

Josh & Laura

by MJA Smith

As he kissed Laura beneath the slender elegance of Nelson's Column, Josh thought of it as a moment of infinite promise; a moment freighted with positive aspirations and limitless possibility; a moment only tinged with a minuscule refraction of sadness that the sensation could not possibly endure.

The university term had ended the day before. After the final lecture had been delivered, to a half-empty auditorium, Josh and his flatmates had regrouped at a nearby pub that they had adopted as their local, much to the disgust of the wizened old men reading the *Racing Post* in grubby leather jackets, swilling pints of bitter from opening time until last orders. Plans were hastily made, texts sent and received from girlfriends and other friends, and a unnecessary notion of hiring dinner jackets swiftly agreed upon; later, swilling from cans of Red Stripe they descended on the shabby student nightclub, dinner jackets already looking dishevelled and stained, and they dispersed into the obligatory blur of jump-cut, randomly fragmented and quickly forgotten conversations with other friends, kisses under the mistletoe with girls and drunken lurching and not-quite dancing to the tedious parade of *de rigueur* Christmas songs, old Oasis songs, Arctic Monkeys songs, Kasabian songs, Kings Of Leon songs, 'Sweet Caroline', all raucously accompanied by the crowd of jubilant students; poor grades and disciplinary warnings for erratic class attendance were effortlessly and temporarily forgotten and nascent intimacies took their place.

And in the middle of this was Josh, feeling like he was missing the point of it all. He knew the world was definitely happening around him but he felt that he wasn't really participating. He heard the songs, sang the words, tasted the lager and tequila shots, felt the brush of lips on his own from the procession of compliant, mistletoe-bearing girls and the dull taste and texture of waxy lipstick that followed; he did not doubt that all of this was really happening, but still he felt somehow out of place.

Retiring to some seats at the edge and pulling at his skewed bow-tie, a bottle of Peroni in his hand, he looked up to see Jennifer gyrating sensuously across from the dance floor toward him, a look of purpose fixed upon her face. Jennifer that he had lost his virginity to in the first week of the term; the same Jennifer who had walked out of his room in the post-coital fuzz that followed, seemingly inexplicably; the Jennifer who the following morning tearfully advised him that in the moments following his tentative, faltering orgasm he had murmured insensitively that he hoped he hadn't caught anything. The Jennifer with whom a second sexual encounter therefore seemed highly remote. She jumped onto his lap, kissed him on the mouth and told him he looked sweet in his dinner suit. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

They flirted and he apologised – for the hundredth time – for what had happened between them. She shrugged, reminding him that the reason they had ended up ensconced in his university-issue single bed was because she had wanted to sleep with a virgin. They laughed and as they did she breathed in his ear that a second time wasn't necessarily out of the question. Ten minutes later, however, she was draped lasciviously over some older student, the two of them kissing frantically and urgently in a dark corner while Josh drank another tequila. He didn't see her again that night.

Josh stood up, stretched, suddenly wishing that the night was over. And then the simple, distorted glam guitar introduction of Pulp's 'Disco 2000' filled the room and there were yelps of what was possibly approval, but could have simply been confusion, from the dance floor. As the drums kicked in, the room seemed to come to life, everyone moving in jumbled unison like some bizarrely choreographed zombie music video. As the first keyboard notes dropped, Josh yawned; and then, as Jarvis Cocker began singing in his familiar, detached way, she just seemed to appear, materialising out of the amorphous crowd in front of him: Laura. A girl he had found himself staring at wistfully in lectures and classes but to whom he had only said at most 'hello' once, twice maybe. She was wearing a short pleated black skirt, a simple black vest and silver tinsel in her jet black hair. But it was the smile, the neat rows of perfect, straight, white teeth – almost American – that filled his field of vision.

She grabbed him and pulled him towards the dance floor, never letting go of his hands. The theme of the song was a decade past, the song older still, but for some reason it seemed to perfectly capture the

sudden rush of euphoria Josh felt at that moment. As the song wound up toward its conclusion, Laura kissed Josh on the cheek and whispered 'Let's go,' in his ear. They grabbed their coats from the cloakroom as the next song was starting, and ran out into the winter chill of London, the incandescent yellow lights in the skeletal outlines of emptied office blocks cutting through the night.

From that moment on, they never seemed to stop running, London passing by them in a blur, their breath emerging raggedly like exhaust fumes; down through Marylebone and along Oxford Street and Regent Street, thousands of bulbs of glowing light from the Christmas decorations passing gracefully and brilliantly above their heads, on through Foubert's Place into Carnaby Street, the decorations becoming more artistic, more adventurous, more over-the-top, camp even. They paused at the O'Neills opposite Liberty, the crowd of revellers spilling out beyond the shallow perimeter of the sheet plastic fencing despite the urgent protestations of the security staff. They fought their way to the bar and drank Guinness and sang disjointedly at the tops of their voices to songs that they barely knew.

