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Just Us

Published in 2018 by YouWriteOn.com

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First Edition

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Typeset in Adobe Garamond

Also by Julian Thomas:

Zita

The Delicate Magic of Life

Walk With Me, Always

Namesake and Other Stories

The Bridge

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*Till the gale blew off on the marshes
And the windows showed the day.*

(Rudyard Kipling, Eddi's Service)

The Tram

*They came free of baggage,
like gossamer—stripped, weightless
and unashamed.
Just bloody beautiful, I suppose.*

When, for the first time, they stood naked and gazed at their reflection in the long mirror they saw a vision that matched their affection.

This, they vowed, is how it shall always be—this vision of togetherness and purity, this vision of an unadorned and uncompromising revelation. And they agreed that such a revelation should never be forgotten.

Through age, or familiarity, people become insensitive to their accumulated chattels, and the two who had revealed themselves before the long mirror of way-back time were no exception—save it was love that made them insensitive, and dispossessed them. Chattels that each had separately accumulated within separate matrimonies, became just so much bric-a-brac—piled high, metaphorically, to form shadows beneath which their shrivelled and subordinate emotions existed within conventional marriages. Whether barometers of periods of opulence or poverty these piles represented

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the convoluting sands of time and were encrusted with memories pleasant and unpleasant of the great highs like wedding photographs and the great lows like bereavement, and ancestral pass-downs that in their turn were encrusted, but whose encrustations had in all likelihood been forgotten. These are the curtains and the pictures and the ornaments and the books, tools and utensils, and the children's toys, the souvenirs—even the tin dust pan and wooden-handled brush (they don't make them like that any more!) that came from the house of a great-aunt long passed on. Wardrobes full of clothes: attics full of God-Knows-What, lampshades and front door knockers, consumer durables, batteries of already obsolete electronic entertainers, costly then but now valueless, everyday crockery, everyday knives, forks and spoons. Their chattels, acquired and managed in order of appearance and practicality, had over the rumble of the years become to represent false senses of security and delusions of happiness—and thus quite meaningless in the evolving dispositions of the two who had stared out from the long mirror and embraced the ripe perfection of the world. And on occasions when chattels were mentioned a glimpse into another life sparked the whisper of natural curiosity.

For the two who had marvelled at the discovery of their blessedness the importance of their chattels had been replaced by a profound and extrinsic love.

And the homes in which each separately resided was a matter of ignorance to the other—and suggestive of canvases awaiting the first stroke from an artist's brush.

*

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But in the beginning ...

The tram rattles clackey-clackety-clack along its metal tracks. This relentless rhythm implies certainty of arrival, which is comforting. The anonymity of its passengers is a comfort too. The tram is unburdened by luxury: only is it a practical means of conveyance. Its wooden seats offer little physical comfort, yet by the monotony of its task the ride offers a spiritual comfort. And while the progression of its yellow livery traverses the urban roads of the German town the thoughts of its passengers lie submerged and lulled into dreaming daydreams. These daydreams can be interrupted by the tram's bell at obligatory stops, and by an exposure to uninvited stares. Back on the street the time for daydreaming is over. Alighting passengers merge into the flurry of common community where they feel again the weight of trivia that oils the disappointments of their lives.

The bell trills. Tudor and Emilie, as yet travelling unknown to each other, alight. They face each other, and smile: It's just us two here, then—before each is swept up to vanish into the flow of human traffic.

But they had been drawn, attracted by exposure to their own uninvited stares. They knew it—and had been possessed by their potency.

*

The next day each sought the other to establish an explanation for the sensation that had sprung so unexpectedly and unsought. In hope, they simply boarded the same tram at about the same time—and alighted at the same stop.

'I'm Tudor.'

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‘And I’m Emilie.’

Not knowing quite what to do next they shake hands, rather formally, but their attentions were penetratingly direct. The street masses passed them on either side. Tudor thought: Yes, there is something special happening because the world has melted away and I am standing beside this lady. He lowered his head acknowledging how extraordinary it was.

‘Come, shall we sit down?’ he said guiding Emilie into a nearby café.

‘Are we playing truant because yesterday we rode on the same tram?’ suggested Emilie playfully.

‘Probably.’ Tudor laughed. He showed a fine set of teeth. Emilie noticed. ‘Brought on by a force beyond our control,’ he added tentatively.

