

THE LAST LEAF

O. HENRY

Generosity requires a willingness to give what you have. Are there different types of generosity portrayed in this O. Henry story? Does Behrman ever achieve his goal of painting a great work of art?

In a little district west of Washington Square* the streets have run crazy and broken themselves into small strips called “places.” The “places” make strange angles and curves. One street crosses itself a time or two. An artist once discovered a valuable possibility in this street. Suppose a collector with a bill for paints, paper, and canvas should in traversing* this route suddenly meet himself coming back, without a cent having been paid on account!

Washington Square: a famous park in New York City

traversing: covering

So, to quaint* old Greenwich Village the art people soon came prowling, hunting for north windows and eighteenth-century gables and Dutch attics and low rents. Then they imported some pewter mugs and a chafing dish* or two from Sixth Avenue, and became a “colony.”

quaint: old-fashioned

chafing dish: a dish set above a heating device

At the top of a squatty, three-story brick Sue and Johnsy had their studio. “Johnsy” was familiar for Joanna. One was from Maine; the other from California. They had met at the table d’hôte of an Eighth Street “Delmonico’s,”* and found their tastes in art, chicory salad, and bishop sleeves* so congenial that the joint studio resulted.

table d’hôte . . . Delmonico’s: i.e., a meal offered at a fixed price at a lower-priced version of the famous restaurant in New York

bishop sleeves: full, gathered sleeves of a woman’s dress

That was in May. In November a cold, unseen stranger, whom the doctors called Pneumonia, stalked about the colony, touching one here and there with his icy fingers. Over on the east side this ravager* strode boldly, smiting his victims by scores,* but his feet trod slowly through the maze of the narrow and moss-grown “places.”

ravager: destroyer

scores: large numbers

Mr. Pneumonia was not what you would call a chivalric* old gentleman. A mite of a little woman with blood thinned by California zephyrs* was hardly fair game for the red-fisted, short-breathed old duffer.* But Johnsy he smote; and she lay, scarcely moving, on her painted iron bedstead looking through the small Dutch windowpanes at the blank side of the next brick house.

chivalric: courteous

zephyrs: winds

duffer: slang: peddler

One morning the busy doctor invited Sue into the hallway with a shaggy, gray eyebrow.

“She has one chance in—let us say, ten,” he said, as he shook down the mercury in his clinical thermometer. “And that chance is for her to want to live. This way people have of lining-up on the side of the undertaker makes the entire pharmacopoeia* look silly. Your little lady has made up her mind that

she's not going to get well. Has she anything on her mind?"

pharmacopoeia: supply of medicine

"She—she wanted to paint the Bay of Naples someday," said Sue.

"Paint?—bosh! Has she anything on her mind worth thinking about twice—a man, for instance?"

"A man?" said Sue, with a jew's harp twang* in her voice. "Is a man worth—but, no, doctor; there is nothing of the kind."

jew's harp twang: the vibrating sound of this small musical instrument

"Well, it is the weakness, then," said the doctor. "I will do all that science, so far as it may filter through my efforts, can accomplish. But whenever my patient begins to count the carriages in her funeral procession I subtract fifty per cent from the curative* power of medicines. If you will get her to ask

one question about the new winter styles in cloak sleeves I will promise you a one-in-five chance for her, instead of one in ten."

curative: curing

After the doctor had gone Sue went into the workroom and cried a Japanese napkin* to a pulp. Then she swaggered* into Johnsy's room with her drawing board, whistling ragtime.*

napkin: handkerchief

swaggered: strutted

ragtime: a style of popular music popularized in the 1890s

Johnsy lay, scarcely making a ripple under the bedclothes, with her face toward the window. Sue stopped whistling, thinking she was asleep.

She arranged her board and began a pen-and-ink drawing to illustrate a magazine story. Young artists must pave their way to Art by drawing pictures for magazine sto-



ries that young authors write to pave their way to Literature.

As Sue was sketching a pair of elegant horseshow riding trousers and a monocle* on the figure of the hero, an Idaho cowboy, she heard a low sound, several times repeated. She went quickly to the bedside.

monocle: eyeglass for one eye

Johnsy's eyes were open wide. She was looking out the window and counting—counting backward.

