

Rapture

A Comedy

By Judy B. Goss

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CHARACTERS

Lila Dozier	Wife and mother of small children, early 30's
Jack Hedges	Senior pastor of Magnolia Street United Methodist Church, widower, approaching 40
LaRuth Rather	Associate pastor, Magnolia Street UMC, single, 30
Japonica Johnson	Wife and mother of small children, LaRuth's younger sister, 24
Dede Freeman	Manager of the Ozark Bathhouse, single, 45

SETTING

A plaza on Bathhouse Row, Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas, between the Ozark Bathhouse* and adjoining green space with unseen amphitheater (off, R). The plaza includes an ornamental fountain, benches, steps on the hillside of rocks and greenery to a promenade above, and a walkway to a small concrete pool of natural thermal springs near the steps. A few steps lead to the Ozark's side porch (L), furnished with chairs, awnings and a door to the lobby.

TIME

Late September, 1990

*“(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)”*

~from “i thank You God for most this amazing,” by e. e. cummings

*Based on historic Hot Springs bathhouses built in the early twentieth century, following Spanish Colonial Revival or Neoclassical Revival styles.

Scene 1

(Warm early evening, late September, a plaza along Bathhouse Row in Hot Springs National Park. Coming from the amphitheater nearby, Jack and LaRuth enter. His tie is loosened, and he carries a jacket on his arm; she has a shoulder bag and a clipboard with notes.)

JACK

Details—falling right into place! Aren't you ecstatic?

LaRUTH

Yeah.

JACK

The park amphitheater's perfect for services—with added chairs.

LaRUTH

Flexibility's the key.

JACK

(Wandering the space, casually.)

Passed here a hundred times since I came in July, but hadn't focused on the space before. Invigorating. Lucky you know all the ins and outs of using the park—thanks!

LaRUTH

You're welcome.

JACK

(Guiding her to a bench.)

Share the local color with me for a minute.

LaRUTH

O.K.

(He invites her to sit, then joins her on the bench.)

JACK

Still awed by the beauty?

LaRUTH

Haven't paused much, since I moved back. New benches, same old design. Air's always a little heavier.

(Gesturing toward the hillside vapors.)

Maybe it's the vapors, soaking up ailments and wishes.

JACK

Folk wisdom?

LaRUTH

Oh, no. My thought—being here alone—or, almost alone.

JACK

Well, the magic's new to me.

(Pulling a crystal from his pocket.)

And this caught my eye, in the souvenir shop down the street.

(Handing it to her.)

Impulse buying—my thanks: for being a good sport—about the revival. Lots of work!

LaRUTH

(With a laugh.)

And more to come!

(Turning it in her hand.)

Oooh, smoky quartz.

JACK

Probably seen a million around here—all your life—

LaRUTH

Harvest moon, in my hand. Don't have many this pretty.

JACK

(With a laugh.)

Invite me up to see your collection sometime?

LaRUTH

Have to find the box! When I left home, just dumped them.

(He takes the crystal again and holds it up.)

JACK

Does glow like the moon. You know all about crystals?

LaRUTH

Hell, no—fancied them. Used to wonder how it would fee to shrink—and wander around inside one. How would the outside world—worlds—look?

JACK

LaRuth the Lonely Daydreamer?

LaRUTH

A kid's game, Jack. While boys like you were mastering King of the Mountain.

JACK

Hey. I played in the Hall of Mirrors at the State Fair—I'd rush in, get lost and hope to be smart enough to see the worn path on the floor and escape! Of course, I bumped into a few glass walls like hundreds of other morons. And, Man, was I pissed when smartasses raced through, proving how slick they were and how stupid I was—in front of the gawkers out front.

LaRUTH

(Laughing.)

I'll hang on to that image, when you preach to the crowd out here next week.

JACK

(Handing the crystal back to her.)

O.K., Rev. Lady, back to business. Finally got the phone number cleared for the new prayer line, but there's a slight twist.

LaRUTH

Because "four-six-three PRAY's" gone.

JACK

You listened! Not your cup of tea, I realize.

LaRUTH

"Baptists roped in ten percent more sinners in one month." So, what's the deal?

JACK

Mama-Lee's number spells, "GOD-HELP."

LaRUTH

You're pulling my damn leg.

JACK

Nope. Would you ask?

LaRUTH

Take it away—from my grandmother. Who had to leave her house for a nursing home.

JACK

Who's a loyal church member—and could enjoy using the service, as well as sharing.

LaRUTH

Japonica and I've dialed 463-4357 forever!

JACK

Sorry for the inconvenience, but times change. We're reaching out to people, LaRuth.

