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## The Leaf in the Wind (1952)

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## The Leaf in the Wind (1952)

### **Abstract**

That September was one of many months, but the leaves, turning yellow and brown and golden on the trees and falling to be wind-driven on the pavements and swirled in the air, helped to urge me onwards. Waiting for something to happen, you never really know what it is, or what it will be. But one day birds in a tree chirp lustily and there you have it. Or a ray of forgotten sunshine falls across the desk in the office where you work. Many days I saw them burning the brown leaves in the park. Raking them together in heaps and setting them on fire, and the smoke straight as a rod. The old man leaned against the rake and smoked a cigarette and watched the leaves burning. Old men always do that, when they burn leaves in autumn.

SAM SEVLON

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When the leaves began falling there was no stopping them. One day you saw a tree leafy and in the evening the branches were naked. The wind twisted and spun and lashed out at you: it waited around corners and outside doors. When it was behind you you didn't have to walk, and in front it braked you with sudden force, so you had to lean and step off again.

For some nights, pacing the streets, I found it bracing and invigorating, for though it was powerful it was not yet very cold, and when it swept you it left you feeling clean. I walked in it, groping for an intangibility to lead me out of the drear dampness I was in. I was indescribably lonely, lifeless and limp; I was a leaf in the wind.

I used to watch sometimes out of the office window at the overcast sky. I should have written much poetry - I felt like it, but all I did was scribble a line or two on the blotting pad, and the next morning I scratched the words off.

The quickness of darkness was a fascination to me. The way how, at four o'clock in the afternoon, a quiet dark would fall and lights go on in the mist and fog. It seemed there was never daylight; you got up in the morning and it was like night was still there, and you went out looking for the sun. If it ever came it was a sick, yellow orange at which you could stare unblinkingly, and you went through the day in a grey fog. Yet I remember moods when I thought it wonderful - I mean, you felt as if you didn't exist entirely, as if it were a half-life, a sort of dream, and you didn't want to go, not really.

All this while I kept reminding myself that it wouldn't do, that I had

to get down to work, do something; but all I did was watch London and scribble phrases on the blotting pad. To make matters worse, I had reached a period where writing meant everything, a justification for living, and I exaggerated my frame of mind into a kind of fear for words. Once or twice I did make a half-hearted attempt, but I had no appetite. I just waited, waited for something to happen.

And then snow fell. I went out in it, turning up the collar of my coat. I went in the park and I scraped the snow off the ground and heaped it up. While I was doing that I thought it was a hell of a thing for me to be doing, but I went on all the same. There were a few children doing the same thing and hurling snowballs, and they must have thought me queer, a grown man scraping snow into little heaps, because the way I was doing it was kind of thoughtful, not as if I was enjoying myself.

One day I went to Kew Gardens to see amber and gold on the trees. It was beautiful. I soaked in it, and didn't make any effort to impose the picture on my mind, because I wanted that if I thought of it in the future, I would only remember hazily that it was beautiful, and not be able to recall any detail about a leaf or the shape of a branch. Sometimes when things happen to you, that's the way you like it to be, because sometimes when you think back about a thing too much or try to remember everything, you lose everything, and it might as well have not happened.

One night it was foggy and I went on Waterloo Bridge and I spat in the Thames. I watched the buildings and the neon lights. A man came up near me and rested his elbows on the parapet and watched too. He said it was a picture. He said he was a painter from Holland, and he was going to Ireland the next day. I said I was from the West Indies, and he said he loved our colours, that he had been to some of the islands. He invited me to his flat - there and then - to see some of his work. I have always had a fear - perhaps foolishly - of a spontaneous friendship with a male stranger, so I told him I was sorry, and went on looking at a barge part the water as it made headway.

My aimlessness was then three months old.

Christmas came. They were preparing for it in London since early October; there is such a lengthy build-up, every day you feel as if it's going to be tomorrow.

Nonetheless, I was determined to use the spirit as a sort of turning leaf in my mood. I joined a u-queue for my wages and afterwards some of the others said what about a drink, and I said, I'm for it.

I remember discovering then what I had been looking for, but the discovery was like covering one step in an unending series. However, that the leaf was turned was in itself something.

On a cold, dead night I walked into a cul-de-sac in Chelsea which they call World's End. It was my beginning.