

Abraham's Leaf
by

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NEW QUEBEC: SHELTER CITY NUMBER 5

WORK COMPLETED 2032

FILTER ENVIRONMENT VENT NUMBER 484

“last service 2063.” Was hand written beneath these words. That was four years ago, Abraham thought proudly. Four years ago he was only eight years old. He remembered reading all of this information posted by the Environvent since, well, since he had first started walking down this way to school. He could even remember when he didn’t understand all of the words, and of course he remembered the day when he finally understood each and every word.

‘last ser’vice 2063.’ He remembered when that part used to change every year, but it had stayed the same for the past four years. That was a long time, hard to imagine that much time all at once, but he had seen it and he had read it every day for four whole years; he always came this way -- even when there were no classes.

Abraham stood looking at the vent, pondering the wonders of time and memory as the pleasant mixed flow of air ruffled his black bangs and tickling the pale white flesh by his ear. He rubbed the tickling away and dropped some of his lessons from class. He bent down to pick up the small circular discs that held his work for the weekend. He should be hurrying home, he

thought, as he gathered them up.

Just then he heard a noise that was totally unfamiliar to him. He looked around puzzled. He saw nothing. The hall tube was spotlessly empty.

He heard the noise again, not a loud sound. It was a soft inviting sound to Abraham. He heard the noise yet again and marveled at its soft strangeness. It beckoned him towards...

The vent.

He stepped closer to slats and put his head close to it... yes the sound was in there. It reminded him vaguely of a scratching noise. Suddenly something made the noise again, then sprang out of the vent and floated, rather than fell, to the floor of the tube.

Shocked, Abraham stepped back making a small grunt.

The thing didn't move from its spot on the floor.

Well, thought Abraham, what was it? It was bright red. It was larger than his hand and lying almost flat on the floor. He bent down closer and saw veins in its thin surface. He had learned about veins just last year in detail. But it didn't seem to be an animal.

He touched it timidly with his finger. It made a little noise but didn't move on its own.

There was a sort of thin handle sticking out of the wider part of it. He grabbed it gently. It uttered its little noise (in protest?) and then he was holding it.

Well, it didn't bite and it didn't breathe so it must not be alive. Then again, it didn't look dead either. Abraham stared at it hoping some clue would magically surface.

He liked the colors. At first it had just looked red, but up close he saw a whole range of burnt colors. Why, the light went right through it, making the warm colors glow.

Its thin flat surface had uneven but symmetrical edges. He counted five points along the edges. He rubbed the surface between two fingers.

He breathed in sharply and stopped. He had made a small rip in the thing. It was delicate, fragile; he would have to be careful taking it home.

That was it! Take it home!! Dad would know what it was and then he could put it in his room. Abraham smiled and started walking on down the tube to his family's door. The thing made its little crinkling noise as he walked.

The family door looked him over with electronic neutrality, then connected the patterns Abraham formed to decide whether to let him in or not. He was growing so quickly now that it took a while before it recognized him and opened.

His father was there, reclined on the fluid couch, while his little sister played nearby, only his mother was out of view.

"Hello Abraham!" they all said.

"Dad, Dad, look what I found!" Abraham rushed across the room towards his father who turned to look at him.

Abraham stopped in place, because he saw a look on his father's face he had never seen before. His father looked totally frozen. Blank. He'd never seen that look before, it was like his father was wearing a mask or something.

"Where in the world did you find it?" his father asked.

"It fell out of the Environvent just down the tube."

Abraham saw the troublesome look disappear from Dad's face. He was glad to see it go. Now Dad was Dad again, he still knew everything, he'd just forgotten for a second or two.

"I haven't seen one of these for a long time."

"What is it Dad?" Abraham asked eagerly.

"It's a leaf, Abraham."

A "leaf", thought Abraham, what a wonderful name.

Abraham's sister came over to look at the mysterious object. Abraham's mother heard their voices and came out into the main room to see what was going on. She was a good deal younger than her husband and had never known life outside of the Shelter City.

"It's a pretty color, huh Dad?" asked Abraham. His father spun the leaf slowly in his fingers holding onto the "stem."

"Leaves are only this color in the fall, Abraham. Most of the time they were green, bright greens. Your Grandfather's book tells about leaves and trees. You can look at it and see. We used to have something called seasons and one of them was fall or autumn. It would start to get cold in autumn." The leaf spun slowly between his Dad's fingers as he recalled these strange times from yesterday."

"Like refrigeration?" asked Abraham's awed voice.

"Yes, like that but slower." His father shook his head. "It's been so long, how long, I can't remember. Forty years, probably more than that. In the fall there were thousands of leaves, brown, red, gold, copper, all combined, bronze leaves in piles as high as your nose, Abraham. They would float free of the trees and rustle on the ground and they had a nice smell. I was little Abraham, smaller than you are now, but I remember the smell."

His father lifted the leaf to his nose.

"Dad, it makes a noise when it falls or when you touch it hard, is that a rustle?" His mother came closer.

"What did you find Abraham?" She asked in a nervous voice.

"It's a leaf mom!" Abraham turned back to his father, "Is it alive or dead?"