LaRuth

(Standing.)

I'll do what I can.

JACK

Thanks.

(Standing.)

I'd like to announce it at the revival, and the new billing cycle begins—

LaRUTH

Done: tomorrow.

JACK

Good.

(She walks across the plaza, to exit past the Ozark. He joins her.)

JACK (Cont'd)

Another important thing: our media coverage.

(They continue walking as they talk.)

LaRUTH

Features in the paper and *Spa City Scene*, this weekend.

JACK

Excellent. My radio spots start Friday.

(He stops, forcing her to pause, too.)

JACK (Cont'd)

The best: TV coverage, starting with an “Alive at Five” interview with Channel Nine’s Tina Malone, next Wednesday. The stage will be set; it’ll be great. I want you with me for that! Make a note for your calendar.

(She digs for pen in the bag and writes on the clipboard paper. Finished, she drops pen in bag and walks again. He walks with her.)

LaRUTH

O.K.

JACK

Tomorrow, she’ll call to confirm particulars. Help me remember to wear blue for the camera.

(They exit, past the Ozark. Blackout.)

Scene 2

(One week later, 5:30 p.m., same setting. Lila sits on a plaza bench reading her Bible. Hearing Jack approaching, she puts it in a “New Dawn’s SONrise” bag and stands to greet him.)

JACK *(Off)*

Thanks again, Tina, you’re the best!

(Jack enters, as from the amphitheater, and Lila waves.)

LILA
Jack—so good to see you!

JACK
You look wonderful, Lila.

(He goes to her with open arms and she offers her cheek to kiss.)

LILA
I’ve really missed—

JACK
And you’ve come—

(Laughing, they speak again.)

LILA
Chris and I knew we’d be blessed.

JACK
Well, a long way, down the mountain.

(He clears his throat, and she pops a hand over her mouth.)

LILA
Oops! I should just be quiet.

JACK
Gosh!

JACK
(Hugging her again.)
No, now I’m so happy you’re here.

LILA
Thank God you planned this revival—like a prophet! Even before the earthquake prediction.

JACK
Don’t claim to prophesy, but it’ll be a grand meeting.

LILA
I mean it!

(LaRuth enters from the Ozark Bath House onto the porch, toting a backpack and water bottle. Seeing them, she pauses.)

LILA (Cont'd)

With our soldiers going to the Middle East—Praise the Lord!

JACK

Indeed—we'll share the spirit. Where's Chris?

LILA

Choir practice, at the Arlington.

(With a slight laugh.)

You know: The Redeemed and Rockin' Rollers.

JACK

Yeah, wild name. But not from First church.

LILA

When you left, First Church lost the flame. The Lord led us to Fellowship on the Rock.

JACK

Well. And I had no idea Chris could sing.

(Jack sees LaRuth descending porch steps to the plaza.)

JACK (Cont'd)

There you are, La Ruth.

LaRUTH

(Joining Jack and Lila.)

Sorry I missed the TV spot.

JACK

Remember, there's another, day after tomorrow. Lila, I'd like you to meet my associate, LaRuth Rather.

LILA

Hello, Lila Dozier.

LaRUTH

Good to meet you, Lila.

JACK

Lila and her husband are friends of mine from way back—during Cheryl's illness and—

LILA

Oh, my, yes—and helped you with the move, after she went to be with the Lord.

JACK

A year ago.

LaRUTH

Support makes all the difference.

JACK

(To Lila.)

So—it's wonderful to have you at the revival.

(To LaRuth.)

Say, nothing's wrong?

LaRUTH

What?

JACK

That you missed the interview.

LaRUTH

(Pointing to the Ozark Bathhouse.)

Oh! Bumped into Evelyn Case, gabbing on and on about the revival—while I'm wrapped in a towel.

LILA

Towel?

LaRUTH

My hot springs bath, which was way overdue. And I sure didn't want to rush the massage.

LILA

You're Jack's secretary at the church?

LaRUTH

Associate pastor.

LILA

Hhm. Never met a lady preacher.

LaRUTH

We'll be familiar as pot lucks, someday.

LILA

I can't imagine.

JACK

Lila, she's one of the best women out of seminary—and a big part of this revival. By the way, LaRuth, just got word about the special effects.

LaRUTH

Effects?

JACK

Tomorrow night, we'll have mist like at the Statler Brothers concert last June. People said they thought angels were hovering all around!

LaRUTH

Missed the Statler Brothers. But like MTV magic.

LILA

Sounds heavenly to me!

JACK

Oh, yeah.

JACK

All it takes is plenty of dry ice and a machine.

