

O. HENRY, THE LAST LEAF

In the 1890s, many artists lived in Greenwich Village, in New York City.

Sue and Johnsy were artists. The two girls met each other in the month of May, at a restaurant in Greenwich Village.

'I'm from the State of Maine,' Sue said to Johnsy. 'I draw pictures for stories in magazines.'

'I'm from California,' Johnsy said to Sue. 'But I want to go to Italy. I want to paint a picture of the Bay of Naples!'

The two girls talked happily for an hour – about art, about clothes, about food.

Soon after their first meeting, Sue and Johnsy moved into a studio apartment together. Their rooms were at the top of an old brick house in Greenwich Village.

In December, it was very cold in New York. Snow fell and there was ice in the ground. Many people in the city became ill. The illness was called pneumonia. The doctors tried to help the sick people, but many of them died.

That month, Johnsy had pneumonia. She was very ill. She lay in her bed and she did not move. A doctor visited her every day. But Johnsy was not getting better.

One morning, the doctor spoke quietly to Sue outside Johnsy's room.

'I can't help her,' the doctor said. 'She is very sad. She doesn't want to live. Someone must make her happy again. What is she interested in?'

'She's an artist,' Sue replied. 'She wants to paint a picture of the Bay of Naples.'

'Painting!' said the doctor. 'That won't help her!'

The doctor left the apartment.

Sue went into her own room and she cried quietly for a few minutes. Then she picked up her drawing board and some pencils. She started to sing a happy song and walked into Johnsy's room.

Johnsy lay silently in her bed. Her face was thin and white. She was looking towards the window.

'Johnsy is asleep,' Sue thought.

She stopped singing and she sat down in a corner of the room. Then she started to draw a picture for a magazine. Suddenly, Sue heard a quiet sound. She went quickly to the side of the bed. Johnsy's eyes were open. She was looking out of the window and she was speaking quietly.

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‘Twelve,’ Johnsy said. A little later, she said ‘eleven’. Then she said ‘ten’. Then ‘nine’. And then she said ‘eight’ and ‘seven’ almost together. She was counting backwards.

What was Johnsy looking at? What was she counting? Sue looked out of the window.

Outside the window, Sue saw the brick wall of the next house. An old vine grew against the wall. There were very few leaves on its branches.

‘Six,’ Johnsy said. ‘They’re falling faster. Three days ago, there was almost a hundred. Ah, there goes another! There are only five now.’

‘Five? What are you talking about, Johnsy?’ Sue asked. ‘Please tell me.’

‘There are only five leaves on the vine now,’ said Johnsy. ‘The last leaf will fall soon and then I’ll die. Didn’t the doctor tell you about the leaves?’

‘Don’t say that! You’re not going to die!’ Sue said. ‘You’re going to get better. The doctor told me that this morning. I’ll bring you some soup and I’ll draw my picture. The magazine will pay me quickly. Then I’ll buy us some nice food.’

Johnsy was still looking at the vine. ‘There are only four leaves now,’ she said. ‘I don’t want any soup. The last leaf will fall soon.’

‘Johnsy, dear,’ Sue said. ‘Please close your eyes and go to sleep. I have to finish this drawing by tomorrow. And I don’t want you to look at those leaves any more.’

Johnsy closed her eyes. ‘But I want to watch the last leaf,’ she said again. ‘It will fall soon. The leaves are tired. I’m tired too. I want to die.’

