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## THE RED TULIP AND LAST-YEAR'S OAK LEAF

*A fairy tale*

One warm spring day a young man with a bunch of red tulips is sitting on a park bench, waiting for his beloved.

Here she comes.

'How lovely they are!' the girl exclaims as she takes the flowers.

'I love you,' says the young man with a wide grin.

'And I love you, my prince.'

'My princess. Let's go for a stroll.'

'Let's.'

And the lovers walk away, without noticing that a tulip has slipped from the bunch and dropped on the path.

The tulip fainted away (after landing on her head with a nasty jolt), but quickly came back to life. She felt lonely and sad – all her friends were gone. The tulip wanted to cry but couldn't, being a cut flower with no water for teardrops. Suddenly there was a piercing cry from above the red tulip's head: 'Look out! Careful! Stand back!' Before she realised what was happening a last-year's oak leaf landed on the ground some five centimetres away.

The oak leaf launched into conversation right away. 'Hello there. What's up?'

'They dropped me, and nobody noticed,' the red tulip explained.

'I know – I saw it all.' The oak leaf tried to comfort the tulip. 'These things happen. Don't be upset – that's the way of the world, nothing you can do – all for the best.'

'I'm not upset.' The red tulip livened up. The moment the oak leaf addressed her she felt much better. 'Please tell me, how did you get here, and what's your name?'

'Oak Leaf's the name. Flew down from that big tree. See the branch where the swallow's perched – I was hanging up there.'

'Being high up like that must be wonderful,' said the red tulip enviously.

'Oh yes! It's cool up there, wicked. You see the sun rise and set, the splashing fountains, children riding the merry-go-round. The blue sky is right above you, snow-white clouds cuddle close and the birds share their dreams, their joy and happiness. You imagine you're a bird too – although there's really no need, up there you're free as any bird!'

'So why did you break away from the branch and fly to earth?'

'Well, hanging out in the same place gets boring after a while. Wanted to travel a bit, feel the thrill of free flight.'

'What was it like?'

'Amazing, unforgettable. Alas, that was my first and last flight, but I'm glad I met you – to be honest, that's why I left the branch.'

'Because of me?'

'Saw you fall, heard you whimpering – I came down to help.'

'Thank you, noble oak leaf. But tell me, please, why are you brown and all the other oak leaves green?'

'I grew old after hanging from the oak all summer, autumn and winter. Should have fallen off last autumn. But in autumn you might end up on a bonfire. I wanted so much to live, to have a close friend and love someone with all my heart. The birds are happy because they live in friendship, they love one another. I expect happiness gives them the power of flight – what do you think?'

'Can there be another reason?'

'Of course not!'

'But what is a bonfire?' asked the red tulip.

'A big wild thing, all red and very, very hot,' explained the oak leaf. 'You also get red and hot if it touches you, then immediately you're turned to dust. Just like that.'

'How awful,' gasped the red tulip.

'I should say so,' drawled the oak leaf.

'You're so clever – you know so much,' the red tulip went on. 'You've lived so long in this world. I only sprouted from the ground two weeks ago. Yesterday I flowered and today I was cut from the root, sold, bought, given and lost.'

'That's very sad, I must agree,' said the oak leaf sympathetically. 'But don't despair. The most important thing in life is never give up – everything works out in the end. Trust me.'

'I trust you more than anyone in the world, oak leaf, you're wonderful, so kind and charming!' Suddenly the tulip uttered a pitiful squeak. 'Ouch! I felt a nasty stabbing pain in my head. There it goes again. Ouch! Why does it hurt so? Ouch!'

'Poor little soul – you're wilting away.'

'What does that mean?'

'You're drying up for lack of water. But don't be afraid – nothing to fear. All the moisture dried out of me long ago, and I'm still hale and hearty,' explained the oak leaf. 'My head never aches now.'

'You mean I'll be dry, spick and span like you when I wilt away?'

'Well... alright, I'll be absolutely frank with you,' said the oak leaf. 'If you want to be like me you must find a human being who needs you for a herbarium. I wouldn't mind ending up in a herbarium, for that matter.'

'What's a herbarium?'

'It's like a fairytale hideaway for flowers and leaves – the only place where there's nothing to be scared of, where you can live forever in eternal happiness.'

