Have Mercy On Us All

Fred Vargas

Chapter 1

I

When manie woormes breede of putrefaction of the earth: toade stooles and rotten herbes abound: The fruites and beastes of the earth are unsavoury: The wine becomes muddie: manie birds and beastes flye from that place

II

JOSS' S settled view was that folk walk faster in Paris than they do in Le Guilvenec, the fishing village where he'd grown up. They would steam down Avenue du Maine every day at three knots. This Monday morning, though, Joss himself was doing almost three and a half, trying to make up the twenty minutes he'd lost because of that blasted coffee.

It hadn't surprised him one bit. Joss had always known that objects large and small have secret, vicious lives of their own. He could perhaps make an exception for pieces of fishing tackle that had never taken him on in the living memory of the Brittany fleet; but otherwise the world of things was manifestly focused on making man's life sheer misery. The merest slip of a hand can give a supposedly inanimate object enough freedom of movement to set off a chain of catastrophes which may peak at any point on the Murphy Scale, from "Damn Nuisance" to "Bloody Tragedy". Corks provide a simple illustration of the basic pattern, viz. a wine cork dropped from the table never rolls back to nestle at the boot of whoever let it slip. Oh no, its evil mind always elects to reside behind the stove, like a spider looking for inaccessible sanctuary. The errant cork thus plunges its hereditary hunter, Humankind, into a trial of strength. He has to move the stove and the gas connection out of the wall; he bends down to seize the miscreant bung and a pot falls off the hob and scalds his head. But this morning's case arose from a more complex concatenation. It had begun with the tiniest error in Joss's calculation of the trajectory required to shift a used coffee filter paper to the bin. It landed just off target; the flip-top lurched sideways then swung back and scattered wet ground coffee all around the kitchen floor. Thus do Things transform justified resentment of their human slavemasters into outright revolt; thus do they force men, women and children, in brief but acutely significant bursts, to squirm and scamper like dogs. Joss didn't trust inanimates, not one bit; but he didn't trust men either, nor did he trust the sea. The first could drive you crazy; the second could steal your soul; and the last could take your life.

Joss was an old and seasoned hand who knew when to yield, so he got down on all fours and cleaned up the coffee mess, grain by tiny grain. Since he did his penance without complaint, the thing-force receded behind its usual sandbank. The breakfast incident was quite negligible in itself, just a nuisance, but Joss wasn't fooled. It was a

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clear reminder that the war between men and things was far from over, and that men were not always the victors, far from it. A reminder of tragedies past, of ships unmasted, of trawlers smashed, and of his boat, the Nor'easter, that had started taking water at 0300on August 23, in the Irish Sea, with eight crew on board. Yet Joss had always indulged his old trawler's most hysterical demands; man and boat had always treated each other with kindness and consideration far beyond the call of duty. Until that infernal storm when Joss had suddenly got angry and pounded the gunwale with his fist. The Nor'easter, which was already listing heavily to starboard, started shipping water at the stern. The engine flooded, and the boat drifted all night long, with the crew baling non-stop, until it came to a grinding halt on a reef at dawn, with two men lost overboard. Fourteen years had gone by since that sad day. Fourteen years since Joss had beaten a lesson into the shipowner's thick skull. Fourteen years since he'd left Le Guilvenec after doing nine months for GBH and attempted manslaughter. Fourteen years since almost his entire life had gone down that unplugged hole in the hull.

Joss gritted his teeth as he made good speed along Rue de la Gaîté, choking back the anger that surged up inside him every time the Nor'easter, Lost at Sea, breasted a wave of his thoughts. But it wasn't really the Nor'easter he was angry with. That good old ship had only reacted to the punch he had given it by shifting its aged and rotting timbers. He was sure the ship hadn't realised what the consequences of her brief rebellion would be, because she had had no idea just how old and run-down she really was, nor had she grasped how heavy the sea was that night. The trawler certainly hadn't meant to kill the two sailors; she was surely full of remorse as she lay like an idiot at the bottom of the Irish Sea. Joss often talked to her, mumbling words of comfort and forgiveness. He reckoned the old girl must have found peace by now and made a new life for herself at full fathom five, just as he had up here, in Paris.

Making peace with the owner, on the other hand, was out of the question.

"Come off it, Cap'n Le Guern," he used to say with a hearty clap on Joss's shoulder, "you can keep the old girl going for another ten years, no doubt about it. She's a sturdy ship and you're her master."

