

The Last Leaf

Introduction

This story has been written by William Sydney Porter who is better known by his pen name O. Henry. He is an American short story writer.

Summary

Sue and Johnsy were two young artists. They shared a small flat on the third storey of an old house. It was the month of November and Johnsy fell seriously ill. She had pneumonia. Sue, her friend, sent for the doctor. Although the doctor came everyday, there was no change in Johnsy's condition. The doctor said to Sue that something was worrying Johnsy and if she did not want to live, medicines would not help her.

Sue tried her best to make Johnsy take an interest in things. One day she heard Johnsy counting backwards. Sue anxiously looked out of the window. She saw an old ivy creeper climbing half-way up the brick wall opposite to their window. The creeper was shedding its leaves in the strong winds.

When Sue enquired about why she was counting the falling leaves, Johnsy said that it was because she was sure that when the last leaf falls she will die. Sue told her that all this was nonsense and according to the doctor, she will definitely get well. However, Johnsy is not convinced. She keeps on saying that she will die as soon as the last leaf falls. A worried Sue rushed down to meet Behrman.

Behrman was a sixty-year-old painter who lived on the ground floor. Sue told him how Johnsy felt. Behrman came up. Johnsy was sleeping. Sue showed him the creeper which had only one leaf. Behrman went back to his room. Johnsy woke up the next morning. The first thing that she did was to draw back the curtain and look at the ivy creeper. She was surprised to find that there was still one leaf left. In spite of the storm and the fierce winds the leaf had not fallen. Johnsy says that the leaf would surely fall that day and then she will die. The whole day long she kept looking at the leaf, waiting for it to fall. In the evening, there was another storm and still the leaf did not fall. Johnsy realises her mistake. She called out to Sue and said, "I have been depressed and gloomy. The last leaf has shown me how wicked I have been. I have realised that it is a sin to want to die." Sue hugged Johnsy. Then she gave her comb and mirror. Johnsy combed her hair and smiled brightly. She also had a bowl of soup.

In the afternoon, the doctor came, examined his patient and told Sue that, "Johnsy has the will to live therefore she will recover soon". Then the doctor went downstairs to examine Behrman who was also suffering from pneumonia. The next morning Sue told Johnsy that Behrman had died of pneumonia that morning. He had been ill for two days only. The first day the janitor has found him on his bed. His clothes were wet and he was shivering. He had

been out in the stormy night. They also found a ladder, a lantern, painting brushes and colours lying near his bed. Sue asked Johnsy to look out of window and look at that ivy leaf. She says that the leaf is not fluttering in the wind. It was because it has been painted by Behrman. It was his masterpiece. He painted it the night the last leaf fell.

Message

The story conveys the message that mind rules over the body and that friendship is the most important asset in one's life. It also conveys love between fellow human beings.

Extract Based Questions

Read the following extracts carefully and answer the questions that follow:

1. She talked about clothes and fashions, but Johnsy did not respond. Johnsy continued to lie still on her bed. Sue brought her drawing board into Johnsy's room and started painting. To take Johnsy's mind off her illness, she whistled while working.

- The meaning of the line, 'continues to lie still', is
- The statement that is TRUE about Johnsy, is:
 - she has no will to live
 - she is suffering from Pneumonia
 - Both (i) and (ii)
 - she needs money
- Johnsy and Sue were roommates and
- The word 'respond' means the same as

Answers

- she is motionless
 - (iii) Both (i) and (ii)
 - friends
 - acknowledge or answer
2. She quickly rushed to the bed and heard Johnsy counting backwards. She was looking out of the window and was saying, 'Twelve!' After sometime she whispered 'eleven', then, 'ten', then 'nine', 'eight', 'seven'.
 - State whether the given statement is True or False. Johnsy was counting the number of leaves.
 - Why was Johnsy counting in reverse?
 - Because the number of leaves on the ivy creeper were reducing
 - Because the water drops on the windows were reducing
 - Because her living days were reducing
 - Because the number of cars on the road were reducing

- (c) Johnsy had the misconception that she would die with the fall of the
 (d) An antonym of word 'whispered' is

Answers

- (a) True
 (b) (i) Because the number of leaves on the Ivy creeper were reducing
 (c) last leaf on the creeper
 (d) shouted or screamed



Short Answer Type Questions

Q 1. How did Johnsy associate herself with the falling of leaves?

