

Joe College

I grew up during the fifties and sixties and spent a lot of time at our family-owned restaurant in a semi-industrial area of Detroit. I needed a short leash, so even before I worked regularly at the Bungalow Bar B-Q, I often had to be there while my parents worked the place. But I soon grew to love its parade of characters as well as the street scenes I witnessed riding with Dad or one of the delivery guys. The rich array of people and action were much more interesting than the white-bread, red-lined neighborhood where we lived—broken rules and busted lives being more fascinating than phalanxes of marching lemmings.

Of them all, my favorite was Joe College, afflicted with cerebral palsy so bad he'd joke—with spit running down his contorted, grimacing mouth—that when he died, they wouldn't bury him but screw him into the ground.

When I first met him, his weird handicap and baby-like demeanor were strangely alluring to a seven year old boy. Like sneaking up on a butterfly, I thought if I treated him kindly I could get closer to this strange and exotic character and indulge my fascination.

His big, yellow, three-wheeled bike parked kitty-corner from the Bungalow announced his newsstand open for business. People often paid him a dollar for a paper costing two bits, or waited patiently while Joe reached into his cigar box to make change, his arms and hands flailing as if drawing doodles in the air.

Nobody knew his real name, and from early on I could not only understand his extremely slurred and garbled speech, but would sit and talk with him as long as he cared to chat or get warm from the brutal Detroit winters. He never took a day off.

Blonde Betty in her white uniform and white crepe-soled shoes is lost in thought at the table near the kitchen as she folds and assembles delivery boxes while I sit with her doing my eighth grade homework. Dad is running an errand and it is a windy ten degrees outside; the dining room is empty but for Betty and me. We both look up when a frigid draft signals that the front door is opening.

A gnarled hand appears on the inside of the door and slowly pushes it open, even though it has no resistance from any pneumatic device. "It's Joe," Betty says, as she continues folding and assembling the take-out boxes now stacked four feet high on the next table.

It takes Joe College forever to sidle the rest of the way through the door. The cold draft is now practically a wind as the open door on the opposite end of the dining room sucks out the heat. His frail body is all jutting angles and knobby bones with the muscle strength of a baby. He is wearing a winter cap with earflaps and dangling laces and an orange winter jacket that covers his corkscrew frame down to his knees.

I yell, "Hiya Joe!" and give an exaggerated wave. He acknowledges me with a circular arm motion of his own that looks like an orchestra conductor's—Joe's version of a wave—and his practically vertical, slobbering mouth twists itself into a grin as he grunts, "Uggghha Hn!" which is Joe-talk for "Hiya Lan!"

As he gingerly makes his way down the aisle towards us he must grab on to each table that lines the aisle, no simple task since his arms flap like a drowning swimmer and his weak, bent knees barely hold him up while his spine is as giving as wet spaghetti and balance as tenuous as an eleven-month-old child's.

Neither Betty nor I offer a hand; Joe wouldn't have it. Tortured step by tortured step, he makes it to our table, falls into a chair, and says in Joe-talk, "I bet my nose looks like a cherry," and grunts—which to him is a laugh—while spit and snot run down his face.

I take a napkin and wipe it clean. I take off his hat and set it in a chair. I unzip his jacket. Though his speech is extruded through severely impaired throat and tongue muscles, I understand it. When I was a little boy he said I was one of the few people who could understand him. Not many others tried. Most turned away from Joe, the evil betrayal of his body a grim reminder of their own vulnerabilities. It left attention as the biggest gift Joe could ever expect.

I yell out to the kitchen, "Hey Eunice! Cheeseburger and fries for Joe! Don't forget to toast the bun!" Joe has heard me yell it often over the last six years. He knows that Eunice knows to toast the bun, but that little command, barked by the boss's son in his behalf, causes his eyes to shine as a twisted grin forces itself onto his spastic, dribbling jaw.

My Dad sold the business during my twenties and I never saw Joe again, but over many decades never forgot him. His mangled body and recalcitrant nervous system gave him every justification to be bitter or envious or despairing, yet he seemed as happy as fate could allow. I came to understand that though we treated him like a child, he knew what he brought to us, knew that our goodwill towards him made us better, and that it was the resonance between him and us that lit up the room.

He said to me once in his Joe-way, "You're happy to see me, aren't you?"

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