

Joss'n'Jules Forever

That morning, final morning, first Wednesday of August 1985, Joss'n'Jules prepared for their outing. Joss selected his most garish outfit, outrageous in purple and red. He ate a Gordon and Durward's sugar mouse in two bites and helped it down with black coffee. Jules brushed his teeth, grimacing at the minstrel mouth facing him in the mirror. He counted to fifty, then to one hundred, trying to divorce his mind from his body, to gain relief, if only for a few moments. He wiped down his face, clicked his back into position and limped to the living room.

"Have you been sick?" said Joss.

"Yes."

"It'll be that pizza last night. Looked undercooked to me."

Jules nodded. "Probably," he said. "Never used to happen. In the old days."

"They didn't have pizza in the old days."

"They must have done. In Italy."

"We've never been to Italy."

"No."

In days past such conversation, trivial, convivial, could have been extemporised until mid-morning and beyond. It would have been a diversion, their wordplay jazzing down ever more implausible byways into the purely fantastic. Today, it expired into silence. Joss poured milk down the sink and piled the contents of the fridge into a bag and placed it in the bin outside. Jules took red roses from their vase and placed them on the composting bay in the garden. They looked round their flat, small and tidy, light, peaceful. Photographs on the walls, so many, so neat, Joss'n'Jules through a lifetime of diversion and entertainment. The common thread was happiness. Nothing is ever so serious, Joss once said, that a frown should eclipse a smile.

"Ready?" he said now. His smile was at its most sardonic, his eyes their most mischievous. His hat was tilted at the jauntiest of angles. They kissed and held hands until the silence became too loud. They looked at the grandfather clock stilled in the hallway.

"Time," said Jules.

"Time," said Joss.

Time pulsed around them, time in its cruelty. Joss Stein and Jules Sartorius thought synchronous thoughts, life distilled into its essence, the transit of love. Remember? First meeting, first kiss, first proclamation? Two lifetimes fused in history, inconsequential to all but them. *For* them, everything. It is seldom the grandest memories which surface in such moments and Joss recalled an afternoon by the river Earn in the early nineteen sixties, lying on the bank beside Jules and staring at the sky. A cloud drifted by, a single cloud in an otherwise pristine expanse, and the sun was momentarily occluded and he felt a chill on his bare arm. It lasted no more than twenty seconds but he could recall it now as though it had only just happened.

Jules looked at the living room and remembered it as they first saw it, empty, dirty, an experience waiting to be inhabited, and the two of them at the start of their great adventure.

“Thirty years,” he said as the door creaked behind them and they stood in the dark passageway.

“You’d think we’d have found time to oil that hinge,” said Joss. They descended the stairs and entered the bustle of Crieff High Street. Half a dozen people spoke to them and they replied with courtesy and no little wit. Bob Duchlage was visible through the window of Cloudland. He waved.

“I think Bob’s cleaned the windows,” said Jules.

“Or wiped off the grease, anyway.”

As ten o’clock struck Joss tortured their Ford Fiesta into starting and they journeyed twenty miles towards Perth. Only twice did approaching cars feel the need to flash their lights. Joss gave them a cheery wave and carried on regardless. The car park at Kinnoull Hill was quiet enough for him to effect a final manoeuvre in relative safety and he rolled the Fiesta to a halt close to a parking bay. He switched off the engine and stared ahead.

“Here we are,” he said.

“Here we go.”

It was silent except for bird song and wind whisper. The sky was clear, the air sharp. It would be hot later but for now there was a chill. They left the car unlocked. Jules’s stomach no longer ached, no longer felt full of gravel and cement and desperation. It happened like that some days, hours of blessed nothingness before the pain returned, redoubled, burnishing itself on his psyche. The physical relief of such times served only to reinforce the mental pain, like the phantom ache of a severed limb.

“It’s a beautiful day,” he said.

“All our days are beautiful,” said Joss. “In their way.”

“In our way.”

“In our way.”

