

Joe for Town Council

by Matt DeVirgiliis

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Joe pulled his head from inside the toilet and wiped the damp, hairy edges of his mouth. Pulling himself up from his knees, he turned to the sink and splashed water through his hair and on his face, splashing away remnants of last night's debacle. He stared into the mirror, at the ghost staring back — stained flannel and torn jeans; pallid, very pallid.

Bacon sizzled and crackled as it hit the hot frying pan. Slices of potato bread crisped in the toaster. And the teapot steamed and screamed. Breakfast came together.

Joe worked his morning magic in the efficiency's kitchen, flipping bacon with his bare hands, buttering the toast with a plastic knife, plopping it on a paper plate, and setting the meal on the kitchenette.

The small, metal folding table — complete with wood-finished covering - barely fit in the cramped space. Two stools were squeezed underneath when no one was eating or using the table. Joe spun in half-circles, cooking on the stove and placing hot food on the table. “Junior, breakfast is ready,” he called.

“What's the occasion? Did you win the lottery?” asked Junior as he entered the kitchen, his bulky backpack slung over his left shoulder.

Joe took the bag from his son. “You shouldn't wear your bag like that. It's bad for your posture.”

Junior pulled out a stool and sat at the folding table. His long, spindly, basketball player legs barely fit underneath, even when

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pushed back. He looked at the food and then at his dad. "Rough night?"

Joe sat down. "Not too bad. I'm here, aren't I? But I will need to borrow your bike for the next couple of weeks."

"Does that mean I get the Cherokee?"

"No. The truck's getting worked on," said Joe.

"I guess you can have the bike. Can you still pick me up from practice?"

"As long as you don't mind riding the handle bars?" said Joe.

"Not at all, Dad. Not at all."

The snapping of bacon strips and crunching of dark toast were the only sounds during the meal. It was a quiet affair.

Joe and Junior walked down the outside stairs of their current home, an efficiency apartment close to the shore town where Junior attended high school. Junior walked with his head down and his bulky bag slung over his shoulder. Joe buried his hands in the pockets of his cut-off jean shorts and whistled a happy tune.

As they walked down toward Boro High, Junior's friend Pat ran up from behind them and joined their trek. "Hi, Junior. Hi, Mister Parker. Heard you had a doozie last night, Mister P." Pat stuffed a handful of munchkins into his mouth and washed them down with a Powerade.

"How do you stay so thin, Pat?" asked Joe.

“What doozie?” asked Junior.

“I heard your dad took out the Dairy Queen drive-thru,” said Pat.

Joe picked up his pace and got ahead of the boys; his hands were still in his pockets, but the whistling stopped.

The trio reached the intersection of Route 88 and North Stream. Dairy Queen was only a few lots from the corner. Joe got to the light first, so he poked the crosswalk button. The two boys came up behind.

Junior immediately looked at the Dairy Queen to his right. The drive-thru window had been covered by a small roof which was supported by two columns. But now the columns were crumbled, and gaping holes were punched in the main building's side where the columns had been attached. Yellow police tape circled the building and most of the parking lot, and orange cones blocked the driveways. A sign, which usually displayed the night's specials, read *Closed for Repair*.

Junior stood at the corner — white-faced. “Dad?”

“It'll be okay, Junior,” said Joe. “It'll all be okay.”

The pedestrian light switched from the red hand to the white, faceless walking man, so Joe and the boys crossed the street. As he walked, Junior kept spinning his head back and looking at his father's work. It was like a car accident. It was a car accident. After they lost view of the Dairy Queen, Junior and Pat pushed ahead of Joe and created a distance.

“All right, Dad, we'll see you later,” said Junior.

Joe stopped. "You don't want me to walk you all the way?"

"We can walk alone from here. My bike's under the stairs."

Junior and Pat turned and headed down the sidewalk toward school, not looking back once. Joe just stood there and watched until the two boys disappeared around the corner a few blocks down. "Have a great day, Junior," he said after they were gone. He turned toward home and walked with his chin buried in his chest.

Joe stood on the pedals of Junior's red cruiser, pushing himself over the canal bridge. As he passed the top, he stopped pedaling and let himself coast down to the bottom.

Low hanging, grey clouds filled the sky and rain drops began sprinkling the ground. Today's work at the marina would have to be done under the canopy dock or in the garage. Joe pulled around to the back of the large, aluminum garage just after the drizzle turned to deluge, just enough to soak through his shirt and tighten his already fitted jean shorts to his legs and crotch.

He walked through the back door and nearly took out Roger Rothschild, his ogre boss. "You're three minutes late, Parker," said Rothschild.

"I rode my kid's bike here and it took longer than I thought it would."

"Three minutes. This is becoming routine with you," said Rothschild. "Be on time tomorrow."

"Of course," said Joe.

Joe lay under the stern of an 18-foot, center console Whaler. A bottle of grease and a grease brush, pliers, and pins laid to his left, and a new propeller laid to his right. Rain resonated off the metallic garage walls and roof, and Joe listened to Willie Nelson.

He put the prop on and whistled with the music and talked... to himself. *I've done too many of the props. I think I've installed them on every boat in the yard. That should be worth something. I need to make more money. I need a new car. I'll never make enough to buy a new car, not doing this.*

The door flew open and Rothschild barged in, startling Joe out of his mental conversation. "Did you install the prop on the last Osprey?" he asked.

"Well, eh, I may have. But you know, I probably only install a quarter of the props in this yard," said Joe.

"Cut the crap, Parker. I know you installed it. It's Ben Verne's boat. You know where the boat is now?"

"Off the shelf catching tuna?" said Joe.

