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Ever green

I balanced the chipped, stoneware plate of blueberry pancakes on my knees, sinking awkwardly into the worn metallic-yellow couch in the corner, obscured by potted tropicals and flocks of earnest customers swaddled in coats and scarves and hats, honing in on the barrista and hot cappuccinos. I burrowed deeper into the couch and screened my eyes with a newspaper I was pretending to read.

My eyes started to water the moment I walked in the door. Soon tears steamed down two chapped cheeks, down my pilled wool sweater, mingling with the pooled warm maple syrup and butter. I buried my face in newsprint. The tall older man who had caught my eye minutes before was now sitting opposite me, self-conscious, pretending to read his paper, stealing a glance when he thought I didn't see him. He dressed like a comic-strip character, sporting a tall black cowboy hat with tassels (*tassels!!*), a formal black vintage topcoat, white collarless shirt, and camel mohair vest to which he pinned a tarnished silver sheriff's badge. I took all of him in as I pretended to read my own paper. A lone feral cat in from the cold. Unnerved, I stood up and left.

Café weeping was becoming a habit. Especially on weekend mornings. "What triggered this week's tears?" I mused. "The drought," I said out loud. Not satisfied with this answer, I began to retrace my steps to the Evergreen. In the two years since I moved to a quiet tree-lined street in this city of strangers and stray cats, Evergreen café had become my *other* "breakfast room," an extension of my little row-house, a short meander downhill from my yellow and white front porch with the green swing. Evergreen was the *real* start of my morning, especially in the soft early light of spring and summer weekends, when I'd slip into the tee and shorts puddled on the floor next to my bed and slide down the hill in bright pink bedroom slippers, seeking connection and espresso.

When the weather was warm, I'd get expresso-to-go and a chocolate croissant to savor on my old porch swing, plumped with pillows and a ragged antique quilt. There, perched in my aerie, I'd sip and smile as neighbors like lemmings sauntered down hill, some stopping briefly to chat, to admire my perennials, to pet Boo my stray-cat companion. And when the weather was cold, I'd order "breakfast-for-here" and commandeer an Evergreen couch or a soft wing chair where I could eat undisturbed but

surrounded with the warm sounds of happy children, cooing couples, and earnest students from nearby Loyola.

Most of the barristas know my name and smile when they see me. Our eyes lock, and in a split-second there is this silent exchange like a secret hand-shake, an acknowledgement of a common scrappiness, struggle, eccentricity, or “otherness.” Maybe they’re stray cats too.

This particular Sunday was unremarkable, not a catalyst for torrents of tears. I left my home in the early morning bundled for a brisk walk around the neighborhood to test my heart – a metaphor for my life choices maybe. Except this particular morning jaunt was a dress rehearsal for a *real* stress test ordered by my physician, a little man with a thoughtful face – someone I trusted. I headed north this morning – in the opposite direction of Evergreen – breathing deeply and rhythmically, bounding uphill to explore my favorite alleys and trees and gardens of the grand old “cottages” of Fredrick Law Olmstead’s Roland Park. The city had been buffeted by big winds recently, and my pathway was smothered in fallen waxy leaves of rusts and yellows and reds.

The verses of “Autumn Leaves,” recited by Roger Williams, drifted into my consciousness. He spoke them in an interview I’d heard on my car radio the previous afternoon. The image of falling leaves conjured up a well of emotion then, and I had downshifted to stop on the side of the road, sobbing as Williams, now 82, talked about love lost, love remembered, and how the memory of love continues to sustain him – and us – as we navigate the difficult “autumns” and “winters” of our lives. “It’s because of the promise of spring!” he exclaimed, alluding to a “promise of hope” – of warmer days ahead.

The “winter” of my two years in this city of strangers took its toll on my own heart. Perhaps the tears this morning were a weary acknowledgement of that.

But there was more. As I walked in a broad loop through my wooded neighborhood, I turned a corner and chanced upon a grove of mature Ginkos, their branches naked, the path and street blanketed with canary-yellow leaves so thick I felt every footstep cushioned as with goose-down. My heart skipped. I reached in front of me and scooped up an armful of tiny feather-fans. I beamed, gliding gently down the hill, cuddling my yellow canaries. An occasional “feather” escaped my round-bowled sweated arms, taking flight then gently lighting on the sidewalk, or a shrub, or the dewy grass. Heading south

towards Evergreen, I stashed the yellow leaves on my worn wicker chair, to be pressed later in coffee table books and perhaps discovered by a visitor perusing my library decades after.

Encountering the bright Ginkgo fans had quickened my step. But they also reminded me of a second voice, not of Roger Williams, but of a gentle younger man I had met while visiting my childhood home, migrating north to New England last month to connect with old family memories of love. That migration north conjured not nostalgia – but possibility. Our new correspondence, nurtured each day by light and laughter and even a few tears, began to open us like a bud.

My heart was light just then, when I crossed the café threshold this early Sunday morning. Perhaps the tears signaled not sorrow – but release from sorrow. A recognition that even I – a stray foundling who harbored feral cats – might find in canary colored Ginkgo leaves the promise of hope. The promise of love. And of my own spring.