‘You mean planned ... for us?’

‘Is there another explanation?’ asked Tudor.

A waitress, standing foursquare and solid, hovered.

Tudor ordered, the waitress shuffled off leaving them isolated, exposed.

‘There is Destiny,’ suggested Emilie.

‘I like that.’

‘So do I. With Destiny there is always hope. And Destiny is a living explanation.’

‘Ah ... but what about the tram! A tram is like life ... for the most part it runs on a predicted course. It meets and carries regardless of who and why. It encourages anonymity. So, what better place for Destiny to choose as a rendezvous?’

‘Quite romantic, then?’

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Tudor's eyes twinkled.

Emilie noticed that too.

Thoughts flashed in Tudor's mind.

Foreign, but not German. An easy dresser—smart, casual, suitable. Not trying to impress. Married: yes. Thirtyish. Attractive, simple hairstyle. Affluent, but not indecently wealthy. Toil-free hands: rather beautiful with artistic fingers.

'Let me guess,' he said. 'You are Italian, and you are in Germany because your husband is here.'

'Yes ... absolutely correct. And you are English?' Already the sense she could be embarking on a momentous journey cautioned her against impetuosity and optimism, yet she felt a lightness of heart, and a confidence clouded by novelty. She stared into Tudor's eyes to draw out clues to what was happening. She had not been searching: so why had she found?

This man is so English and probably not married, she thought, with his shirt and tie, his full head of hair flopping over his forehead, his assured shyness, and the embarrassed look of success.

'Yes. I too live in Germany ... but not here. I'm on business. My friends would be surprised to see me sitting here.'

'Out of character, you mean?'

'Yes.'

'My family would say: You are beautiful Italian so why not sit in a café and be admired. But mind you come home!' Emilie extended a hand across the table and let her fingers brush over the back of Tudor's hand. 'I touch you because I know you will be special.' She leant back, waited.

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‘Special! Today both of us are already special. We have been placed ... I don’t know your surname, and I don’t know where you live. I don’t want to know anything about you save what I see sitting opposite me like a book whose pages have yet to be written ... as if, for us, life begins here, unpretentiously, in this wiped clean, plastic café. We’ll go back to where we live, and then we’ll wake and wonder whether to say yes, let us continue because this could become something wonderful. Or just smile and think: What a lovely happening. And move on.’

Tudor held out his hand, and Emilie took it—long, cool fingers entwining his. They gazed at each other, and imagined a common ground that was there—if they wanted.

Tudor had an idea.

‘Let’s take a tram. You know, sit together like a couple.’

‘Get the feel of it,’ put in Emilie, laughing.

‘Exactly! Why not? Then you can give me your telephone number ... so, if you like, we can do it again!’

*

They kept in touch. When it was convenient they met, which was infrequent. A light meal, a coffee, a walk in the park. A year passed. An anniversary remembered. They felt comfortable with each other. Whenever they met they continued where they had left off as if they had not been apart—however long that had been. As a couple they glided along in harmony. They held hands, kissed each other modestly and moderately, all passion placed to one side. Yet, unspoken and understood, they knew the time would come when their friendship would move on or wither. So they waited

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unrushed in a belief that eagerness detracts. For the present their bodies were poised and uncluttered by doubt.

*

On a summer's day during the second year of their friendship they were seated on a bench in a park, in the shade. They had sat there before. Folk sauntered by, lazily. In the distance they could see the wrought iron gates that led into the park. They felt guiltless, and were at ease—yet beneath the reality there lurked the question: Is there more to this than meeting occasionally and holding hands?

Tudor was thoughtful.

'Emilie, in many ways we are strangers. Our book has no introduction, and on the cover there is only a picture of a tram! That is all ... a tram. Romantic and adventurous it may be. Beautiful too. But from the outside we could be no more than a fairy tale or an excuse for escapism.' Tudor looked back towards the gate. They had come that way, and would leave that way. As always their meetings had been long in arranging and short in time. Worse—meetings were always subject to last minute cancellation for reasons beyond their control. 'We know so little about each other ... things that most couples take for granted.'

'Is there more we need to know?' asked Emilie, seriously. She was wearing a loose, cotton frock, bright with a floral pattern. Her perfume, which she invariably used, gave off an oriental fragrance, which aroused in Tudor thoughts mystical and provocative. 'Surely, whatever it was that drew us together has an attraction as strong as our domestic ties that constrain us.'

