

# Leaves of Pure Gold



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I strained my neck to peer out the window as our car pulled up to the house. It was a rundown old shack, from the looks of it. The paint, which was probably once yellow, had turned to a yellowish-brown, and the faded black roof was missing a lot of its shingles. The wood trim on the cracked windows was peeling off. The driveway was bumpy, and the door was boarded up. So, as you might guess, it was hard to believe that this was where my family was going to be living.

"Well... it's going to need quite a bit of love," my mom remarked. "Oh, but it'll be fine. Right guys?"

My younger brother Jackson, who had been playing Fruit Ninja on his tablet for the majority of the three-hour drive from Cleveland to Ann Arbor, took no notice of the house or Mom's comment.

"Listen, guys," my Dad started. "I know this has been a tough year for us. But we are going to make this house *our* house." He reached out and snatched the tablet out of Jackson's hands, making him let out a squeak of alarm.

"I was about to beat my high score!" Jackson wailed.

"Fruit Ninja can wait," Mom said with a glare at my brother. "For now, we are going to try to settle in. The moving van will be here in a day or so. We'll sleep in our sleeping bags."

"Okay," I murmured, even though I was upset my bed wouldn't be here.

I stepped out of the car, grateful for the fresh air after the cramped ride. I stretched and cracked my knuckles, drinking in the crisp air.

Suddenly I saw something exciting in the midst of the brown, dead grass that was the front yard. It was a tree, a beautiful maple with shining golden leaves.

Instinct won me over and I raced over to the tree, my sneakers crunching on the dead grass. I looked over the trunk and found a knot, which I grabbed and used to haul myself up to the branch I had been aiming for. With a swing and a push, I found myself sitting upon the branch, the wind buffeting my hair.

The golden leaves flew around me. It was almost magical. I closed my eyes, feeling so peaceful that I could barely hear the sound of the busy highway nearby. With a pang of sadness I remembered my best friend Mina, back in Ohio. She had taught me how to climb trees when we met in third grade. I missed her and everyone else so much. I realized that this tree was bringing back many memories, and for some reason I decided to name it. That might sound stupid, but it would be my little secret. I named it Memory, because it made me recall everything in the past. Also, it-

"Claudia!" My dad's call interrupted my thoughts. "Ready to give this bad boy a shot?"

"You know it," I replied, smiling. I swung down from the branch and onto the ground, following my dad to the boarded-up door.

Dad took hold of the rusted bronze doorknob and opened it with a creak.

Inside was not much better than the outside. As we crept around, my hopes slowly fizzled. There were lights, but they were barely working. The kitchen was

dated, and I developed an instant phobia of the bathrooms. The carpet in the living room was crusted with a suspicious brown stain on it.

We picked our rooms. At my old house, I had a *giant* room with my own bathroom. Here I had to share a bathroom with my *brother*.

The next day was the first day of school already. When we arrived at Wellsworth Elementary, I ran up to the building. The big brownstone exterior looked more like a prison hall than an elementary school. Inside, though, the walls were filled with colorful murals and kids. I knew I was in Mrs. Darburry's class, so I boldly asked a girl where that was. She said that she was in that class too, introduced herself as Rosanna, and led me down the hallway.

Mrs. Darburry, a short lady maybe in her forties, greeted us at the door.

"Hello, darlings!" she said excitedly. "I am Mrs. Darburry! Welcome!"

"She seems cheerful," Rosanna muttered.

When we arrived home I put on my jacket and rushed outside to Memory.

"I'm glad I have you, Memory," I whispered as I climbed atop my favorite branch. "I think you're the only decent thing this house has to offer."

Memory's gold-trimmed branches swayed in the wind, as though replying. I felt peaceful for the first time in months. I leaned against her trunk and stroked a shimmering leaf as it fell into my hands. I put it in my pocket so I could always remember how cool that Memory was, despite all the disappointments the house had. I watched the leaves swirl up and fly into branches of other trees. It was like she was trying to give her beauty to other trees, but Memory would always be the best.

Not many exciting things had happened since that day. Only after *two whole months* did I start picking through the boxes the moving van had delivered. I had just found my diary when I heard a knock at the door.

I was curious, so I pressed my ear to the carpet and strained to listen.

"Hello!" my mom started with an edge to her voice. "May we help you?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt," The man's voice gave away that he had an important matter to discuss. "I'm Marek. I work for the mayor. I've come to alert you of a highway extension to go right through this area. It will require the demolition of some homes. You will be given a sum of money to sign this form and leave. If you choose not to sign, you may be forced to leave depending on whether we get enough signatures." He panted, clearing his throat.

My parents were silent for a while, until my mom yelled, "*WHAT?!* We just moved in!"

"Oh... erm, I am *so* sorry, m- ma'am," Marek stammered anxiously. "I- I'll come back for your verdict tomorrow."

"*DARN RIGHT YOU WILL!*" Mom hollered. "*WE'LL SIGN YOUR STUPID FORM, NEVER!*"

"Oh, lord," Dad muttered. "Come inside, Maurine."

