

a Hy-Vee paper bag with two measly sycamore leaves in it.

Donna stood at the trunk of a wide maple tree (the list specified silver maple AND sugar maple!), tiptoed tall to pluck a red leaf that she examined before letting it flutter to the ground. She said, “We hardly ever do anything, just us.”

Donna’s mother said, “You were at Hy-Vee with me yesterday.”

Donna said, “I mean something fun.”

“We have fun.”

“I know,” Donna said. “You’re right. This is fun. Isn’t it?” She crouched down, then plopped backwards into the grass, flopping on her back, stretching out her arms and legs. Grass stains, Donna’s mother could’ve said, but something stopped her.

Donna pointed straight up. “See that one?” she asked. “That one’s perfect. See it? Way up near the top?”

Donna’s mother couldn’t tell one leaf from another on a whole giant tree rippling with red leaves, but maybe something stopped her from saying that because she said, “Oh, right. That’s a good one. Perfect.” A tiny lie.

“I could climb the tree,” Donna said. But she just giggled and wrapped her arms around her chest. Red hair sprawled wide around her, like a blanket at a picnic. Leaves rustling secretively, tumbling down.

This haunting snapshot: Donna’s crunchy hand-knit sweater, that glorious red hair, eyes fixed on something beautiful and far away and perfect. This girl, her girl, Donna’s mother thought on that day, who would play helper later, passing trays of Hawaiian meatballs, saying goodnight before going to her room, making the adults coo over how sweet Donna was, how polite. “What a little lady,” they’d say. Donna’s mother would rush along the nice words with a modest smile, but secretly she’d accept the compliments, thinking, I make this nice family, I made this “little lady.” She’s *mine*.

But watching Donna under the tree, how impossible not to flow fast into the future, understanding that here’s a girl worried about finding a perfect leaf, but next fall maybe she’ll turn sullen, sneak blue eyeshadow, blast jangly records; she’ll be a teenager out of control, like her brothers (the talk of the