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‘Yes ... yes, of course. But we seldom mention our families and friends, do we, because they inhabit a world, which together we are not a part? So, I know very little about how you spend your days ... your routine, your domestic practices, and things like house furnishings that are pointers to your interests and artistic tastes. Where you shop, and the kinds of things you buy. And what grows in your garden! Never have we enquired about anything personal. When we are together these other worlds fade and become irrelevant. Then, for us there are no other homes, no other husband and no other family. We are just ourselves with empty pages to fill.’

‘The children ... we talk about my children, don’t we?’ suggested Emilie.

‘Oh, yes we talk about them because one day I shall meet them,’

‘You really think so!’

‘Yes I do,’ said Tudor.

‘Then we shall become truly tribal. I like the sound of that. Today we are seen by people who have not the slightest interest in us. We travel unnoticed, like shadows. We do not look out so we, too, do not notice. Although we have been placed by a mysterious chemistry of which the ‘why’ has yet to be explained together we have all we need.’

‘Our world extends no further than this park bench,’ said Tudor.

‘With you a park bench is all I need.’ Emilie leant over and gave Tudor an affectionate kiss on his cheek.

‘With our families and friends we travel in furrows ...’

‘... And together you and I travel on tramlines. Is that

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the analogy?’ interrupted Emilie.

‘Well, something like that,’ said Tudor, thoughtfully.’

*

When they had been ‘walking out’ for three years the opportunity came to visit Italy. In the spring when the weather was warm, and before the summer heat, they reached Bologna for a three-day stay. Emilie was there to celebrate her mother’s birthday and Tudor was undertaking a business visit. They booked into a hotel on a pedestrian street close to piazza Maggiore. It had a marble staircase and some original woodwork. Historically dark, it had retained its dusty sense of history, was quiet for its position, conservative in its customs, and tranquil. Its unhurried, casual pace suited Tudor and Emilie who were accustomed to, and frequently weary of, the hectic pace of their lives in Germany. They sat down on the bed, and were in awe. They had found a sanctuary fitting their circumstance. Against a wall between two windows stood a five-foot Italian baroque gilt and painted mirror. Tudor gave out a heavy sigh that indicated they had made it.

‘You look worried, Tudor, when you should look happy. Here, for the first time we have our own little space. Different country ... different air. And we have time. I feel beautifully free because I am with you, and instead of hours we have days. Has not some God placed us here? Has not some God let fortune smile?’ Emilie spread wide her arms articulating the whole world. She moved closer to Tudor and put her face close to his. Then, slowly, she kissed him.

‘It’s just the inevitability ... like this is how it is in books,

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and in films. I want our few days to be different, to be how we really are ... and days we shall remember as close to beauty as two people together can possibly reach.

‘You mean love.’

‘Of course, but of the richest kind. The kind that devours the soul, the kind that few in the whole wide world experience. God-given ... and once in a lifetime. Love unsullied, if you like. And then, on the pages still to be written, we can record our own Garden where there has been no chase, no triumph, and no earthly satisfaction save the blessing of discovery.’

In the morning, after they had risen on a different cloud, they stood naked before the long mirror and beheld a reflection of emotional delicacy and innocence. They experienced what couples experience at their wedding: the side-by-side affirmation of a lifelong commitment, and the overwhelming feeling of an inimitable predisposition. So it was they vowed this is how it shall always be—this vision of togetherness and purity, this vision of an unadorned and uncompromising revelation.

‘Dearest,’ Emilie sighed.

*

They had crossed their line in the sand. On its other side they discovered a landscape as beautiful as the one they had left behind.

‘Let us speak every week until the day when ...,’ began Tudor.

‘... By the when, Dearest, we could be dead!’ exclaimed Emilie.

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‘It needs persistence to direct dreams towards the forever.’

‘But still every week will be quite a challenge. We are not exactly free to pick up the phone, are we?’

‘I’m sure if we make it a routine we can do it. Are we not obliged to try because it’s part of our Destiny?’

‘Of course, Dearest, I realise that. It will be enough to know we tried, even if we fail ... or only hear our voices for a second or two before the line has to be cut.’ In the Basilica di Santo Stefano, they lit candles. In the cool and the hush between stone columns and capitals of ancient Roman architecture they paused and prayed and submerged themselves in thought. Back out into the sunlight they felt lifted by this simple act of faith, this public affirmation.

