

Johanna Skibsrud

*This*  
Will Be  
*Difficult*  
To  
Explain

# Contents

*About the Book*  
*About the Author*  
*Also by Johanna Skibsrud*  
*Title Page*

The Electric Man

The Limit

French Lessons

This will be difficult to explain

Clarence

Signac's Boats

Cleats

Angus's Bull

Fat Man and Little Boy

*Acknowledgments*  
*Copyright*

## About the Book

These loosely connected hypnotic stories about memory and desire showcase one of fiction's brightest new voices.

Taking readers from South Dakota to Paris, to Japan, into art galleries, foreign apartments, farms and beach hotels, Johanna Skibsrud introduces an astonishing array of characters in these piercingly wise stories. A young maid at a hotel in France encounters a man who asks to paint her portrait, only later discovering that he is someone other than who we think he is. A divorced father who fears estrangement from his thirteen-year-old daughter allows her to take the wheel of his car, realising too late that he's made a grave mistake. Time and again Skibsrud's characters find themselves face to face with what they didn't know they didn't know, at the exact point of intersection between impossibility and desire.

In *This Will Be Difficult to Explain*, Skibsrud, whose prose has been compared to Nicole Krauss and Marilynne Robinson, has created a series of masterful, perceptive tales.

## About the Author

Johanna Skibsrud is the author of two collections of poetry. *The Sentimentalists*, her first novel, won the 2010 Scotiabank Giller Prize, Canada's most prestigious literary award. She lives in Montreal and Tucson.

ALSO BY JOHANNA SKIBSRUD

Fiction

*The Sentimentalists*

Poetry

*Late Nights with Wild Cowboys*

*I Do Not Think That I Could Love a Human Being*

Johanna Skibsrud

*This*  
Will Be  
*Difficult*  
To  
Explain

*and other stories*



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

# THE ELECTRIC MAN

---

*For Rebecca*

THE FIRST TIME I saw him he was sitting out on the deck of the Auberge DesJardins, drinking something out of a tall glass. He had a broad-brimmed straw hat on, the kind that women wear, and he was reading *The Herald Tribune*. I was always looking out for *The Herald Tribune* that summer, because it indicated to me the English-speaking visitors when they came. I could no longer excuse the great loneliness of that summer by the dearth of English newspapers in the place, but still—I was always happy to see *The Herald Tribune*.

The Auberge was a spot more popular among the Continentals. The Americans and the Brits and most of the Australians stayed at the bigger resorts, closer to town. We kept Swiss and Belgian visitors, many of whom returned season after season, and so were not—as the Americans always seemed to be doing—simply passing through.

By that point in the summer, my French was good enough for just about every purpose except being able to actually *say* anything. My accent was all right, the guests all said so: I could carry it off. It wasn't marvellous, they didn't say that, but they did say, to my credit, that I didn't sound like an American, pretending, or—and this was worse—a Canadian, being sincere.

When I saw him the first time I was doing the afternoon rounds on the deck—sweeping through, as I did every four o'clock—collecting empty glasses and trays and asking if the guests were quite as comfortable as could be expected.



Everyone mostly said that they were. The Auberge—especially out on the deck, in the pre-dinner hours—was a comfortable place, and very few people thought to complain. Except, of course, on the occasion that they should need a drink, or the bill, or else another drink, and then they did ask, but so politely—in so light and detached a way—that it was as if they wished to indicate that the lack, indicated by the request, was in fact just another element from which was composed an all-around satisfactory whole. One or two guests, however, over the course of the weeks that I stayed on at the Auberge, could be counted on to be more exacting than most. The man with the hat was, it turned out, one of those.

THE FIRST TIME I saw him was not the first time he saw me, and when I made my way over to his table and said, “*Tout va bien, Monsieur?*” because he looked like a man who didn’t need a thing in the world, he said, “*Non.*” He said: “I saw you pass this way fifteen minutes ago, and I tried to get your attention. There’s not enough ice in my drink.” He rattled his tall glass so that I could see that it was true.

From his accent I guessed he was from somewhere in the Northeast. Connecticut, New Hampshire, maybe, and I thought it was too bad that he could tell right away that I wasn’t French. Usually it was just the people who really *were* French who could tell. But maybe, I thought, he was one of those guests whose French was so bad they didn’t even try. Who just spoke English as though they expected everyone to understand, or else learn in a hurry.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I said, in my friendliest voice. “We’ll get that fixed up for you right away,” and he said, “I didn’t expect you to be from the South. I would have pegged you as being from Minnesota or something. St. Paul. Aren’t you a little serious,” he said, “for the South?”

I didn't know what he meant, but I knew he didn't mean to be nice. He had a teasing, half-mean look in his eye and held his glass away from me when I leaned over to take it away. I could tell he was going to be a most scrupulous guest, and any hope that I'd had for striking up more than the usual conversation with him was gone. I just wanted to get back to the kitchen, to get him more ice for his drink like he'd asked.

The glass itself, however, the man with the hat had by then retracted—just enough that I would have had to really reach for it in order to take it away. He watched me carefully as he held it there, at that particular distance, looking interested in what I might do. I didn't do anything. I just stood there with my hand—not extended, but just open and waiting between us—until he got bored with the game and simply handed me the glass.

