JOSEPHINE JACOBSEN

Jack Frost

Mrs. Travis was drinking a sturdy cup of tea. She sat in the wicker rocker on her back porch, in a circle of sun, after picking Mrs. James her flowers. Exhausted, she felt a little tired, and she rested with satisfaction. Mrs. James's motley bouquet sat by her knee, in one of the flower tins.

Mrs. Travis wore a blue cotton dress with a man's suitcoat over it, and around that a tie, knotted for a belt. Her legs were bare, but her small feet had on them a pair of child's galoshes, the sort that have spring buckles. Since several springs were missing, she wore the galoshes open, and sometimes they impeded her.

Half of her back porch, the left-hand side, was clear, and held her wicker rocker with its patches of sprung stiff strands; but the other half was more fruitful, a great pile of possessions which she needed, or had needed, or in certain possible circumstances might come to need: a tin foot-tub containing rope, twine, and a nest of tin containers from the insides of flower baskets; a hatchet; a galosh for the right foot; garden tools; a rubber mat; a beekeeper's helmet for the black-fly season. Near by, a short length of hose; chunks of wood. The eye flagged before the count.

There was a small winding path, like the witch's in a fairy tale, between cosmos so tall they brushed the shoulders. To its right almost immediately, vegetables grew: the feathery tops of carrots, dusty beet-greens, a few handsome mottled zucchini, the long runners of beans. Last year there had still been tomatoes, but the staking-up and coaxing had become too much; she said to herself instead that such finicking

had come to bore her. To the left of the cosmos, below a small slope of scratchy lawn, was the garden proper—on this mellow September afternoon a fine chaos of unchosen color, the Mexican shades of zinnias, the paper-cutout heads of dahlias, a few grownover roses, more cosmos, the final spikes of some fine gladioli, phlox running heavily back to magenta, and closer to the cooling ground, the pink and purple of asters. There were even a few pansies, wildly persisting in a tangle of grass and weeds.

Until a few years ago her younger brother Henry had driven over two hundred miles, up from Connecticut, to help her plant both gardens, but Henry had died at eighty-two. Mrs. Travis herself did not actually know how old she was. She believed herself to be ninety-three; but having several years ago gone suddenly to check the fact of the matter in the faint gray handwriting of her foxed Bible, a cup of strong tea in her hand, she had sloshed the tea as she peered, and then on the puffed, run surface, she could no longer read the final digit. 3? 7? 1883? Just possibly, 1887? For a moment she felt youth pressing on her; if it were, if it possibly were 1887, several years had lifted themselves off. There they were, still to come with all the variety of their days. Turn those to hours, those to minutes, and it was a gigantic fresh extension. But she thought the figure was a 3. It was the last time she looked in the back of the Bible.

Tacked onto the porch wall was a large calendar; each day past was circled in red. Only three such showed; she would circle September 4th when she closed the door for the night.

Now before she could swallow the last of her tea, here came Mrs. James's yellow sweater, borne on a bicycle along the dirt road outside the hedge. Dismounted, Mrs. James wheeled the bicycle up the path and leaned it against the porch post. She was sweaty with effort over the baked ridges of the road, and, half a century younger than her hostess, she radiated summer-visitor energy and cheer.

"Oh Mrs. Travis!" she cried. "You've got them all ready! Aren't they lovely!" She was disappointed, since she had hoped to choose the picking; but she and her summer friends regarded Mrs. Travis's activity as much like that of Dr. Johnson's dog walking on its hind legs.

Mrs. Travis looked with satisfaction at the jumble of phlox, gladioli, dahlias, and zinnias which, with all the slow, slow bending and straightening, had cost her an hour.

"Oh, it's so *warm,"* said Mrs. James with pleasure, sitting down on the step at Mrs. Travis's feet.

Mrs. Travis had so few occasions to speak that it always seemed to take her a minute to call up her voice, which arrived faint with distance. "Yes," she said, almost inaudibly. "It's a very good day."

