

Sugarexplosion

by Matt Briggs

This story is about a boy named Joe who lived in an apartment in the city. He was very lonely because his mother had married a longshoreman named Jason. He asked that Joe call him "Jase". His mother and Jase spent most of their evenings out painting the town red and left Joe at home. He played with his yellow metal taxicab, looked out the window, and cut photos out of the newspaper. Sometimes Joe would sneak honey out of the plastic bear in the back of the cabinet, where his mother had hidden it so that Joe wouldn't be able to find it. He cut the brown syrup down with so much water that the honey sloshed around like decarbonated Coca-Cola. He rolled the soft honey around in his mouth as ran around the apartment, banged his head on the sofa, and jumped up and down in front of the window overlooking the street and the vacant lot across the street where he wasn't allowed to play.

Every morning Joe woke up, excited to be up and moving and able to do whatever he had to do that day. Not to say that he could do whatever he wanted to do, because he couldn't. He had a pretty strict routine, considering he was only six years old. He woke at six-thirty--hours after Jase had left the apartment--to the whoosh of his mother's silver hair dryer. In the still dark apartment, Joe filled his cereal bowl with Sugarexplosion, his favorite breakfast cereal, and the reconstituted milk he had to use because, one, it was good for him, and two, his mother hated milk and wouldn't buy it every week but she would buy anything that came in bulk and she had once bought fifty pounds of powdered milk. Joe liked sitting in the dark living room, half hearing the TV though the dueling crashing noise of masticated Sugarexplosion cereal and his mother's old hair dryer. Finally his mother turned on the kitchen light; standing under the sputtering florescent light, she raised her hands in the air and twirled around. "Well honey, how do I look?"

Every morning Joe would look up to see his mother under the light, her arms raised in the air, her lips in a pouty pucker. "You look beautiful," he said. And he thought she did. But the real reason he said this was because she would come over and kiss him on the forehead. This morning, she kissed him on the forehead and then said, "I'm late."

As soon as she left, Joe felt the sugar frosted grain by-product surge through his blood stream, a glucose flashflood that jolted him out of his seat and sent him stumbling around the apartment. He fell through the kitchen and then tumbled into the living room and careened back through the kitchen singing what he could remember of the national anthem. "Oh-Oh say can you see by the dainty light the last days light." Always, every morning, he almost forgot to check the time before he had to go to school. He was usually late for the bus.

At school, Joe knew the answers to the questions. He used to jump up onto his desk and wave his arm before Mrs. Gestapo told him he would have to stop or he would go to the principal's office, where the other kids said that the principal made you pull down your pants and spanked you with a specially designed paddle. Joe didn't believe this. The kid who told him all this said that the paddle had holes cut into it so that it met any air resistance. Joe believed the paddle really had barbed wire wrapped around it so that it would hurt more. If it had holes cut into it, then there wouldn't be as much wood to hit you with, would there? And Joe believed that the kid was just being nice when he said the principal made you pull your pants down. Really, he must make you pull your pants and underpants off. So there was no way, no way whatsoever, that Joe would go to the principal's office.

Today though, Mrs. Gestapo was sick and they had a substitute Gestapo named Mr. Green, Mr. Nathan Green. The boys in the class laughed when he told them his first name because Nathan was

almost as stupid of a name as Douglas and everyone knew Douglas peed his pants during the Christmas Pageant. Lilly, standing just behind Douglas, silently fainted from the reek of pee. She tumbled off the last row of the bleachers. All the boys who couldn't talk to the girls, Joe being one of these boys, ran back to help Lilly. But because they were all so timid, they just stood around her afraid to be the first one to move. So everyone hated Douglas now. And hated Mr. Nathan Green because of his named reminded them of Douglas and because he spoke in a slow, step-by-step voice. "Now chil-der-un, my name is not an amusement." That started them rolling. Joe knew he would get to answer all the questions today because Mr. Green would let him do anything he wanted to do.

When Mr. Green finally steered the class into its lesson, he told them that today they were going to "review two dimensional and three shapes, or as geometricists like to say 'objects.'" He held up a bright blue plastic square and he held up a cube. "Does anyone know the names of these two objects?"

Joe was on top of his desk shouting, "I do. I do. That's me."

"You can sit back in your seat little one."

"They're both squares," Joe said.

