

Josephine by Carol Emshwiller

Top of list ... always at the top of list, rain or shine, day or night: Find Josephine. Nothing can be done until she's back here at the Old Folks Home where she belongs. Talent night she's our main attraction. We couldn't do much without her. She wobbles on her slack wire but she hasn't fallen yet. The ceiling is so high she can do the slack wire act in there in the living room though she has to watch out for the chandelier. She's not much higher than four or five feet up. When she sings she tinkles out the music on a toy xylophone. Once she brought her wind chimes down to the living room, put them in front of a fan and sang to that.

We pretend not to see how wobbly she is. Everybody else is worse. She's the only one with the courage to dance and sing no matter what. Or maybe it's not courage, just innocence.

Because of Josephine we often have townspeople visiting our performances. We don't know if they come to admire her or to laugh ... at her and at us.

I'm the MC, stage manager, entertainment committee. I'm less important than those who perform. I suppose I do have some poise, though I've been told I rock from foot to foot. Why would the Administrator pick a man like me for finding Josephine? Why pick somebody who has a limp?

No, I *am* the perfect person to send off to find her. Somebody she can have a good laugh at. She'll trip me and I'll be looking up from the sidewalk, right into her greenish tan eyes. There she'll be, found at last, but she'll run off somewhere else before I can get up and hobble after her.

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We live in a grand, though ancient mansion. It was the summer house of millionaires. They donated it to the town for us old people. The living room and dining room are often closed off—too hard to heat.

The breakfast room is the room everyone loves best and spends the most time in. It has windows on three sides with window seats under them. Five tables—enough for all of us. But I'm hardly ever in this room except to eat, nor is Josephine. Too many card games and too much Bingo.

Josephine seldom comes out of her room except to eat and on show-and-tell night. (That's the only time we open the living room and let the heat come up.) Or she comes out to run away. She's *always* lost. If not right now then she would be in another minute.

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I wish I wouldn't have to be the one to find her. For the sake of the doing of a good deed, I do it.

She often says, "If not for *you* finding me, I'd not bother getting lost in the first place." I know that's true. When I find her (or should I say, when she lets herself be found) there's such a look of ... well, it's complicated, disdain, but if that were all I wouldn't do it. There's relief, too. You'd think I'd find finding

her worth it for that look, and I might if it wasn't for my arthritis. I've been using a cane lately. (Josephine gets lost in any kind of weather. Thank God tonight it's clear.)

You'd think by now the people in the neighborhood would bring her back when she strays, but they don't. They're afraid of her. Her hair is wild, the look in her eyes is wild and she makes nasty comments on their noses. She doesn't dress like anybody else. So many scarves you can't tell if she has a dress on under them or not. That must unnerve them. And the dress, which is under them, is more like a scarf than a dress. Everything she wears is like that, and it's always pinkish or pumpkin colored or baby blue. She always wears big dangly glittery earrings.

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I step out on the porch. I admire the night for a few minutes as I always do. I hobble down the front steps. Our mansion has a few acres around it and trees so you can think yourself in the country, but no sooner out the gate and you're in town.

Sometimes I think Josephine is hiding just around the corner, watching me try to find her right from the start. Probably wondering which direction I'll look in first. Loving how my shirt tail's out, my belt unbuckled still. (I came straight from my bed.) Loving, especially, my big sigh.

I smooth at my mustache. I had no time to wax it and it's getting in my mouth. I can feel it's as dragged as the rest of me.

First I check the bushes on each side of the stairs to see if she's crouching there. She can hold as still as a frightened fawn.

I always bow when I find her. I do that because noblesse oblige. I wear my old boater just so I can take it off to Josephine. If ever she can be found smiling (that little I've-got-you-now smile) it's because of me.

I limp off, one helpless person in search of another equally inept.

Poor Josephine, here she is, in town somewhere, but I know yearning to be in a forest instead. She often says so.

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Once a young person came knocking on our door asking for Great Aunt Josephine. (Just like Josephine, her eyebrows were so much the same color as her freckles they might as well not have been there.) Our Administrator lied. He said, nobody here by that name. She said she had papers. But he said the papers must be wrong and he could prove it with other papers. I suspect the Administrator is in love with Josephine.