*

One day in the following year they drove south into the foothills of the German Alps. They parked beside a meadow of wild flowers. The countryside was warm, empty and cooled by the slightest of breezes. Across the meadow stood a white church. They walked to it, and then paused in the shade beneath its portico. It was eerily quiet. To push open the entrance door would have made a noise, disturbed the tranquillity. They stared out onto the landscape.

‘Here the world is at peace. It is because we are here and we do not agitate it that it is so,’ said Emilie.

‘It is because we stand together that it is so,’ said Tudor.

‘I know, Dearest, whenever we stand together our world is at peace, and here only God can see us. Here, amongst His pastures ... just us. Blessed, I should say.’

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Crossing the path along which they had just walked came a hedgehog followed by five hoglets, one behind the other.

‘Look! There’s Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. She does all the washing and ironing for the neighbouring animals!’ exclaimed Tudor.

‘Mrs Tiggy-Winkle? I do not understand,’ said Emilie.

‘A children’s story. Very English, and very sweet.’

‘Washing and ironing! For the neighbouring animals! Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, indeed! I must remember that.’ Then, seriously. ‘Will I ever be your Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, Dearest? Do your washing and ironing? I should so like that, one day. But we are too late to have five little ones. We would become just plain Mr and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, of no descendents and no fixed abode.’

They laughed, and were happy.

That was their last trip together in Germany before each, separately, moved to new homes in England for reasons connected with employment, and although these moves caused ripples in their plans Tudor and Emilie spoke regularly to each other.

*

During the decade that had passed since their trip to Bologna the importance of their relationship continued to add spiritual dimension, and gave purpose to their lives irrespective of their own domestic arrangements. Most years they had been able to meet somewhere—and on one occasion, when they had brought a picnic to London’s Regent’s Park, Emilie announced:

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‘I have told my two girls about us.’

‘What did they say?’

‘They said they were happy for me, and hoped they would like you. That said they got down to how it might affect them, like most teenagers would who were settled comfortably into a routine. What’s his name, they asked? What would Papa say, if he knew? Would he ever come to the house? Would they ever meet him? Was he married? Did he have kids? How old was he? And where did I meet him, and how long ago? So many questions, and all of them direct and to the point. I said: His name is Tudor. Of course Papa would not like it, and it would be most unlikely he would ever come to the house. Yes, they would meet him one day. Yes, now he is married. Yes, now he has kids. He is about my age; perhaps a little younger, and that I met him on a tram thirteen years ago. That said they raised themselves above their teenage years and asked straight out: Mama, are you in love with him? Yes, I said, but not in the way I love you two ... or your Papa who I respect as your father, I added. You are my children and the maternal instinct is always greater. I tried to explain that the love I have for you is spiritual, and that I believed it determined by Destiny. It is a love not sought, but bestowed without warning. I said to them I feel comfortable and fulfilled by it, and immeasurably happy with you. That is why I want you both to know, and that is why I want both of you to be included in this wonderful relationship. They were quite adult about it, and even joked about the latent Italian romantic in me! They look at me differently now. Sometimes, particularly at mealtimes, I see them looking at me and then at their

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father. I know they are thinking: How can their Mama love another man, and how can she have such a big secret outside the home? They thought only teenagers needed secrets, and that Mamas and Papas were there for their benefit. I do feel uneasy when I see them look, almost guiltily, at their father knowing something that affects him about which he is totally unaware. Sorry for him perhaps, which in their eyes turn him into a melancholic figure. Sometimes they seem to be especially affectionate to him, but then I might just be imagining that. But they do want me to be happy, bless them.'

*

'Ah! The London terminus. Do you remember? You sitting on a bench and waiting patiently. You amidst the throng of the travelling public as if a spotlight shone onto you because you were the one everybody should be looking at. There you were, deposited, and just told to wait. And serenity reigning where uncertainty should have been. You with no small brown case, and no label strung around your neck—and far, far outside your comfort zone. Calmly waiting for me, and seated like a statue in praise of love. Yes, yes. Love, and remembrance—for a shared adventure. Then we drove westwards.'

'I remember, Dearest,' said Emilie.