'How wonderful,' said the red tulip, intrigued. 'How do you get there?'

'First and foremost, the human collecting the herbarium has to like you.'

'Is that hard?'

'Not if you're lucky,' replied the oak leaf.

At that very moment an artist sat down on the bench.

'Look – it's a human!' cried the red tulip. 'He's staring hard at us! Surely he must like us? If only he was collecting a herbarium!'

Sure enough, the artist was staring hard at the red tulip and last-year's leaf.

He had come to the park to paint and was searching for subject matter.

'Eureka!' the artist exclaimed. 'Excellent. The oak leaf died a natural death but this youthful red bloom was torn up and carelessly thrown on the ground,

where it withers in agony and dies a tragic death. Their fate was different but similar. That is a subject in itself.'

And the artist rose to his feet, stooped to nudge the tulip and oak leaf closer together until they almost touched for better contrast, unfolded his easel and began painting his picture. He had already thought of a title: 'Two Deaths'. For some reason it never occurred to him that the tulip and the oak leaf might still be alive.

A light breeze blew and with every breath of wind the head of the red tulip leant towards the oak leaf. The oak leaf was blissfully happy. The tulip was blissfully happy. And the artist, too – confident that this would make a fine picture.

'I think he likes us,' said the tulip, quivering in agitation. 'He's bound to take us to a herbarium. What do you think, oak leaf?'

'Not so fast... After all, he's an artist. Our luck has run out, little tulip – artists don't gather herbariums, it's not their thing. Why didn't I guess he was an artist when I first set eyes on him? I haven't got used to viewing the world from ground level. From above I'd immediately see he was an artist,' said the oak leaf, annoyed with himself.

'What's he doing?' asked the red tulip.

'Painting. I expect he took a fancy to us. See the canvas? We'll end up there soon.'

'How will we end up there?'

'Clasped together. Just as we're doing now. Only we're really clasped together here, and on the canvas we'll be clasped together for pretence.'

'What does pretence mean?'

'It means that here we're alive and embracing,' replied the oak leaf, 'but on the canvas our painted selves will embrace – the paints will embrace for us.'

'That's not true, not true,' chirped the swallow, who could clearly see what the artist had painted so far from her perch on the oak branch. 'You look very much alive in the picture. Of course I understand the paints are embracing for you in the picture. But all the same...'

'Is the picture like a herbarium where we can live happily for ever and ever?' asked the red tulip.

'For ever and ever,' replied the oak leaf. 'But even the swallow says the paints are embracing for us – they look very like us, but they're only paints.'

'Is there anything we can do to continue our lives on the canvas, instead of the paints?'

'Only a good wizard could help us,' said the oak leaf. 'But all the good wizards now live in dense forests or impenetrable bogs, in burning deserts or underwater kingdoms – they're needed in such places, indispensable.'

'Couldn't we manage without a kind wizard?' asked the red tulip.

The oak leaf didn't know what to say.

'Yes you can, you can,' chirped the swallow, 'you can manage without a kind wizard.'

'How?' chorused the friends in unison.

'Don't know for sure, but I think you could,' chirruped the swallow in reply. 'To come to life in a picture you must live with all your heart now, love one another with all your heart. I know it.'

The swallow fluttered her wings and flew back to her nest.

'I'll come back and see you, my good friends,' she chirped, disappearing over the treetops.

'We're so much in love, swallow, we love one another so deeply!' the red tulip and the oak leaf cried after her. But the swallow couldn't hear – she was already too far away.

'Will she fly back to us?' asked the red tulip.

'She promised. She's a good sort, that swallow, I know she'll come back,' replied the oak leaf.

Twilight was falling. The artist folded the easel under his arm, muttered 'Until tomorrow', breathed a pensive sigh and headed for home.

'Look, he's walking further and further away,' said the red tulip anxiously.

'Taking his picture with him, and we're not alive on the canvas yet. Why not? We love one another so much, oak leaf! Isn't that right?'

'Yes, little red tulip, you're right. But don't be sad. Most likely the artist isn't done yet – he'll come back tomorrow and finish the picture.'

'What if he doesn't? Suppose he doesn't come?'