"The Nor'easter's no longer safe," Joss kept on telling him. "The hull's out of true and the boards are warping. The flooring of the hold has worked loose. I'll not answer for what she might do in a gale. And the lifeboats wouldn't pass inspection."

"I know my ships, Cap'n," rasped the owner. "If you're afraid of the Nor'easter, that's fine by me. I've got ten others who'd take your cap at a moment's notice. Men made of sterner stuff who don't grouse about safety regulations like those wimps at the inspectorate."

"I've got seven lads on board."

The owner brought his fleshy, glowering face right close up to Joss's.

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"If you so much as whisper what's on your mind to the harbour master, Joss Le Guern, you'll be out on your ear as fast as you can say sea shells. Right round the coast, from Brest to Saint-Nazaire, it'll be 'Sorry, nothing doing'. So if you want my advice - think again."

Yes, Joss was really sorry he hadn't done him in right and proper the day after the shipwreck, instead of only breaking one of his legs and fracturing his sternum. But his crewmen - it took four of them - pulled Joss off his prey. Don't ruin your own life, Joss, they said. They blocked him and then held him down. Later, they stopped him slaughtering the owner and all his henchmen, who'd blacklisted him when he came out of prison. Joss bawled the fact that the port authority fat cats were on the owners' payrolls in so many bars that he made being taken back into the merchant navy simply impossible. Blackballed in one port after another, Joss jumped on the Paris express one Tuesday morning and landed - like so many Bretons before him - on the forecourt of Gare Montparnasse, leaving behind a wife who'd already taken her leave, and nine men to slay.

As the Edgar-Quinet crossing hove into view, Joss stuffed his ancient hard feelings into a mental back pocket, and clapped on full steam. He was running late, as the business with the coffee slops and the wars of the things had wasted at least fifteen minutes. Punctuality was a key part of his work, and it mattered very much that the first edition of his newscast should take place every day at 0830 sharp, with the second edition on the dot of 1235 and the late final at 1810. That's when the street was at its busiest, and in this town people were in too much of a hurry to put up with the slightest delay.

Joss took the urn down from the tree where he strung it up overnight with a double bowline and two bike locks to secure it. This morning there wasn't a lot inside, so it wouldn't take too long to sort. He smiled to himself as he took the urn into the back room that Damascus let him use in his shop. There were still a few decent fellows left, he thought, people like Damascus who would let you have a key and a bit of table space, without worrying about you running off with the till. Talk about a stupid name, though! Damascus was the manager of Rolaride, the skate shop on the square, and he let Joss use the place to prepare his newscasts out of the rain. Rolaride - that's another ludicrous moniker, if you ask me.

Joss took the padlocks off the urn. It was a big wooden lap-jointed box that he'd made with his own fair hand, and dubbed Nor'easter II in memory of his dearly departed. A great fishing vessel of the deep-sea fleet might not have thought it an honour to have her name perpetuated by a modest letter box, but Nor'easter II was no ordinary mail drop. It was a very clever seven-year-old indeed, born of a brilliant idea that had allowed Joss to pull himself up the ladder again after two years' unemployment, six months spinning cables and three years in a cannery. It was on a gloomy December night in a Paris café that Joss had been struck by sheer genius. The place was full of nostalgic Breton exiles droning on about their families and home ports, about when the fishing was good and the onions too. Some boozed-up old sailor mentioned the village of Pont l'Abbé, and all of a sudden Joss's great-great-grandfather, born at Locmariain 1832, sprang out of his head, propped himself up at the bar, and said good evening.

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"Good evening to you," said Joss, tightening his grip on his glass.

"You do rememberme, don't you?"

"Sort of . . . " Joss mumbled. "You died before I was born. I didn't shed no tears."

"C'mon, Joss Le Guern, I don't drop in very often, so cut out the insults for once. How far have you got?"

"Fifty."

"You've taken it hard. You look older."

"You can keep your views to yourself, thanks very much. I didn't ask you to drop in. Anyway, you were no oil painting yourself."

"Watch your tongue, young man. You know what happens when I get excited."

"Sure I do, like everyone else. Specially your wife, who got thrashed all her life long."

"Sure, sure," the forefather scowled. "But you have to put that in context. In its appropriate cultural-historical circs."

"Circs my arse. You liked bashing her up, that's all there is to it. And you blinded her in one eye."

"Belt up, will you? Or are we going to go on about that eye for another two hundred years?"

"Sure we are. It's symbolic."

