

The Indian Summer of Joan Sinclair

"I must be out of my mind."

Joan looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and the face that stared back at her made her more nervous than she already was. She did not usually give her face much thought but tonight it really bothered her

"I'm really a dull looking person," she lamented.

She was, it is true, quite plain, with fairish hair and plumpish features. Not that she hadn't tried her best to improve things by using extra make_up.

"I look like a clown with all this stuff on my face" she grimaced, and was so nervous that she smeared a second layer of lipstick.

"What am I doing this for?" she asked herself, "Why am I doing it? Why don't I stay home and read a book or watch TV? What on earth persuaded me to accept his invitation?" She sat down heavily on the loo seat, took several deep breaths and tried to keep calm.

Last week when she was at Joe and Betty's Silver Wedding Anniversary, mainly helping in the kitchen preparing the snacks, she had been as relaxed and comfortable as she usually was. She had not dressed up for the occasion as it was a very casual affair, and had even worn an apron over her good slacks and the embroidered pink blouse she liked so much because it did not require any ironing.

The party was not large, a cluster of old friends drinking not-too-expensive wine, chattering away and making the usual jokes about "How could Betty and Joe have stood each other for twenty-five years."

She was aware of her good fortune in having friends who always included her in both special and ordinary occasions. Even though she was so very unattached.

Few of them knew that she had once been married, but it had been so short lived and ended so long ago that she herself hardly ever thought of it. At the time, thirty years ago, it had been very painful and she had never got over the feeling of being rejected.

"I was a silly girl to think that a man like Tony could really love me," she used to say to herself. And had always put herself down believing that she understood why, after only two years, he had packed his bags and headed for more exciting pastures.

She came to believe that she did not have the kind of charm that attracted men, but this had not spoiled her life. Her job as librarian was absorbing and she knew that her attention was much sought after by young and old alike. She enjoyed her small house and garden and never missed the presence of a man." Not that" as she often mused to herself "hordes of men have been pounding at my door."

All had gone well at the party until Betty had brought a man over to be introduced. A man new to Cape Town and an old friend of Joe's.

"I am a silly middle-aged woman even to think of this," muttered Joan to herself, still on the loo seat, "I cannot imagine now why I liked him so much."

But she did know. For although she only vaguely remembered what he looked like she had found him gentle and unassuming. They had chatted in a pleasant way.

"What on earth did we talk about?" Joan wondered. But she had returned home feeling quite perky. Until she got into bed.

This had always been her time for taking herself to task.

"Just because a man spent a little time with you there is no need to get all fussed about it. He was being polite and you were being polite and that's all there is to it." But she fell asleep feeling that it had been a quite special evening.

Two days later her phone had rung.

"This is Don Mackintosh. Do you remember me? We met at the party on Saturday."

"Yes. Yes of course I remember you. It was a very good party wasn't it? I have known Joe and Betty for years."

"They are such a special couple. But you are also one of their old friends." Joan could hear herself going on and on. It was just too awful.

"I hope I am not bothering you but wondered if you would like to go out with me on Saturday? To dinner perhaps?" Joan experienced feelings of both pleasure and alarm. She hesitated.

"Well, that is very kind of you. Joe and Betty would be pleased. Thank you. I would like to go out to dinner."

The time was set and here she sat with blurred lipstick and uncomfortable hairdo and high-heeled shoes, feeling an idiot. To say nothing of wearing a fussy dress that was not at all like her.

The doorbell rang. She hoisted herself up and went to answer it.

There he stood, looking so unlike what Joan had imagined.

He was all spruced up in a suit and tie. Slicked down, shiny and round.

"This is what comes of having a date with someone you don't know," muttered Joan to herself, "when you should have the sense to realise that you are long since past this kind of thing." Her heart sank.

"Shall we go?" he asked. "I did think of going to a little place in town where I have been eating since I came to Cape Town but you look so special that maybe you could suggest something more elegant?" Joan pulled herself together.

"I would much prefer your little place," she said, "elegance terrifies me."

His relief was so obvious that Joan decided to make the most of it.

"Would you mind waiting for a few moments while I change my shoes?" she said. "These pinch."

And she grabbed a cardigan which she hoped would cover up the fussy dress she had chosen.

Once seated at his Italian eating place it was not easy for either of them. Joan wondered what on earth they would have to talk about. Don was equally concerned so they both started talking at the same time.

"Hasn't the weather been fine?" they said in unison.

They both felt silly but somehow a little ice was broken.

"I think we had both better avoid the subject of the weather," Joan said. "You will find that Capetonians spend an awful lot of time talking about it. Rather tell me how you have settled. I think it must be difficult to start anew in strange place."