The others here call the Administrator fuddy-duddy and fussbudget behind his back, but they don't

expect that sort of talk from me. I call him Administrator. (I'm sure they call *me* fuddy-duddy and worse behind *my* back.)

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Left, right or straight ahead? It hardly matters. Sometimes she leaves me a sign, a little piece of unraveling rosy fabric from one of her scarves or a plastic flower stolen from the dining room tables, but no sign here now that I can see. I go out the gate, cross the street and down the hill. For no reason. I wish I could see more stars, but then I grew up in town. This is what I'm used to.

I whistle so Josephine can keep track of me.

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I think I love her ... or I must. At least in some way, else why do this practically every day? Every night? And with only a modicum of complaining? (And that, only to myself.) I think she cares for me, too. She's used to me, at least, and wants to torment me. That could be love.

Since I can first remember anything at all I've been in love. As if love came with consciousness itself. I fall in love all the time—always unrequited. I know there's something wrong with me, and I know that it shows, though I've no idea how people can see it as quickly as they seem to. But lots of people are prissy fuddy-duddies and manage to marry even so, while I've hardly even had friends. But I've stuck to my principles. I've been courageous in the face of misadventures. Even catastrophes. People can count on me. Josephine must have seen that in me from the start.

I suspect the Administrator knows only too well that I'm not the sort of man women fall in love with. I'm the safe one to send after her. Nothing will happen between Josephine and me. She practically told me as much herself. She said I was too polite. "Picky, picky, picky," she's said and more than once. I must admit I stick to my dignity as best I can.

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As usual I'm not watching where I'm going. I'm looking up, wishing I could see more stars but of course there's too many street lights. I've so seldom been in a place where you can really see them. Here in town they seem unimportant. Even the moon, were it up, would seem unimportant. That's what I'm thinking when down I go.

At first it doesn't hurt, but then I try to get up.

"Josephine. I've hurt myself." I whisper it. How could Josephine help anybody?

I try again to get up. I *will* get up.

I can't. I have my belt. (I'm shocked to find it still unbuckled and my shirt tail still out. I try to be, if not elegant ... who can be elegant with no money and with the bathroom down the hall and no lock on the door? People see you in all sorts of déshabille. Even so, I always try to be well groomed. But I must be more addled than I thought.) I try coiling my belt about my leg. It's not going to help. I look around for my cane. I wonder if I should use it as a cane or a splint. I take my shirt off, twist it and use it to tie my leg up tight.

I was cold to start with but now I'm colder. The way I'm shaking, I may be in shock. I lie back. I tell myself, have a bit of a rest. Maybe the pain will lesson in a few minutes.

No way to keep any dignity now. Josephine will come to laugh. I am prissy and a fuddy-duddy, but I'm not a coward. I follow wherever Josephine leads. Once into the river. I had found her but she slipped out of my grip as we crossed the bridge and jumped in. I jumped in too. She knew I would. She can't swim even the little bit that I can. We were swept downstream half a mile before I managed to get us out. I had my arms around her. Even as I was busy trying to keep our heads above water, I thought: I have my arms around Josephine!

Neither of us told anybody though I suspect the Administrator had to be aware that we came back soaking wet. We left smudges all across the hall and up the back stairs. Did Josephine care that I spent my middle of the night cleaning up the worst of it as best I could? Of course she didn't, she thinks I'm much too neat and prim about unimportant things like a little bit of water—except there was also mud.

I see her. I *think* I see her. She's above me, poised on a tree branch as though about to do her slack wire act. It's shadowy up there, the light from the street light doesn't reach. But perhaps it's just a plastic bag. Josephine, what with all those scarves, has that same flimsy, maybe-there, maybe-not-there look all the time.

I wait, shaking. Wondering, still, whether it's better to use my cane as splint or cane. I try again to get up. I can't. I shout at myself, "*Do it!*" I push myself up on one knee. "*Doooo it!*" But I can't.