"Joss Le Guern wants to teach his great-great-grandfather a lesson, does he? The same Joss who nearly kicked the guts out of a man on the dock at Le Guilvenec? Or have I got the wrong address?"

"He wasn't a woman, in the first place, and in the second place he was hardly a man. He was a bloodsucking money-grubber who didn't give a fart if men died as long as he made a pile."

"Yeah, I know. I can't really fault you on that one. But that's not all of it, lad. Why did you call me down?"

"I told you, I didn't."

"You're an obstinate bastard. You're lucky you've got my eyes otherwise I would have given you a black'un. Can you get it into your head that if I'm here it's because you rang, and that's that. Anyway I'm not a regular in this bar, I don't like piped music."

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"OK," Joss conceded. "Can I get you a drink?"

"If you can still raise your arm. Because I'll be so bold as to tell you you've had one too many already."

"That's none of your business, old man."

The forebear shrugged. He'd seen a lot in his time and he wasn't going to rise to this tiddler's bait. This young Joss was a fine specimen of the tribe, no question about it.'

"So," the oldster said after he'd downed his pint, "no woman and no dough?"

"You've put your finger on it first go," Joss answered. "You weren't so canny in your own time, I've heard tell."

"Comes from being a ghost. When you're dead you know things you never knew before."

"Are you kidding?" said Joss as he made a feeble gesture towards the barman.

"As far as women are concerned, there was no point calling me down, it's not my strong suit."

"Could have guessed that."

"But work isn't a hard nut to crack. Just follow in your family footsteps. You weren't right in cable-spinning, that was a big mistake. And you know, things aren't to be trusted. Ropes are OK, at a pinch, but as for cables, wires, let alone corks, well, it's best to give them a wide berth."

"I know," said Joss.

"You have to make do with your inheritance. Copy your family."

"But I can't be a sailor no more." Joss was getting ratty. "I'm persona non grata in the whole bloody fleet."

"Who said sailor? If fish were the only thing, God knows where we'd be. Was I a sailor, then?"

Joss drained his glass and pondered the point.

"No," he said after a pause for thought. "You were a crier. From Concarneau to Quimper, you were the itinerant town crier."

"That's right, my boy, and I'm proud of it. Ar Bannour was what I was, the 'Crier'. And the best on the whole south coast of Breizh. Every day that God gave, Ar Bannour strode into another village and on the stroke of half past noon he shouted out the news. And I can tell you, there was folk there who'd been waiting since

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dawn. I had thirty-seven villages on my round - that was quite something, eh? That made a whole lot of folk, didn't it? Folk living in the world, thanks to what? Thanks to news! And thanks to whom? To me,my lad, to Ar Bannour, the best barker in Finisterre.My voice carried from the church steps to the wash house, and I knew all my words. Everyone raised their heads to listen.My voice brought the whole world to them, and believe you me, it was worth a lot more than fish."

"Yeah, yeah," said Joss as he took a swig straight out of the bottle on the bar.

"Ever heard of the Crimean War? I covered that one. I went to Nantes to get the news and brought it straight back in the saddle, fresh as the new tide. The Third Republic, heard of that? That was me again. I shouted it on all the foreshores, you should have seen the commotion. Not to mention all the local stuff - marriages, deaths, quarrels, lost and found, stray children, horses needing re-shoeing, I lugged it all around. From one village to the next people gave me news to cry. The love of a girl in Penmarch for a boy in Sainte-Marine, that's one I still remember. A hell of a scandal, that was. It ended in murder."

"You could have been more discreet."

"Hang on, lad. I was paid to read out the news. I was only doing my job. Not to read it out would have been robbing the customer. You know, Le Guerns may be rough customers but we never stole a penny. Fisherfolk's affairs and squabbles were none of my business - I had enough of that in my own family. I dropped in on the village once a month to see the kids, go to Mass, and bed the wife."

Joss sighed into his mug.

"And to leave her some money," the ancestor added, with emphasis. "A wife and eight kids needs a lot of bread. But believe you me, Ar Bannour never left them short."

"Of a thrashing?"

"Of money, you nitwit."

"You earned as much as that?"

"Loads of money. News is the one line of goods that never runs short on this planet, it's the one tipple people never get too much of.When you're a crier, it's like you're giving the breast to the whole of humanity. You never run out of milk or of suckling babes. - Hey, lad, if you go on lifting your elbow like that, you'll never make a crier. It's a job that calls for a clear head."