And Don did. It seemed as if he had been waiting a long time to tell someone of his retrenchment after thirty years with the same company in Howick. Of his despair and of his good fortune in being offered a position as Tax Consultant with Joe's firm.

"We were at school together in Natal you know," Don said.

"Joe was much my junior. He seems to think I made his early boarding school days much more bearable. So we always kept in touch."

He was silent for a little while and then added, "I will be fifty-five in a few months' time. Awful thought!"

Joan could never quite remember how it was that their evening out suddenly seemed so right. She relaxed and settled back more comfortably in her chair. Don took off his jacket and loosened his tie. And they began to talk.

They talked and talked about themselves, about books, about living alone, but never about the weather.

The evening was so companionable that it was only when he helped her into her cardigan that Joan became aware of the unusual warmth of his hands on her shoulders.

They parted at her front door. After a slight hesitation they shook hands and arranged to go walking

together on the following Saturday.

Track-suited and bareheaded they did the Cecilia Forest walk, huffing a bit on the way up. Joan was glad to accept the offer of Don's arm on the way down and it seemed quite natural to invite him in to have coffee and a toasted sandwich after their exertions.

Before many weeks had passed Joan found that Don was constantly in her thoughts. She was glad to find him in the library waiting for her to finish her late shift. She was glad when he phoned, glad to prepare a simple supper for the two of them, glad to repair his sweater, glad when he offered to put up a bathroom shelf. She was, in fact, permanently glad.

She suddenly felt it was time to take herself to task.

"Joan Sinclair," she spoke firmly to herself in the bathroom mirror. "You are getting sillier by the day. Don is just a lonely man finding his feet in Cape Town and you are letting your life revolve around him. It is time you started evening classes or something."

When Don phoned the next morning to ask her out to a movie she took a firm grip on herself and said, "I don't think I can manage that. I am thinking of taking classes in calligraphy. Two nights a week. And I will surely have to do some homework."

There was a dreadful silence.

"Of course. I understand. I have been taking up too much of your time. I have been thoughtless."

After she had put the phone down Joan burst into tears.

Before long her head ached so she lay down on her bed and felt awful.

She awoke from a troubled doze to hear the bell ringing.

She opened the door and there he stood.

They looked at each other.

"I'm sorry," they said together.

"No," said Don. "I am the one who is sorry. Just because I think about you a lot and enjoy being with you I"

"You do?" interrupted Joan.

"Do what?"

"Think about me a lot and enjoy being with me?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"But," Don added apologetically, "I realise now that you were just being kind because I am new to Cape Town. I have been making a nuisance of myself."

He looked at her closely. "What's the matter? Are you ill? You look as if you are coming down with a cold. Let's sit down."

He led her to the couch and said in a concerned voice, "I don't think you take proper care of yourself."

Joan could not help smiling at his tone and Don thought she looked lovelier than ever in her crumpled state.

He held her hand and she blurted out the story of the calligraphy class that she didn't want to go to.

"Well, why go?" he queried. "It does seem a bit daft to take it up when you don't want to take it up."

He looked perplexed and thought their conversation was beginning to be a bit weird.

"Oh, Don, I am really a very silly woman," wailed Joan, "I only thought that I should occupy myself with something else instead of depending on you."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you depend on me?"

Don looked at her so intently that Joan could not help repeating, almost word for word, the conversation she had had with her mirror. "What pumpkins we are ... so bothered about getting attached I am sure the young manage this very easily."

"Mind you," he added with a shy smile "I do not feel that THAT old."

They sat a while in silence. Then Don stood up purposefully and said firmly, "I will make you some tea. Then you must take an aspirin and go to bed. Tomorrow we will have supper at that Italian place."

He made the tea, stood over her while she swallowed the aspirin, kissed her on the cheek and left.

He arrived promptly at seven with one arm full of flowers and the other hand grasping a bottle of champagne.

"Oh Goodness," cried Joan, "it must be your birthday. Why didn't you give me advance warning?"

"No," he said, reaching out for her, "it is not my birthday. I hope it will be a day much more worth celebrating."

He took her in his arms and kissed her so passionately that Joan's knees felt weak.

When she had recovered she looked into his dear face and knew what she had always known. That this was the man for her. Betty and Joe, feeling like proud parents, gave them a small reception after their quiet wedding. Joan was not in the kitchen making snacks but she did wear her favourite pink blouse. And Don was no longer the out of town man. They smiled at each other across the room. In the years that followed they never tired of talking about their first date; of how nervous they had been, of how old and out of it they had felt.

"Although," Don always said "from the very first time I saw you I knew that you were the girl for me."

And Joan never ceased to blush at being called a girl. But she always reached over to touch his hand and she always said, "Hasn't our weather been fine?"