

A CHANGE OF SEASONS

The old man leaned on the bridge's railing, watching the end of September be the end of September – melancholy and wet and above all, indecisive.

“Neither one thing nor the other,” his sister Jan would say, “Too cold to swim and too hot to ski, no *oomph* to it!”

He had always considered this somewhat unfair. After all, September is an equinox month, and you can't balance two opposite truths without something breaking. Or was that how balancing eggs on the equinox was an urban myth, that is, a lie? Something about truth and lies and breaking eggs anyway; it was getting harder to remember.

He turned away from watching the stream below and caught sight instead of a bus pulling away from a nearby stop. The back of it was taken up by a travel agency ad exhorting him to see the world. He was just reflecting how after thirty or forty times even that gets old when the running girl plowed into him and bounced off.

She fell backwards, splayed out, onto the slushy sidewalk; all her things went straight up, and when it came back down – in the slow-motion way disasters pretend to have about them – her coffee splattered into a tragic puddle all around the old man's feet. She stared up at him in shock; old he was, but not small, easily six foot four with shoulders like a sheltering oak tree and a huge white beard that would be the envy of any streetcorner Santa. He was dressed in a tweed suit and wool coat at the height of fashion for 150 years ago, and despite leaning on a cane had felt as solid as a wall.

“Oh dear me, I am so very sorry. Are you all right, my dear?” he said, reaching a huge hand to help her up.

“My bus!” she said, in tones of deep anguish, then took the hand and climbed to her feet. She stared after the retreating bus for a moment (“*Key Largo? Montego? Isn't it time you go?*”) then sighed. “No... look, I'm sorry. I was trying to catch the bus, didn't look where I was going – hey, are *you* okay?”

The old man grinned. “Yes, I am fine.” Then he sniffed the air. The spilled coffee was producing non-coffee-like smells he mostly associated with pie at the end of a holiday feast.

“Damn it anyway. Mud. October can't get here fast enough.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“Yeah. Of course. Real fall. Leaves and a chill of winter and Halloween, not just this... wet.”

He paused for a moment. “If you are not still in a hurry, I would very much like to buy you a coffee to replace the one that met its end because of my untimely presence.”

“Oh no, I couldn't do that! It was my fault anyway!”

“Grant an old man a moment of generosity? At my age there's no knowing if it may be the last one.”

“If... if you're really sure... and there won't be another bus for almost an hour... well, all right then.” She stuck out her hand. “I'm Sera, by the way.”

He clasped her hand gently in his. “I am pleased to know you, Sera.”

Soon they were seated together in a coffee shop not far from the site of their impactful first encounter, holding identical paper cups with identical beverages inside.

The old man sipped his with something of an air of fascination. “This is a ‘pumpkin spice latte’, you said? But it has no pumpkin...”

Sera smiled. “No, just the spices that get used on pumpkin. There’s a lot of stuff you can get like that now. It’s either a celebration of fall or a desperate fad for nutmeg and allspice, depending who you ask.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “And I’ll tell you a little secret: I love all of them. Even the dollar-store candles. My friends think I lose my mind every year, but... I can’t help it! October especially is *my* month. Fall just fills me with... with... I don’t know.”

The old man’s eyebrows rose. “Wonder, perhaps?”

“Yeah! Wonder. That’s it.”

He chuckled. “Wonderful! I was like that too, a long long time ago. I suppose my job just drains it out of one.”

“Oh yeah? What do you do?”

“I am... a public servant. Yes, that is the way to put it. I organize and arrange things. Very seasonal work.”

Sera took a sip. “Wow. I can see how that could get monotonous. Almost as bad as my job! Office assistant at a shipping accounting firm. Ugh.”

“Oh, things changed. Things changed a great deal, especially in the last few years.”

“Mm. The Internet can be hard to keep up with.”

“No, no. I have no dealings with that. I mean things like this.” He held up his latte as though it was, personally, the source of all his problems. “Modern things, strange things. I used to know my name meant something, and I suppose it must do still, but I don’t always know *what*.”

“Your name. I don’t think I caught it?”

He paused a moment, deciding how best to answer this, and went for the blunt truth.

“I am October,” said October.

“Oh, like how The Saint sometimes went by August? I didn’t even know that was ever a people name!”

“To my knowledge, it is not.”

