

The Leaf Girl

by

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The fire alarm rang and rang and rang. It sounded cold and far away.

The time-for-class bell had a different ring to it. It irritated her more than the fire alarm. Because: class and homework and hurry up she was late were in there somewhere. She could hear it. All of it. Every time it rang. And, worst of all, the time-for-class bell reminded her just how late she was (for everything). She absolutely hated it.

The fire alarm? Not so much. She'd put a lot of thought into the time-for-class bell. Sat at her desk and carved deep resentment into it over the years. She could not say that about the fire alarm. Sure, it sounded louder and more urgent, and she knew what it meant - nothing good - but in her experience, nothing bad ever happened when it went off. It got her out of class, that's what

it did. The fire alarm meant she didn't have to listen to boring Mrs. Bird blah, blah, blah all day long about nothing. No wonder she was late for everything every day. She hated school.

Someone must have pulled the alarm, she realized. Not because of fire. Not as a prank to get out of class. She wished that's why it was ringing. A fire would be better than this. Anything would be better than this. She wished it would: Just. Stop.

But it rang and rang over everything - the gunshots, the screams, her heavy breathing and sobbing. The longer it rang, the colder and further away it sounded.

She kept her eyes closed, squeezed tight.

For half a crazy second - crazy because she knew this was not the time for crazy thoughts, but she could not help it - she wondered what lemons felt like when you squeezed them. Did it feel like how she felt now? She felt terror. But more than anything, she felt sad. Her mother used a handheld citrus juicer when she did it, and lemon juice poured all over her hands like tears. Lemon tears. Like the tears pouring over her cheeks now.

"No time for crazy thoughts, kiddo. Think about what you need to do." Her father's voice. Firm. Certain. And calming - enough. "Close your eyes if you have to." So she knew.

She knew.

If she opened her eyes, she'd see blood and bodies and that would make her panic. Better to keep her eyes closed and...

Think about what I need to do.

If she could do it, without panicking (more than she already was), it might save her life.

The alarm rang and rang and she wished it would stop.

He told them to get out of their seats. Ordered it. Stand up! Shoulder to shoulder! Forced her into the middle, friends and classmates crying and crowding against her body, and some screamed. The screams did not last long. Others went silent. They call that shock. She knew about shock. Happens fast. Like when you mix powdered hot chocolate (with pink marshmallows, her favorite) into hot water and stir it with a spoon. It swirls like a tiny hurricane for a second or two and then blends together. She knew when it was ready.

Same with shock. It stirred her. She swirled like a hurricane. Ready or not, she was in it.

She couldn't understand the man. He yelled everything. It was like his mouth never closed. He had an ugly hole in his face and it spat out things that were supposed to be words but sounded like one, long scream. Kind of like the fire alarm.

Yeah, kind of just like that.

She held her arms down, hands at her sides, as if she stood to attention. An obedient child soldier he scream-talked to. It didn't matter that she couldn't understand a word he said. It was clear. All of it was very clear. He asked his question. You answered. If he didn't like your answer, he shot you in the face. He hadn't liked any of the answers he'd heard so far. Her friends - Judy, Tamicka, and Maria Fernada - they answered and he shot them, and with Tamicka, he tore her necklace off and stomped on the crucifix first. Then he shot her. She saw it happen. That's when she closed her eyes.

Tamicka made sounds afterward, but she was sure they were dead. All of them. Or would be soon. So would she.

Her hands went cold and wet - her father called that “clammy.” Like the shock, it happened fast. She had clammy palms now and worried the knife might slip from her fingers because of it, and that almost caused her to open her eyes.

But she didn’t. She did not open her eyes. New tears forced their way out. She could not stop them. They spilled down her cheeks, so hot and salty they stung. Like bees. But they got her attention, at least enough for her to curl her clammy fingers around the knife handle and keep it from slipping.

She hoped he hadn’t seen her do it. She was a good hider. She’d hid it from everyone else, including her teacher. Maybe she’d get away with hiding it now.

When she pushed the handle’s button, the blade would shoot straight out and lock in place.

Think. Think about what I need to do.

The alarm rang and rang, cold as outer space and so far away she almost couldn’t hear it now.

“Think about what you saw before you closed your eyes.” Her mother’s voice this time. The most trusted voice she knew. Calmed her even more.

She remembered: The man was not paying attention - to anything, really. He focused on her classmates, that’s true, scream-talking spit all over them, but she saw how unfocused his eyes were. She saw shock in them, or something like shock, which suggested foggy thinking. Her father would have called it “the exact opposite of levelheaded” and her mother would have said, “Yeah, and that’s an opportunity.” The man closed the door, for example. He was alone. She remembered.

His friends were down the hall. She could hear them, yelling and shooting their guns too. Doing the exact same thing, and just like in her classroom, people screamed because of it. They were killing everyone on campus.

Why?

She didn't know. All her parents' said was that sometimes things like this happen and when it does, it pays to be prepared. Just in case.

Boom! Ringing in her ears - not the fire alarm. The gun. Again. And something splashed the side of her face, warm like bath water. Blood, she knew. Lots of blood.

The boy next to her dropped. She heard him hit the floor. It was Jeremy, the class clown, a tiny kid with dirty-dishwater-blond hair (what her mother said) and blue eyes so blue she thought they looked like two little planet earths (what she said). She didn't know him very well. Most of the time he was an irritating douche bag, but sometimes he was funny and sometimes he made her laugh, and now he lay dead at her feet, curled up like a sleeping cat. She felt the weight of him. It was unbearable. She wanted to kick him off and she didn't care how horrible that sounded. Her knees wanted to buckle, and with that the deep terror came. She was in shock so deep she didn't think she could get out. Ever.

"Open your eyes, darling," her mother said. And somehow she did. She opened them and saw everything and heard the fire alarm ringing and ringing, sounding cold as the coldest cold ever gets and far away as the most distant star in the universe.

She saw and understood that her turn had come. Question and Answer Time.

He yelled in her face and she smelled onions - of course, he ate onions before coming here to kill them.

But onions made her think of her father. He loved them, especially the yellow ones. He was the only person she knew who ate them like apples. Took big bites. Like they were big, green Granny Smiths. Drove her mother crazy, but he loved to eat them like that.

“One day, sweetheart,” he said, “you’ll eat onions just like me. Runs in the family. Now let me show you what I got you and how to use it.” He held the knife up.

Thin and light as anything, but very strong. Made for hiding. “It works like this,” he said. He pushed the button, the blade shot out, locked in place and stuck in the onion - deep into the onion. What surprised her most was just how much force it had. “Under the chin, right here,” her father said, pointing to the big artery in his neck.

“God forbid this ever happens, honey,” her mother said, “but you need to understand - you need to believe me when I tell you this - but the minute he walks into the classroom, all the rules you’ve been taught won’t matter anymore. That means it’s OK not to do what he says. Doing what he says will not help you. You will feel like you need to do what he says, because he’s a grownup, but do not do that. Do not cooperate with him. Do not obey him. Instead, if you can...?”

“Run,” she said.

“And if you can’t run?”

“Hide.”

“And if you can’t do that?”

“Fight.”

They trained her how to use the knife. She stabbed so many yellow onions she could do it with her eyes open wide or squeezed tight, onion-tears streaming down her face.

Ring, ring, ring, ring!