"Verne would be fine with that. As a matter of fact, that's where he was headed until his prop fell off in the lagoon. The tide was down, so he sunk a bit, and now his ass is stuck in the muck and he's gotta get towed out and in. Guess who has to pay for the tow?"

"Triple A?" said Joe.

"I did, smart guy."

Joe banged a pin into the Whaler's prop. "Boss, that's a fluke. I've never had a problem with props before."

"I eat fluke. And that was no fluke. It was a bad installment. I should charge you for the tow and for the new prop."

"Boss, I've got to get the car fixed and pay a fine, and I'm probably going to have to pay Dairy Queen."

"Maybe you should spend less time at the Arrowhead and save more of your paycheck. You're an adult for Christ's sake. I'll let this one go, but don't keep screwing up."

"Thanks, boss."

"Oh and your kid called. He got a ride home from practice."

Rain blew sideways and pelted Joe's face; and the wind pushed his bike toward the bridge's railing as he pedaled his way home. The bridge horn blew as Joe approached the top, so he back pedaled and braked to a stop. The bridge groaned open and lifted, leaving Joe to sit and wait and get soaked.

Looking around, he saw the forty foot sailboat heading out of the canal, probably making its way to the ocean, maybe for a long voyage. Then he saw a sign that was posted to the railing that read *Vote Tony Grikakis For Town Council*.

"What makes Mister Grikakis so special?" Joe grumbled as he wiped the rain from his face.

Joe walked into the apartment and found Junior sitting on the couch watching TV. "Good practice?" asked Joe.

"Not much of a practice. The coaches and kids just stood around and talked about how much they'll miss the Dairy Queen."

"Sorry, Junior. It'll all be--"

"All right. Yeah, I know, Dad. You keep saying that."

"I'm going to turn in early. We walking to school in the morning?"

"Nah. Pat's picking me up," said Junior without looking at his father.

Joe turned and disappeared into his bedroom. Junior stretched out on the couch and turned down the volume with the remote. The apartment went quiet for the night.

Joe glanced at his watch as he careened over the top of the bridge. It was five after eight. He cut around the corner of the warehouse, jumped off the cruiser while it was still moving, and ran through the door.

"Glad you could join us, Joe." Rothschild was standing at the back of the garage, organizing a tool bench. "Don't even pick up a terrycloth. I gave you one last shot and you showed up six minutes late. If you cared you would've gotten here ten minutes early. Joe stared at Rothschild, not really understanding what was unfolding.

"Probation?" asked Joe.

"Fired, Joe. I might be a prick sometimes, Joe, but I've only ever fired two people. But you really don't leave me a choice. I'm sorry. Joe stood there for a second, not taking his eyes off his

boss, maybe hopping for a change of heart. Nothing happened. "You can come get your tools when your car is fixed," said Rothschild.

Joe halfheartedly pedaled home. At the top of the bridge, he stopped and looked down at the churning canal waters, letting the sun warm his face. He watched a couple of boats scoot by and then he looked over at the marina. He laughed. He didn't know why, but that's what he did; deep chuckles took over and then a long sigh.

Sunlight reflected into Joe's eyes and he saw the sign again. *I should run for council* he said to himself jokingly. He looked at the sign once more, leaning his head to the side and scratching his beard. Then, he spun around, jumped on his bike, and sped down the bridge.

It was dark and late and muggy, and Junior was just coming home from a game, still wearing his green shorts and white tank, smelling like a locker room. Joe sat at the kitchenette. A stack of construction paper, a pack of markers, and laminating sheets were sprawled out in front of him.

Junior picked up one of the signs. "Joe Parker for town council? Career change?" asked Junior.

"I think I can help this town. I just have this feeling," said Joe. Junior tossed the sign back on the table and turned toward his room. "Do you want to help me hang them?" asked Joe.

"I have a test on Friday and I should probably —"

"That's okay. You're busy. Maybe closer to the election."

Junior walked into the room and closed the door, and only a sliver of light escaped through the crack at the bottom. Joe continued writing and laminating. It was a busy night for both.

Junior snagged a pass from Pat. Mike Lambert, a thicker kid — not the typical basketball player's build — put his hand in Junior's face. "Go ahead, shoot," he taunted.

"I'd rather run right through you," said Junior.

"Like your dad ran through the Dairy Queen?" said Mike. The rest of the team laughed.

"This is practice. You're not on the playground. Enough of the chatter," yelled the coach.

"Is your dad going to work at the drive-thru after they fix it?" teased Mike.

"No. He's gonna work at your mom's house.

"My mom doesn't date losers, Junior," said Mike as he swatted at the ball, slapping Junior's arm.

Junior head-faked left and then cut right, leaving Mike behind. Mike tried to catch up, but his stocky legs couldn't move him fast enough. He just stood there and watched Junior lay up the ball. Junior picked up the still bouncing ball, walked it over to Mike, and stuffed it into his gut, forcing out a gasp of air. "I believe you were looking for this," said Junior. "And my Dad's no loser. He's running for town council."

Mike shut his mouth and the boys kept practicing and the coach kept yelling.

Joe pedaled up the canal bridge and tried his best to steady the cruiser. Junior sat on the handlebars and clung to the posters. They reached the top and popped off the bike. The morning sun was already hot, but there was still moisture in the air; it was a perfect day for fishing; and the canal was busy with boats. "Let's put mine right above the other poster," said Joe, holding his sign high above his head. Junior pulled Scotch Tape out of his back pocket and secured one of Joe's posters on the pole.

"It looks good, Dad. There are bunches more to hang, so let's go."

They got back on the bike. Joe pedaled and Junior sat on the handlebars, and they coasted down the bridge and down into town, and they hung every poster on ever telephone pole they could find; and later that year, Joe ran for town council.