Then I hear Josephine whisper, "Don't do it," right in my ear, her hand on my shoulder exactly as lightly as you'd think her touch would be. She has her malicious grin but she's already found a splint. A discarded slat of some sort. She takes off some of her scarves. She puts one around me. It must be silk. (Of course silk, Josephine would never have anything but silk.) I feel how warming it is right away. Her hands are warm, too. And she has the touch—the healing touch. She takes my shirt and belt from around my leg and binds it to the slat with scarves. Then she puts her arms around me and warms me with her own body. She says, "I love you," but then she adds, "Loyal sycophant."

Every time I find her she calls me that, or "Flunky." Sometimes, "*My good man,*" emphasis on the *my*. She always smiles that mocking smile and says, (and what a ridiculous thing to say) "I'll make you a blueberry pie, I'll cook up a half a dozen escargots, *my good man.*" They'd never let her anywhere near a stove or any kind of fire. It's another kind of torment just as saying, "I love you," is to torment me, too. Even her arms around me is meant to add to my misery.

My boater (ridiculous to wear such a hat in the middle of the night) is lying beside me, more out of shape than usual. It already was a little the worse for wear. (You can't get hats like this anymore, except maybe at a costume store. And I haven't any money anyway.) Had I found her as I usually do, I'd have bowed and removed it and held it over my heart and Josephine would have smiled her little I'll-get-you-yet smile. I guess she has me where she wants me now.

We rest a bit and I am warmed and feel less pain. She strokes my forehead. She even smooths my

mustache away from my mouth. Here's her, Now-I've-got-you-smile, only now it's: Now-I've-*really* -got-you and she has a sly look of making plans. I suppose I'll have to do whatever she decides. But then I always do.

She helps me up. My leg, bound to the slat in silk, is as stiff as a cast. But I'll have to use my bad leg now. "I can't go far."

"It's not far."

Not far? What in the world could be, not far? Especially to somebody with two bad legs.

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There's a muddy rivulet flowing across the sidewalk near us. Josephine says, "This little trickle is the fountain of youth."

I can't help but laugh out loud. There's a faucet dripping somewhere. Maybe some lawn sprinkler has dribbled all the way down here where there aren't any lawns.

"You're thirsty," she says. "Drink. Lean and drink."

I am thirsty, but I won't drink this.

"All right then, if you won't be young and gay again, let's go."

She has put my boater back on my head for me. At a rakish angle of course. That's to tease me, too. Here I am shirtless, though wrapped in her scarf. Did she bother to help me back into my shirt? She lets it lie there. I don't have that many shirts. She must know that. Back at our mansion there's not much we can hide from each other. I've turned the collar, but this side is now as worn out as the other.

She helps me. Here she is, hardly coming up to my shoulder and yet strong enough to really support me. Of course she's strong, how can you be a dancer and slack wire walker, tree climber without being strong. I've noticed before how muscled her legs are.

This is exactly what she's always wanted, I can see it in her eyes. Her mouth twitches. She can't hide her smile though she's trying.

We walk over my shirt and go. I'd much rather stay here and wait for help. I'd like to be carted off to the hospital. That would be a nice change. I'd be able to eat by myself. I'd be all cleaned up. Josephine could come visit. She wouldn't. She would. She'd like to see me in bed with maybe my leg in traction.

I haven't paid attention to where we've been going. I've been too concentrated on how to keep going than to notice where. Here we are in some alley I've not seen before.

I'd like at least to wait until the pain subsides, but Josephine pulls me. "Come on, my own, you can rest in a minute."

I go where she wants me to as I've always done, but I'm feeling dizzy and nauseous. I know what that means, I'm going to faint if I don't sit down, and right away.

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Next thing I know my own groaning wakes me. I stop as soon as I realize it's me making that racket. I'm crumpled up in the back seat of a roadster. Top down. I may be thin but even so I can't imagine how Josephine got me there. Here she is driving down the road, no lights. She's driving by the street lights. I wonder how long I've been out of it. My leg is propped on the door. My boater is on the floor. I'm covered with a dusty, moth-eaten army blanket.

