

Stylist

‘Fall’

Emma Donoghue

Harnessed and pillowed in her pod as tight as an unborn, Annie waits. Gives herself up. Too late to uncurl, scramble out, escape this watery fate. Knees to double chin, she can't straighten so much as an elbow. Beyond all hope of an easy way out. Her lid is nailed down and it was she who paid the young boatman to do it, that's the joke.

Her tapered barrel hangs upright in the water, bobbing on its rope. The wicked hag at the end of the fairytale gets packed in a barrel for her just deserts. Annie's mummified in darkness. She adjusts her grip on the handles, twitches in her bindings. Her stomach is empty, in case she might vomit. One of the seams must be starting to give already, because Annie's feet are wet.

Outside, she knows, the afternoon sun is glittering on the crowds that clog both shorelines. The motion picture company will have set their camera rolling. The bookies are offering a thousand to one on Annie coming through. Her manager has her letter in his pocket, fully exonerating him.

“What age would you be, ma'am, if you don't mind”, the boy at the oars mumbled as he was rowing her out to the island. Annie's hair is grey, her throat is wattled. The body creaks but the spirit fares. Seven, when she'd first been knocked speechless by the sight of the Horseshoe Falls at Niagara. Nineteen, when she'd lost husband and baby. “I'm 43, and why should I mind?” she told the boy, hiding a grin at her lie. At 43, she'd still thought she could earn her crust by teaching children elocution or piano, acrobatics or languages or whatever was a la mode. Now Annie's one hope is to stay out of the poorhouse. Yes, 43, that has a good ring to it; she can be 43 again because time is loose and sparkles like water, and she'll turn, magically diving back into her life like a salmon, thrashing upstream to the unforgotten home.

The other thing the boy asked Annie out of the side of his beautiful mouth was whether she was a strong swimmer. She almost laughed, she waved to the mob along the shoreline instead. That's a thing she never got around to learning. Besides, swimming won't help, if her barrel gets smashed. A hissing, a sizzling; the boy must be compressing her oxygen with a foot pump now. She fits her lips around the mouthpiece. Sealed with a kiss. Her breathing tightens, her mind speeds up. Cowards die many times before their death. Knock knock on the roof, that's his signal. All ready, she calls hoarsely. Half a mile north to the Horseshoe Falls, but it won't take more than a few minutes once the current seizes her. She hears the boy's knife grind and grind, cutting her cord.

And she's away.

Giddy terror in her skirts: the scalding wet comes from her. A loosening, a rocking, a slurring from side to side, a heave as the water yanks at her, she can't tell which way but what way but one is there to go? A catch, a lurch, Annie's upside down, then the barrel rights itself and plunges on. She pictures its crazy passage as if with the indifferent eye of a heron. An inch and a half of oiled oak between her and her death. Sss, sss, she metes out her air as slowly as she can.

Thrown again, slammed like a baby's rattle. What kind of a pure lunatic would... But there is no Annie any more, only a swollen coffin with a secret inside and what does the water care? The almighty river's seen stranger sights than this one, smashed greater crafts, accepted finer sacrifices (three or four a year).

Smooth, all of a sudden. A pause that's worse. One hundred and fifty-eight feet, Annie says the number as if knowing makes any difference.

Here goes what falls what what who'd a thought such a why whee save me water water everywhere and not a whit not a jot not a wherever in the world whirling falling like hail like a stone flung down a well a spear a bird a Jesus Jesus.

Her brains are kedgerie, her eyes are pickles, bruised in their own brine. Annie thinks she's alive, just about. Is her barrel swirling in the whirlpool? Dangling, spun and spat from rock to rock? She doesn't know where or what or how she is. She's soaked, as cold as a fish, but dry-mouthed. She reckons she's used up all her air. Funny, that, to stifle in the middle of all this flood. She gasps, she yawns, she hasn't an inch to stretch and catch a breath.

A lifetime.

The clang of metal makes her jump. Hooked? A scraping, a dragging. Shore!

Annie waits while a saw chews the wood a few inches from her head. Light, like an elbow in the eye. Strangers drag her out onto the rocks, she's as dizzy as a faun. Her hands unfurl, greenish blue. The decks of the Maid of the Mist are thick with faces. When Annie staggers to her feet and brushes down her wet trunks, a long cheer goes up. Her barrel's iron hoops are stoved in; the thing looks like flotsam. She manages a curtsy, wipes water off her face that turns out to be blood. Her manager runs forward with a red carnation, and an overcoat to make her decent. But Annie's staring past the sightseers, up up up the cloudy tumult of the Falls. A photograph flashes silver.

Is Annie changed? What does she know now? Why, nothing; nothing more than when the first hands wrenched her into the world 63 years ago, when she was ignorant, eager for the air.

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