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Falling

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Falling

by Kerri Kor

True autumn doesn't come with a date on a calendar; it comes with a change in the air, a certain quality of light, the heightened busy-work of birds and squirrels, the deepening of nature's colors. And it comes for each person, early in the new academic year, when the buzz of human concerns crashes head-on with the ancient rites of transition. Groans and grumbles and added stress change in that moment of messy glorious perfection when we are once more reduced to parts of the whole and the illusion of control gives way to Reality. Will you recognize it when it comes for you?

Amy recognized it. She was crossing campus deep in thought and fearful of her own flashes of brilliant insight. A thistledown traveling along each new current caught her attention and they gazed at each other for one suspended beat. Two. Three. Amy realized then just how long she had been holding her breath – probably since the first rush of student loans and class schedules and textbook purchases had begun. She breathed beyond now and the world spun in sparkling jewel-toned light. The heat of Indian summer was betrayed by the lingering scent of early morning wood smoke. The ebb and flow of the university surrounded her. She was amidst the tide of fresh-faced students and time-honored professors and revolving administrators. With them but in that moment not of them. The hum of some unknown beetle species drowned out all other sound. Straining to understand she thought she could just make out a ritual chant inside the beat of its wings.

“Contemplating the theory of everything?” Amy jumped at Ross' velvet voice. He stood there all golden and strong and well, all male. She was sure he had flaws. She just hadn't discovered them yet. How she longed to begin that exploration.

“What?” Oh, yes, that was showing off her extreme intellect. This is what he did to her, turned her into a babbling child bereft of any originality or substance. But he was grinning that slow smile, his eyes lit and still interested, so she tried again.

“Yes, TOE, the focus of my dissertation. And right now my thesis is that everything laughs at all our theory-making.” That was better.

“I agree,” he said. “So come to lunch with me.” It didn't follow, logically, but she didn't

care, and she went.

The thistledown bobbed alongside them like a fun-loving third whose sole purpose is to increase the romantic tension. They only had twenty-five minutes left before afternoon classes, plenty of time to fuel their next eternity. They fed and talked and laughed and flirted. Amy gave up trying to halt the prophetic visions of little Ross-A-mies playing in front of a charming cottage safely snuggled by proverbial white pickets. That would come, of course, after her brilliant success in the professional world and just before Ross won the Nobel for his service to underprivileged populations.

The thistledown had waited in a playful dust-devil just outside the café. It accompanied them towards lecture hall. Perhaps it noticed that Amy held a certain aura about her, like untidy hair and glowing skin and tumultuous sensations. Perhaps it also noticed how careful Ross was to occasionally let his bare arm brush up against Amy's and how carefully she returned the favor by leaning just slightly towards the middle with every third step. Maybe it knew how little they would be pondering scholarly thoughts in their next class, or wondered how often they would remember to snap to attention when the professor's eyes roamed over their places. By tonight they might regret missing that important piece of information needed for final exams, to advance to the next level in their academic careers. Right now they could care less, and next semester was a whole season away. This was a time of primordial transition, when new thoughts and new complexities were running up hard against the seductive call of warm earthy blankets and tempting cornucopias of old wisdom, a time of virginal maidens descending to underworld lords, a time of letting rest and letting go because, really, what else can be done when it comes down to it? Such ancient rites will not be denied.

Nature mimicked man as the thistledown brushed itself carefully against a leaf of newly golden-red, and the leaf returned the favor by leaning slightly towards the ground. Amy and Ross entered the subtle arch of the hall, their theories of everything laden around them like ripe fruit hanging from an arbor. Some unknown species of beetle quickened its humming chant. The thistledown knew when to leave like a good third wheel should. It whisked away but looked back at the tree. The golden-red leaf trembled, yearned, stretched, then finally let go, falling. Autumn had come.

Kerri Kor is an adjunct in Religion and Humanities at DUC. A fall baby herself, she revels in the colors and layers and mysteries of the season. During the rest of the year she spends her time studying, writing, and tending to her small human family and even larger creature clan somewhere near the wild northern California coast.