"I hate to bust your bubble but they're not. Would you sit?"

Joe knew he was right, and what was more, that Mr. Green wouldn't tell him he was right because he was mad because Joe was standing on top of his desk. Joe jumped off his desk and hurled himself at Mr. Green. "They're squares!" He bit Mr. Green on the cheek. Mr. Green, stunned, twirled back, clutching at Joe's striped shirt, and then fell against the window that overlooked the courtyard where the kindergartner's took their recess. The window held for an entire instant; cracks spread from the point where he had first hit the

window, and then the whole thing showered down on Joe and Mr. Green.

The class, sat quietly marveling at the broken window, at the cool pine tree scented air that has suddenly filled the room, at Mr. Green who was even more stunned now, and at Joe who ran out into the courtyard singing, "I'm free! Liberty! Come on kids, lets make a break for it and establish our own kingdom." He ran up to the shattered window and shouted at them, "I don't even want to be king!"

After the school nurse had seen Joe and Mr. Green, Joe's mother came to pick him up and take him home. "How come I get to go home?" Joe asked riding in the front bucket seat where he was normally not allowed. He looked outside. It seemed, now, like a long time since he had broken the window. It seemed like someone else, like something he had seen instead of something he had actually done.

Joe's mother stayed home with him that evening. She and Joe rented two movies and while they watched them, his mother sat on the other side of the room with her arms folded across her chest. One of the movies they rented was called, Crash! Bang! Boom! Whenever anyone exploded in the movie Joe started to laugh because a part of their clothing would get thrown to the other side of the street. The main character, Stump, who had escaped from prison so that he could find his mother's murderer--a murder he had supposedly committed--captured a machine gun from one of the prison guards. He machine gunned a policewoman and her partner and their stop sign shaped caps blew to the other side of the street. Joe chuckled. His mother spent more time watching Joe than the movie.

"It's pretty funny isn't it Joe?"

"This movie is great!" An explosion on the screen muffled the screams of a diner full of people who were interrupted in their late breakfast by a detonating car bomb.

Joe woke before his mother the next morning, excited to be up. He dressed for school and sat down to eat a big bowl of Sugarexplosion. His mother woke up and didn't use her hair dryer. Instead she sat at the table watching Joe eat. "Stop looking at me," he said. "I'm eating."

"Honey, you've got an appointment today. Do you remember what happened yesterday?"

"We saw Stump," Joe said. "Stump blew up a train in this really great explosion toward the end of the movie. And just before the fireball annihilated the gas station, he jumped clear. As he jumped away from the train, he kept firing down at the policemen under the trestle. He killed three of them before he landed in the river and was swept down the rapids to the bridge, where he executed the family driving the Volvo. But he forgot to kill the little boy and the little boy had a sling shot, and he hit Stump in the back of the head before Stump turned around and blew the kids eyes off."

"Do remember what happened at school."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"How much sugar have you had today?"

"None."

Joe's mother picked up the box of Sugarexplosion and read the

ingredients. It only had three: sugar, corn starch, and artificial flavoring. She knew that they put the ingredients in descending or ascending order, she couldn't remember exactly which. Looking at the label, she decided it probably didn't matter what order she looked at the ingredients, they weren't good.

"We're going to see a specialist today. He will make you take some tests--"

"No one told me about a test. What test?"

"You can't fail it."

"They told me that about the alphabet, Mom. When I couldn't remember what came after 'G' I had to start over again and then I didn't even know that 'E' came after 'C'. Mrs. Gastapo kept me after school and she kept saying over and over again, 'you can't fail this.' I'm not going."

"Do you remember biting Mr. Green."

"No."

"You did bit Mr. Green."

"No. I did not."

"I saw the spot where you bit him."

"He's faking. He pinched himself."

"Joseph, are you lying?"

"Whose Joseph? Do I look like Joseph?"

“Get your coat.”

“I lost it.”

Joe's Mom pulled last years coat out of the closet and dressed him up and they drove to the clinic where the specialist, Mrs. Boyle, worked. Her clinic took up the top floor of a tall medical building built inside an old factory. When they parked in the lot, Joe looked at the smokestacks and the glass windows. “You're not taking me to a doctor. You're sending me away to factory so that I can spend the rest of my life working, aren't you?” She didn't listen to him as he complained on the way into the lobby. The lobby housed the clinic's reception desk as well as the local Boilermaker's union. Men with clunky boots and hard hats stood in a long line out of the door. A couple of older men, with thick round mustaches, nodded their heads at Joe's mother. She didn't even look back, but Joe said, “Mom those guys are looking at you.”