The car seems as old as Josephine. Has she stolen it? If she has, why didn't she steal one that has working headlights?

I fade off and when I come to I'm groaning again. It's because the road is suddenly bumpy. We've gone beyond the streetlights. Josephine drives slowly, by the stars.

The road is little more than two ruts now, and soon the trees above us close off the stars. And Josephine is driving by instinct. Or perhaps the ruts force the car in the right direction.

This must be her forest. The one she's wished to be in all this time. But why didn't she come here long ago, by herself? Or did she need a sycophant? A watcher? As if her whole life means nothing without me to observe it?

We go on and on. I'm gasping at every bump and there's nothing but bumps. It's like being on a small boat in choppy seas. I'm actually feeling seasick.

Dawn is coming. I can see Josephine's windblown mop of hair in silhouette against the grayness. I see the glint of her dangly earrings.

I call out, "I'm going to be sick."

She stops the car and helps me lean over the side. She holds my forehead. She calls me, "My dear," but I'm too miserable to think anything about it.

As to my dignity, that she teases me about every day, there's none left. My vomit and my sweat are all over me.

"We're already there," she says. "We're home."

Home!

But we bounce on, and dawn keeps coming. Things are turning pink. We round a corner into a clearing, and there's a sudden breeze. We stop near a lake full of whitecaps—pink whitecaps. When Josephine stops the car I can hear the lapping. On one side of us there's a clapboard cottage in need of paint and on the other a tumbledown shed. Ahead of us a rickety dock slanting at a crazy angle.

I'm so sick and exhausted I don't want to move. I pull back when Josephine tries to help me out. She gives up and goes inside, screen door slamming (at first I think we're being shot at) and comes out in a few minutes (another rifle shot) with hot tea. It tastes odd, dusty and stale, but it helps right away. Powerful stuff. No doubt some Josephine-type secret herbs in it.

Now she helps me in. The shutters are closed so it's dim inside. Moth eaten deer head on the wall, a half

a dozen fishing rods crosswise on its antlers. Its eyes glitter with what little light there is.

Josephine plops me down on an overstuffed chair. Dust flies up and I sneeze. She props my bad leg on a foot stool. Then she goes into another room and comes back with a white shirt. Seems brand-new. But then she sees how filthy I am, sidewalk dirt and vomit, tea stains... She brings a basin of warm water and towels and soap. Cleans up my top half.

She says, "No wonder..."

First I think, no wonder what? But then I know: I'm much too thin and my chest much too concave so of course no wonder. No wonder I'm nothing but a toady.

"I'm going to leave you here alone and go get groceries."

"Get me crutches."

I can see she won't. Why should she, now that she finally has me completely in her power?

"Please."

She looks away. At least she won't lie. There's always that about her. I appreciate it.

"I'll get night crawlers. If you want to fish right now, dig one up. You can drop a line at the end of the dock."

What a silly thing to say. Well, maybe not if she wants to tease me with suggesting things I can't possibly do.

"Watch out for snapping turtles."

Indeed.

She's off (she reaches to pat the neck of the deer head on her way out, then comes back and kisses him on the lips. Sawdust trickles out.) Here I am, sunk (too deep) in the chair. But clean—top half anyway—and with a new shirt.

I pull myself up, sneeze again from the dust, and prop myself on the arm of the chair. Using my arms and my one good/bad leg I support myself over to a harder chair. The deer's eyes follow me like those in front-staring portraits always do. There's disapproval in its look.

If I tip this hard chair from one side to the other, I can make progress. Without Josephine's herbs I'd not be able to manage it without pain. It takes a long time. When I get to the closest window and open shutters, here's Josephine driving up. I notice now the roadster used to be red.

I watch her bring in packages. She seems much more efficient than she normally is. Likely her confused look, and wandering away all the time was one more game.

I wonder where she's been because the first thing she does is hang wind chimes in the doorway. It sets to tinkling right away. Can't she do without that sound for half a minute—even here with rippings and rustlings?

