Falling Leaves

I pulled off my coat and threw it on the old brown chair in the TV room. My friend Dan’s Tabby cat leapt off the chair to avoid getting smothered by my coat. I rubbed my hands together for warmth, since they felt like icicles after the short walk from my house to Dan’s house. I sunk into the couch, grabbed a chip, and turned on the Packers’ game. I dunked the chip into a bath of salsa and devoured it. I glanced through the window as a maple leaf danced its way to the ground.

“All right, boys. Enjoy the game. I’m off to Pick N Save, but I left some snacks for you in the TV room,” Dan’s mom called on her way out the back door.

“Yeah, mom, whatever,” Dan mumbled back. He hadn’t seemed too thrilled since I arrived to watch the Packers’ game. He shot a glance at me when he heard the back door slam. “Come with me.” He grabbed my arm just as I was about to dunk another chip into salsa.

“What’s the big deal? I thought we were going to watch the game,” I responded while shoving the chip into my mouth.

Usually, when I went over to Dan’s house to watch the Packers, we would play a round of ping-pong and talk about the match-ups to watch in the game. This time, we just sat on the couch without even speaking. He kept rubbing his eyes and coughing. I wondered if he would tell me what was bothering him. Dan was my best friend, but he seemed to be tuning me out, and now he was dragging me away from the game.

The screen door slammed shut behind us as we stepped into the backyard. A frosty chill greeted us, and I wished he had given me time to put on my coat. We stepped along the path in the grass that had been flattened over the summer by the slip ’n slide. Dan led me past the garage, past the dying raspberry bushes, and into the alley.

“Look, Dan. You’re acting really weird. Could you please just tell me what this is all about? Did you find something back here?”

“I want to show you something, but you can’t tell anybody about it, okay?”

“Of course, you know I won’t say anything,” I responded eagerly. I blew hot air into my hands to try to keep them warm, and I remembered the last time Dan had something to show me; only, he hadn’t been so secretive about it then. It was around my birthday, and Dan had purchased a coveted Jose Canseco Topps rookie card. He couldn’t wait to give it to me, so he let me see it before my actual birthday. Then he surprised me with tickets to the Brewers game on my birthday. Something told me that Dan’s latest secret wasn’t a birthday present, since he had brought me to a cold alley in the middle of November.

Dan reached into his hooded sweatshirt pocket and brought out a lighter in his left hand and a cigarette in his right. He handed me the cigarette.

“Where did you get this?” my voice squeaked, and I realized that I had never held a cigarette before. Still, I wanted to sound tough in front of my friend.

“I’ve got connections,” he said mysteriously, raising one eyebrow. “Try it.” He held up the lighter.

My teeth chattered, though not necessarily from the cold. I looked up at the sky, wondering what to do. I didn’t want to disappoint my friend, but I also didn’t want to smoke that cigarette. My hesitation was a sign of weakness for Dan.

“I knew you’d be chicken,” Dan scoffed. He pulled out another cigarette and placed it between his lips. He held the lighter up to his mouth and used his other hand to
shield the wind. He lit the cigarette on the first try. I watched him carefully, so I would be ready to repeat what he had done. The end of the cigarette flared into red embers when he inhaled. He paused, as if enjoying a hot fudge sundae from Kopp’s. Then he removed the cigarette, and exhaled slowly. He pursed his lips together, so that the smoke came out in a steady stream. “See, it’s easy.”

I didn’t like the smell and felt like coughing, but I held it in. Again, I was stuck for words. I looked around the alley, searching frantically for help – a passing car, someone taking out the garbage – but nobody came to the rescue. I glanced up and saw Dan’s basketball hoop attached to the back of his garage. I finally thought of something to say. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Just a couple of times. It’s really not a big deal.” Dan tapped the middle of his lit cigarette with his forefinger to release the loose ashes at the end of it. The ashes sparkled red, then turned brown and were swept away by the breeze. Dan shifted his weight onto his other foot.

I examined the cigarette still in my hand, rolling it between my fingers. Now I knew Dan’s secret. I knew what was making him cough and rub his eyes. I hated that cigarette at that moment, because I knew what I needed to do.

“I don’t think I want to do this now. I’m going to go watch the game.” I held up the cigarette so that he would take it back.

“I’m telling you, it’s no big deal,” Dan’s voice sounded hollow, like he didn’t really believe what he was saying.

“I know. I’m just not in the mood.” I stared at the cracks in the pavement. “I don’t want to smell like smoke.” I’m not sure whom I was trying to convince anymore.

“You’re missing out,” Dan responded. He took a deep puff, looked me in the eye, and blew smoke right in my face. He took the cigarette from my hand.

“I’m going home. I guess I’ll see ya.” I slowly stepped away.

“Yeah, whatever,” he mumbled.

I turned my back to him and walked quickly down the alley. My face burned and tears gathered behind my eyes. I fought them back. I stopped a few houses down and looked back at Dan, still holding onto the cigarette. He wasn’t even looking at me.

I couldn’t help thinking about the summer, when Dan and I spent hours on the slide, giggling like little boys. Well, we weren’t little boys anymore. Walking down the alley, I wondered if I had made the right choice. Was I losing my best friend? My insides churned like one of those taffy machines at the State Fair. I felt different, and somehow the Packers’ game didn’t seem that important anymore.

I wished I had my coat. I couldn’t go back and get it now, but my parents would wonder why I left it at Dan’s. I wasn’t about to tell them what just happened. Dan made me promise not to tell. I kept walking past my house. I needed some time to clear my head. Another leaf plummeted to the ground from the maple tree in my backyard.