

Leaves

by Ashley Yang

During the winter, when I was eight years old, my family moved to a skyscraper in an apartment complex in China. We were living on the 25th floor, and my father told me, "You have to stand high to see far." I loved this house a lot, not only because of the unique design of all the floor-to-ceiling windows but also the beautiful views. At night, I could see cars speeding on the brightly lit road through the window of the kitchen. On the roadside were shining high-rise buildings like the ones in fantasy novels, and I could see fireworks blooming in the sky from time to time. The arrival of spring was occasionally accompanied by heavy fog. On foggy days, I felt like I was living in a house on the clouds. The world looked like doomsday. The big trees were looming in the fog, and the sky was filled with gray mist.

In the summer, the kitchen was like an oven. Leaning against the window, I could see green vines climbing around the fence and purple flowers on the rooftop of an apartment next to my house. At that time, I liked to watch the owner doing busy work on the rooftop in the early morning. He was an old man who always took care of the plants alone with a watering can. Looking at him, I imagined that I would have my own rooftop for planting when I grew up. Although I loved plants, there were no plants in my room, except the flowers I drew. Whenever I was watching that old man tending his garden, I would smell the aroma of food emanating from the kitchen pot. The smell of stewed soup—beef, corn and carrots—mixed to emit a sweet smell. At this time, my mother would ask me to serve the bowls and chopsticks because it was time to

eat. I didn't hesitate because I was used to laying out the tableware for the whole family before every meal. If anyone didn't come to the table after I finished setting it, I would scoop a spoonful of rice and a bowl of soup for everyone. Although I would complain in my heart—why am I the only one doing all these things—I knew it was useless. My mother often said, “You are the eldest kid in our family, and *this is your responsibility* to set a good model for your younger sister.” And my father once said, “There is no absolute fairness in the world, but the eldest child should know how to yield and take care of the younger ones, because it is our traditional virtue. *This is your responsibility.*”

Days passed, and I grew up gradually. During this period, I had arguments with my mother, and we moved from China to America. I remained fed up with the unfairness I received in China. Even though I am the oldest child in the family, I was not the head of power among my brothers and sister. My younger brother was. He had the best computer in our family and the largest room. His “responsibility” was to play games in the room after school every day, while I needed to put the washed clothes in a big basket in the hot summer day, take them outside, hang them on clothes hooks, and then carry the dry clothes from the backyard to the second floor in the afternoon. Then I had to put away the clothes hooks, sort the clothes, and fold them. Occasionally, I needed to send the clothes where they belonged. Whenever I asked why boys don't have to do these things, the answer I got was always, “You are a girl; you will have to do it when you grow up; *this is your responsibility.*”

Every time before dinner, my mother would ask me to go downstairs to help her cook. Although it was not difficult, it was boring, especially at five pm when the sky was gloomy, and everyone was on the second floor. This atmosphere made me feel lonely even though I was not afraid of ghosts. I would need to find the pot of rice in the lifeless kitchen, then use a transparent

white plastic bowl that had some scratches on it to scoop up the rice. I then had to pour it into the iron pot, rinse it with water, and slowly rotate the rice with my hands to make sure there was no dirt in it. I then had to repeat it twice, but make sure not to wash it "too clean" because then it would not have the smell of rice. Finally, I added the oil and pressed the start on the rice cooker. The timing song that I had heard countless times sounded again. And every time I complained, "Why do I have to cook, why not my younger brothers and sister?" The answer I got was always, "You are the eldest, *it is your responsibility* to help this family do what you can."

Besides the kitchen and laundry room, my room was the only room in our house with wooden floors. The side effect of having such a room was that I was the only one in the family who needed to mop the floor by hand every week, while my younger brothers and sister could lie on the bed and be on their phones, waiting for the robot vacuum cleaner to take care of the rest. I often complained that the mop was difficult to use. It looked like a Halloween costume wig, like a piece of cloth cut into strips, folded in half, and stapled to the middle of a stick. When I was mopping the floor, I could always hear the creaking sound of the plastic that was used to stabilize the mop rubbing against the ground. In addition to mopping, I also needed to sweep the floor every week; otherwise, the corners would become a kingdom of dust and spider silk. If I was unlucky, I could also see rat tails coming out of the pipes under the heater. Although I like fairy tales a lot, living in Cinderella's room was not fun at all. And every time I complained, the answer I always got was, "This is your room, *you are responsible* for keeping it clean."

