

# Mr Jules

## or The End of Everything

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## Storm

It began with the weather man. No one saw it coming. It fell from the sky. Like snow in August.

‘And now to Storm, for tomorrow’s weather,’ said the newsreader at the end of the news, as he did every day.

And as he did every day, without looking up from his paper, Jonathan’s father said, ‘Funny name for someone who reads the weather forecast.’

He listened to the TV as he read the paper. To gain time. He was always short of time.

Then Storm came into view. As he did every day. Yet different.

He stood in front of a large map. Usually there were little suns on it. Or little clouds with dashes to indicate rain. Little arrows. Letters. Now the map was completely empty.

Storm looked lost. He looked like a little boy at the school gate, forgotten by his mother.

His shoulders drooped more than usual. His face drooped too. His eyes, his cheeks, everything was limper than limp washing on the line. Even his ears drooped, and the stripes of his purple jumper.

Storm took a deep breath.

‘There’s no weather tomorrow,’ he said.

Silence.

Suddenly and everywhere. On the TV: silence. In Jonathan’s head: silence. Throughout the house: silence. The rustling of the newspaper had stopped. Even in the kitchen, where there had just been the jingling of spoons and forks, it was silent.

Storm raised his eyebrows. He briefly shrugged his shoulders. It was as if even he couldn’t comprehend what he’d just said.

‘There’s not going to be any weather tomorrow,’ he repeated. He was speaking louder now.

He shrugged, throwing his arms some way into the air and leaving them to slump like wounded birds against his body.

‘No weather tomorrow.’

He spoke the words one by one, with little bits of nothing in between. A little louder again. He was almost shouting them out.

‘Does he think we’re deaf?’ said Jonathan’s father. ‘Does he see us sitting here? With our fingers in our ears? Or buckets over our heads?’

Of course that was impossible, Jonathan knew. They were watching him. Storm could only see the camera. And the man behind the camera, who must be looking at him with as much surprise as they were.

‘No weather.’

Storm shook his head and pulled a crazy face. A face he probably thought befitted his strange message.

‘That’s all,’ he said with relief. ‘Back to you, Philip.’

The newsreader was busily searching through the papers in front of him. When he realised he was on screen, he quickly straightened his tie. He brushed a strand of hair out of his face.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘Eh.’

His voice sounded different from before. Higher. More airy.

‘Let’s take a quick look ahead to tomorrow.’

He rummaged among his papers again.

‘Apparently nothing is known about tomorrow. Nothing. Nope.’

He looked into the camera and scratched his head. Jonathan had never seen a newsreader scratch his head. Something very out of the ordinary must be going on.

‘We’ll get back to this in the late news bulletin. Perhaps we’ll know more about tomorrow then.’

For a moment nothing whatsoever happened. The newsreader sat very still and oddly straight, like someone having their photo taken. He didn’t even blink. All over the country people were now staring silently at the TV. At a newsreader who looked back, unblinking. In the heads of all those people, brains were beeping and crackling. Then an advert for lemonade began.

## Sophie

Jonathan’s mother came out of the kitchen, her face frozen with surprise. Her hands remained close to her shoulders. She was dripping.

‘Huh?’ she said.

She was far from her right mind, Jonathan could see. Otherwise she wouldn’t be standing there getting everything wet.

‘What was that?’ asked Jonathan’s father.

He hadn’t noticed that he’d crumpled up his newspaper and now had a big wad of pulp on his lap.

‘He said there’s no weather tomorrow,’ Jonathan’s mother stammered.

‘Is this a joke?’ his father growled.

‘Not knowing anything about tomorrow.’

‘Is it 1 April, perhaps?’

‘It’s June.’

‘What nonsense.’

‘Does he mean we’re skipping a day?’

‘Ha. That’s impossible. I’m much too busy for that. Ha. Have they gone completely bonkers?’

Jonathan wondered who his father meant by ‘they’. He said nothing. It was best to keep quiet. And small. Invisible would be best really.

‘Let me have a look at my diary, see what I have to get done tomorrow.’

Jonathan’s father picked up a bulging black book from the table, with notes and pieces of paper stuck all over it, covered in exclamation marks and thickly underlined.

He began to leaf through it wildly.

‘Aha, here,’ he said. ‘Here.’

His eyes grew as big as slices of salami.