*

The years that rolled away were not easy years. Occasionally Tudor and Emilie struck out for a couple of days together, and then untruths that were not in their natures to exer-

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cise had to be invoked to obscure their movements, yet the lives with their respective families were not dislocated—honouring commitments given not pushed to one side. The daughters slipped into the frame and became the oil in the emotional mechanics that ensured the bond between their mother and Tudor did not grind to a halt. And, as the decades came and went, they admired their mother's perseverance to hold onto that which they had come to learn was rare and beautiful. On one occasion Tudor said to Emilie:

'It's knowing you are there, which is important and which is comforting. Absence, if there is doubt, is not sustainable. But we, whether together or apart, abide.' Emilie was looking out wistfully from a window that overlooked an old waterwheel long silent, but whose mill had been converted into a small hotel. Water still gurgled below the window. Tudor went over and stood beside her. He put his arm around her and pulled her close.

'Our bones should lie together. They should have lain together in life, but that has not been possible, but in death they should for all eternity.'

'Surely, that is the ultimate Destiny ... and a comforting thought in old age.'

'God willing, we'll hang on to this planet for some time yet. So, let's make the best of it. We are here, and here we unwind. So let's lie on the bed and soak up all that is wonderful about the world.'

'But it is middle of the afternoon! Isn't that just a teeny bit naughty!'

'It would be if it did not chime with our inmost souls.'

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‘You want to hear bells ringing in your ears?’ Emilie teased.

‘Of course! But it is the beating of your passionate heart I really wish to hear.’

So they lay together and, for a while, were silently absorbed as they listened to the rhythm of the water gurgling beneath their window. Then they gave way to the experience of complete togetherness bestowing liberated love one to the other. Emilie lay back, disarrayed and part exposed. Her eyes were closed. Tudor, raised on one shoulder, studied her.

‘This must be the embodiment of life.’

‘Why is that, Dearest?’

‘I hear the running of pure water and see the majestic bosoms of womankind ... the two essentials of life.’

‘Then, Dearest, together we have reached Paradise.’

*

Time is important. Places moreso because time is not recoverable while places etched deep into the emotional psyche are like picture postcards in the mind and can be revisited. From different roots chance had placed Tudor and Emilie on the same tram, and it will be sufficient to remember it was a German tram running on German tracks along a German street, and that now, onward of sixty years, they are at an English resort looking out across the sea from a well-appointed viewing terrace. There are boats to see, and rising up from the beach below they catch occasional shrieks from happy, playful children. It is summer. Little else—beyond them, registers. They can detect the same hum of summer

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that fuelled their earlier days when they rode the clouds of happiness.

‘We would do it all again, wouldn’t we, Dearest?’ suggests Emilie. ‘Oh, yes,’ replies Tudor.

She is sitting in a wheelchair with a light mohair travel rug across her knees: he beside her on a bench. Her left hand stretches out slowly, invitingly. Age has disfigured the once velvet-soft skin, and arthritis has attacked the joints. Yet Tudor watches as it comes towards him, and still marvels at its beauty. He takes it in his, and for a while absorbs the well-being of his good fortune. Peace ... and with her. What more could an old man want. I’ve been lucky ... luckier than my old pals.

‘Dearest, do you know what Mama will be saying if she is looking down?’ asks Emilie. Often did she refer to her mother and her childhood days. They had been devoted to each other. Tudor had never met her mother, or any of her Italian family, but it appeared to Tudor that her mother’s death had not weakened this maternal devotion. For sixty years he has lovingly listened to tales from her childhood. He has probably heard this one before, but he would not have remembered hearing it and she would not have remembered telling it.

‘No, dear, I do not know what your mother would be saying.’

‘She would be saying she was pleased I had found contentment because that was all she wanted for me. Contentment, Dearest ... you have given me that.’ With her other hand she wipes away a run of fluid from her eye, which catches the sun, glistens, reflects. She leaves her other hand

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resting in Tudor's.

Tudor nods, and continues to gaze out to sea.

And they sit in silence for a while, meditating—and being as close as they have always been. And the sun warms them.

'I thought of you every day, Dearest,' says Emilie.

'I know. And I thought of you every day,' says Tudor.

'Ah, so many beautiful thoughts,' says Emilie.

'So many beautiful thoughts.' repeats Tudor. 'But never any letters,' he adds sadly.