"Oh look!" said Mrs. James, pleased. "Look how well the rose begonia's doing!" She had given it to Mrs. Travis early in the summer, it was one of her own bulbs from California, and she could see its full gorgeousness now, blooming erratically beside the path, hanging its huge rosy bloom by the gap-toothed rake and a tiny pile of debris, twigs, dead grass, a few leaves.

Mrs. Travis did not answer, but Mrs. James saw it was because she was looking at the begonia's gross beauty with a powerful smugness. They sat companionably for a moment. Mrs. James seemed to Mrs. Travis like one of the finches, or yellow-headed sparrows, which frequented her for the warmest weeks. Exactly as she thought so, Mrs. James said, suddenly sad, "Do you know the birds are all going, *already?"*

"No, not all," said Mrs. Travis soothingly. "The chickadees won't go." But Mrs. Travis did not really care; it was the flowers she created out of nothing.

"I hate to see them go so soon," said Mrs. James, stubbornly sad.

"But you'll be going too," said Mrs. Travis, faintly and comfortingly. Mrs. James, lifting her chin, looked at Mrs. Travis. "Are you going to stay here all winter, *again?"* she asked.

Mrs. Travis looked at her with stupefaction. Then she said, "Yes." She was afraid Mrs. James was going to repeat what she had said for the past two autumns, about Mrs. Travis moving into the village for the winter; here she was, no phone, no close neighbors; nothing but snow, and ice, and wind, and the grocery boy with his little bag, and the mailman's Pontiac passing without stopping. But Mrs. James said only, "Look, here comes Father O'Rourke."

There was the clap of a car door, and Father O'Rourke appeared between the cosmos, surprisingly wearing his dog collar, his black coat slung over his white shoulder. Mrs. James stood up, pleased that Mrs. Travis had a visitor. "I've got to get these flowers back," she said. Now came the embarrassing moment. "How—er, they're so lovely; what . . . ?"

"That's three dollars for the pailful," said Mrs. Travis with satisfaction. Mrs. James, whose grandmother, as a little girl, had known Mrs. Travis in Boston, continued to feel, no matter what she paid, that the flowers had come as a gift from Mrs. Travis's conservatory. She laid three dollars inconspicuously on the table by the oil lamp, and Mrs. Travis watched her and Father O'Rourke saying hello, and good-bye for the winter, to each other in the hot slanting sun.

As Mrs. James wheeled her bicycle away, Father O'Rourke replaced her on the step. He did not offer to shake hands, having noticed that such gestures seemed to distract Mrs. Travis, as some sort of clumsy recollected maneuver. He had just come from making the final plans for the Watkins wedding, and, fresh from all that youth and detail, he looked at Mrs. Travis, whose pale small blue eyes looked back at him, kindly, but from a long distance. The purpose of Father O'Rourke's visit embarrassed him; he was afraid of Mrs. Travis's iron will.

"What a lot of flowers you've still got," began Father O'Rourke, obliquely.

Mrs. Travis looked out over the ragged rainbow on the slope. The sun, at its western angle, was still a good bit above the smaller of the big dark mountains behind which it would go. "Oh yes," she said, "they'll be here for a long time. A couple of weeks, probably." He saw that she meant just that.

"Well," he said, "you know, Mrs. Travis, after five years here, I've found we just don't know. Things may go on almost to October; and then, again, a night in late August will do it."

Mrs. Travis did not reply to this, and Father O'Rourke plunged. "I saw Mrs. Metcalfe at the post office this morning," he said, looking placatingly at Mrs. Travis's profile. "Did you know that she's finished making that big sitting-room off her south porch into that little apartment she's going to rent out?"

Mrs. Travis, who had had enough of this for one day, indeed for one lifetime, turned her head and looked him straight in his hazel eye.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said, surprisingly loudly, adding, from some past constraint, "Father O'Rourke."

