

Sasha Petrova



A Leaf on the Wind

*A Leaf
on the
Wind
by
Sasha Petrova*

I dedicate this book to my mother who earned my forgiveness, my sisters who are still in denial, and my daughters who never knew the whole story.

Reviews

Prior to reading *A Leaf on the Wind*, I naively thought, "Get over it" when confronted by a woman who allowed her abusive childhood to influence her adulthood. After reading Petrova's story, I wonder not only at my own arrogance, but also at the strength and determination of women who eventually do get over it. In the end, triumph overcomes tragedy.

Mary Glavand, North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

When I started to read *A Leaf on the Wind*, I had no idea what to expect, as this was the author's debut novel. I read about 200 books a year and Petrova's book is as compelling as any I've read. In truth, I couldn't put it down ... a gripping true story.

A Leaf on the Wind is genuine, well written, thoroughly enjoyable, and a real eye opener.

Lee McGraw, Kansas City, Kansas

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Sasha Petrova

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by Sasha Petrova

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PROLOGUE

Other than persons who have passed away, I have changed most of the names of the people in this book for reasons of privacy. This is a story of my life as seen and experienced by me.

I do not presume to know what is in another's mind and can only interpret a particular person's intent by the specifics of the event and behaviors exhibited at the time the event occurred.

In addition to telling what I believe is an important story, it has been my purpose to answer those foolish and ignorant questions all too often asked, "Why do you still cry so many years after the abuse ended? Why can't you just put it behind you and move on?"

CHAPTER 1

Nineteen forty-five celebrated the end of the war and my arrival into this world. I grew up in a time when fear of strangers didn't exist. I recall with great fondness the unlimited freedom my sister and I had to wander as far from home as our curiosity dictated and physical endurance permitted. The only restriction placed on our travels was to be home in time for dinner.

The neighborhood provided an impressive number of children my age to play with. Games of tag, hide-and-seek, Simon Says and Statue lasted for hours, filling the warm summer air with shrieks of laughter as we chased each other from one backyard to another. Play lasted long after the sun had disappeared. We went home when physical exhaustion robbed us of the necessary energy required to argue with our mothers, who called out into the dark night that it was time to come home. Despite my loud protestations, sleep was always a welcome friend.

Mommy was a great cook and an immaculate housekeeper, but her real passion was gardening. Red, yellow, pink and white roses lined the picket fence that separated our yard from the neighbor's. Towering over a wooden picnic table next to the house was a tall, soaring Snowball tree covered with a zillion large, round clusters of tiny white flowers. Red and white carnations, yellow daisies, fire-red poppies, lavender lilacs and dozens of other flowers with names I had not yet learned, bloomed throughout the yard.

In the corner of the front yard was a large, bottomless pond filled with man-eating piranhas that lay hidden beneath a thick layer of green lily pads. Daddy's vivid description of the flesh-eating fish lurking beneath the

surface was more than enough to keep our curiosity in check.

Wild blackberries grew unchecked along both sides of the alley behind our house and offered a free snack to any passer by. A giant cherry tree in Frank and Edith's yard next door provided my sister and me an ample supply of pocket money. A small paper bag filled with cherries sold for a nickel, more than enough to buy a vanilla coke at the local soda fountain a few blocks from our house. It was not unusual for as many as three lemonade stands to be set up on the same block at the same time, creating fierce price wars as each one tried to outsell the other.

Boredom was not in our vocabulary.

The fun I enjoyed with my friends, the world of games and laughter, was separate from a private world only I was permitted to enter. I discovered my secret world by accident after waking from a nap on a hot summer afternoon. I was five years old.

Still groggy from sleep, I stood in the kitchen doorway looking out over the backyard. Paying no attention to the mechanics of what I was doing I stepped down onto the narrow sidewalk that divided the backyard in half. As I lifted my foot, I noticed a tiny ant twisting its broken body back and forth on the hot concrete as it tried in vain to escape.

Words alone cannot describe the guilt that swept over me at that moment. I watched, helpless, as the twisting slowly ceased. The ant lay motionless. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I tried to contemplate what I had done. My chest swelled with a painful sense of guilt. Overcome with remorse, I began to calculate an endless list of ifs.

If I had paid more attention to where I placed my foot, or had delayed just a few seconds longer, the little ant might still be alive. Did he have a family? Had my reckless action sentenced his children to a slow, agonizing death by

starvation? The shame I felt rose to an unbearable level. I knelt down and with my tear stained chin pressed against the thick grass, I whispered, "I am so sorry."

I repeated my apology several times hoping the sadness in my voice would convey the sincere sorrow and remorse I felt.

Drained of all energy and feeling too weak to stand up, I rolled over onto my back. Somewhere above I heard birds chirping. I smiled, wondering if they were warning each other of some impending danger or exchanging information on where the biggest and tastiest worms lived.

In the distance beyond the birds I heard a dog barking. Straining to hear better, I shut my eyes and listened intensely. I recognized the familiar yelping of our neighbor's collie. What was she saying? Was she calling out to her five new puppies or was she making meaningless noises?

Surrounded by so many sounds of life, I wondered if all the grunts, groans, howls and squeaks animals made meant something. Did animals talk? The question fascinated me and I quickly found myself following my train of thought to the next logical conclusion.

I surmised that when God made people, he gave them the ability to communicate. It made sense that he would do the same with animals. If animals talked, there was no reason I could not learn to talk to them. I smiled at my cleverness and wondered if anyone had ever thought of this before.

