Journey of the Waterfall

By Christine Zillah Jones

She tumbles in tiers like fine bridal lace,
And shines like the eyes that light a child’s face.

She sings with the sweetness of heavenly choirs,
And sparkles in sunlight like coals in the fire.

She dances in time with the spirits of hills,
Entwining with rivers past houses and mills

Through country and city, joyful and free;
In a rush to unite with her sister, the sea.
SEEING RED

by

Christine Zillah Jones

Of course, they’ve all taken to me in here. Didn’t take them long to cotton on to the fact that I make a darned good friend. Once I befriend a person, I bend over backwards. Can’t help myself. On top of that, I’m perceptive. Mrs. Sensitivity, that’s me.

They like their little “chats” in here. I put things in perspective, that’s why. And none of the wardens jokes about painting the town red or anything. The chaplain is wonderful – always grateful for my pearls of wisdom. As for the psychiatrist – brilliant! Poor love having to put up with other folk’s woes – you can see her little face light up at my homespun stories.

I’m not bitter, not in the slightest. I don’t see red when I see red – before you ask.

If you ask me, it’s Jenny Proudfoot who needs a psychiatrist. Apparently she’s dyed that lovely red hair of hers – fancy! She was always like that with colours though. Oh but I’m getting ahead of myself!

Jenny, you see, was a really good friend. One of those arty types. Interior designer! The way she dressed! Stripy tights – you know the ones – red, green, yellow, purple. Then black fishnets on top. Tiny little skirts, skimpy tops, quirky hats. Made me wonder if Trev and me might appear a bit hoity-toity in our designer M&S outfits. I always say – “You know where you are with a good high-street brand. They wash well, they never date and the elastic waists are ever so comfy.”

Looking back, I do hope that Jenny didn’t feel we were a bit too sophisticated on the dress front. Poor thing – she’s so skinny, the quality retailers’ stuff wouldn’t fit.

But when it came to home design, Jenny really knew her stuff! I would have thought that working on other people’s houses all day long would have got it out of her system. But, no, she was always changing the colour of her walls, her drapes - as she called them - her cushions. Everything had to be the latest style. One minute, she’d have a lime green bathroom with towels, bathmats, and even loo rolls all to match. Then before you knew it, the whole lot’d be stripped out and she’d go all ethnic and earthy.

I didn’t want to dress like her. Well, it wasn’t quite respectable was it? Course not. I’ve got a real woman’s figure Trev always says. But I did admire her flair in home décor. Notice that I do like to use the fancy words when I can. I got that from Jenny. And I do admit that I used her as a sort of barometer on the home fashion front. I put my hands up here and now.

Deary me! I wonder what she’d say to this place. She wouldn’t have called it a “Secure Unit”. No, Jenny would have alluded to a sad building in need of an uplift. Something like that anyhow.
She, Jenny that is, was a hard one to keep up with though. No sooner had I asked her round to admire our new lime green bathroom, than it seemed she'd rush home and redecorate her own - again.

We were very close. I had a front door key from when I first met her. She asked me to feed the cats when they went away for a weekend. They must have forgotten about the key afterwards. And I felt strongly that it was a good thing for someone like me to have a key. For emergencies – you never know do you?

Anyhow, I was happy to help out a neighbour, not to mention a friend. Jenny and her husband David both had high-powered jobs. Oh, now let me tell you about David! He was terribly theatrical. Incredibly good looking with long black hair in a ponytail, designer jeans by, ooh let's think, Diesel I think it said on the dry-clean-only label. Fancy having to dry-clean a pair of jeans! He often wore a floppy orange Italian shirt. *Outside* his jeans! Shame what happened to David. But there you are!

As I was saying they worked long hours, I used to wait for one of them to come home, then I'd go across for a cuppa. It's nice, isn't it, when you come home after a hard day and there's someone to chat to? Unburden yourself a bit. And I used to take the opportunity to nosey round to see what new theme she'd gone in for this time.