‘Hey? How is that possible?’

He leafed back and forth.

‘What is this?’

His face was a grey as his shirt. He swore through gritted teeth. It sounded almost like a growl.

‘What? What is it, darling?’ asked his mother. ‘What is it? What?’

It sounded like she was singing a song.

‘Empty,’ said his father, giving her a similarly vacant look.

'Empty? There must be something in it?'

'No, Sophie, there's nothing in it. Absolutely nothing. Not for tomorrow, not for the day after, and not for after that.'

He sounded surprised and angry at the same time. And slightly scared.

'Darling. Haven't you just forgotten? Surely that's it. You simply forgot to write it down.'

Jonathan slowly hunched his shoulders up to his ears. When his mother started out like that, with that little elastic voice, when her voice made little rollercoasters, up and down, then there was going to be a scene.

'Are you looking properly? You can't have looked properly. Darling.'

Jonathan knew precisely what would happen next.

His father might explode at any moment.

'Don't talk so childishly!' he would soon be shouting. And then louder, 'Not like that!'

That was what his mother was waiting for. She'd been storing up ugly words in her mouth all day long for that moment.

'How dare you shout at me!' she would trumpet back.

And then the row had begun. Soon it wouldn't be about Storm or a diary anymore. They'd drag everything into it. The word 'always' would be used frequently.

Jonathan's father turned the pages. He pulled at them. Some tore and the shreds fluttered across the room.

'I really think you've forgotten, darling. There's almost no other explanation.'

Now, thought Jonathan. Now.

He folded his face shut in preparation and paused his breath in his chest.

'Shall I have a look, love?'

Now.

His father didn't move an eyelid. He didn't hear her. Or pretended not to.

'Love, give it here. Love.'

No explosion. Not a hoot. Nothing.

On TV all sorts of things were happening. People were talking noisily around a large table. Many heads were shaken. Someone even shook a fist.

A woman with a microphone came into view. She was standing in front of a large building. Cars stopped and men got out, with coats and bags. They rushed up the steps to the entrance, followed by people with yet more microphones. Cameras flashed. One man stopped. He spoke into the camera, with a face as if something was hurting.

'Although we don't yet know anything for certain, we need to seriously consider the possibility that there will be no tomorrow,' he said.

Jonathan closed his eyes. He tried to get the man's words into his head. It wasn't working. They flew in all directions. Would there be no school tomorrow? He didn't dare to ask.

Jonathan's father was on the phone. He took long strides across the room. From the kitchen to the window and back. His mother danced along and sang, 'Love? Quietly now. Quiet love.'

He was now swearing out loud. At the phone, not at her. Had he even noticed she was there? It didn't seem like it. Otherwise it would have been war long ago.

His mother chewed on her lower lip. She looked around and sniffed. She was sitting there with her mouth full of fighting words.

This would be a good time to dissolve into the air, Jonathan thought. Too late, she'd already seen him. He groaned softly.

'Why aren't you in bed? Have you looked at the time? What are you still doing here?'

She fired the words at him like bullets.

'But, Mum,' Jonathan started a sentence that would never come to a full stop in his head.

'No buts! Upstairs!'

'But.'

'Immediately!'

Jonathan gave up. His mother's anger was like a storm. Or hysterical laughter. Once it had broken out, you could only wait until it was over.

'Ye-es,' he sighed submissively.

He shuffled out of the room and dragged himself up the stairs. His feet were heavy as lead. He sat down on the top step. He slung his arms around his knees, pulled them to his chest and positioned his chin on top.

Everything had gone quiet downstairs. Only the underwater murmur of the TV remained. He wondered if his parents would still get into a fight. Not for now, by the sounds of things. It was a strange evening.

Jonathan knew his father and mother's fights by heart. He could play them back in his head.

Once they'd shouted everything, all the ugly words they could think of, his mother always had one more thing to beat his father around the ears with. One more thing: that she'd given up her dream for him. For her husband.

Jonathan knew what that was about. His mother could sing beautifully. He'd never heard her himself. Couldn't actually imagine it to be honest. But everyone said it: she'd once been almost famous.

She'd stopped when she got married. She should never have done that, she screeched into his father's ear at that point, never should have got married.

That always gave Jonathan a faint feeling in his tummy. And him? Where would he be, if they hadn't got married? Would he have existed? He wondered that every time.

