

Red Tulips

By Pat Spears

JOSEPHINE DROPS into what she calls her dead papa's lap. After twenty-five years, she believes she can still smell his Prince Albert tobacco in the tattered fabric of the recliner. She leans back and shoves forward the little do-hicky on the side, popping out the footrest. She gingerly props one swollen foot and then risks the second. The footrest has a history of slamming down just when she's settled. The doctor has told her to sit with her feet up to help keep the swelling down.

"There," she says.

Working her double-knit pants upward, she loosens her support hoses, worn rolled and knotted at her knees, and squirts Mentholatum cream on each knee, rubbing lightly. She ought to go on network TV speaking on the healing powers of Mentholatum cream. She'd say, it relieves pain and unclogs sinuses to boot.

Getting on TV reminds Josephine of the second reason she sat down in the first place: her show. She fumbles through a pile of newspapers, flower seed catalogs and local circulars scattered beside the chair, and says, "Shoot fire, where's my flicker?"

With her knees in the shape they're in, Josephine looks upon her remote control as a godsend.

Steadying the footrest, she tugs on the arm of the chair and rolls toward the TV tray. She picks up the remote control, clicks on the television and Oprah's face sizzles onto the screen. Josephine smiles, greeting Oprah as though they're good neighbors visiting over the backyard hedge.

She watches Oprah alone, now that Flo has gone. Flo was her best friend and she dropped dead March 23d of this year with a massive heart attack. Nobody suspected, not even her family, that she was sick. Doc said her heart just exploded, and Josephine figures it was from all those years of putting up with sick white folk. Flo's heart had to have been heavier than she'd ever let on, it slipping up and taking her like it did.

Even after knowing Flo, Momma still won't stand for anybody who's not white to pop on the TV for more then a second before she

yells for Josephine to change the channel. That's just plain backward in Josephine's book, but Momma doesn't understand that the old ways are turned bottom-end upwards. With so many blacks on TV, Josephine is sure if it wasn't for her flicker, she'd be getting up and down all evening trying to satisfy Momma.

But that's what Josephine has come to expect from her eighty-six-year-old mother who's had her way too much. She may be bent and drawn into a little wad of a woman with cotton-puffed hair, but that alone can't make her sweet after so many years of contrariness.

Josephine has often thought it would be nice if some of the others took Momma for a visit, at least long enough for Josephine to go on one of those boat cruises she has read about in the travel magazines her sister Lizzie brings over. But to hear Lizzie talk, or their brother James and his lazy wife Trudie, it's God's will that Josephine care for their sick momma.

Becoming the family's old maid sister wasn't what Josephine had in mind for herself, but married or not, she wants to watch who she pleases on TV and get out of the house once in a while. She covets her sister's freedom. Lizzie has been alone since her husband died ten years ago, leaving her with a widow's railroad pension. She got the best of everything, it seems, except for her pitiful name.

Josephine prizes her own name and thinks of it as royal.

She loved Buddy's story of the beautiful Queen Josephine who sailed around the world on a barge loaded down with horny men and fresh fruit. He'd made it all up, but she doesn't believe he'd done it just because he'd wanted in her pants at the time.

Josephine's attention returns to the TV. She doesn't think Oprah being overweight has hurt her one bit. She tries to imagine what it would be like to be a star, living a life among lecherous men, preying on her every human weakness. To her surprise, she feels between her legs like she did when Buddy had touched her there. The first time he'd tried, she'd nipped it in the bud. Been a good thing too, because Momma was peeking from behind the curtain at the window near the swing where she and Buddy sat.

"Josephine, you got that gal on again?"

"No, Ma'am, it's the Braves losing to some team from up north."

"The mail come?"

“Yes’um. Remember? I got that card from Sears saying they’ve run out of size 42 in navy blue.”

“What you gonna do about it?”

“Wait, Momma, like they said.”

Josephine drifts into a fitful sleep. Dream-like, she hears her momma calling her name and each time she calls, Momma’s voice grows louder and louder, until Josephine runs from the house, covering her ears with her hands. But her momma’s voice follows her into the road and in her dream she never outruns it.

“Josephine. You better answer me.”