“I know, honey, don't look back.”

“Mom, they're still looking at you.”

“Don't let them see you looking.”

“Are you looking at my Mom,” Joe asked one of them.

“Excuse me little guy,” the workman said. He hunched down. Joe stared into his skin, it was orange and had big pores and looked a little like a basketball hide. The bristles of his mustache started from hairs that jutted out of his nostrils. “My name's Pete,” the man said. He stuck out his hand for Joe to shake. Joe took his palm into his hand. The man squeezed so hard that Joe felt like his hand would get squeezed out of existence. When he got his hand back it felt ten times too big. The man had permanently altered how big Joe's hand was supposed to be.

The man stood up and said to Joe's Mom. "Nice boy."

"He's a monster," Joe's Mom said. "He bit his teacher yesterday. The school said he had to go to a doctor."

"It doesn't sound like he's sick," the man said. "All he needs is a little discipline at home."

"I can take care of my kid," Joe's Mom said.

"Then he wouldn't be biting people," the man said.

"Fuck you, you ass hole," Joe's Mom said.

The other men in the line laughed when she said this. "Oh, hot pants!" a short man with a long clean chaven face said.

They rode the elevator up to the top floor. The walls of the elevator had carpeted. In fibers of the carpet someone had drawn a big A inside a circle with their finger. Joe's Mom didn't even look at it, but Joe stared at the whole time wondering what it meant.

Joe's mother sat in the waiting room reading the headlines in the magazines and looking at the pictures. She found a model she thought looked like herself. The model had a different hair cut, long hair that curled at the ends and it had been dyed a brilliant bug red color. Joe's mother gently tore the page out of the magazine, folded it up and put it into her pocket.

Joe spent all afternoon performing the tests. The doctor sat across room him and scribbled things into his notebook. The tests weren't difficult. Instead they were putting things together or trying to remember what letters came after which letters. Now and then the doctor would get up and stretch. She stood away from her desk,

raised her arms into the air and turned her wrists backwards. After many hours of working through the tests, the doctor stood up and said, "yes, I see, I see. It was a pleasure to meet you young-man. You can go out into the lobby and send your mother in."

"She doesn't get to do the tests too?" Joe was a little disappointed because he thought the tests were just for him.

"No," the doctor said. "I want to talk to her about you."

"You said I couldn't fail these tests."

On the way down the elevator, Joe rubbed his elbow over the circle with A and then wrote, "Eat my fucking pussy," in the carpeted elevator wall. His mother didn't even look back at him. The door opened and the men, who were still in line started hooting and calling at Joe's mother. She looked at them and looked around like she had suddenly found herself in the middle of the Hollywood Papparizzi. She walked slowly out of the lobby and Joe followed behind her, chuckling to himself. He knew he would get back at him mother for having brought him to the doctor. He wasn't sick.

Joe's mother told him that the doctor said he was very normal and not to worry but that Joe had 'hyperactivity disorder' and to counter-act it they were going to have to cut down on the amount of sugar he was allowed. The nurse would also give him a pill at school. The result of all this was that Joe didn't get to eat his cereal anymore. Instead he had to eat oatmeal. His mother bought him the super-box of instant oatmeal that came in eight different flavors in microwave safe packages.

"Can't I have honey to put on my oatmeal? Honey is a natural product of bees."

“No.”

Joe didn't get to take the pills for a couple of weeks. He worried about what they would do to him. He knew he had gone over the line by biting the substitute Gastapo, but he couldn't help himself at the time. He liked himself when he was floating like that, when his nervous system flipped out onto the outside his skin and he could do anything and everything felt as sharp as the butcher knife Jase brought over when he cooked porter-house steaks for his mother. Joe had been allowed to wash the knife. The blade had edges on either side, just like a dagger from a comic book, and it was so sharp that the sponge accidentally sliced in two, though his mother thought Joe had done it on purpose.

At school the other kids started call Joe 'sugar spaz' and they would bring him Milkyways, Butterfingers, chocolate kisses, and toffees so that Joe would freak out on the playground. They would follow him as he climbed up to the monkey-bars and hang from his legs and sang the only raunchy song that he knew by heart, "I've got big balls, you've got big balls, but I've got the biggest balls of them all."