Then his father would say he was leaving. He just needed to fetch his things.

And his mother: that she really couldn't care less.

His father: that he wasn't coming back.

Her, shrugging: that he was never there anyway.

Her hand was already sweeping him outside.

Him: that he meant it, this time.

Her: fine.

Him: fine.

If she was really infuriated, really really, she would rush upstairs and start hurling Jonathan's father's clothes out of the window.

'I'll help you,' she would then call downstairs. 'I'll help you get on your way. Here.'

Sometimes an empty suitcase flew after them.

'You're welcome. No need to thank me. My pleasure.'

It would have been the same this evening. If it had been an ordinary evening. But it hadn't. Not since the weather forecast. Not since Storm.

A little sigh of wind crept up the stairs, tugging the odour of cigarette smoke behind it.

Jonathan puffed. He got up. I have to get outside, he thought, I'm suffocating here.

Cautiously he descended the stairs. He skipped the last step, because he knew it creaked.

Downstairs he peeped into the living room with one eye. Jonathan's father was sitting on the sofa. His head was wobbling.

'I don't understand it,' he said softly to himself. 'I don't understand a word of it. Not a word.'

His mother was sitting next to him. She stared at the ashtray on her lap. At the half-smoked cigarette. Even that hadn't angered his father.

Her lips opened and closed again. She searched her mouth full of ugly words for something kind. She couldn't find it. He could see that. Jonathan sometimes had the feeling he knew his mother better than she knew him.

The late news bulletin began. The newsreader looked crumpled. His face was pale. There were dark circles around his eyes. He's tired, thought Jonathan. His voice was soft and hoarse.

'There's just been an official message from the government. There's not going to be a tomorrow. Nothing is currently known about the cause. It looks like it's over. Everything.'

His upper body jolted. As if he wanted to shake off what he'd just said.

'If I might add a personal note: I would like to thank you for all the wonderful years that I've had the privilege of reading the news to you. Thanks for watching. There's nothing to follow now. That was all. It's finished.'

He pursed his lips and nodded briefly.

'Good luck.'

Jonathan's father and mother stared silently at the screen. A waving flag appeared.

They were sitting close together. Jonathan felt like squeezing in between them, as he had often done in the past. It would never work. The strip of sofa left over was far too narrow.

And yet, now that he saw his parents sitting like that, it seemed as if the entire world would fit between them.

He shuffled along the hallway. Silently he opened the front door, until the crack was just wide enough to get through. He slipped out and closed the door very quietly behind him.

'Click,' whispered the latch.

## Jules

It was dark outside, but light shone at each window in the street. It was warm. Far too warm for so late. Far too many people too. Noise everywhere.

Sami Lacheb came out of his shop, diagonally opposite. Jonathan raised his hand. The man didn't see it. He could only see the bustle. The hurried passers-by on the pavement, the motorbike crackling past.

Sami's neighbour also came outside. They began an excited conversation. They nodded frantically. The woman's dog jumped up, yapping against her leg.

They had to move aside for a lady tottering over the paving stones on awkward shoes. She was lugging a large suitcase along.

In the middle of the street the tall man from the newsstand was shouting to another man, whom Jonathan didn't recognise and who shook his head continually. The tall man needed all his arms and hands to ensure that the other, a short, fat man, continued to listen.

A car went by honking loudly. It was travelling dangerously fast. There was waving and swearing from the two men, who managed to jump out of the way just in time. For a moment they were in agreement. Then they went back to arguing.

Jonathan was still standing with the front door knob at his back. A girl and her mother went by half at a run. The child looked at him curiously. She had swollen eyes. From sleep, he thought. Or perhaps she'd been crying. She continued to stare at him over her shoulder, as the woman pulled on her arm impatiently.

Jonathan wondered if it had been such a good idea to go out alone. But he couldn't really ring the bell and ask if he could come back in. His parents thought he was asleep.

More to the point: he had a plan.

He jumped off the doorstep and strode away. Most people he encountered were already at their destinations in their heads. They weren't really paying attention. He had to make an effort to avoid them.

Jonathan crossed the road. After the shop window of LACHEB FOODS he turned the corner. It was silent in the side street. He leaned his back against a wall. His head was buzzing. It was full of fat blowflies. They were all looking for a way out, running into each other and growing increasingly angry.

