Autumn

The air was thin, stretched between the warmth of summer and the frost that pressed at the edges of night. Shadows lengthened sooner now, and the earth exhaled in a tired hush, readying itself for the sleep of winter. Across the forest, leaves trembled, each one waiting its turn to fall.

Across town, porches were already lined with sagging pumpkins, their carved faces collapsing into crooked grins. Smoke from backyard fires drifted low, catching in sweaters that would smell of it for weeks. Playgrounds emptied sooner now, swings creaking in twilight silence as children were called indoors.

One forest leaf lingered longer than it should have. Its veins were brittle, its edges curled, yet it clung to the branch as though memory itself might hold it. It remembered the burst of Spring, when sap had carried sweetness into its stem, and the heavy green days of July when cicadas droned and sun pooled like gold across its surface. Now it felt the weight of release. The air whispered: *l e t g o*

It did. The stem snapped with a sigh, and the leaf spun down through the dusk. For a brief moment, the world slowed. Its fall brushed past a squirrel scurrying below, the animal's fur twitching at the sudden motion. The squirrel did not think of nostalgia; only of hunger, of nuts buried and forgotten, of the growing urgency in its bones that Winter was near. The ground was already cluttered with brittle leaves, each crunch underfoot resembling the sound of broken glass. The squirrel's paws sifted through them, stirring the faint perfume of rot and damp

earth, the smell that always meant the year was dying. It pawed at an acorn, sharp teeth cracking the shell, yet the leaf's soft flutter startled it into stillness.

High above, an owl watched. "*Who, whooo*?", it cooed. Its eyes, round and golden, followed the twitch of the squirrel, not the fall of the leaf. But the leaf crossed its line of sight, drifting into the owl's vision, an amber blur that forced hesitation. The squirrel bolted. Hunger groaned in the owl's belly.

The forest absorbed all of it; the loss of the leaf, the squirrel's pounding heart, the owl's empty hunger, as it had countless times before. Every year, leaves died, animals prepared, predators struck or missed. But to the forest, it was not repetition; it was rhythm. An ancient cadence of endings.

And yet, there was an eeriness to this autumn dusk. The trees loomed like black ribs against a fading sky. The air carried not only the scent of rot and smoke, but the echo of other autumns, other creatures, other eyes that once looked up at a falling leaf and thought of death, of beauty, of the fragile hush before Winter.

The leaf settled on the ground, its once-green skin dulled to a crinkle of rust. It would not rise again. The squirrel would return, the owl would hunt again, and the season would finish its slow descent. The omniscient sky, wide and watching, recorded it all, and whispered the same truth to every living thing: *Autumn always falls*.