She doesn't pay attention to me but busies herself in the kitchen. There's not exactly running water but there's a pump next to the sink and every time Josephine needs water I hear it creak-creaking. It sounds as if it's in more pain than I am. Josephine sings and hums. I've never heard her sound so happy. She brings me broth—store-bought broth, the kind we always have at the Home.

"There's real broth simmering on the stove," she says, "but it'll take a while."

She plops herself down in that overstuffed chair and puts her feet on the footstool she'd pushed over for me. She gives a big sigh just like the one I always sighed before I started off looking for her. Before I realize it (probably before she realizes it) she's asleep. She does look exhausted. After all she drove all night but I wish I'd stayed in the chair myself.

There's a screened-in porch. I wobble my chair out there and find a love seat just right for lying with my leg up on the arm. I fall asleep almost as fast as Josephine did. I dream a sick dream of being, not only a toady but a toad in fact, and of herbs that keep me helpless. In the dream I try to wrestle myself out of my own torpor. I fight to wake up and find myself fighting with the wicker back of the love seat and then I'm on the floor fighting the floor and then Josephine is beside me and I'm fighting her.

She slaps me, hard, on each cheek. It feels good because it wakes me out of my bad dream. How did she know to do that? Could she ever have been a nurse?

She sits on the floor beside me and pulls me across her lap, calls me, my dear, again.

I lie in her arms, poplars rustling, waves rustling.... There's a bird chirping right outside. I hear it all as if clearer than I've ever heard anything. I feel Josephine has me just where she wants me but I'm where I want to be, too.

After a while she puts a cushion under my head, goes and gets me more of that same dusty tea. She helps me back to the soft chair with the footstool and brings me broth that was on the stove all this time. In these few hours it has turned into real homemade broth with cloudy ribbons in it and little flecks of something or other. I've no idea what.

There's one other room, a little bedroom with a sagging iron bed. The white paint from the iron is chipping and lies all over the bed and floor. Josephine brushes it off and puts me to bed there. It has a lumpy, sagging mattress but I fall asleep instantly. I feel drugged, but I'm glad I am.

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In the morning I wake to thumping and bumping and then something falling part way down stairs. Turns out there's an attic and there was an old desk chair on castors up there. She's carried it down the steep stairway, castors dropping off and down first. I don't think I could have done that even without a broken leg. She rolls it next to the bed, helps me on it and pushes me out to the kitchen.

She has opened all the shutters. With the morning sun pouring in you can see the dust rising. You can even see our footprints across the floor. But Josephine doesn't clean up, instead (and it actually comes true, just as she said) she bakes me a pie. Not blueberry but mulberry. She's already been out picking things. For supper we have fiddle heads cooked in butter and fried puff ball steaks.

I eat, dressed in another clean white shirt. It smells of having been hung on the line in the sun.

In the evening she rolls me out on the rickety dock away from under the trees so we can see the stars. My God, stars so dazzling and dizzying.... It looks as if any minute you'll fall right off the earth into them. She knows them all: Cassiopeia's chair, Betelgeuse, Aldeberon, the teapot, the swan....

Next morning she pushes me out on the porch so I can watch her as she rows herself out in the old flat bottom boat and fishes. She catches a sunfish and a pike.

That evening we sit on the porch and listen to the birds settling down for the night. We watch the sun setting over the lake. First comes the wishing star and then more. Here on the porch, complete stillness, but all sorts of rackets going on outside, rustlings and tweetings, peepers peeping, bullfrogs karumphing.

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Days pass like this. Soon I'm well enough to take little walks.

She hasn't been teasing me lately. Or, rather, her teasing is more playful. Even her warnings make me laugh. ("Watch out for the bears." "Watch out for rattle snakes." "Watch out for roots that trip." "Watch out for ground hornets nests." "Watch out, watch out, watch out.") Then she'll put my dilapidated boater on my head, always at a rakish angle. "And don't step on any wild strawberries." I'm beginning to love a life like this. I'd like to learn to drop a worm into the water. How hard could that be? I'd like to pick gooseberries. First though, I'll dust this place. Josephine isn't going to do it. She doesn't seem to notice. I'm the one sneezing all the time.

