Tough Stuff*: Compiled and edited by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Kimberly Kirberger