'In that case I think – I know – someone else will take a fancy to us, maybe lift us from the cold earth and take us to a warm herbarium,' the oak leaf answered hesitantly.

'Overnight I'll wither away, and by morning I'll be ugly, so hideous that even you won't like me, you'll stop loving me there and then.'

'Nonsense, how can you think so poorly of me. I think I've found the answer. I'll curl up like a saucer, and you must stretch the tip of your stalk towards me. Overnight dew will collect in my saucer and you can drink your fill, you'll be fresh and full of life again. With luck the first person to fall for you will whisk you off to his herbarium.' And the oak leaf curved like a saucer. 'There you are – hold out your stalk.'

But the red tulip found this very difficult – she had drunk nothing since morning and her strength was ebbing away. The red tulip might never have stretched out her stalk alone, but a big ant crawling past at that very moment understood the language of flowers and leaves. Being extremely magnanimous, kind and strong, he gave a helpful push. The tulip thought she had achieved the feat herself, the big ant was so diplomatic and considerate in carrying out his good deeds. Neither did the ant stop to introduce himself – firstly due to his humble nature, secondly because it was his custom to keep good deeds secret, thirdly he observed the rule of never interfering in other creatures' lives, and fourthly he had many urgent matters to attend to – the big ant was in charge of a vast anthill, besides anything else.

So the red tulip and the oak leaf lay there all night, luxuriating in the freshness and silence of the park beneath the silvery moonlight. Dew appeared in the curled saucer of the oak leaf and the tulip drank. By morning her headache had eased a little and her cheeks looked fresh and ruddy. The sun rose, the birds trilled their morning song and our friends were brimming with happiness. 'If only a human collecting for his herbarium could see us, he's sure to like us,' they mused. 'Or the artist might reappear – after all, when he said 'Until tomorrow', he must have been addressing us, who else?'

When the artist awoke the next day his first thought was to rush back to the park and finish the picture. But since he wasn't in the habit of painting in the morning, he had lunch before setting off. He found the same spot in the park, the same bench, but the red tulip and last year's oak leaf had vanished from the path.

'What a shame,' he muttered, taken aback. 'I can't possibly finish the picture without the same models.' And he sank down on the bench, dismayed and dejected.

He was roused from his sad reverie by a flash of red between the slender trunks of a hazel grove. The artist took a closer look and saw a flower bed filled with red tulips the other side of a hazel grove.

'There's an idea. I can just pick another red tulip, find an oak leaf from last autumn and put them together in the same place as yesterday. Then I can finish the picture once and for all,' he decided.

'Hey-ho, here we go!' Yet another last year's oak leaf flew down from the oak and landed on the bench.

'Well I never: exactly like your counterpart of yesterday.' He unfolded his easel, looked closer and found the leaf to be remarkably like its fellow from the day before. He approached the flower bed.

As he stooped and stretched out his hand to pick the most beautiful tulip he suddenly had a strange feeling.

'What's going on? What is it? What's happening to me?' the artist cried out in surprise.

He suddenly felt what a shame it would be to pick this sublime flower. He went back to his easel.

And what did he see?! How was it possible? The picture was already finished! What a miracle! But true enough, the painting was now complete. Very impressive it was too – the red tulip and last year's oak leaf really looked alive. The best picture the artist had ever painted.

'That must be why I felt sorry to pick the tulip – the red tulip and oak leaf in the picture saved me from an evil deed,' he mused. 'This really is my best picture ever.'

He congratulated himself on completing the task, told himself he was undoubtedly talented and imagined how he would show the painting to his wife and children, how they would give him a smacking kiss on both cheeks and thank him for this magic gift.

'But I'll call this picture 'Two Lives' instead of 'Two Deaths', that's more fitting,' the artist decided.

He folded up the easel, grinning, and set off for home. He turned back for a second, took the oak leaf so amazingly similar to yesterday's leaf from the bench, carried it to the flower bed and left it between the most beautiful red tulips.

'Two lives! Two lives!' the artist whispered rapturously, and walked home very pleased with himself. Yesterday's swallow circled in the sky above him, accompanying him as far as his house.

But what became of our red tulip and last year's oak leaf?

This is what happened.