A final sense of the futility of his effort struck him silent. They sat quietly for a few seconds. What on earth am I trying to do? he thought suddenly. Why *should* she move? Well, so many reasons; he wondered if they were all worthless. He knew that before he was born, Mrs. Travis had enlisted in the army of eccentric hermits, isolates, writing their own terms into some curious treaty. But she was so much older than anyone

else that the details became more and more obscure; also, more romanticized. There was even doubt as to a dim and distant husband. A fallen or faithless lover appeared, along with factual but tinted tales of early privilege. But the Miss Havisham motif he tended to discount; it was so widely beloved.

All he knew for certain was that, with Mrs. Travis, he was in the presence of an authenticity of elimination which caused him a curiously mingled horror and envy. At times he thought that her attention, fiercely concentrated, brought out, like a brilliant detail from an immense canvas, a quality of some nonverbal and passionate comprehension. At other times he saw a tremendously old woman, all nuances of the world, her past, and the earth's present, ignored or forgotten; brittle and single, everything rejected but her own tiny circle of motion.

With a fairly complex mind, Father O'Rourke combined a rather simple set of hopes, not many of which were realized. One of these was to enter Mrs. Travis's detail, as some sort of connection with a comfort, or even a lack of finality. The bond between them, actually, was a belief in the physical, a conviction of the open-ended mystery of matter. But since Mrs. Travis had never been a Catholic, that particular avenue wasn't open to him. Her passion was in this scraggy garden, but he distinguished that it was coldly unsentimental, unlike that of most lady gardeners he knew. He was not sure just how Mrs. Travis did feel about her flowers. He considered that, in homily and metaphor, the garden thing—Eden to Gethsemane—had been overdone; nevertheless, in connection with Mrs. Travis, he always thought of it. He had, on a previous visit last month, brought up some flower passages from the Bible; but the only interest she had shown was by a question as to which type of lily the lilies of the field had been. She had at least five kinds, lifting their slick and sappy stalks above confusion. But when he had said they were most like anemones, she had lost interest, having forgotten, after fifty years in the New Hampshire mountains, what anemones looked like.

"I have to go back to the Watkinses again tomorrow," said Father O'Rourke. He knew he should have been back at the rectory half an hour ago. Here he sat, mesmerized somehow by the invisible movement of the sun across the step, by the almost total stillness. It was cooling rapidly, too. He picked up his coat and hunched his arms into it. "Can I bring you anything, then?"

"No," she said. She was sorry to see him go. She turned her head to look fully at him. "Do you want any flowers?" she asked.

He hesitated, thinking of Mrs. Metcalfe's pious arrangement, three pink gladioli in a thin-stemmed glass on each side of the altar. "Well," he said, "how about some zinnias for my desk? I'll pick them tomorrow," he added hastily, as he saw her eyes cloud, rallying for action. On the step he lingered, smiling at her. Oppressed. "Well," he said idiotically, "don't let Jack Frost get your flowers."

She watched him attentively down the path. Just as his starter churned, the sun left the porch and, looking up to the mountain, Mrs. Travis saw that it had gone for the day.

She went in at once, forgetting her rake, lying in the garden, her empty teacup and the three dollars on the table, but carrying a short chunk of wood under each arm. She took at least one each time she went into the house. She never turned on the furnace before October, but there was a small chunk stove in the corner, by the lamp table, and it warmed the room in a matter of minutes. She decided to have supper right now. She had a chop; and there was still some lettuce. She had picked a fine head this morning, it was right in the colander, earth still clinging to its bottom.

By eight o'clock it had got very cold, outside. But the room was warm. Mrs. Travis went to sleep in her chair. Sleep often took her now with a ferocious touch, so that everything just disappeared, and when she woke up, she found that hours had passed. On a warm night in July she had slept in her chair all night long, waking up, disoriented, to a watery dawn.