"I don't want to depress you, old forebear," said Joss as he shook his head, "but there aren't any criers any more. Nobody even knows what the word means these days. 'Cobbler', well, just maybe, but 'crier', that's not even in the dictionary. I don't know if you've kept up since you died, but down here things have moved on a bit.Who needs to have the news shouted down his lughole in the church square? Everyone's

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got the newspapers, radio and TV. You can log on at Loctudy and see who's having a piss in Pondicherry. That's the way it is."

"You really think I'm an old idiot?"

"I'm telling you the way it is, that's all. My turn now."

"You're losing it, my poor Joss. Pull yourself together. You've not understood much of what I've been telling you."

Joss stared vacantly at the stately silhouette of his great-great-grandfather as he slid off his bar stool with considerable style. Ar Bannour had been a big man by the standards of his day. It's true Joss was quite like the brute.

"The Crier," the forebear declared firmly as he brought the flat of his hand down on to the bar to underscore the point, "is Life itself. Don't tell me that nobody knows what it means any more or that it's disappeared from the dictionary, or else the Le Guerns really have gone to wrack and ruin and no longer deserve to cry it out loud. Life!"

"What a pathetic old fool!" Joss mumbled as watched the old man depart. "What a load of balls."

He put his glass back down on the bar and bawled out after him: "In any case, I did not call you down!"

"That'll do, now," said the barman as he took Joss by the arm. "Go easy, friend, you're disturbing the customers as it is."

"Bugger your bloody customers!" Joss yelled as he held tight on to the bar.

He later recalled that two guys much smaller than he was ejected him from the Mizzen and sent him rolling along the road for almost a hundred yards. He woke up nine hours later in a doorway at least ten metro stations away. Around noon he dragged himself back to his room, using both hands to hold up his splitting head, and went back to sleep until six the next evening.When he finally opened his sore eyes he stared at the filthy ceiling of his flat and said out loud, unrepentantly, "What a load of balls!"

So seven years had now passed since Joss had taken up the outmoded calling of Town Crier. It had been a slow start. It took time to find the right tone of voice, to learn to project it, to find the best site, devise the headings, acquire a clientele, and set the rates. But he'd done it and there he was, Ar Bannour. He'd taken his urn to various spots within a radius of half a mile of Gare Montparnasse (he didn't like to stray too far from the main line to Brittany - just in case, as he said) and about two years ago he'd settled for a pitch on the square where Boulevard Edgar-Quinet crosses Rue Delambre. That location allowed him to tap the local residents who shopped at the market stalls as well as office workers and the well-camouflaged regulars of the local red-light streets; and he could also fish among the crowds

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pouring out of Gare Montparnasse on their way to work. Dense knots of people crowded round him to hear him bark the news. Maybe not as many as mobbed his great-great-grandfather Le Guern in his day, but against that you had to reckon that Joss gave three performances a day, seven days a week, on the same spot.

What he got a really large number of, though,were messages - on average, about three score were dropped in the urn each day. There were always more in the morning than the evening, as night-time seemed more conducive to people slipping things in without being seen. The routine was that messages had to be sealed in envelopes weighted down with a fivefranc coin. Five francs wasn't an exorbitant amount for hearing your own thought, your own announcement or quest cast into the Paris air. In the early days Joss had tried rock-bottom pricing, but people didn't like to see their sentences valued as low as one franc. It cheapened what they had given. So the five-franc rate suited the crier and his customers equally well, and Joss grossed about nine thousand francs a month for his seven-day job.

Old Ar Bannour was right, there was never any shortage of material. Joss had to give the old man his due when he saw him again one drunken night at the Mizzen. "They're packed full of things to say, people are, just like I told you," the old man said, delighted to see his descendant getting the business back on its feet. "Packed as tight as horsehair in a mattress. Packed to the edges with things to say and things not to say. You're doing them a good turn, and you clean up at the same time. You're their outlet pipe. But watch it, lad, it's not always a piece of cake. Flushing through pipework brings out the shit as well as the water. So keep an eye out for trouble. There's loads of muck in men's heads."

Old Ar Bannour was right about that too. In his urn Joss found things he could say, and things he had better not. "Things better left unsaid" was how the bookworm who ran a kind of lodging house next door to Rolaride put it. When he picked up his envelopes, Joss always began by sorting them into two piles, the "can dos" and the "better nots". The "can dos" were the sort of things usually dealt with naturally by human speech organs, in normal trickles or in howling waves, a process which prevents the build-up of words from reaching sufficient pressure to cause an explosion. Because people were not like mattresses, in the sense that they packed more and more words in every day, and that made evacuation an absolutely vital issue. A trivial portion of the "can do" material came to the urn under the headings of "For Sale,""Wanted,""Lonely Hearts,""Miscellaneous" and "Technical". Joss put a quota on that last category and also charged a one-franc premium because "Technicals" were such buggers to read aloud.

