

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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Autumn Leaves

I have just returned to my cosy computer desk after an afternoon in one of the nearby parks, taking pictures of the autumnal colours of the shrubs and trees. As the weather forecast is gale force winds in a day or two, I decided that if I wanted to have colourful photos of the trees covered in red, orange and yellow leaves, I had better get them now before they all blow away. Fortunately this afternoon the sun managed to shine in between the scudding clouds, and the winds were mild, so I got my photos successfully. Eventually mizzly rain finally persuaded me to go home, and I was delighted to find my bus arriving at the bus-stop at the same time as I did. I had everything I wanted safely within the camera and had no further argument with what the weather was likely to do.

The park people had put a notice board at the entrance instructing visitors to keep away from the trees in stormy weather. This reminded me of the Great Storm of 1987 that left a trail of devastation and damage across the country, both trees and buildings, and how all the leaves were stripped from the trees overnight. The landscape went from end-of-summer green to bare in just a few hours. Summer seemed to turn to winter overnight and I felt somewhat deprived of the autumn glory of the trees that always signals the beginning of the slow march towards winter. The storm's official description was an extra-tropical cyclone, and not the hurricane that it was commonly labelled as being. The highest gust was recorded as 122 mph in Norfolk, England, and 137 mph in Brittany, France. There was extensive damage to power lines and buildings, and 22 people lost their lives.

I woke up during that night and realised something was missing. The street lights were all off as there was no electricity. In

addition something was different about the sounds. The wind was strong and howling, not just gusts here and there as might be expected but a continuous sound with only a slight variation in the noise to indicate the changing direction of the gusts. The thick mist and rain was whipping past almost horizontally. I immediately thought of the roof tiles and spent the next few hours in bed telling them to stay attached to the house. Fortunately they did and there was no damage. Everywhere we went in the ensuing weeks brought sights of fallen branches and trees, and smashed walls.

In the past I had no camera to record the colours of autumn, and I would sometimes collect up the brightest leaves, especially from the street almond trees whose leaves were the most brilliant orange and yellow. I washed them in the bath, dried them off and then played with rearranging and admiring them. I never knew what happened to them after that, as being quite young, I lost interest after a while and my parents would have cleared them away when they had been abandoned for other toys. At school we were sometimes shown how to make rubbings of autumn leaves, using thin paper over them and soft crayons, in the manner of brass rubbings. We then had an accurate outline with all the veins, which we could colour in. An alternative was to cover the leaf in thick paint and press paper onto it, to produce a print of the shape. The resulting artwork lasted a lot longer than a rapidly drying and disintegrating leaf. The brightest autumn leaf is one with the sun shining through it, and against a dark background, and for this it needs to be almost ready to fall, but still just clinging to the tree, something I did manage to get this afternoon in several of the sunny periods, before the clouds came over. (647 words)