"Twelve," she said, and a little later "eleven"; and then "ten," and "nine"; and then "eight" and "seven," almost together.

Sue looked solicitously* out of the window. What was there to count? There was only a bare, dreary yard to be seen, and the blank side of the brick house twenty feet away. An old, old ivy vine, gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed half way up the brick wall. The cold breath of autumn had stricken its leaves from the vine until its skeleton branches clung, almost bare, to the crumbling bricks.

solicitously: anxiously

"What is it, dear?" asked Sue.

"Six," said Johnsy, in almost a whisper. "They're falling faster now. Three days ago there were almost a hundred. It made my head ache to count them. But now it's easy. There goes another one. There are only five left now."

"Five what, dear? Tell your Sudie."

"Leaves. On the ivy vine. When the last one falls I must go, too. I've known that for three days. Didn't the doctor tell you?"

"Oh, I never heard of such nonsense," complained Sue, with magnificent scorn. "What have old ivy leaves to do with your getting well? And you used to love that vine, so, you naughty girl. Don't be a goosey.* Why, the doctor told me this morning that

your chances for getting well real soon were—let's see exactly what he said—he said the chances were ten to one! Why, that's almost as good a chance as we have in New York when we ride on the streetcars or walk past a new building. Try to take some broth now, and let Sudie go back to her drawing, so she can sell the editor man with it, and buy port wine for her sick child, and pork chops for her greedy self."

goosey: (slang) foolish person

"You needn't get any more wine," said Johnsy, keeping her eyes fixed out the window. "There goes another. No, I don't want any broth. That leaves just four. I want to see the last one fall before it gets dark. Then I'll go, too."

"Johnsy, dear," said Sue, bending over her, "will you promise me to keep your eyes closed, and not look out the window until I am done working? I must hand those drawings in by tomorrow. I need the light, or I would draw the shade down."

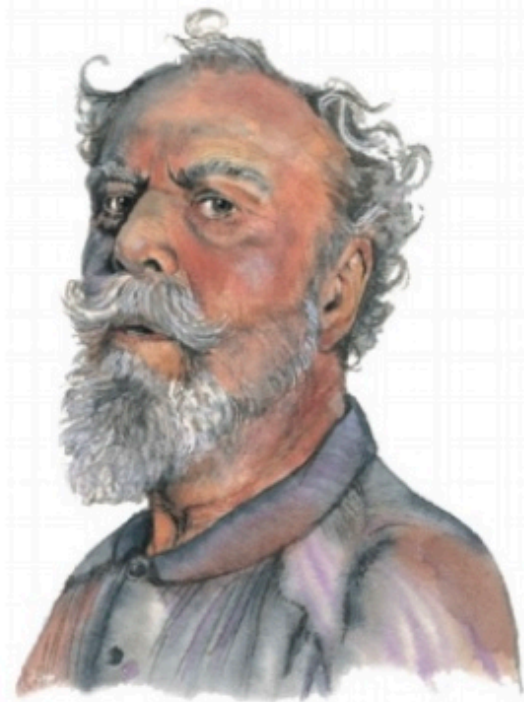
"Couldn't you draw in the other room?" asked Johnsy, coldly.

"I'd rather be here by you," said Sue. "Besides, I don't want you to keep looking at those silly ivy leaves."

"Tell me as soon as you have finished," said Johnsy, closing her eyes, and lying white and still as a fallen statue, "because I want to see the last one fall. I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of thinking. I want to turn loose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor, tired leaves."

"Try to sleep," said Sue. "I must call Behrman up to be model for the old hermit miner. I'll not be gone a minute. Don't try to move 'til I come back."