'I know, Dearest. I was never good at writing letters. It wasn't quite fair, was it? You being so good at writing beautiful letters, and never getting one back.'

For a while, a quietly descending peace. Then, gently

...

'I would have liked the tram driver to be here to see us now. He became quite friendly, didn't he? We did always try to catch his tram. He would have smiled. He had such a lovely smile. What was his name?' murmurs Emilie.

'I can't remember.'

'We must be getting old.'

Tudor turns towards her, with a twinkle in his eye.

'I don't think so, dear ... we still enjoy a cuddle.'

'Well, you haven't changed! And that twinkle ... I saw it! I was jealous once ... jealous some other lady would see it. I needn't have worried, need I, Dearest?'

'No.'

'And you always so attentive, even now ... since that tram ride.' Emilie wheels back her memory, nods her head in recognition she could still remember, that age has not

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removed all her faculties, and that memory is important to her happiness. 'We'll never ride a tram again, Dearest. I'll just ride this chair,' she says nostalgically. 'But you will push me ... and that's better than a tram, isn't it?'

'Why is that?' teases Tudor.

'No bell, Dearest! No bell to put me out on the pavement.'

They smile at each other: affectionate smiles that comes from age-old hearts beating in unison.

A cock-sure gull struts in search of titbits.

'Why you and me?' muses Tudor.

'I don't know, Dearest. Some God put us on the same tram, that is all.'

'Let's stay here a little longer. The sea is so calm. Just you and me ... let's dodge lunch.'

'Just you and me, indeed! It's the cauliflower cheese you don't like!'

She smiles. Their hands squeeze.

Emilie is thoughtful. Dodge ... ever since they met they have been dodging something, and today it's cauliflower cheese!

'Dodge, Dearest. Are we still doing that?'

'We never dodged love, but we missed our moment, didn't we? We should have recognized it when it came. But it came camouflaged and we did not see it ... until it was too late. There was a moment, we had a chance.'

Emilie nods.

An elderly gentleman walks by with the help of a stick. He is wearing an old boy's tie, which a keen observer might have sensed he wears with pride—and in remembrance of

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days when his world was a different world. Because of the sun he wears a panama, which he raises politely. Emilie smiles at him, and wants to engage his loneliness by saying a few words to him. Quite a stickler for courtesy is Emilie, and she holds in high esteem any man whose graciousness touches her.

‘What a nice man,’ she says.

‘How can you tell?’ says Tudor.

‘Intuition, Dearest.’

‘Intuition?’

‘See how far it has taken us! And experience,’ she adds with a smile.

‘What experience?’

‘None really, Dearest. I’m only teasing. But I do remember one time we were in London and you found me chatting away with a man while you were getting the coffees. You really were quite upset. You became quite sharp with me.’

‘Soon as my back was turned you were chatting with a stranger.’

‘I know, Dearest. It must have seen a bit hurtful. But men did find me attractive, didn’t they? Now don’t look sad! We’re here in the sun.’

‘I was just wondering ...’

‘Best not wonder, Dearest, at our time in life.’ And changing the subject she says: ‘I expect the residents are already eating their cauliflower cheese. And wouldn’t they prefer to be like us! Sitting in the sun and holding hands. Some of the poor dears haven’t had anybody holding their hands for years, I wouldn’t wonder.’

‘Because they had conventional lives,’ suggested Tudor.

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‘Oh! I expect some were happily married.’

‘Well, they didn’t meet on a tram like us.’

‘No, Dearest, I don’t expect they did.’

Before they return to their residential home they go for a little ‘totter’, which is their name for a walk. Tudor pushes the wheelchair. They circle the rose garden, neatly laid by the Corporation, and they are keen to acknowledge people they pass: and to those who may have been over eighty they offer an extra kindly nod suggestive of being members of the same exclusive club. Tudor stops for a moment, and bends forward.

‘You never did tell me how old you were,’ he says mischievously.

‘And you were too much the gentleman to press me,’ says Emilie.

An elderly lady who stubbornly refuses to be seen using a stick, though she very much needs one, and whom they have come to know by sight but not by name, stops them.

‘It must be lovely to be still married at your age ... and helping each other,’ she says.

‘Oh, we’re not married ... our spouses wouldn’t let us,’ says Tudor, with a twinkle.