As their conversation faded away, I couldn't stop thinking about what would happen to us now.

A millisecond later Jackson came running into my room, anxiety in his hazel eyes.

"C- Claudia?" he whispered. "Do you think we'll have to move again?"

"Not if I can help it," I answered.

And then I hatched my plan.

The next day we gathered recruits. My plan was to ride to Town Hall, where we would protest and charm the mayor into stopping the highway plans. I shared my plan with Rosanna and she was able to persuade Amber, her twin Ryan, Charlie, and Wendy to help us. This was great so far!

After school we saw Marek leaving our house, a triumphant look on his face. I immediately knew what had happened. Jackson and I climbed Memory.

"Your tree's great," Jackson remarked as I hauled him up onto the branch.

"Exactly," I said. Then I sighed. "Looks like Marek got his way."

"Yeah," Jackson muttered. "But we've got our plan, right?"

"Yep," I agreed, wishing I shared his optimism. "Okay, who'd you get?"

"I'm sorry, sis," He sounded discouraged. "I...only got one person- Sam."

"No, that's fine!" I reassured him.

We decided to do it the next weekend on Sunday, so Jackson and I called all the people. They all agreed to meet up at Amber's house at 5:00, and leave for Town Hall. Wendy had a phone, so she was going to GPS it. It all seemed perfect.

The next few days flew by. All that Rosanna talked about was the Plan to Stop the Highway (or PSTH), as everyone called it. I was happy that everyone was willing to support me.

At last the day arrived. It even snowed, and Memory's leaves began to fall for the winter. We informed our parents that Amber had a really cool sledding hill in their yard and wanted to go sled there. They agreed and we left.

We arrived at about 5:05, and everybody else arrived shortly after.

"Remember the plan," I whispered. "We go protest and hope to make a difference."

"Yes," everyone murmured.

"Then let's go!" I cheered, running to hop on my bike. Wendy pulled her phone out and got directions.

We arrived at the town hall shortly after. We snuck up to the grand entrance. Muffled voices came from inside. With a loud *ERRRKK*, I pushed the large door open to see a large grand room.

A pedestal labeled *Mayor* stood at the back with decorated pillars on the sides. Long benches sat in front of the mayor's pedestal.

Seated on the benches were men and women in suits and ties. All heads turned on the kids walking right in.

"What is this?" the mayor asked, making me flinch.

"Mr. Mayor?" I tried, my voice shaking. "I have... come for... the highway..."

"Call me Mr. Tanner," the mayor ordered impatiently. "I have a document to sign, so get on with it."

“That’s why we’re here, Mr. Tanner,” I answered boldly. “My family just moved here. And everyone has been so nice, But what you- *you*, Mr. Tanner- are doing... is insane. You’re making my family leave again. It’s not *fair*,” I wanted to wail like a toddler. “You- you’re ruining my life! My family! And you’ll have to cut down Memory...” My voice trailed away as I realized what I had said. Everyone was staring at me with utter shock on their faces, which slowly changed to confusion at the mention of Memory.

“Well... never mind the Memory thing,” I covered up quickly. “But you get it. You’re not only destroying our homes, but our love. Our life. Our joy... and as rundown as my house is, *it’s my HOME!*” My voice rang around the room. A tear ran down Rosanna’s cheek.

The mayor cleared his throat. “Erm, yes, my dear. But we need this highway-sorry.” He raised his pen meaningfully and sent it down towards the paper.

*No*, I thought. *All our work for nothing.*

“No!” yelled Jackson. He ran like a hare towards the mayor and grabbed the paper from the Mayor’s hands and ripped it apart.

“Jackson!” I screamed, though part of me admired his bravery.

“ENOUGH!” the mayor boomed.

Jackson was silent.

But then Mr. Tanner laughed. “I’m joking. I do suppose you are right. And you seem every... passionate about this topic. Therefore, I officially call off the plans.”

“Really? I squealed.

“Really,” the mayor said, but there was regret in his eyes. “I’m sorry about my foolishness towards this topic. Though I do believe ripping up the form was a bit much,” he added. Then he gestured towards Jackson. “May I see that paper, young man?”

Reluctantly Jackson handed Mr. Tanner the bits of paper. He smiled at us. I realized just then that Marek was in the crowd. I stuck my tongue out at him victoriously.

“We did it, guys,” I announced to the kids. “Thanks so much for all your help. I can’t thank you enough.”

Wendy cheered. Charlie clapped. Rosanna jumped with joy, and Jackson dabbled. It was an epic dab fail. Sam danced a little.

I couldn’t believe it at all. My heart was racing as we pedaled home.

We said our goodbyes. When we neared our street we found our parents yelling frantically.

“Jackson! Claudia!” Mom and Dad called. Spotting our bikes pulling up, they hugged us and scolded. But my eyes were all for Memory, whose leafless, snowy branches waved in the wind, as though saying *thank you*.

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