Whenever I finished cleaning, I would open the window and try to fill the room with fresh air. With the wind chimes tinkling above my head, it reminded me of the old man on the rooftop. All these beautiful leaves and flowers blossomed into ravishing plants in a garden full of sunshine and aromatic smells that flowed around the rooftop. But they did not belong to me. All I

had was an inescapable house that trapped me, and forced me to do things I did not want. Why are these my responsibilities? I was not able to choose the order of my birth. I was not able to choose whether I wanted to be a boy or a girl. I was not able to choose whether my room was carpeted or not. But all these things that did not belong to me, my culture and family required me to be responsible for. As leaves have no right to choose their color, and no right to choose their type, I had no choices.

When I was 17, I liked to look out the window of my room because the colorful leaves I saw outside created a fairytale town. At night, I could see the gradient sky and occasionally see stars shining like diamonds. But inside my room, there was only one old, small tree. I often forgot to water it, but it always somehow managed to stay alive. I am still not sure what kind of tree it was, but each branch of it had five oval-shaped leaves, which together looked like a duck's claw. As the season changed to fall, the leaves of this tree would also become dry. They would then fall to the ground, and then I would clean them up.

As October approached, all the leaves lost their original green and put on their colorful clothes. My sister, my mother, and I carried leaf-gathering tools to clean up the front yard. Like in previous years, I used a tool that was two heads taller than me to scrape the leaves on the grass that were mixing with the color of green and wheat. I used to think that we were fixing the “hair” of the earth to make it a more interesting task. Using the tool, we piled up vibrant leaves into a mountain. Behind me was the rustling sound of the leaves colliding. A fresh smell of rain, grass, and the fragrance of flowers hit my nose, and the sounds of tires hummed as the car ran through the road. Sometimes, we could hear mirrors whistling in the wind, and the autumn wind swept like waves. The leaves started dancing in the air. With the melody of the wind, the leaves spun

and rotated in the air like graceful dancers. When the wind was finally done with playing, all the leaves fell gently in front of me and scattered into the grass, forming a unique autumn painting.

Then, I would have to do everything all over again. It was so annoying. But my mom had told me *this is my responsibility* to clean up the leaves even though they do not belong to me. Holding a huge tool made me tired. My hand started to shake after an hour. I could feel the heat coming from my body as I breathed rhythmically. But it did not stop me because I knew time was passing away. Next year, I would be leaving the house. Every time I found a beautiful leaf, I picked it up in the palm of my hand, looked at it, felt the textures, and then just threw it back into the leaf pile. Even it was a maple leaf that had the color of sunset. I could feel the rough touch but a hint of coldness. The unevenness of the edge reminded me of the gear and wood pruner. These dry leaves were witnesses of time.

At the age of 18, I no longer need to dry clothes, cook every night, use that difficult mop, or clean up fallen leaves. But when I'm gone, who will be the one replacing me? Who will clean up the fallen leaves for me and do those responsibilities that originally belonged to me? To me, leaves are not just part of a tree. The leaves were once green on the branches, but now they are golden. Their withering records the changes in my life. Leaves are the proof of injustice and repeatedly questioning cannot bring justice. Leaves are those people who go against the wind and try to change but are blown down. Leaves are a transparent wall, trapping those who cannot speak out. Leaves are wings that cannot fly. Leaves are the responsibility of the passing of time. Leaves are a pair of hands, stealing the youth of children and leaving behind persistence and complaints.

But next year, when spring comes, all the leaves will be vibrant again. Leaves are a dry river, washing away people's grief. Leaves are colorful, they shine like rainbows and lead

me to find treasures. They are magnificent. Leaves are all these beautiful things waiting for me in my life.