On top of that, when they were out, I'd pop in occasionally to make sure the gas was turned off and all the windows were locked. Regular security officer! I did it all off my own bat. They didn't know, of course, and I never expected thanks. That's the sort I am.

Anyway, popping in regularly killed two birds with one stone because Jenny quite often used to forget the exact paint colour she'd used or where she'd got the multicolour throw or the stainless steel candleholders. So to save bothering her, I'd have a quick rummage in the cupboard for the paint tins or peek at labels. Trev and me, felt it our duty as neighbours to join them in the latest style.

One day, after we'd known them a while and with several major makeovers behind us, Jenny and David invited me and Trev round for supper. It was inevitable that they'd want to get to know us better. Well, did they have a surprise in store! Jenny said to come up and see what she'd done to the bedroom.

"I'm painting the whole house red!" she said, all excited like.

Yes, that's right – bright, screaming red! I could hardly believe it! She'd started with their bedroom. And - wait for it! She'd got a red duvet, carpet, drapes, lampshade and ornaments – the lot! We were only allowed to stand in the hallway and peer in. "It's not quite dry yet." David explained. "And we don't want you to ruin your outfits." He's ever so caring.

"It's a bit… well, it's a touch on the brightish side!" Trev opened his mouth before I could nudge him in the ribs.
“It’s the latest toning crimson theme, darlings” explained David, proudly patting Jenny on the back.

I shot one of those “I’ll be busy for the foreseeable future” looks at Trev. Honestly, I’d only missed going round for a couple of days and she’d done all that. I hadn’t even quite finished the last bedroom scheme.

“Is ochre and aqua quite out then Jenny?” I asked, a weenie bit dismayed.

“Oh quite, quite out! In fact, it’s so out, it’s as though it’s never been in!”

“Well I think Lindy’s done a splendid job on our bedroom, actually!” Trev reached for my hand and gave it a little squeeze but it didn’t make me feel much better.

“Oh, I’m sure she has” David butted in “It’s just that, well, I suppose I’m lucky to have Jenny here. She certainly stops us from becoming passé!”

Did I say that David works on film sets? Very creative! I suppose that’s why they landed up together, both being arty types. He winked at Jenny which made me doubly determined to transform our bedroom yet again. Afterall, Trev is very understanding and not an artist or anything, just an accountant. But how long can any man put up with a wife if she can only provide a passé bedroom?

I’ve never known Jenny to be quite so helpful as she was that evening. She had the paint charts all ready to show me. She’d used post-box red on the walls, sun red for the paintwork and scarlet pimprenel for the ceiling. She told me about the fabric, curtains and lampshades. I wrote everything in my diary. When it was time to go, they both wished us luck and Jenny said she’d be thinking of me as she painted her other rooms red tomorrow evening.

Next day I was up with the larks and down at the DIY store. The only thing I hadn’t written down was whether I should use matt or silk finish for the skirting. So off I scooted to Jenny’s to check it out. I was just about to put the key into the lock when I heard voices from inside the house. At the mention of my name I stood stock still and listened.

“It was David’s idea.” Jenny was saying. “He’s so clever at illusions and everything. He borrowed these special lights from the set of The Vampire’s Revenge. Worked a treat. Sent everything red! We just had to be careful that neither of them stepped inside the room because they’d have realised something was up if their clothes went red too. David just told them that the paint was still wet in places and he left an open paint tin in the room – you know – for the smell.”

“That’s so brilliant!” replied a snooty female voice.

“Well, it certainly had them convinced. Anyway, if you’ve finished your coffee.” Jenny was saying “we should leave or we’ll be late for the exhibition. I told David we’d meet him straight afterwards, and we’ll go out for a bite to eat.”
“Yes, that’s great. It’s going to be an awfully long day. The exhibition doesn’t finish until 8:00 tonight.”

