

## Hold the Golden Seasons

An oak leaf rose from the ground and rejoined its branch. All around, trees had exchanged their autumn gold for shades of emerald and jade. Apples and pears unripened in the orchards. And swallows abandoned their journeys south to dart back into the cornflower blue sky over the village. There were no more promises whispered in woodsmoke of morning mists and shortening days. The valley sulked beneath the curse of eternal summer.

By the twin birch trees at the forest edge, wept Conal, the candle maker's son. "I didn't mean it," he said, lifting his sunburnt face to the green canopy above. "I'm sorry."

A fortnight ago, he'd blown out the special birthday candle his father had carved from beeswax. And somehow, in the strangeness of his mother's absence, the fateful words had shot from him like an arrow. Conal had wished aloud that it could be summer the whole year through.

"Turn round three times and spit," ordered his grandmother.

"Cross your fingers, toes, eyes, everything!" said his cousins.

And hadn't he tried to unwish it? Yet the day after his party, the sun came up an hour earlier and sank two hours later. Conal's father said his candle business was ruined.

"Can anyone hear me?" Conal called into the trees. "I'll do anything to restore the seasons to their rightful place."

A figure stepped from behind an oak. Her hair was cobwebs, sparkling

with dew. Her skin was rimed with white, and her dress glowed with every tint of copper and rust missing from the landscape. “Never underestimate the power of wishes, Conal,” she said, in a voice like twigs cracking underfoot. “Are you a fish?”

Though Conal blinked and stared, the woman remained, no figment of his imagination. He shook his head.

“Then stop gaping and account for your actions. What devilment made you banish me?”

“Are you... Are you... Autumn?”

“You need to ask? Now answer my question.”

“It wasn’t devilment, honestly it wasn’t.” He wiped his rough linen sleeve across his eyes. “Everyone kept saying what a glorious summer it had been. I wanted more of it. The warmth and the colours. Games in the fields. And no chilblains.”

Autumn’s mouth grew pinched. “And so you dismissed me like some servant?”

“Not exactly. I just wished for summer all year round. Next day, the roses in grandmother’s garden burst into flower as never before. I thought she’d be pleased. But she said it wasn’t natural, that late in the year.”

“So you banished me for roses?” chided Autumn.

“Not only for roses,” cried Conal. “Last winter was the cruellest ever. Toiling to keep the fire lit. Breaking the ice in the well. Finding enough food.”

“So you banished me for an easy life.”

“That’s not it either.” Conal shivered in the heat, as memories bled through his bones.

“What then?”

“My mother died last winter. And though no-one said it, by my birthday we all knew we were reaching that time again. Father seemed weighed down with sorrow. My sister Granya sobbed herself to sleep. I couldn’t face the thought of darkness and snow ahead. None of us could.”

Autumn’s breezy sigh made Conal’s skin tingle. “Life can be as short as a mayfly’s or as long as an oak tree’s. Everything has its own cycle, Conal. From seed to harvest. From the dark-of-the-moon to the shining. From high tide to low.” She spread out her arms and danced a perfect circle, her skirts whipping up clouds of dust and beetles. “All seasons are golden, in their own way. No good can come from trying to control them.”

Conal glanced over his shoulder to the village sweltering in the valley. “The soil is dry as ashes. Father asks how we’ll know what to do, with no seasons to guide us. Grandmother says the sloes won’t make a mellow gin, without the frost. Can’t you tell me how to set the year running forwards again?”

From the way Autumn arched her eyebrow, Conal guessed his penance would be a hard one. “What you must do, is bring me an acorn.”

“An acorn?” He looked up. There had been acorns, briefly. But those not gathered by squirrels had climbed back into the oaks once Conal had made his birthday wish. He could see them now, tiny green nubs that nobody could call acorns at all. “But how...?”

He found himself alone again. Couldn’t she have asked for anything but that?

Conal trudged back to the cottage. In the lane, children who had been his friends, were ushered indoors when their mothers saw him. The blacksmith split his thumb, distracted by the sight of Conal passing by.

The village would remember this forever, thought Conal. He would go down in its history as the boy who condemned them to summer without end.

He drew back the curtain that divided his half of the bedroom from Granya's. From beneath his bed he dragged a wooden box, keeper of his most precious possessions. Ten birthday candles. A shell he'd found while helping his father plough the field. The chalk he'd used to learn his alphabet. And, down in a corner, one wizened acorn.

They'd gone to collect kindling for the fire. Was it really a whole year ago? His mother was singing a folk melody, seeming as much a creature of the woods as the deer or the dormice. She had tossed the acorn to Conal, laughing at his surprised leap to catch it.

Now he held it in the palm of his hand. Must he really sacrifice this? But what was the alternative? He knew his mother would ask what need he had of relics. Wasn't she in his heart, head, soul? Yet still a fresh tear rolled down his cheek.

He closed the box, squeezing the acorn tight in his fist back to the forest.

"I'm here," he called. "I've brought it."

No-one answered. What was he to do now? Just wait? Though he stood awhile, Autumn did not appear. All he could do was to plant the acorn, he decided. Maybe it was too withered to grow. Or it might be stolen by squirrels. Or then again, perhaps it would stir itself to life and become a giant of the woods. And whenever Autumn came to claim it, she would see he'd done her bidding.

Scraping out soil with a stick, he buried the acorn. He stood to scuff over the disturbed earth with his foot. And as he did, a leaf fluttered down, brushing his

forehead. Conal caught it before it reached the ground. It was hazel brown. And across the leaf were two words. *Thank you.*

He knew the writing, for it didn't belong to any weird spirit of the seasons. It was written by the same hand that had taught Conal to write. And as he marvelled at the miracle he barely noticed that the light dripping through the trees was no longer green, but amber, ruby and gold.