

FOR THE BIRDS

A one-act play

by

Virginia Hobart

A day in the life of
a disreputable old man

FOR THE BIRDS

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SYNOPSIS

Frank Tossel worked 47 years for the Canadian Pacific railway through the prairie settlement, the Depression, the break-down of his marriage, corporate cut-backs and eventual redundancy. Always a loner, he has managed, in retirement, to antagonise landlord and neighbours, with only his parrot, Joseph, for company, and garden birds to feed and care for in the winter. This day begins with a ritual struggle with an obsolete stove for a morning cup of tea. It continues with a series of frustrating and distressing phone-calls, and ends with a barricade against threatened eviction.

Although the play is set in Canada, Tossel could easily be a British immigrant, and does not need to have a Canadian accent.

SET

Living room of a run-down house near shunting yard with old-fashioned heater stove, book case stacked with food tins and packages, a kitchen chair and table, collapsing sofa surrounded with bulging bin bags. An air rifle is propped by rear window onto back yard, and old railway uniform coat hangs near wall phone with rolled newspaper to hand. Overhead a diagonal line holds a few small items of washing and, at front right, a pair of long johns almost conceals a parrot perch hanging in what is a poorly lit corner of the room. The front garden occupies a metre or so of the front stage. It is distinguished from the house by a pair of boots and a door mat heaped with junk mail indoors, and a couple of rubbish bins outside.

FOR THE BIRDS

TO THE CLANK AND CLATTER OF SHUNTING TRAINS
TOSSEL WAKES ON THE SOFA WHERE HE SLEEPS IN
AN OLD BLANKET, CLOTHES AND WOOLLY HAT

Morning Joseph. Sleep all right then old son? Cats didn't keep you awake? Yowling out there all night? (louder) I said you didn't wake up with the - no, slept through it, didn't you, lazy old sod. Sleep right through the Last Trump, you would. And bloody awful, since you're asking; thank you very much, I'm sure.

RISING TO PUT KETTLE ON STOVE

Goddam cat, crapping all day, whoreing all night. Can't get a decent night's sleep round here, and crap everywhere you want to put your feet. I'll wring his neck one of these days. What do you think, Joseph? Serve him right one of these days if I wring his bloody neck. (louder) I said . . . waste of time, this. Waste of good time, waste of good breath, waste of good manners. I might as well be talking to myself.

FINDING HIS GLASSES

Now then you old bugger; where's the tea pot? That's what we need; that's the answer isn't it. Tea pot, here we are; lubricate the old voice box with a nice cup of tea.

SINGING WHILE PUTTING IN TEA BAGS

Tea for two and two for tea, and me for you and you for . . . no? Too cheerful by half aren't we this morning. All right then: nobody knows the trouble I see, nobody knows the trouble.

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TESTING KETTLE WITH HAND

Know what they say about the watch pot, Joseph? The watch pot never boils, heard that one have you? The watch pot - come on then (talking parrot fashion), the watch pot never boils, the watch pot never . . . All right you old bastard, don't talk if you don't want; it's no skin off my nose.

LIFTS STOVE LID AND PEERS IN

If you can't be bothered to - SHIT!

POKES AND RATTLES THE GRATE

But you can watch yourself, old son; there's not a lot of use in parrots at the best of times, and parrots that refuse to talk could just end up in the pot theirselves. Parrot stew. Couldn't they?

GOES TO OPEN WINDOW, COUGHING AND WAVING ASIDE SMOKE

Parrot stew, make a nice change from beans and boiled - OY! Get out of there, get out of my yard, you -

GRABS AND BRANDISHES GUN OUT OF WINDOW

Cats! Goddam cats. Touch one of my birds! Touch one of my birds and I'll have you. One hair of their head and I'll have your guts all right. I'll string them on a fiddle. I'll stuff them full of sausage meat. I'll - (FIRES) Got him! See that, Joseph? Do you think I got him? Mangey old flea bag. I think I got him this time.

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CLEANING HIS GLASSES

All right birdies, all clear. It's all clear now. Come on back, come on. Don't worry, old Tossel's looking after you. Going to get you some breakfast in a minute; going to get you something to eat.

RETURNING TO TABLE, MIXING SEED IN PAPER BAG

Millet for breakfast, and the linseed. Handful of peanuts. There we go, handful of barley and not forgetting the salt. They like a bit of salt, birds do, starlings specially - and the jays. Not a lot of people know that Joseph, but they like it when you put in a bit of salt.