I could hardly believe my ears. As you know, I pride myself on being an impeccable judge of character and I’d never guessed. Poor Jenny and David. What lengths they felt they had to go to in order to impress us. This put a completely different complexion on matters. Excuse the pun!

I quickly bobbed round the corner of the house out of sight. I watched Jenny and a trendy model type drape themselves in Jenny’s lilac sports car and drive away. So it was all show was it? I bet they didn’t even own that car. They just felt they had to keep up with Trev’s company Rover. It was just to impress they shallow, poser friends. And to think they’d put Trev and me in the “must impress” category as well. Some folks just don’t understand people.

I made my way home and put all my different red paints in a box with some brushes and went back to Jenny’s. Now – what had she said? Ceiling this red, walls that red, paintwork the other.

I wondered if Jenny realised that duvet covers and curtains dye ever so quick in her cold wash programme. And just a light covering of thinned-down emulsion on lampshades and carpets works a treat!

I was so engrossed in glossing the wardrobe that I hadn’t heard David come into the house. Well, I wasn’t expecting them back until late. So I don’t know how long he’d stood there in the doorway. Nearly gave me the fright of my life I can tell you. Funny but I always thought David was a really laid-back chap. Another most unusual error of judgement on my part! Those two turned out to be nothing like they seemed!

Anyway, he was sort of foaming at the mouth, his face was as red as the wall and he was shaking from head to foot.

“What the ….” he screamed. I really can’t bring myself to repeat his exact words. I’ll just say that his language was as colourful as the room and leave it at that!

Next thing I knew he was striding towards me, chin jutting out, fists clenched.

“You stupid, stupid woman!” he was screaming.

It’s quite unbecoming to see a man so out of control.

“No, honestly, I don’t mind doing this for you and Jenny. Mind the chest, it’s still …”

But it was too late. He made a frenzied grab at a paintbrush and somehow the two of us got into a sort of sword fight. Then he started throwing things at me. This scar on my cheek is from a flying paint tin. It was quite difficult to get red out of my hair I can tell you.

Somehow my collarbone fractured but I don’t blame David for that. It just happened in the skirmish. No point in holding grudges is there? That’s the sort of person I am.
There was one of those very pretty Victorian looking-glass mirrors on a shelf nearby. One of those with a long handle and mother of pearl pattern. Anyway, I grabbed it. As he was about to lash out again, I hit him over the head quite hard. Well, very hard actually. So hard that he staggered back and fell with quite a thud. Then blood started gushing out of the wound. I wasn’t too worried because it was red on a red carpet. I knew it wouldn’t stain too badly.

When the ambulance came, they rushed him off on a stretcher. What a to-do, I can tell you. And then the police! Did they really need that awful siren? And those dreadful blue lights! Dead on arrival they said. David I mean. Not me, obviously!

As I explained to the judge, David was so embarrassed, poor love, that I’d seen through their little guise. Seen what lengths they’d gone to just to try and impress us. They couldn’t hide it from me any longer.

“Mrs. Sensitivity – that’s me!” I told the Judge. “If only he was here now, I’d have explained that the fact they hadn’t really decorated their bedroom in red would make not one jot of difference to our friendship. After all, they might not have been able to afford it, might they?”

What I feel awful about to this day, is that he took those lights off the set on our account. I know Jenny called it “borrowing”, but suppose he’d forgotten to take them back? I said that from the dock but no-one seemed the slightest bit concerned! Whatever is wrong with society these days? It wasn’t “borrowing” was it? It was stealing! A criminal offence! Am I the only one left with standards?

I can hear footsteps along the corridor. One of my many visitors. Oh, how lovely, it’s that nice doctor again. She does like to hear this story. Always gives me tablets too. I think she and I will turn out to be really good friends.
His most highly acclaimed photograph was the one of the young Croatian girl as she lay dying: another innocent victim caught in crossfire. Nathan thought about her even in this peaceful place. Under-nourished and small for her age, no more than about fifteen or sixteen, the girl in the blue shawl epitomised all the scenes of suffering he’d skilfully frozen on film during a lifetime behind his camera.