His father gently handed the leaf back. "Well, it's dead, but it won't decay or anything like that. If you're careful you can preserve it for a long time."

Abraham's sister screamed. "It's dead, Mommy, it's dead!"

The little girl ran to her mother and leaped into her arms. Her mother held her tightly; the little girl was terrified.

Abraham held the leaf up by its stem and walked toward his mother and sister. "Anne,

it won't hurt you, it's not a bad kind of dead!"

The girl screamed even more loudly when he brought the leaf closer to her, but she was scared of everything, so it didn't bother Abraham. But he was surprised that his mother was scared too.

"Abraham, put that thing down! It came from outside, it's contaminated."

Abraham looked confused.

"It's probably all right," his father said.

"Probably all right!" She said, "The entire outside world is contaminated. Why do you think we live in here? That thing isn't from the past, it's from right here and now. You know how many diseases are outside now, and your son has this dead thing in here where it could infect us!"

Abraham's father knew that she was probably right. The city had been disease-free since they had all entered it. The slightest little thing might set off a plague.

"Abraham, you do as your mother says." His voice sounded sad. Abraham stood all alone in the middle of the room holding the red-gold leaf.

"NO," he shouted with conviction, "NO, it's not bad! It's just a leaf. My leaf!"

He ran to his bedroom. The door slid shut behind him. He took one of his lesson discs and wedged it under the door. A friend at class had told him this would keep the door shut, it did something to do with the door's magnetism and jam it.

Outside of the door, Abraham heard his mother's muffled voice saying she was calling the contamination crew. Then it was quiet.

Abraham sniffed a little and rubbed a tear off his cheek. He had to hide the leaf before the contamination crew got in. It had to be a good hiding place because if they found it they'd destroy it and he would never have another leaf again.

He heard unfamiliar voices from the other side of the door. The contamination crew was

here! He heard them tapping at the outside of the door. Then he saw something sticking through the door from other side. They knew what he had done! They'd knock his lesson chip out from under the crack and it would be all over.

He went to the door and grabbed the little rod they had stuck under the door and pulled it through to his side. He heard a surprised noise from the strangers outside. He'd shown them. But not for long...

They'd find something else to stick under the door soon enough. He had to find a hiding place. Now. Then, just when he was about to panic, he found the perfect place just as another rod knocked his lesson chip out from under the crack and the door opened.

His mother pulled him out of the room as the sensing devices went in and starting going over his entire room, tasting, smelling, compiling all of the facts and figures its senses gave it.

Abraham sat with his family in the main room and waited, hoping his hiding place would fool the sensors. One man from the team grimly checked each of them out for any contamination as well. Abraham was nervous but felt fairly secure. "Don't worry, we're all okay." He told the man as he looked them over.

"How can you know that little man?" The guy said almost laughing at Abraham.

"I don't know as much as you, but I know that." Abraham said strongly.

"A lot of people thought they knew a lot of things, but look where we ended up." The man said.

"Well, they should have learned more, like I have." Abraham spoke defiantly.

"Maybe." Was the last thing the man said, he exchanged looks with Abraham's mom and dad and finished examining them.

Finally the entire job was done. The female head of the contamination team stayed behind while the others left.

"Well, we didn't find a trace of contamination of any kind," she told them.

Abraham's mother and father sighed with relief.

"Are you going to fix the Environvent?" asked his mother.

"Yes, we're doing that right now. Nothing like this is going to happen again. From now on, all the vents will be serviced regularly; it was a ghastly mistake to miss that one."

That night his mother was tucking him into bed and tried to explain.

"Abraham, I'm sorry I had to take that thing away from you, but even though you're very smart you don't know how invisible things made people sick..."

"Invisible things like ghosts?" Abraham interrupted.

"Well, yes I suppose..."

"But ghosts aren't real and invisible things are just like pretend."

"Well these things look invisible, but they are just very very small and they made people die and ruined most of the world, we're lucky to be in the city and be alive and we have to keep it safe to survive."

"What about those nice things dad said about the way the outside was..."

"Those were true once, but not anymore, do you understand?"

Abraham said yes, and that was the end of the incident for everyone except Abraham.

He still had the leaf. Abraham learned that it was a sugar maple leaf. He read all about it in his grandfather's book of trees. Which is where he hidden it from the contamination crew. He kept the leaf in-between the pages of the big book and his father was right, it didn't decay.

Books were so rare, the crew probably didn't know that it opened and never thought to look inside. Everyone read from screens these days.

He kept the leaf from drying out completely with a moisturizing agent he developed when he got a little older. He learned more and more about what had gone wrong outside and began to try to think of ways to fix them. He grew taller than both his parents and his sister but still had more to learn to be the great scientist he wanted to be. Yet the more he knew the more

he still believed that what was once true could be true again.

Someday when he was much older and fully-grown, he planned on taking the leaf back outside. Because where there was one leaf there must be another and the tree that the leaves came from.

He would go outside and find the tree and lay his leaf under it along with the others where it belonged. And then Abraham would sit down in the grass and listen to the rustling of the leaves in some future autumn.

THE END

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