I notice she has her parasol here, just in case of a slack wire. It suddenly appeared, crosswise on the antlers along with the fishing poles. It reminds me how much I miss Josephine's act. It's nice seeing birds perching on her head and feral cats coming when she calls but not as nice as that balancing act of hers.

We have our rituals: Our cleaning of the lamp chimneys, our lamp lighting, our last cup of tea before bed, Josephine patting the neck of the deer head and giving it a goodnight kiss, sawdust dripping out every time.

My leg is better when the Administrator finds us. I'm able to hobble with my cane almost as well as usual. I've cleaned up. I've fished and picked berries. I've chopped wood and gathered kindling. We've been out with a flashlight and caught frogs for frogs legs.

By now we're so used to our wind and water sounds, our wind chimes, our screeching pump, that we hear him right away and from a long ways off. We look at each other over our lunch of crawdads and miner's lettuce. There's a sudden panic. We see it in each other's eyes. We're like children, caught in an act of mischief. Of course at first we don't know it's the Administrator. What we know is, this can't be good. Then, through the trees, we see the big black car the Administrator always drives.

I say, "Where?"

She says, "Follow me."

But I change my mind. I say, "No, we're grown ups."

I've taken my usual role. Exactly what Josephine doesn't like about me the most.

"*You* may be," she says and is gone.

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He comes alone. Black suit, striped tie and all—even way out here in the woods. He has a pistol in his belt. I can't imagine why, what with two (probably more addled than we think we are) old people.

I step out to meet him. *Bang!* goes the screen door. (I'm usually good at remembering to be careful.) I hold out my hand but he ignores it. "Well, well," he says. "Well, well, well." He looks all around: our shed, our paint peeling cottage, our rickety dock. He can't stop saying, "Well."

Then we hear singing—raspy, wobbly, old lady singing. We look up and there's Josephine. Talk about not being a grown up! She's dancing ... I can't believe it, first across the cottage roof, holding her pink parasol for balance. Then ... I can't believe it even more. My God, she's stepping out on the wire where electricity used to come into the house back when it was paid for. She's in no hurry. She turns, scarves twisting, goes back and forth, gives a little jump. We're mesmerized—as we always are when she does her act. After a minute or two of this, she goes off along the wire, and when a good tree comes along with nice straight branches, she hops out on those and then over to another tree and another. A scarf floats down. We lose sight of her after that.

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If he takes me away, what will happen to Josephine? She won't stay here without me. She'll come back to the Home of her own accord. Is that what he's counting on?

I surmise ... many surmises I had not surmised before. I couldn't stand the Home if Josephine wasn't there. She and I ... once I really think about it, we both love being outside day or night in any weather. I didn't realize it but I loved chasing after her. It was our excuse for a little bit of freedom and adventure. I loved the responsibility and Josephine loved the misbehavior.

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The Administrator looks at me in such rage! As if it's all my fault, *all* of it.

He shouts warnings and her name. And, "You'd better this or that, or else this that and the other." And then he shoots in the air.

I say, "You can't scare her. She doesn't scare," so he turns and points the pistol at me.

"Maybe I can scare *you*."

"Maybe."

He shoots in the air again. "Take me to her."

"No."

I couldn't anyway. God knows what hiding places Josephine has out there in her woods and I don't

know a single one.

He makes a barking sound then turns and shoots out our front window. I hear something fall inside. From the sound of it, bull's eye! The deer head has gone down. I can't say I'm sorry. That deer head never did approve of me.

He puts the pistol down at his feet. I think to grab it. I could run ... hobble.... Perhaps I can run faster than I think. Throw the pistol in the lake. But as usual I deliberate too long. He takes handcuffs out of his pocket, puts one cuff on my wrist and looks around for someplace good and solid to handcuff me to. There's no place. Finally he handcuffs me to the pipe that takes the water from the well in to the kitchen pump.

"At least *you're* not going anywhere."

He reloads and off he goes, following the wires, but first he shoots one more shot—at our jay. Misses. (That jay perched on Josephine's head almost every time we left the cottage.)