OFFERING

Joseph likes a bit of salt as well, don't you? (parrot talk) Bit of salt. Bit of salt. Bit of . . . All right, I didn't get him if that's what's bothering you. The cat, I didn't hit him. Couldn't hit a barn door with these glasses - never mind cats - lucky if I could I could hit a barn door. Put the wind up him though. Put the fear of God; it'll be while before he shows his -

PHONE RINGS

Now what? Who's that going to be? Some damn fool busy body I shouldn't wonder. If that's the Welfare, I'm out, Joseph, all

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right? If that's the Welfare sticking their noses in other people's business again. Nothing better to do than stick their noses . . .

TAKING AND SPEAKING INTO THE PHONE

If that's the Welfare, he's out. He's gone out to - hold on a minute

LEAVES THE PHONE DANGLING TO ATTEND TO THE KETTLE

He's gone out to lunch. Mr. Tossel's gone out - (GETTING HIS OWN JOKE) Mr. Tossel is out to lunch. Get it Joseph? Next time you can tell them I'm - Shit!

FILLING TEA POT, SPILLING AND WIPING UP WITH UNDERPANTS

FROM LINE

Now look what you made me do. That was your fault you know, not answering when

a person talks to you. It's all your fault. What's the point of a parrot if it's not to keep a person company? Don't I get enough cold shoulder already round here? Mrs. Alsop next door for one; that's enough cold shoulder right there without you joining in as well.

STIRRING POT WITH BREAD KNIFE.

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Mrs. Alsop has not spoken to me for seven years, d'you know that Joseph? Not one word for seven years, and you want to know why? Seven years ago she caught me pissing in the marrow patch, and it has deprived her of the power of speech. 'Mr. Tossel' - her last words this was, her very last words. 'Mr. Tossel, is that a nice sight for a lady coming to make a call?' 'It is not, Mrs. Alsop, you're absolutely right, it is not; but don't let that worry you, Mrs. Alsop; any lady making a call would have the manners to look the other way'. Some lady. Stupid old cow. Making a call, my foot. Making a nuisance of herself, more like. Minding other's people's business, more like. 'What about joining the over sixties club, Mr. Tossel; make yourself lots of nice friends, and why don't you let me get you the meals on wheels?' Put a stop to all that nonsense, didn't I?

RETURNING SQUEEZED TEA BAGS TO CADDY

Well, it was my back yard, Joseph, it was my marrow patch, and it most certainly was my piss. Nothing to do with her - or anyone else, come to that.

POURS AND SIPS TEA

Any way, it's good for them, piss. Not a lot of people know that Joseph, but marrows do very well on a daily dose of . . .

NOTICING AND REPLACING PHONE AND SWATTING COCKROACH

So that's Mrs. Alsop for you Joseph. Not another word for seven years. Over

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Sixties Club! Bunch of old has-beans. One foot in the grave most of them. One foot in the grave and the other . . .

UNABLE TO CONSIGN THE OTHER FOOT, HE TURNS TO
THE NEIGHBOUR ON THE OTHER SIDE.

The other side now, there's a different matter. Could do with a few lessons in the cold shoulder, that one all right. If she could lose the power of speech for seven days, never mind seven years!
(PEERING FOR COCKROACHES) Who's she, the cat's mother? You've hit the nail right on the head there Joseph, my boy. Mrs. Crouch, the mother of the cat. (SWAT)

'Mr. Tossel, it's about your dandelions. If you don't get them cut soon, all that seed will blow right into my yard which I consider most un-neighbourly. And while we're on the subject Mr. Tossel, there's an extremely nasty smell coming from your drains. I don't think the Sanitation Department is going to like that at all'.
(MIMICKING) I don't think the Sanitation Department is going to like that at all. And I don't like people telling me when to cut my dandelions, Mrs. Crouch. I'll cut them when I damn well please. If I damn well please, and if I don't feel like it, I won't be cutting them at all. It's still a free country, isn't it? It's still a free country.

COUGHING FROM EXERTIONS

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Unless we sold out to the Russians when I wasn't looking. Got Comrade Crouch on the secret police. How do you like that Joseph? Forty seven years on the railway. Length and breadth of this land, back and forth, forth and back all hours, all weathers, never a sick day - not one sick day in forty seven years, and now Comrade Crouch wants to . . .

EYEING NEWSPAPER

Not the Russians, though Joseph. No time for the Ruskies, our lot, have they - too busy getting into bed with the Yanks.

PHONE RINGS AND HE GOES TO ANSWER

Yanks on top, of course. What they call the misery position, right?

PICKING UP PHONE AND CONTINUING INTO MOUTHPIECE

I call it prostitution, myself. Same thing, same thing, selling yourself - who? Mrs. Crouch? And so would you Mrs. Crouch. Going to bed with the yanks for money, I'd call that prostitution, wouldn't you?