(To LaRuth.)

The rental guy's delivering it tomorrow around three, and he'll show you the set up.

LaRUTH

Mist. O.K.

JACK

At three. And you're ready for the morning Bible study?

LaRUTH

Miraculously, after a million interruptions from people hysterical about that iffy earthquake.

LILA

Predicted—by authorities.

LaRUTH

I'll swear, if we had one tomorrow, at least it'd be over!

JACK

LaRuth's joking.

LaRUTH

A massage never felt so divine.

LILA

Thank the Lord for sending warnings!

JACK

We're well aware of how close we are to the Memphis fault line.

(To LaRuth.)

Haven't you stocked up some water and canned goods?

LaRUTH

When? People rail about End Times—I have no time! Dottie Davis wants a program next week for Circle Two: tying earthquakes, floods, and battles to prophecies in Revelation.

How on earth can I do that?

JACK

No problem. Use the millennium. Strong dash of history, to the turning point. Then: God's plan to save mankind—ah, humanity. Age old story of the Bible.

LaRUTH

Seriously, mixing Revelation and Advent? Guess I should pick up a crystal ball with the dry ice.

JACK

No rules against creativity. You're free to design the program, use nuance—

LaRUTH

Well, I won't call it: "The Last Christmas: Shake, Rattle and Roll Call Time."

LILA

(Forcing a smile.)

Heavens! She's still joking.

JACK

She doesn't make light of people's concerns—

LaRUTH

Humor helps them lighten up.

LILA

Jesus didn't joke about fears.

JACK

LaRuth and I approach scripture to make it relevant to people's lives today.

(To LaRuth.)

Unpleasant, but true: anxiety helps folks change for the better—nothing valuable comes free.

LaRUTH

I thought grace did. No joke.

LILA

(With a step closer to Jack.)

Driving down, we heard Jack on the radio, and when he said to look at the earthquake prediction as a “love shake” from God, I knew exactly what he meant.

JACK

Earthquake or love shake, adversity connects us to the “least and the lost,” who need God most. And if the lighting goes as planned in the evenings, we’ll feel the glow. But, can’t expect miracles without effort.

(Checking his watch.)

Excuse me, ladies, got to catch the technicians. Lila, I’ll walk you part way to the hotel.

LILA

No, I’ll read until time to meet Chris.

JACK

(To LaRuth.)

Should I call tonight about tomorrow’s afternoon workshop?

LaRUTH

No, thanks. Don’t worry.

JACK

I’m cool. See you both later.

(He exits.)

LILA

It’s a blessing Jack’s here.

LaRUTH

Everybody thinks so. ‘Bye, Lila.

(LaRuth turns to fountain to refill her water bottle at a spigot on the side.)

LILA

Then you shouldn’t disrespect him.

LaRUTH

Beg your pardon?

LILA

When he left our church, so did we. You mock the revival. Even mock the Bible.

LaRUTH

It's a joke to read it like a Ouija Board.

LILA

You won't be laughing in Hell.

LaRUTH

But it keeps hell on earth at bay. You think the Lord's awareness is vaster than ours?

LILA

Of course.

LaRUTH

Then, since awareness triggers humor, God probably rolls with belly laughs half the time.

LILA

Ridiculous.

LaRUTH

"God works in mysterious ways."

LILA

I came to renew my strength, not play at being clever. Don't look for me at your workshop.

LaRUTH

Bless your heart.

(LaRuth turns again to the fountain to fill her water bottle. Lila returns to get her bag on the bench. Japonica enters on the sidewalk and goes to LaRuth. Japonica is dressed in bright colors with big jewelry and a couple of prominent yellow ribbons.)

JAPONICA

Sissy!

LaRUTH

(Capping her bottle.)

Hi, Japonica.

JAPONICA

Dede didn't tell you to call me back?

LaRUTH

Yeah, but you reminded me yesterday about Mama-Lee's birthday party.

JAPONICA

Oh—you know why someone’s calling—and save time by not calling them back.

LaRUTH

Japonica. I got her a new nightgown, pretty lavender. If you want to split another gift—

JAPONICA

Hey, my damn turn, Sissy!

(Curious, Lila sits on the bench, pulls a book from her bag and affects reading.)

LaRUTH

O.K.

JAPONICA

Danny found that huge flag Brother Hedges wants for the revival. Mr. Roper let him run over to Nashville and haul the rigging stuff back here tomorrow. Danny said it’s going to look great, and, you know, he never gets excited about church.

LaRUTH

Uh-huh.

JAPONICA

No lie! Aren’t you glad?

LaRUTH

Great news. Jack’ll really appreciate the effort.