Now she not only slept, she dreamed. An unpleasant dream, something extremely unusual. She was in a dark huge city lit by thin lamps, and she was afraid. She was afraid of a person, who might be coming toward her, or coming up behind her. And yet, more than a person—though she knew it was a man in a cap. She must get into a house before he found her. Or before he found someone else. A strange-looking girl went by her, hurrying, very pale, with a big artificial rose in her hair. She turned suddenly into an opening on the dreamer's right; it was the darkest of alleys and the dreamer hurried faster than ever. Ahead of her, in the fog, she could see the dimly lit sign of an inn, but as she hurried faster, a terrible scream, high and short, came out of the alley. It woke Mrs. Travis, her hands locked hard on the arms of the chair.

She sat quite still, looking around the familiar room. Then memory handed her one of the clear messages that now so seldom arrived. The Lodger. That was just it. She had suddenly, after all these years, had a dream about Jack the Ripper, as she had had several times when she first read of his foggy city streets a very long time ago. But why this dream should have escaped from the past to molest her, she could not think.

The little fire in the stove was out, but the stove itself still ticked and settled with heat. The wall clock said two minutes to eight. Stiff from sleep, Mrs. Travis reached over and turned the dial of the small discolored radio under the table lamp, and immediately a loud masculine voice said, ". . . front, all the way from the Great Lakes, throughout northern New England, and into Canada. Frost warnings have been issued for the mountain areas of Vermont and New Hampshire. Tomorrow the unseasonable cold will continue, for a chilly Labor Day; but by Wednesday . . ." Appalled, Mrs. Travis switched off the evil messenger.

Frost. It was not that it was so strange; it was so sudden. She could still feel the heat of the sun, on the porch, on her hands and her ankles. Two weeks, she had thought.

As she sat, staring for a moment straight ahead, a brand-new fury started up, deep inside her. Two weeks. It was an eternity of summer. The long nights, the brutal chill, the endless hardness of the earth, they were reasonable enough, in their time. In their time. But this was her time, and they were about to invade it. She began to tremble with anger. She thought of her seeds, and how dry and hard they had been; of her deathlike bulbs, slipping old skin, with everything locked inside them, and she, her body, had turned them into that summer of color and softness and good smells that was out there in the dark garden.

She turned her head, right, and left, looking for an exit for her rage. Then suddenly she sat forward in her chair. An idea had come to her with great force and clarity. It grew in the room, like an enormous plant covered with buds. Mrs. Travis knew exactly what she was going to do. Her intention was not protective, but defiant; her sense was of battle, punitive battle.

She stood up carefully, and went and got the flashlight from the shelf over the woodbox. She went to the porch door and opened it, and then closed it hastily behind her, protecting the room's warmth. There was no sound or light in any direction, but there was a diffused brightness

behind the mountain's darker bulk. She tipped over the pail that had held Mrs. James's flowers, so that the leafy water poured down the sloping porch. Then she began fitting the tin flower-holders into it. She could not get them all in, and she took her pail into the house and came back for the last three. She arranged the pail and the tins on the kitchen floor, and then she attached a short length of hose to the cold-water spigot, dropped the other end in the pail, and turned on the water. She filled the big tins the same way, and then lifted the small ones into the sink, removing the hose, and filled them. Turning with satisfaction to look through the doorway at the clock, she was disconcerted to see that it said five minutes after nine. She stared at it, skeptical but uncertain. It could *stop;* but surely it couldn't skip *ahead.* Perhaps she had mistaken the earlier time. She began to move more rapidly; though she was so excited, all her faculties had come so strongly into one intention, that it seemed to her that she was already moving at a furious pace.

She went over to the kitchen door and took off its hook a felt hat and an ancient overcoat of Henry's. She put the hat on her head, got carefully into the overcoat and stuffed her flashlight into the pocket. She took down from the top of the refrigerator a cracked papier-mâché tray Mrs. James had sent her several Christmases ago; its design of old coins had almost disappeared. At an open drawer she hesitated over a pair of shears. Lately she had found them hard to open and close, and after standing there for half a minute, she took a thick-handled knife instead. She went to look at the empty sitting room and then moved back through the kitchen faster than seemed possible.