A little way further on stood Mr Jules on his doorstep looking at the sky. His hands were deep in his pockets. His collar was sticking up. He looked cold. That's almost impossible, thought Jonathan.

The front door was open a crack. A thin cloud of golden-yellow light leaked out. It lit the man's back. As he approached, Jonathan saw that Mr Jules' eyes were closed. He wasn't looking, he was listening.

The boy stood still. He made his arms long and stiff against his sides. He balled his fingers into fists.

'Just walk by, don't look, don't say anything,' he whispered to himself. 'Onwards.'

'Hello Jonathan,' the man said, as he approached.

Jonathan stopped with a jolt. His lungs were suddenly empty, making his voice sound much older than he really was: 'Hello sir.'

How did Mr Jules know his name? They'd never spoken to one another before.

Jonathan passed this way every day, on the way to school, but the man rarely showed himself. And when he did he was usually disappearing around the corner, or through a door that closed right behind him.

Then Jonathan saw his back. The back of his head. Or just a piece of leg with a foot attached. Never his face. He wouldn't recognise him if they came across one another in town.

There was probably no one who knew any more about him than his name and where he lived. Yet everyone here was familiar with Mr Jules. Just as they were familiar with the trees and the streetlamps and the cats in the little park.

He was part of the neighbourhood. Like the strings of bunting that had once been put up across the street for a party and never been cleared away, however much Jonathan's mother complained about them.

'Pleasant evening,' said the man.

He had a soft voice. Friendly. The flies in Jonathan's head calmed down somewhat.

'Yes,' he said.

He looked down the shabby little street. There was a garage, where they had the radio on loud. Then came a whole row of doors that could lift up, behind which people parked their bikes or stored old stuff in crates and boxes. At the end was a laundrette where you never saw anyone.

On the other side there was just a long wall. Jonathan would have liked to take a look over it, but it was high, and on the top were sharp iron spikes.

Apart from Mr Jules no one lived here. His house was an odd case. It looked extremely old. Not that it was run down, or dirty. On the contrary. Yet it seemed as if the house had been there much longer than the rest of the neighbourhood.

It had always been there and would always be there, thought Jonathan. Like Mr Jules himself.

It had a ridiculously high chimney. And strange antennae that you didn't see on any other roof at all. The curtains were closed, day and night.

A while back Jonathan had peeked in through a crack. To see if he could see anything. He'd crawled up to the window on his knees and cautiously stuck his head up above the windowsill.

He'd seen something flashing in the dark inside. Perhaps a mirror, he thought at first, or a clock on the wall.

Suddenly he realised that it was much closer. A button. A gleaming button on the coat belonging to Mr Jules, who was standing right at the window.

Something shot out of his mouth from the shock: 'Huh!'

At lightning speed he withdrew his head.

'He didn't see you, he didn't see you, he didn't see you,' he soothed his stampeding heart. 'He was looking over you. And if he heard anything it's sure to have sounded like a bird, or the wind.'

It had been an eternity before he dared to creep away. Since then he'd tried to walk past the house as fast as he could.

Now that strange man was standing here next to him, with his hands in his pockets and his eyes closed. The moon was eerily low. It was as if Mr Jules was warming himself on its light. Every time he breathed in, his nose whistled very softly.

Two boys cycled by. They weren't much older than Jonathan. They were pedalling their hardest, as if they should have been somewhere long ago. Jonathan watched them until they reached the corner and disappeared into the noise and fuss there.

'Did I scare you, recently?' Mr Jules asked suddenly.

'No,' said Jonathan, rather too hastily. 'What? When?'

'The other day. A couple of weeks ago. Here.'

He gestured with his left ear towards the window behind him.

Jonathan felt a glow creep over his cheeks, all the way to his neck. Fortunately it was dark, as he must be crimson by now. Could this man read his thoughts?

'Oh no, it was fine.'

His voice sounded strange. As if it belonged to someone else.

'Sure about that?'

Mr Jules looked to the side for the first time. Jonathan sighed.

'Actually you did. Yes. You did a bit.'

He hadn't the courage to return the gaze. He stared at the black spot of chewing gum on the paving stone in front of his feet.

'I'm sorry.'

'No need,' said Mr Jules and he turned his head back to the sky.

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