

Joe's Sniff Shack

by Anthony Van Hart

We used to watch the people that frequented this place called Jittery Joes. It was a sniff shack and everybody knew it. That was the appeal. We were kids and we knew. No. Not the place Mangum played in Athens, it was a smaller spot in West Milwaukee near the middle school where the tough kids would slide in after copping a feel on the playground to get a quick sniff before lazily strolling home to get smacked around by their old man or his absence. Joe's had coffee. Or something that came in coffee cups -peppermint sticks, white chocolate Nestles, popcorn, and a cigarette machine.

Joe's, always smelling of cherry chapstick or the fragrant breeze that wrestles up through subway grates, used to service some of the finest dupes in town. Rejects and low lifes that couldn't honestly say that their mothers or anyone with even a semi clear conscience still cared about them. Ragged and frowning they'd walk in and out of that filthy place all day with pixie sticks hanging out of their shirt pockets.

We never got too close. We'd just watch from the bus stop or from the playground knowing that if our mothers knew we knew what the outside of the windows of this stain on society looked like we'd get the stare. And there was nothing worse than the stare. Wooden spoons, belts, open hands-whatever. Those didn't do half as much damage as the stare. But at least they loved us. Then.

But one day, out of nowhere, Joe's shut down. Bars on the windows and everything. A few of the frequents moped and fidgeted outside its remains for a couple days but they evaporated and we never saw any of them again.