He’d always consoled himself that the truth needed to be told to an ignorant world. But the cost of getting those photographs had almost broken him and left him isolated from human emotion. Over the years he’d developed survival strategies for turning off empathy, tuning out pity, erasing memories. Except when it came to the girl. The girl in the blue shawl.

*Frame! Focus! Shoot! Run!*

She inhabited the details of his waking hours and the rhythm of his dreams. During occasional media interviews, however, almost from habit now he would explain how he’d grown immune to the suffering of conflict.

“Emotional involvement is obstructive to the job of a war photographer. It simply gets in the way of what we have to say.”
For years he believed it himself. Until he held his camera over the girl and squeezed her last moments into a picture. She was the one who represented all the injured and dying that his conscience told him he should have helped. Instead, disguising his motives as the necessity to tell the world what was happening, he’d been seduced by lucrative media deals and made his name.

Today, a world away, in a leafy Surrey park, he set up his tripod and camera on the path bordering a field surrounding the church. He stooped, peered and framed the church between sky and poppies. Twee. Postcard fodder. Calendar standard. Just what his contract demanded.

*Frame! Focus! Shoot! Run!*

How he hated this job. He cared nothing for the subject, didn’t need the money, had enough of his chosen art and wondered why he’d taken the assignment in the first place. He knew the answer to that of course! Just didn’t want to admit it. Keep working. Keep your mind occupied on other things. Transpose past images for new ones. Keep sane.

So, whenever the agency called nowadays, his answer was always affirmative. Celebrity weddings? Polo matches? Architecture? – Yes! Of course! No problem! Nathan Palmer, world famous photographer couldn’t
have imagined that he’d put himself out to grass like this. Once renowned for his bravery in getting the pictures that shocked nations and described as having the guilt of the world in his lens, now reduced to a project on English bloody churches.

He considered a filter for this second shot and decided against. No need. As far as English summers went, it was a perfect day. Clear lighting typical of June. Mare’s tails hanging in a sky as blue as lapis lazuli. Exactly the same colour as the girl’s shawl.

The poppies were in full bloom. He squatted and took the top of a stem between his index and middle fingers, bending the bloom towards him. The four petals filled his cupped palm. He stared into the pepper-pot centre.

The blackness of the poppy seeds and the scarlet of the petals became her pleading eyes alight with fear in a torn, bloody face.

*Frame! Focus! Shoot! Run!*

Get a grip on yourself man! Right! A few more from that angle and get onto the next monstrosity while the light lasts! Now, what’s this one again? He consulted his schedule. St. Edward’s, Sutton Park, Woking. Okay!

“Fantastic poppies aren’t they mate?”

Nathan turned, startled at the voice behind him.
“Sorry! I made you jump!”

Nathan took in the youth’s baseball cap and a necklace strung with plastic sharks’ teeth. And noticed that, despite the warm weather, he was bundled up in a hooded garment and thick baggy denims loosely belted at hip level and torn strategically at the knees. Headphones, slung round his neck, blared out discordant, random sounds. Nathan wondered why anyone would want to subject themselves to the pain and expense of an eyebrow piercing when there was so much suffering the world for free.

What the hell’s this scruffy hoodlum doing in a place like this? Up to no good, Nathan reasoned. Probably planning to break into the church. Or a lay-about druggie.

“Sorry! Didn’t realise.” The boy misread Nathan’s blank expression and looked down at the headphones. He felt for the CD player strapped to his belt and hit the “off” button. He hesitantly held out a hand in greeting.

“No! No!” I was just … Just thinking!” Nathan shook the outstretched hand in spite of himself.

“They’re fantastic, aren’t they? The poppies! I’m Jack. Jack Pennington!”

Poppies eh! So it is drugs!
“Nathan Palmer!”