Sera squinted at him, suddenly worried she’d gone to coffee with an escaped asylum inmate. October just regarded her mildly with his inscrutable storm-blue eyes and let her stare at him. A few hairs caught Sera’s eye, and she suddenly knew with certainty that the old man’s white hair and beard had once been the brilliant red-gold of sunlight shining through autumn leaves.

“My dear, It has been my job for two hundred years to make the proper arrangements for my time of the year, to arrange the ripening of the harvest and the first snowflakes of winter yet to come. September is my brother, prim and proper but desperately indecisive and mercurial.”

The girl slowly pushed her chair back. “Ooooookay then, I’ve definitely got to get going, thanks for the coffee, see you later, and so on...”

October made no move to get up or bar her way. “Yes, it does sound rather crazy, does it not? I said much the same myself two hundred years ago.”

The sensible part of Sera’s mind, the part that had suggested that stopping for a latte on her way to catch an inconsistent bus might have been a bad idea, watched in horror as the rest of her pulled the chair back in. Something about this old man was tugging at the parts of her that were still six years old and jumping in leaf piles, the parts that still felt, deep down, that ‘magic’ wasn’t just a word for stage men with decks of cards and no fashion sense.

“Only two hundred years? What about before then? There had to have always been a... a tenth month, hadn’t there?” she said.

“The October before me had been a sailor and still looked it, with a great red brocade coat and a huge handlebar mustache you could hang a shovel from. Still red. He told me the one before him was a crusader, both harsh and just, but of course I did not meet him.” He chuckled. “There has always been an October, my dear, but surely you can see October of, say, 1965, would be very different from that of 1720, and neither of them at all like the one in 1012. Times change, and time changes with them. To my knowledge there has been only one thing October has always been: a redhead.”

Sera unconsciously rubbed the back of her head. Her hair was a layering of dark blues and turquoises, but her natural color was indeed dark copper. “Why are you telling me this? You know this sounds ridiculous, right?”

October took a long sip of his coffee. When he met Sera’s gaze again, it was with an expression of deep sadness. “I know. Of course, once upon a time, the notion of the Earth orbiting the sun, or of maladies caused by minuscule creatures also sounded ridiculous. Yes yes, I know, it is not the same thing. I have not spoken of the work to anyone but my brothers and sisters in ages; I do not care to be looked at like a madman.”

“Your brothers and sisters?” Sera broke in, “As in... May, August... months?”

“Indeed. It is a strange family that comes and goes. My sister May is a gentle soul, older again than me; August is new, and he is a dark, dour boy who I fear thinks too much of the power of the ever hotter sun. As for why I am telling you, surely you must have figured it out. We do not age like mortals, but we age when time begins to pass us by... and I fear I am very much at the end of my days. I used to preside over the great harvest and folk preparing for winter; now the harvests and the feasts are unconnected and the changing climate means I am not entirely certain what October will even be ten years hence. I simply do not understand, and I am too old and tired to learn this much-too-fast world. So I have been looking for a successor.”

“Me?”

He nodded.

“Were you waiting for me? Have you been watching me??”

“Not at all, not at all. I have known you no longer than you have known me, about forty-three minutes. But when we met, without knowing who or what I was, you told me of your love of fall.”

He grinned. “And you told me October was *your* month.”

Sera stared at him. This had gone well beyond ‘crazy’ and into ‘call the police’, but still she sat.

“What... if I say no?”

“I bid you a good day, and continue my search with a heavier heart.”

“Will I remember any of this?”

“I presume so. Perhaps the tale of introducing a crazy old man who thinks he is a month to pumpkin spice lattes will serve to entertain your friends.”

“And what if...” Sera said, ignoring the screaming in the sensible part of her mind, “what if I say yes?”

October smiled and, just for a moment, laid one of his gnarled old hands on hers. “I believe you just did.”

The girl blinked and looked around. She was alone, with no sign that the old man had ever been there, not even his coffee cup. She rubbed her face. “Oookay, this is a thing that happened? Come on. Get it together. You don’t need to be hallucinating in public. And you do need to catch a bus.”

She grabbed her things and hurried out of the coffee shop. When she brushed against the coffee shop’s corporately-approved bushes, some of the leaves began to turn red, but in her hurry she did not notice this, nor the way a chill in the air began to follow her, nor even how her hair had somehow returned to its natural colors. There would be time enough to notice these things when it was her month.

After all, the one thing October always was, was a redhead.