

**THE LAST LEAF *O. Henry (1862-1910) (*edited version)**

In a little district west of Washington Square at the top of a squatty, three-story brick house, Sue and Joanna had their studio. "Joansy" was the nickname for Joanna. One girl was from Maine; the other 1 from California. They had met at "Delmonico's," and found their tastes in art, chicory salad and

fashion so similar that their combined artist studio resulted.

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. Mr. Pneumonia was not 2 what you would call a **chivalric** old gentleman and Joansy he **smote**. She lay, scarcely moving, on

her bed, looking through the small Dutch windowpanes at the blank side of the next brick house.

Sue called for a doctor to come home to check on Joansy. After checking her, the busy doctor invited Sue into the hallway with a shaggy, grey 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. Your little friend has made up her mind 3

that she's not going to get well. Has she anything on her mind?" "She—she wanted to paint the Bay of Naples some day," said Sue.

"Paint?—bosh! Has she anything on her mind worth thinking about twice—a man, for instance?" 4 "A man?" said Sue "Is a man worth—but, no, doctor; there is nothing of the kind."

"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.

After the doctor had gone Sue went into the workroom and **cried a paper napkin to a pulp**. Then she 5 swaggered into Joansy's room with her drawing board, whistling as though nothing was wrong.

Joansy 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. As Sue was sketching, she heard a low sound, several times repeated. She went quickly to the bedside. Joansy'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 curiously out the window. What was there to count? There was only a bare, dreary yard 6 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.

"What is it?" asked Sue.

"Six," said Joansy, 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, Joansy?"

"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 silly girl. Don't be a goose. 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!

"You needn't get any more wine," said Joansy, 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."

"Joansy, " said Sue, "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 to-morrow. I need the light, or I would pull the blind down."

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

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"Try to sleep," said Sue. "I must call old Boris up to be my model for my painting. I'll not be gone a minute. Don't try to move 'till I come back."

Old Boris was a painter who lived on the ground floor beneath them. He was past sixty and had a Michael Angelo's Moses beard curling down from his head. Boris was a failure in art. Forty years he had **wielded** the brush without getting near enough money or success. 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 drank gin to excess, and still talked of his coming masterpiece. Still, he was a fierce little old man, who  **scoffed** terribly at softness in any one, and who regarded himself as a guard dog -in-waiting to protect the two young artists in the studio above.

Sue found Boris smelling strongly of gin in his dimly lighted den below. In one corner was a blank canvas on an easel that had been waiting there for twenty-five years to receive the first line of the masterpiece. She told him of Joansy'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 Boris, with his red eyes, plainly crying, shouted his **contempt** and **derision** for such idiotic imaginings.

"Vass!" he cried. "Is dere people in de world mit der foolishness to die because leafs dey drop off

from a confounded vine? I haf not heard of such a thing... Go on. I come mit you. Gott! dis is not any 8

blace in which one so goot as Miss Yohnsy shall lie sick. Some day I vill baint a masterpiece, and ve shall all go away. Gott! yes."

Joansy was sleeping when they went upstairs. Sue pulled the blind down to the window-sill, and motioned Boris 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. Boris, in his old blue shirt, took his seat to model for Sue as she painted.

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

"Pull 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 whole 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.

"It is the last one," said Joansy. "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind. It will fall to-day, 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 Joansy did not answer. 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.

Joansy 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 stupid girl, Sue," said Joansy. "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 9 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. "Sue, some day 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. 10

"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. Old Boris, his name is—some kind of an 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 to-day to be made more comfortable."

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 Joansy 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. Boris 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 11

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 Boris's masterpiece—he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell."

The three main characters in this story are different yet are all friends. What motivates their actions and decisions? Provide evidence from the story.

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| **CHARACTER Key words** | **ACTION MOTIVATED BY** | **EVIDENCE?** |
| **Joansy** |  |  |
| **Sue** |  |  |
| **Old Boris** |  |  |