That morning a little boy and girl took a walk in the park. They went along the same path, past the bench where our friends lay. The little girl picked up the red tulip: 'Look, a tulip. But it's ugly and dying.'

'Surely not?! Oak leaf, is that true?!' cried the red tulip in despair. 'Oak leaf, why don't you answer me? Am I so ugly you stopped loving me? Why don't you answer, why don't you love me any more?'

The oak leaf loved the red tulip as passionately and devotedly as ever and answered as loudly as he could, but his reply was inaudible. The little boy had unknowingly stepped on the oak leaf and completely covered it with his sandal.

'The tulip needs water. Quick, put it in the fountain,' advised the boy. The little girl agreed and the children ran to the fountain, giggling loudly.

'Take me too! Take me too!!!' the oak leaf desperately shouted after them.

But the children couldn't hear – they were already too far away. And they couldn't understand plant language, anyway.

At that moment the swallow returned to find her friends of the previous day. Seeing the disastrous turn of events, she seized the oak leaf in her beak and flew to the fountain with him.

The children had already tossed the tulip in the water. The stalk immediately sank and only her purple head bobbed to and fro on the surface. The tulip thirstily drank the water and wept bitterly. Now she had enough water the tulip could give way to tears.

But then a miracle occurred! The swallow dropped the oak leaf right beside her! What a joyous encounter!

'Do you still love me, my darling oak leaf?'

'Even more than before, my lovely red tulip!'

And they splashed, embraced, kissed and splashed again. They were carried by a light breeze. Our friends were overcome by joy and happiness.

But the tulip inadvertently scooped too much water in her petals. Before she had time to tip it out the tulip found she was sinking to the bottom.

'My darling oak leaf, help me!' was all she had time to shout.

'Hang on! Here I come!!!' cried the oak leaf, splashing about in the water with all his might to get wet and dive after the tulip. The warm breeze helped as much as it could. Finally the oak leaf began sinking through the water.

By now the red tulip was lying on the bottom, smiling at the oak leaf. The oak leaf smiled back at her. That's how they expressed their love and devotion to one another. Being born on dry land, they were unable to talk in the watery depths.

But disaster struck again. The underwater current in the fountain carried the red tulip and the oak leaf in different directions. This was more than they could bear. After ending up at opposite sides of the fountain, unable to see one another, they died of a broken heart at the very same moment. Although only their delicate bodies died, not their eternal, unyielding souls.

For a long time the swallow circled over the fountain, chirping pitifully. Then she flew to the oak tree, to the bench where she hoped to wait for the artist and see her friends again in the picture. When he finally appeared and she

saw the painting, her heart overflowed with joy – the red tulip and the oak leaf had come to life in the picture, their souls had transmigrated. The red tulip and the oak leaf thanked the swallow for her help once again, asked her to stay close by forever and swore a vow of eternal friendship. The swallow agreed and they heard her – they were alive and all was well.

When the artist went home the swallow accompanied him as far as his house, so she knew where the picture would hang.

When he entered the house his wife and children smacked kisses on both his cheeks and spoke kind, tender and loving words – they really liked the painting.

It was hung in a spacious sunlit room and the swallow had a good view of the picture from a large open window. That day she perched on the windowsill for a long time, chatting with her friends who had come alive again on the canvas. And she went on visiting them, day after day.

The children saw that the swallow came and perched on the windowsill every single day. After a while she grew brave and flew into the room, where the children kindly fed her shelled pine nuts. After that she visited the room every day, took nuts from the children and perched next to the painting, talking for hours with the red tulip and the oak leaf – about the sun, the blue sky, the snow-white clouds and the warm rain, bringing the latest news from the park and the world outside. The red tulip and the oak leaf felt as if they were flying like birds, seeing and knowing everything, singing the birds' loud, joyous songs. Eternal friendship and true love turned their life into an everlasting, joyful celebration.

When the swallow grew old her fledglings flew to see the picture. And when the artist's children had their own children, they too fed the visiting swallows their favourite pine nuts and listened to their merry chatter with the red tulip and the oak leaf.

To this day swallows fly inside the room to look at the picture, chattering in their own special language with the red tulip and last year's leaf, who will live forever.

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