Autumn Valentines or (Why Trees Lose Their Leaves)

By, Jessica McIlvaine

Valentine’s Day occurs every year during the cool autumn months, as everyone knows… well, if you’re a tree anyway! And, to be truthful, Valentine’s DAY lasts much longer than one day. It’s more like a Valentine’s Season, and it can go on for many weeks; sometimes until the first snowfall. It was first celebrated by trees near and far many, many, MANY centuries ago… before the world was round if you can believe that, but that’s another story entirely! As a matter of fact, it was discovered quite by accident, as most great discoveries often are, by a most unlikely character as well.

The Great Inventor, as he later became known, started out his life as a very small tree. Yes, The Great Inventor was a tree. Trees are capable of inventing things too, you know! Where was I…? Oh, yes… The Great Inventor was a very, very small tree. However, he felt that he was destined to do wonderful things. He wanted to make a difference in the world but he was frustrated by his small size. He had the heart of a great oak tree but he couldn’t seem to grow much taller than a sapling. Year after year, he would watch the trees around him grow taller and taller, but he always seemed to stay the same. He couldn’t grow fruit like the apple or peach trees (he could just grow more green leaves). No one decorated him at Christmas like the evergreen and pine trees and squirrels couldn’t collect acorns from his branches like the oak trees. He tried everything he could think of to be noticed, but he was just an ordinary, little tree.

In the little tree’s part of the forest, if he looked around all of the much taller trees, he could see another little tree very much like him. This tree was on the other side of a small stream and was a very pretty little tree. He wanted very much for the pretty little tree to notice him, but without fruit or flowers to offer, all he could do was let the wind blow gently through his leaves to her. He wanted to spout beautiful poetry, but all the wind say was, “Helllloooo”. The wind was frustratingly unhelpful!

One cool afternoon, when the tree was feeling particularly sad and starting to wonder if he was destined to be a weeping willow, he noticed a small, human boy in the forest. The little tree forgot about his troubles and was immediately overjoyed to have a visitor! Humans very rarely came into the forest, so he tried to stand up as straight as he could to get the boy’s attention. To his delight, the boy chose to sit under the little tree to rest. He chose HIM! Out of all the much taller trees in the forest, the boy chose him! Maybe there was something special about him after all! The little tree looked around to see if anyone was noticing this great honor, but, as usual, the taller trees were all busy looking over his head! He especially wanted the pretty little tree to take note of this wonderful occurrence, but he couldn’t tell if she saw him or not; all he could see were green leaves… he was getting so tired of the color green! He sighed a frustrated and disappointed sigh and decided to focus his attention on the boy sitting just below his leaves.

Now, the little tree wasn’t exactly an expert on humans, but as humans went, this boy seemed to be particularly small. Plus, he could see that the boy looked a lot like how he had been feeling earlier. He definitely had a bit of the weeping willow within him! This young boy was doing a great deal of his own frustrated and disappointed sighing.

After a few minutes, the boy picked up a pink daisy and began to spin the stem gently between his fingertips. With the loudest sign yet, the boy began to pull the petals off the flower. The little tree was fascinated by the actions of this human boy and was startled when he actually began to speak. With the first petal, the boy said, “She loves me” and with the second petal, he said, “She loves me not”. Each time the boy pulled a petal from the daisy, he would say, “She loves me” or “She loves me not”. Soon, the boy was down to his final petal. As the boy pulled the last petal from the small, pink flower, he happily declared, “She loves me!” This action made the boy very happy and the little tree watched as he jumped to his feet and skipped out of the forest singing, “She loves me, she loves me, she loves me!!!….”

The little tree remembered how sad the human boy had been earlier and he wondered how something as simple as pulling the petals from a flower could produce so much joy. Unfortunately, picking up a flower was something that the little tree couldn’t do. For years, he had thought that growing UP would make him happy, but now he was wondering if bending DOWN to pick up a flower was the key to his happiness?

While he was pondering everything he had just seen he happened to notice that the pretty little tree was looking directly at him! The little tree couldn’t believe what he was seeing! She had never looked at him before… had she? Their eyes locked for an instant and the little tree quickly looked away. He didn’t know what to do!

Suddenly, a strange feeling began to come over him. He grew warmer and warmer and no matter what he did he couldn’t make the feeling stop. He glanced over at the pretty tree again hoping that she could offer him some help, but she was just staring at him with wide eyes. In fact, he began noticing that all of the trees were looking at him in much the same way. He wondered what everyone was staring at (because that was very rude), so he looked at his reflection in the slow running stream. He let out a loud GASP when he saw himself in the water. He was stunned to see that all of his once ordinary green leaves were turning a bright shade of red!