Joe's mother locked the honey and sugar in a strong box that she kept in the floor cabinet, next to the kitty litter that they used to have before their cat grew old and died. Joe sometimes opened the cabinet and looked at the cat litter. He could barely remember the cat that disappeared long ago. He saw it curled under a window in the early morning and he crawled over the carpet and ran his hands over the dark warm fur. The cat yawned and its breath smelt good and meaty like a roast beef sandwich. Then it sat up suddenly, its eyes slitted over the round, amber pupils. It bit Joe on his hand and

darted across the room. Joe never cried when the cat bit him because if he did, his mother would take it away. He tried to find the cat, and finally discovered its dark furriness under the couch. It hissed at him, and then his mother came into the room and lifted away from the floor and set him in the crib, locked away from the hot carpet, the warm fur, from the wide expanse of linoleum floor that ended in the stiff and cool columns of aluminum kitchen table legs.

After Joe had thought all this he pushed past the litter and tried to open the lock box to get at the sugar that he needed, but he didn't know how to turn the combination on the lock. He squatted down onto his knees and listened to the dial, to click, like he had seen happen in the movies, but it didn't even make a noise, except for the sharp whiz of the dial as it whirled around, the arrow pointing to different numbers. Joe had just learned to count in school: one, two, three, but these numbers were confusing because they were so big, two numbers together, like the numbers he had on his football jersey.

Oatmeal cooled very quickly and then Joe had a plate full of bland and cold mud. When his mother left, Joe walked outside and set the oatmeal down in the middle of the street. He looked at the window his apartment, and then around at the vacant lot on the other side of the street, at the parked cars, at the misty sky, so cloudy that some of the clouds were breaking up in the top of the row of trees that went down the edge of the road. A crow yelled from one of the branches and then flopped itself into the middle of the road. It looked down the street, hopped, and looked up the street, and then it nudged its beak into Joe's oatmeal. Joe stood on the sidewalk and asked the crow, "Do you have a name?"

Joe had watched a tv show a couple of weeks before about parrots in the Amazon, and how they passed information down from generation to generation. "If these birds only had opposable thumbs, then they

would build tools, and man would have serious competition from these, one of the most intelligent species in the world.” Joe felt a little stupid and self conscious because everyone knew animals didn't talk, and this crow didn't squawk or anything but ate and ate the oatmeal that Joe hated. When it had finished Joe took the bowl inside and washed it, he dressed, and went to school. He thought about the crow all day and when the other children offered him a package of M & Ms, Joe shook his head. “No thanks.” He didn't want to get distracted because he had to think of a name for the crow.

On the bus home Joe called him Mr. Explosion. When Joe came home, Mr. Explosion sat in the last tree, next to his apartment window. Mr. Explosion had a small plastic army soldier in his beak. He dropped it on Joe's head. It bounced off his nose, and skipped under a red Bronco. It was one of the green GIs that had once held a metal detector. Joe picked the man up and told Mr. Explosion, “Thanks.”

Joe called out to him and told him that he had named him. He went inside and brought out some more oatmeal. Mr. Explosion flew out of the tree and began to eat. After a while some more crows came and Mr. Explosion didn't seem to mind the company, so Joe let them all eat.

The covers couldn't stay on Joe that night. Joe squirmed and wiggled and threw the covers onto the floor. He pulled them back onto him. He held the army man in his hand and thought of all the adventures that he and Mr. Explosion would have. The next morning, Joe put out the bowl of oatmeal and went back inside to finish getting ready for school. As he put on his tennis shoes, he heard cawing from outside. He opened the drapes and saw Mr. Explosion hobbling away from a large furry creature that at first Joe thought was an infant in a fur coat and then he realized was the raccoon brigand who lived in the vacant lot. It hobbled over to Mr. Explosion, grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him into the bushes. Joe ran outside. One of

Mr. Explosion's friends circled and cried over head. The crow landed on the telephone wire and shook. Joe dove into the briars. He picked up a rock. Huddled under the vines he saw the raccoon. It lurched up and ran away, leaving Mr. Explosion in a pile of feathers and blood on the ground. Joe took him inside and lay him in kitchen sink. He called 911. "Mr. Explosion has been badly beaten up," Joe said. Joe has blood all over his arms and bloody feathers coated the sink. When the operator asked for a description of the victim, Joe described Mr. Explosion and the operator, laughed. "I'm sorry, but this line is only for humans."