Ans. Johnsy had a severe attack of pneumonia. It made her physically and mentally weak. She developed a strange superstition. She kept watching leaves falling from the old ivy creeper from her window. She started believing that she would die when the last leaf fell down. Thus, she associated her death to the falling of leaves.

Q 2. How did Sue react when she learnt about Johnsy's belief regarding the falling leaves of the ivy creeper?

Ans. Johnsy believed that she would die as soon as the last leaf from the ivy creeper fell. However, Sue said that it was natural for the leaves to fall as it was autumn. She called Johnsy's belief as 'nonsense'. According to her, the old ivy leaves had nothing to do with her being sick. She also told her that the doctor was confident that she would get better.

Q 3. Who were Sue and Johnsy?

Ans. Sue and Johnsy were two young artists. They were very close friends. They lived in a room on the third floor of an old house.

Q 4. What methods did Sue adopt to take Johnsy's mind off her illness?

Ans. Sue tried her best to make Johnsy take an interest in things around her. She talked about clothes and fashions. She brought her drawing board into her room and also whistled while painting to take Johnsy's mind off her illness.

Q 5. Do you think the feeling of depression, that Johnsy had, is common among teenagers?

Ans. Yes, the feeling of depression, that Johnsy had, is common among teenagers. The teenagers are emotional. They may feel depressed due to various reasons such as academic performance, stressful relationship with parents, feeling of inadequacy and peer pressure.



Long Answer Type Questions

Q 1. What is Johnsy's illness? What can cure her, the medicine or her willingness to live?

Ans. Johnsy fell seriously ill with pneumonia in November. She would lie in her bed without moving, just gazing out of the window. Sue, her friend, sent for the doctor. Although he came every day, yet there was no change in Johnsy's

condition. One day the doctor told Sue that Johnsy had made up her mind that she was not going to get well and if she doesn't want to live then medicines will not help her.

Johnsy had given up her desire to live. She thought that she would die when the last leaf of the ivy creeper fell.

Johnsy suffered from depression. Only her willingness to live could cure her and not the medicines.

Q 2. Behrman has a dream. What is it? Does it come true?

Ans. Behrman was a sixty-year-old painter. He lived on the ground floor of the same building in which Sue and Johnsy lived. His life long dream was to paint a masterpiece but he has not yet been able to achieve it. When Sue informs Behrman that Johnsy has lost all hopes of getting well and believes that she will die when the last leaf of the ivy creeper falls, then Behrman becomes worried for her. He knew that the leaf would definitely fall as a strong storm was blowing. So, he decides to paint an ivy leaf so that Johnsy does not lose hope. The leaf painted by him appears real to Johnsy and her faith in life is renewed. However, Behrman contracts pneumonia and dies. But the last leaf painted by him is his masterpiece as it has saved Johnsy's life.

Q 3. What sacrifice did Behrman make for Johnsy?

Or Old Behrman sacrificed his own life to save another life. Comment.

Ans. Behrman was a sixty-year-old painter who lived on the ground floor of the building in which Sue and Johnsy lived. He was a compassionate man. When he came to know that Johnsy was depressed and that she believed that she would die as soon as the last leaf of the ivy creeper fell, he became worried. He knew that the leaf would definitely fall in the stormy weather and then it would be impossible to bring back Johnsy from the brink of depression. So, he goes out in the stormy night and paints a leaf that appears to be attached to the ivy creeper. Johnsy, on seeing the leaf, believes it to be real and comes out of her depression. She now has the will to live. However, after spending the night in a storm, Behrman catches pneumonia. His old body is not able to fight back the disease and he dies. So, Behrman sacrificed his life to save Johnsy.

Q 4. The last leaf which old Behrman painted on the front wall facing Johnsy's window was really 'a masterpiece,' said Sue. Do you agree with her?

Ans. Yes, I definitely agree with Sue. Old Behrman painted the leaf in a stormy night, standing on a ladder and in the dim light of a lantern. Johnsy keeps on seeing that leaf throughout the day. Yet she fails to observe that it is painted. The leaf appears real to her. That leaf gives her a ray of hope and she snaps out of her depression. She decides to fight back her illness. So, Sue was correct in saying that the leaf painted by Behrman was indeed the masterpiece which he longed to paint throughout his life. ●