JAPONICA

Makes you look good, too, being family and all.

LaRUTH

Yeah, thanks. What’s with the ribbons?

JAPONICA

I swear, you never pay attention: the whole town’s decorating. The Guard’s heading to the Middle East for Desert Shield, and we’re sure as shootin’ backing them up. And I want to show Joey and Michelle, you know, how to be patriotic. Thank God for my glue gun.

LaRUTH

I wish ribbons could keep them home.

JAPONICA

You got it backasswards, LaRuth. That’s why the revival’s so perfect. Keeps God on our

JAPONICA (Cont'd)

side—you know, protects them. Brother Hedges inspired everybody on TV a little while ago. It'll be a big crowd—really needing to worship.

LaRUTH

Hhmm, loving the Lord more with a big American flag hanging over the altar?

JAPONICA

Bunch of BS! Most churches have one.

LaRUTH

And don't need it.

JAPONICA

Our country, "under God," you know—like your career, LaRuth. You really got up on the wrong side of the bed today. Say, why weren't you with him on TV? Oh shit! You quit?

LaRUTH

No, I—

JAPONICA

Didn't even want to be on TV, I bet. You're just not normal. Here's a dynamite preacher who can get people going. Handsome as they come—

LaRUTH

Important in ministry.

JAPONICA

A widower, not even divorced.

LaRUTH

Whoa, Nikki.

JAPONICA

I'm just saying, most people love him, but you go 'round giving the cold shoulder.

LaRUTH

Back up. Will Danny help fly this flag?

JAPONICA

Honored, since, you know, his unit'll likely activate by summer. He'll get closer than any of us to the Holy Land.

LaRUTH

Oh, no!

JAPONICA

Yes ma'am. When we're at war, whose side you gonna be on?

LaRUTH

Everyone's.

JAPONICA

BS! Like your bumpersticker: "Vizualize World Peace." Tell me: what the hell?

LaRUTH

When we meditate on the well-being of all people, we work for justice. Not a quick fix, but, eventually, world harmony—

JAPONICA

Don't make me laugh! You know, when you were in preacher school you used to talk all the damn time about sacrifice. I swear, you gave up the best wedding prospect you had. Ran off to Dallas, and dumped Richard for a pile of sermons. Now, when you won't even pray for our country to win a war, you know, that goes way over my head.

(Lila rises and walks toward the fountain. LaRuth sees her approaching.)

LaRUTH

Truce! I'll meet Danny, and the flag, soon as he gets back.

JAPONICA

O.K. Hard to argue with someone whose mind's way out there in space anyway.

LaRUTH

Space? We're on the sidewalk, where we skated twenty years ago. When you fell down, I was supposed to pick you up. And I did.

(Dede enters the bathhouse porch to straighten chairs before closing; she overhears the sisters and works busily.)

JAPONICA

What about when Danny goes to fight? Someone close, you know, who might die for his country. That's sacrifice: he'll cross the ocean to help people he doesn't even know.

LaRUTH

What about Iraqi babies, mothers, that our soldiers—God forbid, Danny—could kill?

(Lila stops as the argument escalates. She checks her watch.)

JAPONICA

What kind of life they got now? Not like us, poor things. Look evil in the eye, Sissy. Like, in Hot Springs! What about devil worshippers around here?

LaRUTH

Devil worshippers!

JAPONICA

You'd give them a chance, too!

LaRUTH

God gives everyone a chance, Nikki.

JAPONICA

Oh, yeah. That's how you keep those pie-in-the-sky ideas. The creeps sacrifice dogs!

LaRUTH

Says who?

JAPONICA

I forget—but it was on TV. They look like Carl, long-haired grocery boy at Kroger, you know, always wearing black under his red vest. He handed me a fresh half-gallon of milk yesterday, because mine was leaking, and I saw a devil star tattoo—right there on his fist. Maybe he doesn't go around waving a flag at church, but he could commit a bloody crime, before someone locks him up.

LaRUTH

Sorry. Got lost between war and witch hunts. We're settled on Mama-Lee's gifts, right?

JAPONICA

Dismissed! Get a new damn sticker: "World peace begins at home!"

(Dede exits into the bathhouse; Lila moves toward the sisters.)

LILA

(Stepping to them.)

Excuse me. I couldn't help overhearing. The Lord works so rapidly among us these days!

(Pause.)

LaRUTH

Lila, this is my sister, Japonica Johnson.

(Over her shoulder, to Japonica.)

Lila's a friend of Jack's. Here for the revival.

JAPONICA

Hello.

LILA

Pleased to meet you.