Unsure what to say next, Jack stuck his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders.

“You like photography?” he asked, embarrassed. “Stupid question, huh? Seeing you’ve got all this equipment. I’ve just brought this along.” He pulled a mobile camera-phone from his jacket and laughed nervously.

“Uh huh!” Wanting to finish the job, Nathan turned back to his tripod and camera.

“For my granny!” Jack explained.

“Look! I don’t mean to be rude but …”

“She couldn’t get here today. In her nineties now. First time she’s missed. Made me promised I’d come anyway and then describe it to her! Thought I’d take a picture for her. She’s very ill see!” Jack gabbled, lining up the mobile for a photo.

“Nearly a century, eh? Good innings.” Nathan hardly bothered to hide his disinterest.

“Yep! I’m sorry! I can see you’re busy!” he said. But the youth was obviously agitated and wanted to talk more.
“Christ, why can’t he stop apologising?” Nathan wondered.

“Um! Do you mind if I talk to you mister? There’s something I can’t get out of my head!”

Now Nathan looked properly at the young face and saw something beyond the trappings of fashion. Jack’s troubled expression kindled a spark deep inside him.

“Your Gran likes this place then?”

Nathan’s quizzical look gave the youth enough courage to hurriedly continue.

“She was only fourteen when her only brother was killed in the Great War, see! That’s my great-uncle. For years, she visited Flanders in his memory. When she got too old to travel so far, she came here instead. Said that the peace and colours of this place reminded her of the war cemetery.”

Nathan took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, still with his eyes on the youth, he put one in his mouth, reached for his matches and lit up. He held out the open box.

“Smoke?”
“Oh no! Thanks! He did though! Jack, I mean. Gran says I’m ever so much like him. I’ve got his name even! ‘cept I don’t smoke or drink or anything! Not like him!” the youth smiled. “Can’t blame him though. Times was different then, weren’t they?”

Nathan remained silent. Preserving his familiar impassive position.

“I went with her once. To Flanders. After that I came here with her. Every 6th of June. That’s when he died, see.” Jack’s voice was hardly audible.

Nathan continued to stare at the young man, listening intently.

“Oh dear. Sorry! Sorry! I don’t know what made me blurt all that stuff out. It’s just I can’t stop thinking about him. He was only my age when he was killed. Gran asked if I’d still come here to keep his memory alive, when she …”

Nathan nodded.

“Oh well. Anyway. Thanks mate! I’m gonna go and look inside the church now. I’m really into architecture. I’m gonna do it at college. Gonna make sure I make the most of my life. Not everyone’s lucky enough to be able to say that, are they? Cheers mate!”

Nathan stood still and watched as Jack turned and walked away along the path.
As he neared the church, a ray of sunlight poured over the roof and spilt onto the poppies beside the porch. The glow encompassed the young man and illuminated his blonde hair.

Grabbing the Nikon from its case, Nathan sprinted part way in Jack’s tracks. He crouched down. Raised the camera. Got it! Sky! Church! Poppies! Youth!

A lark flew overhead.

Frame! Focus! Shoot! ....... Don’t run! Not this time!

“Hey! What’s-your-name!” Nathan bellowed. “Hey! Jack!”

Frowning, Jack turned to face him.

“Can you come back here a minute? Write down your grandmother’s address?” He mimed a pencil writing on the palm of his hand. “I’ve got a photo. I’ll send it. Process it tonight! Send it straightaway!”

Nathan relaxed the frowns in this forehead as he saw Jack grin broadly, wave his hand in acknowledgement and start back towards him.

Despite himself, Nathan looked beyond Jack to the church.
“God - if you’re there - thank you.” He whispered. “Seems I’ve been wrong. There is still hope for the world.”

Then he looked at Jack who had stopped along the path. Nathan mirrored the youth who was shielding his eyes from the sunlight, head tilted towards the skylark. The bird entranced them both as it scattered its song among the poppies.