Her momma’s voice reaches through her sleep, and Josephine jerks forward, her foot slipping from the footrest, shooting prickles up her leg. Late afternoon shadows play across the shabby room rug. Glancing around the room, she sees the bouquet of waxed flowers sitting on the TV; red tulips she’ll take, without her momma knowing, and place upon her daddy’s grave. She sees the tulips as they will become in time: faded and ugly.

“Weren’t that Henry’s car I heard?”

Josephine doesn’t get up from the recliner, but answers. “Yes’um, Momma, he’s bringing Estelle back from the doctor’s in Tallahassee.”

She expects Henry will come later with the details of their trip. He’s in the same place with his sister as she is with Momma. He’s asked her plenty of times to ride over with them to the doctor’s. Said he’d be glad to drop her off at one of the big malls, and he talked about them stopping afterwards at a nice restaurant and having supper.

“Josephine, you ain’t started supper?”

Momma forgets fixing a meal is not what it used to be. How long can it take to blend a cup of string beans and a cup of stewed prunes? Josephine hates mealtime. Whether Momma’s spooning blended food, spitting it up, or worse, it looks and smells the same.

“Josephine, if you don’t intend to fix my supper, I want you to call Lizzie up right now.”

“My Lord, Momma, that’s a pure joke,” Josephine says. She knows blame well Lizzie won’t come. The very idea of Momma wanting her to call Lizzie makes Josephine want to scream. But, instead, she clicks the TV volume up a couple of notches.

Josephine remembers it was Flo who did the most to help, not Lizzie or James and Trudie; and Momma sometimes treated her like a leper. After Momma's stroke, Flo stayed days until Josephine could work out her last year at the post office. After Josephine retired, Flo came by the house and the two of them sat, shelling peas or doing whatever else needed doing, sipping tall glasses of iced tea and watching Oprah. Flo carried on over Oprah's good fortune like she'd been one of Flo's own six daughters. Alma, her youngest, turned out good. She's a nurse at the retirement home and sometimes Josephine sees her in the grocery store to talk to her.

For Flo's last Christmas, Josephine ordered her a membership in Oprah's fan club. Momma had said spending money for some TV star's picture was the worst thing she'd ever heard of a white person doing. Josephine remembers being mad enough to want to say that there were a lot of things Momma had never heard of, and while she was at it, she meant to say that how a sixty-five-year-old woman spent her money was her business. But she'd actually said, "Raise all the cane you want, but it beats sending money to some warped TV preacher."

When she turns back to the TV, her tears well up and catch her by surprise. She wipes her face and wishes she'd remembered to bring a glass of iced tea. The show is on lesbians and Josephine leans forward, listening carefully.

She doubts women can love other women like those two say they do. But she studies the women—perfectly normal looking—sitting there, claiming they're pledged to each other same as any married couple. She searches their faces and for a moment she's swayed. Then an angry woman, wearing a blue dress and her hair piled high on her head, screams from the audience. "Their kind is an abomination in God's sight."

Josephine reads pain on the faces of the lesbians, but the other women is waving a Bible and shouting things she can't make out with all the noise. She wishes there weren't so many people pushing her to take sides on things. Maybe she'll look up the scriptures for herself.

"Josephine."

"Just a minute, Momma."

Before Josephine can pull herself up from the recliner she catches the awful odor of blended carrots. Clicking off the TV, she goes to wash

and change Momma, and to strip the bed.

Believing the Bible when it says, children shall bury their parents, Josephine prays that Momma is the first to go. She thinks it's probably even Christian to hope there will be time for her to take a boat cruise. But she's sure that hoping she'll have time to learn to dance is pushing.

She has never danced in public. Her partners are the broom and mop, swaying to easy listening tunes on the radio here in the kitchen. Buddy promised to teach her to dance and he talked about taking her to the Elk's Club. They have a live band on the last Saturday of the month. Although, now that she thinks about it, that was twenty-five years ago. Drying the last of the supper dishes, she puts them away and waters her African violets. She glances at the stewed carrots and prunes still in pots on the stove and has decided to eat a bowl of bran flakes when she hears a tap on the front door.

Then she hears, "Darling, you home?"

It's Lizzie. Her sister's voice is like tiny bells and Josephine thinks it's too bad she didn't get a name suited to her voice, silver hair and frilly dresses.