Mr. Explosion passed away at five to eight o' clock, five minutes before Joe's bus rounded the corner of his street to take Joe to school. Joe quickly plucked all Mr. Explosion's feathers, wrapped him in Reyold's wrap, and lay him in the freezer.

Joe couldn't concentrate at school that day. He stared out the window at the playground and the sky that grew cloudier and cloudier and finally started to rain. At lunchtime, he stood under one of the old maple trees that grew at the furthest edge of the playground. So many kids had played at the base of the trees, that dirt had worn way around the top layer of roots, and their crazy angles stuck out of the ground. Joe stuck his feet and legs into the crossing roots and leaned against the tree. He could hear kids yelling on the other side of the play ground. And rain started to fall more heavily, sounding like deep groan from the bottom of the earth as the heavy drops pelted the grassy play field. Most of the kids ran inside to the lunchroom, but Joe waited until the bell rang, and then he walked across the muddy field.

After lunch, Joe's teacher sent him to the nurse's office. He used to like to go the nurse's office when he had a bloody nose or anything. He would lie on the crinkly paper bed that was hard and felt rubbery

under his head. He would stare up at the nurse's body-part mobile, legs, eyes, livers, hearts, and bones circling each other. But today, he arrived and a line of other kids that Joe knew were total spazzes circled down the hall. The nurse sat a little desk and handed out pills and cups of water. Joe stood up and she handed him a little pill and checked his name off on a list. "Thanks," Joe said.

He went back to class. They huddled over multiplication problems. The bluish sheet of paper had a line of bees across the top and read, "Keep Bee-sy!" Joe started working on the problems but he suddenly became so tired that he knodded onto his desk. He woke; he didn't know how long he had been asleep. But his face was cold. A pool of water had somehow collected on his desk and the gloomy daylight from the tall windows reflected across it. Mrs. Gastaop huddled down next to him, and lifted Joe up. "Are you all right, Joe?"

"Give him something to eat," one of Joe's worst enemies said. "He likes Butterfingers."

"Maybe you should go home Joe. You're never this quiet. Is something the matter?"

Joe knew what the matter was. His only friend, Mr. Explosion had been murdered that very morning, and there was nothing he could do about it. He wished Mr. Explosion could be alive forever. He also wished that he could be a bird and live with Mr. Explosion up in the trees and then he wouldn't have to multiply sixteen times eleven and forty times twenty-three. Instead he could poke around in other people's garbage, and when it was raining he would be happy because when the rain stopped all the worms would have to evacuate the wet ground. And he and his buddy birds would toss the rotting leaves out of the gutter and chow on fat nightcrawlers.

Joe's mother took an hour off work to pick him up and take him home "You are a sick little man," she said. "You lay in bed until Mom comes home back home, all right?"

Joe tried to lie in bed. But he thought of Mr. Explosion in the freezer. He thought maybe he should bury him, but then he remembered the worms would eat the bird, and that was just wrong.

"I know what I'll do," Joe thought. He took Mr. Explosion out of the freezer and laid him on the chopping board. He found Jase's knife and salt and a stick of butter. He had seen the Cajun Chicken Master on tv once, and he remembered how Cajun Chicken Master had said it was important if you wanted the tastiest chicken to kill the chicken yourself. Then he prepared the freshly killed bird. Mr. Explosion had just died.

Joe prepared Mr. Explosion and then cooked some rice. His mother came home, much later with Jase and she and Jase looked at each other. "Honey?" she said when she first came in the door. She tossed her leather vest onto the couch. "Oh, Honey? What have you done?"

"I made some diner," Joe said. He had set the places at the table.

"Yeah?" she said.

Joe was happy to see his mother and Jase sit down at the places. Jase took his spoon and scooped some rice up. "Oh, this is good," he said. "Your kid sure can cook." And they ate the diner, with the pieces of Mr. Explosion shredded and diced and mixed between the broccoli and peas. "Delicious," Joe's mother said.

Joe felt Mr. Explosion enter him, and slowly settle down the wildly swinging pendulum inside him.

