

A Last Meal

Owen Jow · December 2011

He stares at the water, watching it ripple, seeing rocks poke out of the surface near the shore. The sun warms him, fighting the winds in defense of his comfort. As he sits there, a seagull flies past, circling the sky before finally settling on a nearby pole and joining him in his surveying of the world.

Somewhere behind him, some unfathomable distance away, cars roar by, rushing to jobs or parties or dentist appointments. It is a world that he is no longer part of.

The buzz of an insect catches his attention, and he turns, contemplating the trees surrounding him on his outlook of the ocean. A leaf flutters down through the air. Falling. Slowly, it tumbles, losing height every second. It reminds him of himself.

In his mind, he can see them telling him his future. He sits, feigning calm, in a well-kept office filled with books and papers and bad memories. The news comes out: the woman that delivers it is sympathetic, kind, speaking in a voice that cannot possibly be meant for a man of forty-two years. He does not blame her for what she says. No one would want to tell this to a person; no one should ever have to. She talks quietly, explaining the details of what is to come.

“...you probably have another thirty days.” The phrase registers in his mind; he understands yet cannot understand the words. By now, he is dulled. It is just another bullet, come out of the blue. He has already been shot; he is already dying, so what does another round matter? He has thirty days left to say good-bye to his family and his friends. It is a generous amount, he thinks, and for one insane second he feels blessed.

The sentiment does not last, of course. Even if he is more or less resigned to his fate, it has been panic-inducing to acknowledge, and unease has him in a stranglehold. He is too young! It is the middle of his life! A bout of chills overtakes him; it is late in the afternoon and the sun is beginning to lose its strength. Soon, they will tell him to come back in. He is not ready for that, either. Despite the growing cold, he wants to stay out, looking at the sea for the rest of the day.

The sea. It is the origin of everything. Everything comes and leaves by it; one can cross the world on the waves. It amazes him.

Perhaps the diagnosis *is* a blessing. He has never appreciated anything so much before.

He shivers – and maybe not just from the breeze. A blessing? He cannot quite make himself believe it. Something inside of him breaks down, and he knows once again a horrible crushing sensation.

A loud rustling breaks through his thoughts. He glances toward the source: a tree, a large one, stands there, barren and empty where it has just been full and orange. A thick blanket of leaves covers the ground around it. As he watches, the leaves begin to drift around in the wind.

At the edge of his field of view, he sees a second tree shake its branches, it too dropping its coat to the earth. Another one follows. Suddenly, he is surrounded by empty branches. Leaves are flying everywhere: rising, swirling in the air. It is a blizzard, a hurricane of yellow and orange – the foliage spirals in a swarm over the lake, blocking the sun and plunging him into a shocking cold.

He sits, transfixed, as the leaves dance around the sky, shooting off in all directions. But they are not the only things moving. The water joins in on the party, sending waves as couriers to parade over the rocks. A sparkling silver platter catapults through the rippling surface, whirling across the heavens before landing perfectly on the man's lap. A group of leaves soar onto the plate, completing the dish.

Slowly, uncertainly, he rakes up a couple of orange leaves and pops them into his

mouth, crunching on them briefly before swallowing. Immediately he is instilled with a sizzling glow. Fantastic images and feelings flood his mind.

He knows nature, and growth, and resilience.

Two small sea rocks spring up from the ocean and clatter onto the dish. He picks them up, admiring their smooth texture before he swallows them whole. All at once he can see his entire life before him. He has memories of events in the past that he has never known before. He can peer into the future. In the instant it is truly as if he will exist forever. His head clears, he perceives an inexplicable wisdom, and he realizes – life is filling him up. It is giving him experiences that he would never have the chance to know otherwise.

So he consumes everything that makes an appearance on his plate. The universe has prepared a feast for him, and every course is heartily delicious. His appetite is never-ending. Water from the ocean. Cobwebs from the rocks. He devours it all, gaining new understanding with every helping. He sees places he has only dreamed of, feels emotions he has never before appreciated.

The leaves bring him a piece of ice, and he is in Antarctica. His face is covered by a soft fleece ski mask and he wears three layers of thick clothing. A frigid wind is blowing, but with his jacket it is a mere breeze. Stumbling through the snow, he laughs in delight as penguins waddle around the ice in front of him. A pair of them approach him curiously, peering at him with an air of wonder that he himself is surely echoing.

A crew of leaves swoops out of nowhere, depositing a long, woody vine into his hands. He breaks it into pieces and gulps it down. They have found him a liana from the Amazon rainforest, and now he is there, gawking openmouthed at the tropical landscape. Clad in a light khaki outfit, he views the rainforest from the safety of a large mosquito net. The growth is lush; the entire backdrop is green. He is in a natural arboretum. Plants are everywhere, and the surrounding clusters of leaves absolutely tingle with life. A bold blue butterfly zips past, providing contrast to the intense greenery. From above comes a loud croaking noise, and he looks up, surprised to see a majestic toucan

with a long orange beak perched leisurely in the branches overhead.

Eventually, another group of leaves appears, dropping a gleaming, red-hot sphere of light into his open mouth and saturating him with awareness of the universe's incalculable scope. He finds himself on a space station, viewing Earth from afar. The leaves have captured a portion of the sun for him.

He continues, gorging himself on everything. He plays ball with his grandchildren; he sits on the porch with his wife.

Nothing goes untouched, and at long last his craving is satisfied.

A sense of great tiredness overcomes him. He is, he feels, long overdue for a rest. But he will wait another day, so that he can see the people he loves one last time...

Stroking his chin in silent reflection, he is surprised to feel the rough whiskers of a beard there. Hesitantly, he reaches up and brushes his hair. The short strands that fall onto his lap are the color of an elephant. Turning his hand over, he notices that his palm is like an elephant too: wrinkled and worn. Yet almost immediately after recognizing this fact he has forgotten it; it is of no concern to him.

And so he remains, gazing fondly at the ocean scenery. Things have calmed down: there is no sign of the earlier frenzy of leaves. Vacant trees sway gently around him. A little brown bird walks along the shore like a ballerina, watching its mother dive into the water to search for dinner. It is a fine thing to see, and he waits for the sun to go down before standing up slowly and navigating the path back to the perennial gray building.

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The chiseled old man lies in the hospital bed, serene. All around him are his family: his wife, his sons, his brothers. For them, it is a moment of sadness. A man they love is leaving them forever. They murmur kind words to him as they weep. Softly, he tells them not to despair. They are not in his position; they do not understand. For him, it is a completion of the picture. For him, it is as if he has everything. He has, in a manner of

speaking, lived a full life, and death holds no fear for him. He considers: life has given him an extraordinary last meal, and he is ready to go, ready to move on to another reality.

He closes his eyes.