Hanging the dish towel on the oven door, Josephine steps through the dimly lit hallway calling, "That you, sister?"

"Yes, darling. I have precious little time."

Josephine has decided that Lizzie believes all her minutes are precious. She unhooks the latch and says, "Come in, Lizzie, and sit down. I'll get us some tea. Just now made a fresh pitcher. We'll have it with lemon, the way you like it."

"Oh, no, darling, I can't. I have Ladies Aid, you know."

"Won't take me but a minute."

"Darling, I can't, but I've brought you more travel magazines."

Lizzie hands Josephine the sack and smiles, "You seem to enjoy them so, no matter you're not planning anything."

"Thank you, Lizzie; there's little sin in looking."

Josephine follows her sister down the narrow hallway to their momma's bedroom. Lizzie's orange citrus perfume reminds Josephine of Orlando. Although Josephine has never been there, she watches the Magics and the Disney Channel, and sometimes feels she has. She often thinks about staying overnight at one of the Disney World hotels,

and maybe seeing the Magics play Larry Bird's team.

Lizzie gushes over their momma for five minutes and when she begins to back out the door, Momma begs her to stay longer. But she has ladies depending on her to bring the devotion; some other time, she smiles. Josephine has learned to distrust Lizzie's smile. It makes her feel there's a dirty job rolling around the room, and it's about to land at her feet.

Lizzie wrinkles her nose and Josephine hates being reminded of the odors that cling to the heavy living-room drapes and wool rug. Most days the room smells like a wet dog. Stepping back into the front room, Josephine feels her chest tighten as though she's swallowed a handful of walnuts, shells and all.

Josephine goes to prepare Momma for bed although she hasn't left it today, except to sit propped in a chair while the sheets were changed. Josephine reads the daily Bible lesson to her momma, and when she gets to the scriptures, she speaks in a strong voice.

"Stop that, Josephine," Momma scolds. "Don't you try reading like a preacher."

Josephine looks at her momma and remembers the expression on her daddy's face when he would walk out of the house and be gone for weeks at a time. Over her momma's protest, Josephine closes the Bible and leaves the room. Behind her, Momma is saying something about how Lizzie would never go with the lesson unread.

When Josephine goes to sit on the porch, a slight breeze comes up, raising goose bumps on her arms. She loves this tiny sliver of time, and thinks of it as her own. She watches as day fades into darkness, and she imagines that its colors are saved someplace to make tomorrow's dawn. Across the road, a stand of trees is silhouetted against the sky, and owls have taken up melancholy posts in the black pines. Kitty Tom claims his place in her lap, and as she clips sandspurs from his matted fur, she wonders where Buddy settled after leaving without her.

Troy, a clerk at the post office, said Buddy had gone to live in Arizona, or maybe it was Arkansas. She'd been thirty-nine when he'd left. That was the summer following the spring she'd stopped pushing his hand away. He wanted her to quit her job at the post office and come with him; claimed they would see the world. But she feared he'd meant

for them to ramble and that had been against her ways. For only a few miles up the road, three generations of her family on both sides lay buried so close their bones rubbed on windy nights.

Maybe it was Buddy's wavy red hair and blue eyes or rumors he'd left a wife and children back in South Carolina that caused Papa to reject him. To Momma he was Irish trifling and she swore he would never make a steady man. Josephine hadn't believed then, and doesn't believe now, he was any of those things. She believes it was because her daddy was to leave the same spring, and this time it had been for good. Wherever Buddy went and whatever he'd done, she's certain he was the one man for her.

When Kitty Tom leaps from her lap and scrambles off the far end of the porch, she knows to listen for Henry's steps on the gravel road that runs in front of their two houses.

"Good evening, Josephine. How're you tonight?"

"Evening, Henry; I'm fine. How's Estelle?"

"She's feeling a little peaked right now."

"What'd the new doctor say?"

"Nothing she's not heard before."

Josephine inquires as to whether or not Estelle heard from her only son. She knows Henry will take her question to mean he's invited to sit.

"Yes, she did. And it's not good," Henry answers, taking a seat in the nearest rocker. He explains that something has come up and they can't come and bring the new baby. Estelle said she's afraid she'll die before she sees her grandbaby.