What struck the crier most was the unforeseen quantity of "better nots". They piled up because there was no other drain for getting this kind of verbal matter out. "Better nots" were either way beyond acceptable bounds of violence or outspokenness, or else weren't within striking distance of the level of interest that would justify their existence. Whether they were over the top or short of the mark, these "better nots" were thus condemned to a shadowy, silent and shameful life in the darker recesses of the mattress. All the same, as Joss had learned from his seven years on the job, those messages didn't just wither away. They built up into piles over the years, they clambered on top of each other, getting ever more sour at their molelike existence as

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they angrily watched the infuriating comings and goings of authorised and thus more mobile messages. The thin six-inch slit in the crier's urn offered a breach to which these prisoners flew like a plague of grasshoppers. Not a morning passed without him finding a crop of "better nots" at the bottom of his letter box - harangues, insults, expressions of despair, calumnies, denunciations, threats, ravings and rantings. Some of the "better nots" were so feeble, so desperately mindless, that they were hard to read right through; some so convoluted that their meaning was all but lost; some so creepy as to make you drop the sheet of paper to the ground; and some so vindictive and so destructive that the crier got rid of them.

For Joss did not leave his news unfiltered.

Though he was a dutiful man aware of his responsibility to save the mind's least wanted waste products from total oblivion, in pursuance of his ancestor's work of salvation, Joss assumed the right to exclude anything he could not utter with his own tongue. Unread messages could be taken back together with the five-franc fee, since the Le Guerns, as the forebear had emphasised, may be rough customers but they never stole a penny. So at every newscast Joss laid out the day's rejects on the orange box he used as a stand. There always were rejects. He never read messages promising to reduce women to pulp, or to send blacks or wogs or Chinks or queers to hell. Joss guessed intuitively that he could easily have been born female or black or queer, so he exercised censorship not out of moral principle but from an instinct for self-preservation.

Once a year, during the low tide of the mid-August holidays, Joss would put the urn in dry dock: he would sand it down, repaint it bright blue above the Plimsoll line and ultramarine below it, with Nor'Easter II in copperplate black lettering on the bow, Timetables on the port side, and Rates, Conditions and Terms After the Fact to starboard. He'd heard "after the fact" many times during his arrest and trial, and had hung on to the formula as a souvenir. Joss felt that "after the fact" gave a touch of class to his newscasting, even if the lodging-house scholar seemed to think there was something wrong with the word. He didn't quite know what to make of the scholar, actually. He was called Hervé Decambrais, was certainly an aristocrat - he had a very grand manner - but he was so broke that he had to sublet the four bedrooms on his first floor, sell off the table linen and take fees for giving perfectly useless counselling sessions. He camped in two ground-floor rooms mostly occupied by piles of books. Even if Hervé Decambrais had ingested millions of words from his books, Joss wasn't worried about his choking on them because the toff talked his head off all the time. He took words in and spewed them out all day long, sometimes with complicated parts which Joss did not always understand. Damascus didn't get all of it either, which was reassuring in a way; but then, Damascus wasn't a rocket scientist either.

As he emptied his urn on to the table in Rolaride and then began to sort the messages into "can dos" and "better nots," Joss lighted upon a particularly wide envelope in thick, off-white paper. For the first time it occurred to him that maybe the bookworm was the source of these fancy envelopes he'd been getting for the last three weeks, weighted with no less than twenty francs apiece. They contained the most disagreeable messages he'd had to read in all his seven years as crier. As he opened

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this missive Joss could hear his forebear leaning over his shoulder and whispering, "Keep an eye out for trouble, Joss my lad, there's lots of muck in people's heads."

"Shut up," Joss said out loud.

He unfolded the sheet of bond and softly read out the following message:

When manie woormes breede of putrefaction of the earth: toade stooles and rotten herbes abound: The fruites and beastes of the earth are unsavoury: The wine becomes muddie: manie birds and beastes flye from that place

Joss turned the page over for the rest of the sentence, but the verso was blank. He shook his head. He'd drained off plenty of weird language, but this really took the biscuit.

"A nutcase," he mumbled. "This one may be loaded, but he's a nutcase." He put the sheet aside and got on with opening the rest of the day's haul.

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