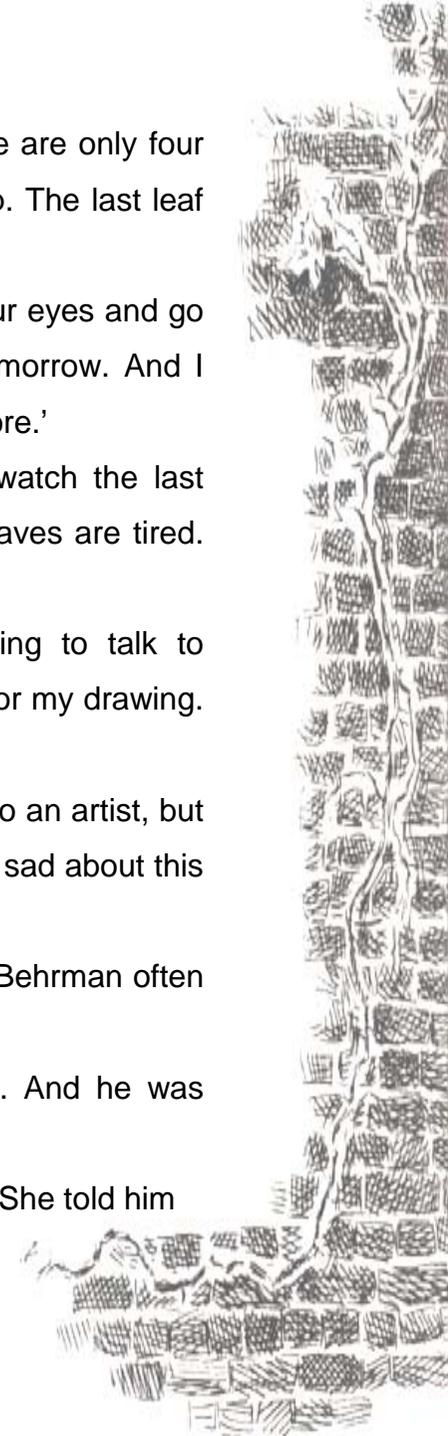
‘Please try to sleep,’ Sue said. ‘I’m going to talk to Behrman for a minute. I must have a model for my drawing. Behrman will be my model.’

Old Behrman lived downstairs. He was also an artist, but he had never painted a good picture. He was sad about this and he was angry about it too.

‘One day, I will paint a wonderful picture,’ Behrman often said. ‘One day, I will paint a masterpiece.’

But he had never painted a masterpiece. And he was more than sixty years old.

Sue found the little old man in his dark room. She told him about Johnsy and the vine leaves.



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Oh, the foolish girl!' Behrman shouted. 'An old vine can't kill people!'

'But the vine *is* killing her,' said Sue. 'She's very ill and weak. She sees the vine dying. Now she wants to die too.'

Behrman was angry, but he loved the two young artists very much.

'Ah, little Miss Johnsy,' he said quietly. 'She's too good for this place. One day, I will paint a masterpiece. Then we will all go to Italy. We will go to Naples. Yes! But today, I'll be your model.'

Together, they went upstairs. Johnsy was sleeping. Sue pulled the shade down over her friend's bedroom window. Then she took Behrman into her own room. They both looked at the vine. Cold rain was falling.

'Soon there will be snow,' Sue thought.

Behrman sat down and Sue started to draw a picture of him.

That night, there was a storm. The rain fell heavily and the wind was very strong.

Johnsy woke early the next morning. 'Pull up the shade,' she said to Sue.

Sue pulled up the shade. There was still one leaf on the vine! The leaf was dark green and yellow. And it hung from a branch twenty feet above the ground.

'That's the last leaf,' said Johnsy. 'It will fall today. I'll die at the same time.'

Sue put her face close to her friend's face. 'Don't say that, Johnsy,' she said quietly. 'I don't want

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you to die.'

Johnsy did not answer.

The leaf stayed on the vine all day. That night, there was more wind and rain.

In the morning, Johnsy woke early again. 'Pull up the shade,' she said.

The leaf was still on the vine. Johnsy lay in her bed and she looked at it for a long time. Then she called to Sue.

'I've been a very foolish girl, Sue,' she said. 'I wanted to die. But the last leaf has stayed on the vine. It has taught me a lesson. Please, bring me a bowl of soup now.'

An hour later, Johnsy spoke again.

Sue, my dear,' she said. 'One day, I'm going to paint a picture of the Bay of Naples!'

The doctor visited the girls in the afternoon. He looked at Johnsy carefully and he held Sue's thin hand.

'Take good care of your friend,' he said. 'She is going to get well. Now I have to go downstairs. I have to visit Mr

Behrman. He has pneumonia too. I must send him to the hospital.'

The next day, the doctor spoke to Sue again.

'Your friend will soon be well,' he said. Then he told her some other news.

That afternoon, Sue went into Johnsy's room and she put her arm around her friend's shoulders. 'Mr Behrman died this morning, in the hospital,' she said. 'Two days ago, one of the neighbours found him in his bedroom. Behrman was very ill. His shoes and clothes were cold and wet. The neighbour sent for the doctor. Later, the neighbour found a ladder outside in the yard. There was a lamp next to it. And there were brushes, and some yellow and green paint.'

'Johnsy, look out of the window,' Sue said quietly. 'Look at the last leaf on the vine. It's still there. It has never moved in the wind. Didn't that surprise you? It's Behrman's masterpiece, dear. He painted it on the night of the storm.'