My skin tingled with excitement as my brain raced from thought to thought. I knew animals communicated emotions. I had seen this for myself. On more than one occasion I had observed Cecil, my dog, chase Bea up a tree, my cat shrieking in terror. I remembered when Buttons, Mommy's Chihuahua, fell down the stairs and broke her leg. Her high-pitched whine had alerted us to her pain. But

were animals capable of communicating complete thoughts the way people do? Could Cecil's simple sounding woof, woof, woof, mean, "Stay away from the boy who lives in the yellow house around the corner. He threw a rock at me today!"

Suddenly faced with the immense responsibility of learning to talk to the animals, I wandered through the yard in search of a worthy subject. I stopped at the corner of the house and stared up at the large beehive hanging suspended from the edge of the roof. Ready to bolt at the first sign of danger, I strained to hear the sound of the bees hidden inside the hive. Their individual hums blended into a single, thick purr that filled the air above me. However, the danger they presented quickly eliminated them from the list of potential subjects for my study.

I continued down the sidewalk away from the hive absorbed in inspecting every rock, scrutinizing all evidence of life that I came across. Spiders were scary, worms were slimy and slugs were plentiful, but disgusting. Birds were abundant, but impossible to catch. I dismissed Cecil as a potential subject. He spent most of the day trotting around the neighborhood and only came home at night to eat.

Bea slept all day and when she was awake, she never had much to say. Buttons had a lousy attitude and did not like to be touched. Frustrated at my lack of progress, I knelt down next to the lilac tree that stood guard beside my bedroom window.

All the wonderful sounds of life filled the air around me. Somewhere between the birds chirping above, a dog barking next door, and bees humming a few feet away, I heard chickens clucking. I gazed over at the large wire-covered pen in the corner of the backyard that housed a family of chickens. Months ago, soon after their arrival, I had lost interest in pursuing a relationship with them. They

were too easily frightened and no matter how hard I tried, they would not let me play with them.

Determined to improve on my first failed attempt to make friends with them, I ran over to the pen. My sudden appearance startled the chickens, causing them to scatter in all directions within the pen. They quickly forgot their fear and went back to scratching the ground in search of grains. Confined and unable to run away, the chickens were the perfect subjects to study. But how could I interact with them without triggering their quick-flight response?

I considered hiding inside a large box within the pen. But my view would be limited and that would compromise my ability to observe the chickens. I searched the pen from top to bottom and side to side, trying to find a spot where I could sit undetected. Suddenly, my gaze stopped at the roof and I smiled at the thought of what I would do next.

Daddy built the pen up against a large mound of dirt that created a terrace or a second level to the backyard. Two rows of large rocks lined the terrace preventing the dirt from falling onto the lower level. Behind the pen, two empty wooden orange crates sat stacked one on top of the other. Standing on the boxes made climbing onto the roof easy.

Bursting with newfound enthusiasm, I jumped up and, ignoring the scattering of the chickens, I ran up the steps that led to the back of the pen and proceeded to climb up onto the roof. I got down on my hands and knees and crept across the roof stopping a few inches from the edge. From there I could view the entire enclosure below.

After watching the chickens for an hour, a pattern in their behavior became apparent. The chicks stayed close to the hens and the two roosters kept a significant distance between themselves and their brood. If a hen or chick encroached on a rooster's patch of dirt he flapped his wings

frantically and charged, beak first at the offender, chasing them away.

For several days, I continued watching the chickens from the safety of my perch on top of the pen. I practiced mimicking the chicks and hens. However, learning to crow like a rooster was far more difficult. It was impossible to get the roosters to crow on demand forcing me to wait patiently until one was in the mood to do so. By the end of the week, I was finally able to identify the sequence of notes. The first note repeated several times with a short pause between repetitions. The second group was the same as the first, but higher on the scale and repeated slightly slower. The third note was a loud, single, high-pitched screech that slowly trailed off into silence. I practiced for a long time perfecting my technique until I felt confident I could convince both roosters I was their long lost brother from the feed store.

The next morning I got up early and took my position on the roof of the pen. Standing alone in the center of the pen was the big red rooster. I counted one, two, three, then let loose with a flawless crow causing the chicks to scatter and the hens to freeze in mid-step. The red rooster snapped his head back and forth several times looking for the source of the sound. I continued crowing, changing the pitch and the order of notes to see what reaction I would get from the rooster. I had clearly struck a nerve.

The animated response from below was magnificent. I spent every day over the next several weeks interacting with the black rooster. I did not know what message I conveyed to the rooster, or what he said back to me. However, my determination never wavered. I ignored the cruel remarks from my friends about my strange behavior and pretended not to care when my sister, Teresa, told me I was crazy. As far as I was concerned, I was doing

something important and nothing anyone said, no matter how cruel, would deter my dedication.

Long after Teresa started kindergarten, I continued to climb onto the roof of the chicken pen and crow into the wind. As summer turned to fall, bringing with it days filled with cold wind and rain, my visits became more infrequent. After a solid week of heavy rain, the sun came out for a brief appearance and I ran out to the pen but the red rooster was gone. Concerned, I informed Mommy of the rooster's puzzling absence. She laughed and said, "Sweetie, we ate him for dinner last night."

Words alone cannot adequately describe the horror I felt learning I had eaten my friend. I not only ate him, I had asked for seconds. I felt a sickening wave of nausea rise up from my stomach and stick like a chicken bone in my throat. Gasping for breath, I ran into my room.

I spent the rest of the day agonizing over the demise of my friend, my comrade, my partner. I dismissed all plans to continue with my scientific project. Even if I did learn to speak chicken, I could never tell them their fate lay in the hands of cruel humans who thought nothing of chopping off their heads, plunging their lifeless bodies into a pot of boiling water with a few carrots and potatoes, and eating them for dinner. No, I could not tell them that.

I never again stood on the roof of the pen and crowed into the warm summer wind and I never again ate chicken.