I fear for her, but I fear for him, too.

I try to squeeze out of the cuff until my wrist is raw. I move the cuff up and down the pipe.

And then, thump, here is Josephine, right beside me, dropped from the roof. She gives me such a smile! As if she'd heard the shots and thought to find me lying dead and yet here I am alive. "Thank, thank, God, God, God, God!" she says. She throws her arms around me and kisses me hard right on the lips. This time there's no irony in it.

She didn't have to come back. She could have stayed lost in the woods. I'll bet she has dozens of hiding places. I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't nest in the trees as chimpanzees do. I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't eat all sorts of leaves. We've already dined on nettles.

She gets a wrench from the kitchen and twists at the joint where the pipe enters the cottage. It's so rusty it won't move, but it does break and she slides the cuff off the end and I'm free.

She says, "Nobody knows he's here." There's that sly look again.

"Are you sure?"

"Why else would he come alone? And with a pistol? He wants me. You he'll kill and throw in the lake."

Just what I was thinking to do with him.

"He used to come to me at night until I started running away."

I'm shocked. Except.... Well, *maybe*, but it could be as ridiculous as that filthy fountain of youth.

"This is the perfect place for him. He'll tie me to the bed and come here every weekend. Feed me nothing but oatmeal. I know him."

Oatmeal—that part I know is true. It's our usual breakfast at the Home.

"I couldn't tell about it back there. Everybody thought I was too addled. They'd never believe me."

That's true, too. Even I don't know what to believe.

We hear shots close by. And then a squawk. Might be one of our ravens that we've been putting food

out for. (I know it's only a raven, but it makes me angry. I may not be able to be as impartial as I wish to be.) Another shot, then lots of squawks. They're defending their own. I've a good mind to head off in that direction and help them.

Josephine must see it on my face. She says, "Go." I go. Weaponless except for my cane. Off into the woods with no sense of direction except raven calls. Like it or not I will be ... I *am* her hero.

I tramp on May apples and wild strawberry plants, mushrooms (toadstools I suppose), pass by a puff ball and think, must remember where it is. The ravens stop. I stop. I listen. Without the ravens I have no direction to go in.

Yet I go on, more slowly now, listening between each step. I come upon a hut of leaves and branches, floor covered with a bed of ferns.

But why isn't anything making any noise? Why not even the ravens? There's just a stirring of leaves and the easy going lapping of waves somewhere over on my left.

Then I hear him crashing towards me. I hunker down and wait and wonder what to do with no weapon except a cane. I think maybe crook it round his neck or trip him.... I think how he's a much bigger man than I am. Younger, too.

Instead of him I see a doe leap past. I hear a shot from right behind her. I'm thinking this is not a doe. Her mate was mounted on the wall and now lies on the floor. That deer head has looked at me with such suspicion all this time. I don't know where these thoughts come from. I know that can't be true. But then I see the glint of gold. Is the doe really wearing a long dangly earring or is it a trick of sun rays coming through the leaves in little spots of light? Did she wink? Or, rather, blink at me as she dashed by?

.....

After the doe, here he comes. I no longer wonder if I should do this or that. I grab his leg as he goes by. I make him miss his second shot. How dare he! How dare, and even if the doe isn't Josephine? How dare? And in our forest! I'm on top of him, fearless. There's one more shot. First I'm thinking: Missed me! Then I'm thinking: He did it to himself.

It seems to me Josephine somehow choreographed the whole thing on purpose. Sent me off, then risked her life for ... I don't know what. Me I suppose.

By the time I find my way back to the cottage it's dark, but, as I enter the clearing, it's a dazzling, shiny dark with Josephine ... my God! above me, on the telephone wires again dancing to a background of the constellations, skirt and scarves billowing out, parasol.... Quite extraordinary. And dancing better than I ever saw her dance. It would have been a joy to everybody back at the Home. Alas that only I am here to see it.

"My love." I finally dare to say it. "My only, ever and always love."

She hears. She says, "I am your heart's desire."

Is that yet another joke or irony? But of course it's simply real and true. I answer, "Indeed." Indeed.

The End

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