The festive spirit and optimism they'd shared during 'Disco 2000' seemed to heighten wherever they went. They ran through the streets of Soho, never letting go of one another, Josh's shirt tails trailing behind him, his dinner jacket left somewhere on the route, a problem he would think about tomorrow when the suit needed to be returned. Laura's heels had been abandoned many streets ago, the chipped red nail varnish of her toenails poking through the ends of her tights, but still they didn't stop running. They passed the sex shops; passed the debris from the market outside the Music And Video Exchange on Berwick Street, which was being cleared away ready for the set-up early the following morning, ran through Covent Garden, so much more captivating in the silence of the tourist-free early hours of the morning.

They sat in McDonald's on The Strand, eating the fries they'd managed to scrape together enough change between them to buy. Watching taxis and buses dart along the road in front of them, Josh asked Laura what her plans were for Christmas. She shrugged, and Josh thought he saw a trace of sorrow behind her smile.

'What about you?' she quickly enquired, scraping the corner of a fry along the bottom of her tub of sauce and leaving a sticky mess behind her nails.

'Family stuff, I guess,' he said, when actually he knew he would probably spend the entire holiday thinking about Laura and this perfect night. He pulled a piece of shiny lametta from her hair and put it in his pocket; a strange memento of this optimistic night.

Leaving the McDonald's, they walked west along The Strand to Trafalgar Square, Laura's arm looped casually through his. At Nelson's Column, here Laura draped her arms round Josh's neck and kissed him passionately on the mouth. He waited for the strings to rise up in the soundtrack in his head, not knowing whether this was a pivotal moment in this film or an ending. As he embraced her, she wriggled free and kissed him on the cheek, whispering that she had enjoyed their evening together before flouncing off in the direction of Charing Cross. He didn't know whether he was supposed to shout after her, run after her or watch her go. For the few seconds that they had kissed it felt like the start of something bright and affirming; when she left he remained full of hope, tried not to think that this signalled the end, not a beginning, even though that was what he expected.

The run-up to Christmas passed mournfully for Josh. He spent the days pining after Laura, wondering why his text messages were never answered and why he was beginning to feel like he had misunderstood the poignancy of the few hours they had spent in the company of the decorated city.

It was Christmas Day before Josh finally found the courage to call Laura instead of relying on text messages. Christmas Day had been spent at his brother's house. He had stepped outside to avoid the washing up duties that his mother was trying to foist upon him, but also the atmosphere between Simon – his brother – and Helen was becoming unbearable. Sharing a cigarette from the packet of Winstons Simon had brought back from the States while they huddled in the cold of the back garden earlier in the day, Simon admitted that they were having a few troubles. Not that he had needed Simon to confirm this: it was easily detectable in the exchanges of unpleasant remarks across the dining table. Josh assumed it was a consequence of the arrival of their second daughter into Simon and Helen's lives earlier that year, but Simon hinted at something else. Josh didn't want to ask what it was, and he suspected Simon wouldn't have told him anyway.

Later, Josh went back outside, chain-smoked the remaining cigarettes and stared at his mobile like he was expecting it to give him all the answers. He scrolled through the names and nicknames and came to Laura's entry, kept staring at the assembled characters fixedly; the screen would fade almost to black, but

before it did he would drag his finger across the screen again, flick through the names again and settle on Laura's name once again; scroll, pause, fade, over and over. Finishing the packet's last cigarette and taking a sip from a glass of red wine he had found on the work surface, Josh breathed deeply and finally hit the connect button.

In those few seconds before she picked up, time slowed to a glacial pace. Josh's pulse raced and he continually thought about hanging up. After all, she had ignored his messages and presumably that was intended to signal to him that she didn't want to talk to him. In the brevity of those few seconds, he found himself re-analysing the night they'd spent traversing London, wondering – not for the first time – whether she had maybe given him some sign that he shouldn't build his hopes up, something that his adrenalin- and alcohol-distorted mind had chosen to ignore. He wondered whether he had come across too strong, or that something he had said had disappointed her, or in fact whether he had just come across as boring. Since the incident with Jennifer in the early days of the term, he had become exceptionally wary of what he said around girls, and that heightened sense of caution sometimes came across as awkward, sometimes disinterested and sometimes just plain dull. He couldn't remember anything specific that he had said, but it was possible that he had just been exceptionally tedious that night.

His nihilistic self-analysis was mercifully cut short when Laura answered the phone. He made a small, unintentional choking sound when he heard the call connect and waited for a fraction of a second for the automated voice to tell him he had reached a voicemail service.

'Happy Christmas Josh. I miss you,' she said, quietly, and once again Josh waited for the uplifting strings from the soundtrack in his head to ascend toward some sort of crescendo.