All of the birds and animals of the forest began to chatter loudly, “Look at his leaves! Look at his leaves!” And the continuously unhelpful wind was rustling the leaves of the other trees and said, “WOWWwww!” The little tree began to think that everyone in the whole forest was looking at him! He kept glancing in the stream, but each time he looked, he saw that his leaves were growing a deeper and brighter shade of red.

Just then, a loud crow, who nobody really liked, flew into the forest and perched in the little tree’s branches. The crow knew the human world very well. He lived in their cornfields and would mockingly squawk about something called “scarecrows”! The little tree had always figured that the humans must not like the loud crow any more than the forest community did if they went out of their way to build things that were specially designed just to scare him away! The crow looked at the little tree up and down and immediately began to laugh loudly; even more loudly than he usually laughed, which was pretty loud! Through his loud and hysterical squawks, the little tree could start to make out what the crow was saying. “He’s blushing… he’s in love… he’s blushing because he’s in love!” The crow was laughing so hard that he almost fell off the branch that he had perched on. The little tree began to wonder where he could get one of those “scarecrow” things that he had heard about.

The crow let out one last hysterical squawk and flew out of the little tree’s crimson leaves. He flew up into the clouds crowing as he went, “He’s blushing! He’s in love! He’s blushing! He’s in love….” The little tree knew that he was still turning a brighter and brighter shade of red and began to wish that he could just be average again with his boring green leaves. He wanted to be noticed, but this was NOT what he had in mind!

Then, in the midst of his most embarrassing moment, the little tree suddenly thought about the human boy whom he had seen earlier. He thought about how the boy had removed the petals of the flower and wondered if he could make his leaves fall off as well. He was desperate! The only thing that he wanted to do was to lose his strange, red leaves! So, with one final glance at the pretty little tree (who was still staring at him by the way) he began to let his leaves fall to the ground one by one.

Just as the human boy had taught him, as each leaf fell, the little tree quietly muttered to himself, “She loves me, she loves me not. She loves me, she loves me not…” This took a lot of concentration for the little tree since he had never dropped so many of his leaves before. Maybe one leaf here and there to shoo a pesky insect away, but never ALL of his leaves before. He was so busy concentrating that he failed to notice two things. First, his quiet muttering about love had grown to almost a shout and second, they were all now focused on the pretty little tree on the other side of the calm stream. It was barely noticeable at first, but as each red leaf fell, the change in the pretty little tree couldn’t be ignored. She was blushing! At first, she was just a soft shade of pink, but the color quickly deepened to red as she watched each of his leaves fall and listened to him chant, “She loves me, she loves me not. She loves me, she loves me not…”

The little tree finally let his last leaf fall. As it drifted slowly to the ground, the once unhelpful wind, caught the leaf in a soft breeze and sent it over to the pretty little tree. The little tree watched his leaf float through the air and then locked eyes with the pretty little tree. “She loves me!” the little tree declared happily as his last leaf fluttered to the ground beside the pretty little tree who was now just as red as he had once been. He was also surprised to see that many of the other trees around him were changing too. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one who was hiding his true colors!

Some of the trees blushed in different colors. There was orange, and yellow and purple as well as several different shades of red. It was all very beautiful! The other trees then followed the little tree’s lead and began to let their leaves fall. The forest echoed with a chorus of “She loves me, she loves me not” or “He loves me, he loves me not.” until the ground was covered with brightly colored autumn valentines.

The little tree, or The Great Inventor, smiled as he admired what he had started. The bigger trees had finally noticed him and he now knew that the pretty little tree loved him. The older trees were very impressed with the little tree and decided that he should be honored. On that day, it was decided that during each autumn, all the trees of all the forests in the world would make their feelings known to their true loves. Except for the pine trees… they’re too prickly! They would still have to rely on the humans to decorate them with any color.

Our Great Inventor grew up to be one of the tallest trees in the forest. The smaller trees would turn to him and his wise (and pretty) wife for advice. He was and still is a great celebrity and many of the younger saplings wanted to know if all the stories they had heard were true. They couldn’t believe that there was a time without autumn valentines and that he had once been as small and as ordinary as they were. He answered all of their questions with great pride and patience. He had made a difference in the forest and he had proven to himself, and to others, that anyone could be extraordinary if they try hard enough and believe in themselves enough to not give up.