Old Behrman was a painter who lived on the ground floor beneath them. He was past sixty and had a Michelangelo's Moses beard



curling down from the head of a satyr* along the body of an imp.* Behrman was a failure in art. Forty years he had wielded the brush without getting near enough to touch the hem of his Mistress's* robe.* He had been always about to paint a masterpiece, but had never yet begun it. For several years he had painted nothing except now and then a daub in the line of commerce or advertising. He earned a little by serving as a model to those young artists in the colony who could not pay the price of a professional. He still talked of his coming masterpiece. For the rest he was a fierce little old man, who scoffed* terribly at softness in anyone, and who regarded himself as especial mastiff-in-waiting* to protect the two young artists in the studio above.

satyr: mythological creature of half man and half goat

imp: a small demon (devil)

Mistress's: Art's

robe: cf. Mark 5:24–34

scoffed: mocked

mastiff-in-waiting: watchdog

Sue found Behrman in his dimly lighted den below. In one corner was a blank can-

vas on an easel that had been waiting there for twenty-five years to receive the first line of the masterpiece. She told him of Johnsy's fancy, and how she feared she would, indeed, light and fragile as a leaf herself, float away, when her slight hold upon the world grew weaker.

Old Behrman, with his red eyes plainly streaming* shouted his contempt* and derision* for such idiotic* imaginings.

streaming: crying

contempt: scorn

derision: ridicule

idiotic: stupid

“Vass!” he cried. “Is dere people in de world mit der foolishness to die because leafs dey drop off from a . . . vine? I haf not heard of such a thing. No, I will not bose as a model for your fool hermit-dunderhead. Vy do you allow dot silly pusiness to come in der brain of her? Ach, dot poor leetle Miss Yohnsy.”

“She is very ill and weak,” said Sue, “and the fever has left her mind morbid* and full of strange fancies.* Very well, Mr. Behrman, if you do not care to pose for me, you needn't. But I think you are a horrid old—old flibbertigibbet.*”

morbid: psychologically unhealthy

fancies: images; thoughts

flibbertigibbet: (slang) silly person

“You are just like a woman!” yelled Behrman. “Who said I will not bose? Go on, I come mit you. For half an hour I haf been trying to say dot I am ready to bose. Dis is not any blace in which one so goot as Miss Yohnsy shall lie sick. Someday I vill baint a masterpiece, and ye shall all go away. Yes.”

Johnsy was sleeping when they went upstairs. Sue pulled the shade down to the window-sill, and motioned Behrman into the other room. In there they peered out the window fearfully at the ivy vine. Then they

looked at each other for a moment without speaking. A persistent, cold rain was falling, mingled with snow. Behrman, in his old blue shirt, took his seat as the hermit miner on an upturned kettle for a rock.

When Sue awoke from an hour's sleep the next morning she found Johnsy with dull, wide-open eyes staring at the drawn green shade.

"Put it up; I want to see," she ordered, in a whisper.

Wearily Sue obeyed.

But, lo! after the beating rain and fierce gusts of wind that had endured through the livelong night, there yet stood out against the brick wall one ivy leaf. It was the last on the vine. Still dark green near its stem, but with its serrated* edges tinted with the yellow of dissolution* and decay, it hung bravely from a branch some twenty feet above the ground.

serrated: saw-toothed
dissolution: death

"It is the last one," said Johnsy. "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind. It will fall today, and I shall die at the same time."

"Dear, dear!" said Sue, leaning her worn face down to the pillow, "think of me, if you won't think of yourself. What would I do?"

But Johnsy did not answer. The loneliest thing in all the world is a soul when it is making ready to go on its mysterious, far journey. The fancy seemed to possess her more strongly as one by one the ties that bound her to friendship and to earth were loosed.

The day wore away, and even through the twilight they could see the lone ivy leaf clinging to its stem against the wall. And then, with the coming of the night the north wind was again loosed, while the rain still beat against the windows and pattered down from the low Dutch eaves.

When it was light enough Johnsy, the merciless, commanded that the shade be raised.

The ivy leaf was still there.

Johnsy lay for a long time looking at it. And then she called to Sue, who was stirring her chicken broth over the gas stove.

"I've been a bad girl, Sudie," said Johnsy. "Something has made that last leaf stay



there to show me how wicked I was. It is a sin to want to die. You may bring me a little broth now, and some milk with a little port in it, and—no; bring me a hand-mirror first, and then pack some pillows about me, and I will sit up and watch you cook.”

