

Joseph

by Adam Sifre

There is a dead factory. It sits on the tip of a small piece of land that extends into a forgotten lake. The whole structure looks like a giant dirty-inked thumb print pressed against a faded blue sheet of paper. Sunny days show up here about as often as pearls in washed-up oysters. Today is one of those rare days.

Joseph walks the perimeter, a reverse moat of concrete that keeps the waters at bay. To Joseph, it seems as if some deranged architect feared that armies of water nymphs and other fantastical creatures would rise up from the old lake and storm the ramparts. But this is not castle, and it was no army, real or imagined, that destroyed this place.

Joseph continues his silent patrol, head cocked to the sky. His eyes are closed, but he opens them quickly every few steps, to avoid catastrophe or embarrassment, the two being synonymous for most Englishmen, even those from Yorkshire. When his eyes are shut, he feels the sun's embrace, a mother's soft hand on his face.

Soon he stops walking, tired of opening his eyes and not wanting to chance falling into the water. There is wind and he hears the leaves along the shoreline sighing. He stands there a time, waiting for the ghosts. It is a beautiful, sunny day. Even so, their eventual appearance is inevitable. There is a bottle of not-so-cheap golden heat in his coat pocket, but today there is no chill excuse to seek it out, so Joseph just stands there, arms at his side, grizzled face (no wife, no work, no reason to shave).

Eyes still closed, Joseph resists an urge to shout. Instead, he listens. He waits. After a time, he thinks that maybe it isn't ghosts he came to see. What would be the point? What do ghosts do, other than mock and offer false comfort. No, there are no ghosts here that Joseph hopes to stumble upon. The discarded, living or dead, cannot help him. It is at this moment that Joseph realizes that is exactly what he is. Discarded. Left behind and of no further use. He almost laughs then, but part of him knows that is not a path he can afford to

go down at the moment.

This is the last place I was happy, now Joseph the Discarded has returned to haunt it. I am the ghost.

The thought hits Joseph with all the weight of sadness and he feels daylight's warmth fade from his face. Probably a cloud, maybe a cloud. He does not open his eyes to see. He does not want to know the answer.

Imagine, if you can, working in a shoe factory. Many people can't. Imagine working from dawn to night in such a place, with the noise and the chill and the grey and the monotony. Imagine doing it every day, every hour, slowly trading away your years, your life, in exchange for standing on a noisy factory floor. Now, imagine being happy. Joseph may well have been the only man alive capable of imagining just that. And the realization almost kills him.

Warmth returns to Joseph's face. Still he does not open his eyes. He does not turn his head.

Joseph does not return here on rare, sunny days, with the hope of glimpsing ghosts or other such ships, long since sailed. He comes here seeking a way back. A way to trade this world for a story, a world where old men can slip back and reclaim important moments. Where time is a merry-go-round, a roundabout, and where sometimes a man gets to jump on and ride in circles, the years sloughing off him like a snake shedding its skin.

Right then, Joseph is not thinking about what he might have done to make things better. He doesn't want to change anything. He wants a place that needs him. A place that wants him. His place. His happy place. The factory.

A tear fights free from Joseph's closed eyes. He feels it make its way down his cheek. Tears always feel bigger in darkness, and this one feels like a river. He hears something then. It's only wind in

trees. Only breeze and leaves and desperation. But to Joseph it almost sounds like a factory whistle.

Not almost. It is a factory whistle.

At this moment, he knows with absolute certainty that if he opens his eyes, he will see them. The discarded, all walking toward the factory's big double doors. He hears them now, a murmur that follows any crowd. Lost words about children and wives and baseball scores and politics. Joseph can't make out anything the discarded are saying, but he knows exactly what they are saying.

He stands there for a long time, but his eyes do not open. He has no interest in seeing ghosts. That is not why Joseph haunts this place on rare, sunny days.