HOLDING THE PHONE AWAY FROM HIS EAR, BRIEFLY AFFRONTED

Hang up on you? Why did I hang up on you? That wasn't me just now, that was the Welfare. They're like that Mrs. C. Put you on hold for half an hour, and when they think you've had enough they just hang up. Make themselves a nice cup of tea while you're

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holding on and . . . How would I know what you want with the Welfare, that's your business, I don't go poking my nose in other. . . .

Who were you calling then? If it wasn't the Welfare, it must have been somebody else. If it wasn't the - me! (WARY) And why would you be calling me Mrs. Crouch, there's nothing wrong with that drain, I've checked it out, and there's not a thing wrong with . . . Ah, the cat.

Now, that's another thing altogether Mrs. Crutch. that tom cat of yours is a menace to society. That tom cat thinks my back yard is his personal crap house, which happens to be very dangerous, in case you didn't know. Cat crap is full of germs Mrs. Clutch. All sorts of diseases are being discovered in the excrement of cats. Extremely nasty diseases just waiting for some innocent person to . . . my what, my -? All right, all right, you've got my drains, I've got your crap. We'll call it evens then. I can put up with crap if I have to,

but not my birds. If that cat of yours even touch one of my birds, I'll fill him so full of lead he . . . I don't give a shit if it's against the law. It's against the law crapping on my geraniums - the new cat law Mrs. Crotch? In the Journal? I can read you know, and I don't have to put - no you listen to me. I don't have to put my word against yours in a court of law. I've got the evidence right here in my back yard, several bags of which I can . . .

EVIDENTLY CUT OFF, HE STILL TALKS TO THE AIR

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I can scoop up and set before the judge. Right Joseph? Get myself one of those pooper scoops and take a goddam sack of that . . . shit, who gives a shit anyway.

HANGS UP AND SITS SIFTING SEEDS AT TABLE

I don't know. When it all comes down to crap and dandelions. Little people in little boxes fighting over dandelions and crap. Ah Joseph, you and me have seen better days old friend. On the railways, haven't we? Length and breadth of this land. We certainly have seen some better days.

Seen it all open up, didn't we? Seen the lakes and the ships and the mountains, and the green wheat on the prairie, sky to sky when it's rippling in the wind. Green wheat like water rippling in the wind. Brought out all the settlers, didn't we? Po-lacks, I-talians, Uker-anians: old folks right down to the children all bundled up with their hopes and their fears and their bits of luggage bursting at the seams. All off to the promised land; then comes the Depression, didn't it? Hobos everywhere you look riding the rails. Out of work, out of luck, back and forth to nowhere, forth and back to nothing, poor devils. Share a sandwich, spare a dime, swap a yarn - and watch out for the inspector coming by.

HE BECOMES QUITE ANIMATED BY THIS MEMORY
WHILE COLLECTING TIN FROM SHELF

The 'inspector' Joseph, remember that night just out of Winnipeg? Big fellow wasn't he? All fat arse and full of himself. 'Who's

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that you're talking to in there Tossel? You know the rules as well as I do. No free-loaders in the caboose'. 'Free-loaders? Me sir? Talking to free-loaders? You must mean Joseph, sir, my parrot. Keeps me company on the night runs. Bit of company, it helps to pass the time'. Yes, and that hobo, poor bastard, half starved wasn't he. Hanging on the step for dear life till old Fatarse took off and he could come back inside and warm his hands on a nice cup of tea. Cup of tea. Game of cards. Songs even, one or two that still had the heart to sing.

RETURNING TO TABLE

Those were the days. Joseph and me in the caboose and all Canada stretching away to the stars.

OPENING AND POURING TINNED STEW INTO PAN,
HUMMING THEN SINGING TO A HYMN TUNE eg. LOVE DIVINE

Joseph's coat had many colours/ Apple of his father's eye/ But the envy of his brothers/ So they took him out to - no brothers here though Joseph. No bad brothers, just the babies, just old Tossel and the birds.

PHONE RINGS

(singing louder) Wasn't dead though when they found him/ Joseph he was still alive . . . All right, all right, I can hear it, I'm not deaf you know, not yet. Not like some people I could mention round here. Don't give you a moment's peace, do they? Can't even get your dinner; well I'm not interrupting myself for that bunch of do-gooders thank you very much. The Welfare again I shouldn't wonder.

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Ten to one it's the Welfare want to come and give me a bath. Want to cut my toe nails or some damn thing.

TASTING STEW AND STIRRING AS PHONE STOPS

Put you in the poor house for two pins. I know, with their forms and their

files and their 'sign on the dotted line Mr. Tossel'. Next stop it's the poor house, I know, I know.

HASN'T REGISTERED STOPPED PHONE

Tell you one thing though Joseph, you lose your taste getting older. Food. Doesn't taste like it used to, no flavour any more. Wouldn't know this for beef. Could just as well be horse meat - or hippopotamus for all I know. Damn fool farmers, antibiotics