Out on the porch, a square of light came through the window, and looking up, she could make out a cloud over the mountain, its edges stained with brightness.

She lit her flashlight, and went cautiously down the step and along the path, carrying her tray under her arm. Faces of cosmos, purple and pink, loomed at her as she went, but even in her tremendous excitement, she knew she couldn't bring in everything, and she went on, the tops of her galoshes making a little flapping noise in the silence. She turned carefully down the slight slope, and here were the zinnias, towered over by the branchy dahlias. She laid her tray on the ground.

But now, breathing more rapidly, she saw that she was in trouble. To cut with her knife, she had to hold the flower's stem, and she had to hold her flashlight to see it, and she had two hands. Fiercely she looked about for an idea; and at just that moment, a clear thin light streamed

over the edge of the cloud and lit her. The moon was full. She might have known; that was when a black frost always came.

Mrs. Travis made an inarticulate sound of fierce pleasure and dropped the flashlight into the tray. Then she began to cut the flowers, working as fast as she could, giving little pants of satisfaction as the shapes heaped themselves up below her. Inch by inch she moved along the ragged rows, pushing, with a galoshed toe, the tray along the ground before her. She cut all the gladioli, even the ones which were still mostly flaccid green tips; she cut all the dahlias, even the buds, and every zinnia. She felt light and warm, and drunk with resistant power. Finally the tray was so full that blooms began to tip over and fall into the cold grass.

Very cautiously indeed she got the tray up, but she could not hold it level and manipulate the flashlight. It made no difference. The moon, enormous and fully round, had laid light all over the garden; the house's shadow was black, as though a pale sun were shining.

Teetering a little to hold the tray level, Mrs. Travis went up the path, carefully up the step. She set the tray on the table, knocking over her dirty teacup and saucer, and each broke cleanly in two pieces. She stepped over them, opened the door on warmth, and went back for her load.

First she filled the pail; then every tin. There was a handful of zinnias left, and a pile of phlox. Threatened, Mrs. Travis looked about the kitchen, but saw nothing helpful. She could feel her cheeks burning in the room's summer, and with a little noise of triumph, she went through the door to the bedroom and came back with the big china chamberpot. It had a fine network of fractured veins, and on it was a burst of painted magenta foliage. When she had filled it under the tap it was too heavy to lift down, so she stuffed in the flowers and left it there. A small chartreuse-colored spider began to run up and down the sink's edge.

Then, just as she was turning to look at all she had done, like a cry from an alley, like a blow between the shoulders, to her mind's eye came the rose begonia. She could positively see in the air before her its ruffled heavy head, the coral flush of its crowded petals; from its side sprang the bud, color splitting the sheath. The bulb had thrust it up, and there it was, out there.

Though she felt as though she were drunk, she also felt shrewd. Think of the low ones you can't stoop to tonight, she thought, the

nasturtiums, the pansies, the bachelor's buttons, the ragged robins. But it made no difference. She knew that unless she took the rose begonia, she had lost everything. She looked at the clock; it was half past ten. She could be back in ten minutes; and she decided that then she would sit right down by the stove and sleep there, deliberately, and not move into the cold bed and take off bit by bit so many clothes.

There were four sticks of wood by the stove, and under the lid the embers were bright. She put in three sticks; then she went empty-handed to the porch. It was very cold and absolutely still. The moon was even brighter; it was almost halfway up the sky. She found a terra-cotta flowerpot on the porch corner, and she rooted in the footbath until she found her trowel. Then she went, as fast as she could go, down the path to the halfway point, where she came upon the rose begonia, paled by the chill of the light. As she bent over, her head roared; so she kneeled, and drove the blunt trowel-edge into the earth.