They walked ahead, muffled in overcoats and scarves. Jules coughed, Joss limped. Two crows flew above them. A magpie strolled on the grass alongside. A sharp wind pulsed from the east.

“I’m cold,” said Jules.

“You should have worn more clothing.”

“More clothing wouldn’t have helped.”

“It wouldn’t have hindered.”

They climbed, slowly, stopping regularly to feign interest in whatever lay before them, rosebay willowherb rising high and pink, thistles alongside, whins of turquoise blue, sharp-tined and malevolent, broom scabbed with black seed pods, hogweed white as bones in the high sun. Grass and more grass and more grass. Soon it would all turn, autumn landing, the end approaching. They walked on.

“We should have gone to Italy,” said Joss. “Once.”

“Very wet this year, I hear.”

“We’re Scottish. Rain doesn’t frighten us.”

The hill was deserted except for them. It made the slowness of their passage less obvious. Jules cramped half way up, doubling over for a few painful seconds, gasping for breath, trying not to be sick. He pulled himself straight and smiled and looked at the world as though a stranger and they walked on.

At the top of Kinnoull Hill, highest point for miles, the wind gusted and circled. The light was pale. Around them, the Strathearn valley lay revealed, fields resolving into green and gold and yellow, hedges and dykes, stands of oak and beech and birch, the river's eccentric meander, lazy like the unfurling of eternity. Before them the hill plunged sheer and deep, granite dropping two hundred feet into the void. Neither looked at the other. There was no need, symbiosis, unbreakable.

"You can see for miles," said Joss.

"You can see forever."

"Forever's not as far as you think."

"I never thought to hear you say something like that, Mr Tomorrow." Jules's voice was light and teasing.

"There's always tomorrow," said Joss, "but at some stage it becomes today and today turns into yesterday and there's nothing you can do to stop it."

"Junctions."

"I think this is a junction."

"No, it's a hill."

"Ho ho ho. We must remember that one."

"I remember the first time we came here. Must be thirty years ago. Thirty-five?"

"It was 1949, Jules."

"It was?"

"Twenty-first of June, 1949."

"You remember that?"

"Of course."

"I didn't realise."

"You told me you loved me."

"You told me you loved me."

"I always will."

"I always have."

"I love you."

"I love you."

"Together."

"Forever."

"Love you today."

“Love you tomorrow.” Jules looked around. There were tractors and combine harvesters in the fields, men working, bringing the season to an end. A jackdaw sat in a beech tree. Blaeberry bushes all around were ripe with fruit. A rabbit ran. Lives were lived.

“It’s just too hard,” he said. “I’m sorry, I can’t do it any longer.”

Once there was a young man called Jules Sartorius. He was strikingly clever. Beautiful. Poised. He wrote music and sang songs that could make people cry with happiness. He fell in love with his opposite, his correlative, Joss Stein, and together they lived in laughter and dreams. Whatever happened to Jules Sartorius, fine young man? His head thrummed with the pulsing of his blood. His limbs were heavy but his body felt light. He saw but he could no longer absorb the images. They made no sense. They were no longer part of him.

He looked at Joss and smiled. He kissed him once, softly, on the lips. He stepped towards the edge with a nimbleness he hadn’t known for thirty years and looked down at the trees stretching into the distance, world at rest. Beyond, a ribbon of roadway transporting people through their lives. Further on the Tay flowing unstoppably. He stepped forward, into air. He fell, straightdownwards, and it was quick and graceful, seventy yards, and he landed on his feet as though he expected to walk away to inspect the nearby shrubbery.

Joss looked down for a moment, then away. He bit his lip. He looked at the sky one last time. Clouds and blue. Chill on his arm. He remembered. Savoured the moment. He sat heavily on the edge of the hill and closed his eyes.

“Joss’n’Jules forever,” he said.

He rolled forward and then he, too, was gone.

And, far below, a starling began to sing in a nearby birch tree. It stopped. It took fright and flew off and circled a scene that had blown up in an instant.