An hour later she said:

“Sudie, someday I hope to paint the Bay of Naples.”

The doctor came in the afternoon, and Sue had an excuse to go into the hallway as he left.

“Even chances,” said the doctor, taking Sue’s thin, shaking hand in his. “With good nursing you’ll win. And now I must see another case I have downstairs. Behrman, his name is—some kind of artist, I believe. Pneumonia, too. He is an old, weak man, and the attack is acute.* There is no hope for him; but he goes to the hospital today to be made more comfortable.”

acute: severe

The next day the doctor said to Sue: “She’s out of danger. You’ve won. Nutrition and care now—that’s all.”

And that afternoon Sue came to the bed where Johnsy lay, contentedly knitting a very blue and very useless woolen shoulder scarf, and put one arm around her, pillows and all.

“I have something to tell you, white mouse,” she said. “Mr. Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. He was ill only two days. The janitor found him on the morning of the first day in his room downstairs helpless with pain. His shoes and clothing were wet through and icy cold. They couldn’t imagine where he had been on such a dreadful night. And then they found a lantern, still lighted, and a ladder that had been dragged from its place, and some scattered brushes, and a palette* with green and

yellow colors mixed on it, and—look out the window, dear, at the last ivy leaf on the wall. Didn’t you wonder why it never fluttered or moved when the wind blew? Ah, darling, it’s Behrman’s masterpiece—he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell.”

palette: board on which an artist mixes his colors

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

O. Henry, otherwise known as William Sydney Porter (1862–1910), was born in Greensboro, North Carolina; lived in both Houston and Austin, Texas; fled to Honduras; served time in Columbus, Ohio; and became known as the “prose laureate of Manhattan Island.” During his time in Texas as a bank teller for his uncle, Porter was suspected of embezzling funds and skipped town, running all the way to Central America. Returning to the United States because of the severe illness of his wife, Porter was arrested, tried, and convicted. Of flight he was certainly guilty; of embezzlement there is still doubt today. He served three years of his five-year sentence and began writing magazine stories to earn money while in prison. He was deeply ashamed of his prison experience and chose to write under the pseudonym O. Henry.

After his release, Porter continued his productive career, moving to New York and writing about one hundred stories a year. His collection *The Four Million* established his fame and introduced his trademark: the surprise ending or “twist” that makes an O. Henry story such a pleasure to read. Other outstanding O. Henry stories are “The Gift of the Magi” and “The Ransom of Red Chief.” Porter’s stories, which find valuable lessons in everyday events, have admirable, even heroic, characters who demonstrate his understanding of human nature. Porter’s emphasis on plot keeps the reader interested and entertained.

THINKING ZONE

Sometimes literature provides the reader insight to future events in the piece. In “Martin and Abraham Lincoln,” Snowden gives the reader an idea of what is to come when he says, “I’ve seen [soldiers] jump up and stand just as proud and straight when Abraham Lincoln came along.” As the reader discovers later in the piece, Lincoln does come along and Martin does jump up and salute him. Snowden’s comments foreshadow Lincoln’s arrival. **Foreshadowing** is an indication of events that will occur later.

When a writer attributes human characteristics to something that is not a human, that writer is using **personification**. In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Rainy Day,” which you read in an earlier unit, the author tells his heart to “cease repining.” He is speaking to his heart as though it were an individual that could reason and “feel.” In this selection, be prepared to identify examples of personification.

1. According to Johnsy, when will she die?
2. What point of view is employed in this story?
3. What actually makes Johnsy get well?
4. What lessons does Johnsy learn by the end of the story?
5. Does Sue ever change her mind about her question “Is a man worth [thinking about]?”
6. O. Henry uses **personification** to describe pneumonia. Find other examples of personification, especially early in the story. Why is the technique effective?
7. What qualities about Mr. Behrman make him a likable character?
8. How is Johnsy’s recovery foreshadowed early in the story?
9. What examples are there of generosity in the story?