When the roots came up in a great ball of earth she pressed them into the pot, stuffing more clods of fibrous earth around them. Then she started to get up. But with the pot in one hand and the trowel in the other, it was impossible.

She dropped the trowel. She did not even think that she could get it tomorrow. Suddenly she was cold to her very teeth. She thought just of the room, the hot, colored, waiting room. Holding the pot in her left hand, pushing with her right, she got herself upright; but it made her dizzy, and as she lurched a little to the side the rake's teeth brought her down in a heavy fall. The flower shot from her hand and disappeared into the shadows and a bright strong pain blasted her. It was her ankle; and she lay with her face close to the cold dirt, feeling the waves of pain hit her.

Mrs. Travis raised her head, to see how far away the porch was. It was perhaps ten or eleven yards. Another country. Things seemed dimmer, too, and wrenching her head sideways and up, she saw that the huge moon had shrunk; it sat high and small, right at the top of the sky.

Mrs. Travis lowered her head gently and began to crawl, pushing with her hands and the knee of her good leg. She went along, inch by inch, foot by foot; she had no fear, since there was an absolute shield between one second and the next.

The porch was so shadowed now that she nearly missed it, the step struck her advancing hand. It took her three tries, but she got up over it, and went on, inch by inch, toward the door. A sliver of china bit her

hand. Bright light came through the keyhole. She reached up and easily turned the doorknob, then like a crab she was across the sill.

She could not, she found, turn; but she pushed out with her left foot, and miraculously the door clicked shut just behind her. She felt no pain at all, but there was something forming under her ribs.

In the room's heat, the foliage of the marigolds gave out a spicy smell, stronger than the fragrance of the phlox. A dozen shapes and colors blazed before her eyes, and a great tearing breath came up inside her like an explosion. Mrs. Travis lifted her head, and the whole wave of summer, advancing obedient and glorious, in a crest of color and warmth and fragrance broke right over her.

Profiles of the Authors

HEINRICH BÖLL was born on December 21, 1917, into a Catholic family of leftist and pacifist sympathies in Cologne, Germany. Anti-Nazi feelings were strong in his family, but he was conscripted into the German Army and served from 1939 to 1945, when he was captured by the Americans. His first collection of stories, *The Train Was On Time*, appeared in 1949, and his first novel, *And Where Were You, Adam?*, in 1951. Before his death in 1985, Böll published scores of stories and a dozen novels as well as plays and essays. Although he refused to declare himself a Catholic on government tax forms, he always maintained his allegiance to the church and explored religious questions in his writing. Böll won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972.

MORLEY CALLAGHAN was born on September 22, 1903, in Toronto. In the eighty-three years since then he has become Canada's premier man of letters writing in English, prolific both as a short story writer and as a novelist. His novels include *Such Is My Beloved* (1934), *A Many Coloured Coat* (1960), and *Close to the Sun Again* (1977). Ironically, he is perhaps best known in the United States as the author of a memoir of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, *That Summer in Paris* (1963). Writing in 1965, Edmund Wilson described Callaghan as "today, perhaps the most unjustly neglected novelist in the English-speaking world." He has received several prestigious Canadian awards for literature.

ELIZABETH CULLINAN was born on June 7, 1933, in New York City. She received her education at Marymount College. In addition to her two novels, *House of Gold* (1970) and *A Change of Scene* (1982), Cullinan has published two collections of short stories: *The Time of Adam* (1971) and *Yellow Roses* (1977). Most of the stories appeared originally in *The New Yorker*, to which she continues to contribute. Commenting on her intelligence and craftsmanship as well as on her precise attention to domestic detail, Joyce Carol Oates remarked, "It takes immense skill, after all, to deal with trivia and escape becoming trivial."

ANDRE DUBUS was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, on August 11, 1936. After serving in the Marines, which he left as a captain in 1964, he took an M.F.A.