Josephine thinks maybe there is something wrong with a family when children don't visit. But it's hard to know what causes people to stay or leave the place where they grew up.

They sit for a while, neither talking, until she notices Henry's breathing becomes a little labored and then, shaky as a new bride, he says, "Josephine, let's me and you—and Estelle—take one—those cruises you're always thinking about."

He hands her brochures. Rushing on, he tells her that a boat leaves out of Tampa on the twenty-third, and they can drive to Tampa in six hours. But that he'll need to call the man in Tallahassee by day after tomorrow.

"It can't be the money," he declares. "Your daddy left you some and

there's your retirement and Social Security coming in."

"Now, you just whoa, Henry Townsen. You've gone to meddle."

"I know, Josephine; I'm sorry, but it's just—"

"Stop. Think what you're saying. And it ain't true six hours is a little trip," she says.

"Josephine, it's you who needs to stop and think. What if it's the twenty-third or never."

Josephine hates decisions, and especially when Henry tries to frighten her with the consequences of her choices. It's like preachers all the time using hell and damnation to scare you into going to church and tithing.

When she doesn't respond, Henry stands to leave, then he says, "Josephine, sometimes I think you use your momma to keep you from—"

"Henry," she interrupts, "you've said entirely too much, already."

"Well, in that case, I'll leave."

He walks to the road, turns and calls back, "Josephine, you can change your mind. The offer is good for as long as I am."

Josephine smiles, glad that Henry isn't quitting easily. It's too dark to see him, but she looks in the direction he has walked until she hears the front door drag across the warped boards of his porch. She sits for a while, stunned by what he said. She still likes Henry, but not like she did before he chased Kitty Tom out of Estelle's chicken yard with a pan of scalding water. Now she's confused about whether she likes him enough to consider going off with him.

Oh, but Lord, if she were to say yes, Flo would be up there leading God's angels in a parade, and Lizzie would be down here green as a gourd. Lizzie's crazy about men, always has been, and any man who pays her a compliment is a gentleman. Maybe she's right: life moves too blamed fast for old women to be too particular. Josephine can't help but giggle. She calls Kitty Tom back, and, stroking the old cat's fur, she swings and thinks.

Henry's no prize, she knows, but then she's not Queen Josephine neither. He was a soldier in World War II, and would probably get around just fine in exotic places. Josephine knows he can be nice, and everybody, even Momma, is always saying how good he is to Estelle. Going off with Henry on a cruise seems proper enough to Josephine,

especially with Estelle there every minute. Mabel Jean next door will have something to say, for sure, but Mabel Jean talks about things that haven't even happened yet. Who knows, it might be fun to be the one talked about for a change.

Josephine can't say what one thing causes her to go inside to the telephone and dial her brother James' number in the next town. When Trudie answers, she says, "Hey, Trudie. Please put James on the line."

"Josephine, is it Momma?"

"No, James, but it's about Momma."

"She worse off?"

"No, James. I'm calling to let you and Trudie know that y'all need to figure on staying with Momma for a while. I'm going on a four nights and three days cruise with Henry and Estelle."

Holding her breath, Josephine listens. "Cruise—Josephine? You ain't making sense."

There's a long throbbing silence during which Josephine talks herself out of going, and then back into going. She manages a feeble, "Momma will be expecting you on the twenty-second."

"Josephine, hold on; we can't just pick up and come over there and stay."

"Brother, dear, it's been nice talking to you. Give Trudie my best. Bye now."

Josephine puts down the phone and her hands are shaking so badly it takes two tries to open the screen door. Her breath, what little there is of it, comes in short, uneven snatches. Back on the porch, she drops onto the swing and Kitty Tom jumps into her lap. She begins to swing and stroke the cat, and she swings higher and higher, the toes of her tennis shoes barely scraping the floor, and strokes Kitty Tom harder and harder.

By the time her heart has stopped pounding and the old cat is napping in her lap, she's satisfied that what's done is done. Then she sets her imagination totally free, and whispers, "Dear God, Flo, what if my Buddy is on that same boat?" Standing, Kitty Tom still in her arms, she dances across the moonlit porch.