That's the way things went for some time. He didn't like me very much, and I didn't like him. Or else he liked me too much, and I didn't like him. I couldn't decide, and neither one pleased me.

I could never please him, either. I wasn't, perhaps, quite *authentic* enough for him. Whenever I answered his questions—about where I had come from and why—he always gave me a suspicious sideways look, as if he supposed I was lying and he and I both knew it but we weren't going to say anything about it—at least for a while.

He was the one who asked questions—I never volunteered information on my own. And he never believed what I told him. It gave me an uncomfortable feeling, because his questions were never particularly complicated, and I had never before had anyone doubt the answers I gave to questions as simple as those.

I SAW A LOT of the man with the hat after that. He stayed on at the Auberge for the final part of July and most of August.

Unlike the other guests, he didn't go into town, or take weekend excursions to Provence or down along the Côte d'Azur. Like me, he stayed at the Auberge pretty much all of the time.

I would see him in the mornings in the dining room when I delivered curled-up butter to the tables, and then later I would see him down at the beach, sitting in one of the Auberge's folding chairs, his woman's hat on, when I went down to the shore to collect the beach furniture that had been abandoned by the other guests. In the late afternoons, I would always see him on the deck, before the dining room reopened—he was always very prompt at mealtimes—and I would laboriously refill his tall glass with ice that, it seemed, melted unnaturally fast in his hands.

One afternoon, I said to Marie-Thérèse, who was a niece of Madame and Monsieur Rondelle, the owners of the Auberge, and had worked in the dining room three summers in a row, "Il n'est jamais contente!" As I spoke, I tossed my hands in the air in order to emphasize my disdain for a man who could never be *contente* with a thing. I was always talking with my hands in those days—to make up, I suppose, for how I always suspected my words to fall so short of whatever it was I was trying to say. Marie-Thérèse just shrugged. She was a very easygoing girl, quite *contente* herself, almost all of the time. "Quelque personnes," she told me, "sont comme ça." She shrugged again, and went out onto the deck to check on a guest, who was just then at the very beginning stages of needing something.

The way she said it, "sont comme ça," as if it were the most inevitable and insignificant thing that it should be so, made me feel a little foolish for having allowed myself to be so bothered by the hatted man, who was—as Marie-Thérèse said a little later—obviously "un peu cuckoo." As she said it, she wound her finger as if around an invisible spool beside

her ear, rolling her eyes up into her head so just the bottom bits of her irises showed.

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOONS, before I had to go up to the deck to refill the guests' drinks with ice, and take away and refill the trays with little things to eat, I would always go down to the beach myself, and lie out on one of the long fold-out chairs, in the shade. I always covered myself up completely, even in the shade, on account of my fair skin, which was so easily burned. I wasn't like the French girls who just got browner and browner as the summer wore on and could lie out from ten to two o'clock and not get burned, even on their most sensitive spots, which were also bare.

Because everyone else preferred the sun, I had my shady spots all to myself, and the beach felt secluded and private in the places that I chose. I liked it that way. It was a change from the constant hum of the Auberge, which was busy in the high season. Also, it made me feel as though, at least in those moments, I had control over my solitude. That it was a thing I had chosen.

Sometimes I would try to read, but I was allowing myself to read only French books during the day, and that was difficult. I could never get into the plot of anything. I understood the words, that wasn't the problem—it was just that that was all they seemed to be to me on the page. Just little, individual words—each one isolated, and independent of any of the other little words, which I also understood, and therefore not seeming to be continuous, in any broader sense, beyond their exact and independent meaning.

So after a little reading I would give up, and put the book down on the sand, and stare around at the beach and out to the water, which always looked very blue and warm, even though if I ever went down to it, it turned out to be cold. Also, it was green and brown up close, and not brilliant and blue as it had looked from afar.

For some time I was always re-convinced from a distance that the next time I went down to the water it would really be how it appeared. But after a while I stopped going down at all. I didn't like to keep finding that I'd—again—been wrong.

So I stayed up in the shady spot that I had all to myself instead, not reading, and just looking around. I had rediscovered an old habit of mine, which was to look at things through a narrowed field of vision by cupping my hand around my eye. In this way I would reduce the world to such a small point—my palm curled like a telescope, and one eye closed—that all I could see was one particular thing. For example, I would look out at the ocean and narrow my palm in that way so that all I could see, beyond my own hand, was a completely uniform shade of blue, uninterrupted by any other shade, or by any of the noise and commotion of the bathers, who stayed in the shallow parts, near shore. Or else I would turn my head and with my telescope eye see just the top bit of a sail. Or a radar reflector—glinting in the sun. Seeing neither, that is, the radar or the sun, but instead just—that *glinting*; just the reflection of metal and light.

It was, indeed, an old habit—back from when I was a kid, and would go out into the small front yard of my mother's house in Jacksonville and look at things like that, just a little at a time. After a while I knew the whole front yard that way—in small sections, each the size of a dime. What I liked best was to look at the natural things: the grass and the little scrubby flowering bushes in my mother's garden by the porch—and the sky. I could pretend that the rest of everything didn't exist. That I was a different sort of girl, who lived in the country instead of in town, and was surrounded by wilderness on all sides.

When I had chosen one unblemished spot, one particular, dime-sized part of the yard, I would concentrate on it very hard. I would try to press myself, every bit of