

Under a Bruised Sky

(A Homeless Story)



by [Lee-Anne Carver](#) on Sunday, May 30, 2010 at 12:26pm



He leaned heavily on the guardrail, his head bent like the spent bloom of a sunflower. I think his sad eyes were blue but had faded to pale, in the shade of colourless dreams. Chin-to-chest, he choked on the humidity as he wrestled to catch his breath.

He didn't know I could see him through the still leaves of an Amur Maple.

His right hand was dun, and swollen around a worn cane; it ushered him forward in deep, winter boots which softened his broken gait. It was June.

"Are you okay?" I startled him. "Well, no, not really," he managed. He had been battered, ten unenviable days before, and had

been sleeping outside sitting up since then. He was "afraid" he said, "I won't lay down to the contrary I may not be able to get back up." He was in penury; forsaken... He was 77.

His name was Joe.

Joe was sedate; he was weary. I could both see and hear his obvious suffering. He inched his way onto the seat of my van once he admitted he needed an ambulance. I turned the air-conditioning on and directed every vent towards his wounded brow. He looked like he was melting.

As we drove, Joe lamented, he would not see fall. He was absolute he would not see his birthday on January 4th. "Listen," he gasped, "they probably won't keep me in the hospital. They'll tell me there's nothing wrong. There is never anything wrong, until you're dead, and then, it's too late." He lifted his head, "Will you come back and get me if they don't keep me?" I couldn't answer quick enough, "Of course!" (Underestimating his insight). He braced his painful chest with his left hand. He looked like a soldier. He behaved, like a king.

I learned Joe had been a part of the war and that his friends called him Yogi. I wanted to know him.

His face was familiar in the emergency room. He plead for me to stay. When he registered, he was asked for his next-of-kin. He was quiet. I offered. I think my chest hurt more than Joe's at that moment.



I wheeled him to the waiting room. I was content to leave him with some cold fruit and warm wishes. We agreed I would go. He smiled. It was a nice smile.

In the evening, I received unwelcome word to reclaim Joe. I barely remember driving.

The doctor identified, "Joe was tender" from a beating. He explained Joe's problem was "social and not medical." ("Who's problem?" I wondered). In a weak attempt to advocate for Joe, I responded "It's 95 degrees out there. He's almost 80. He doesn't have anywhere to go." I swallowed my anger; it tasted bad. The doctor spoke it was summer and, "If I fill up my hospital with people like Joe, I won't have any room for people with real problems." (Joe's problems were real, unless I had imagined the day). I closed my mouth, and opened my eyes; I held mercy in them. I hoped it was contagious. It wasn't.

I sunk in my seat. My sorrow spilled like coffee, staining my faith in humanity. "I'm sorry Joe. I am so sorry," I whispered. "It's okay Honey," he hummed, "just drop me off near the electrical box near Market Square ." I did. It was entirely, the most shameful thing I have ever done.

Joe caught my hand in his own, and blessed it at his dry mouth. He kissed it three times and then placed it on his moist cheek. "Listen, I appreciate everything you tried to do for me Honey." I hugged Joe. I hugged him like he were my father. He felt like my father. He, hugged me too.

I didn't look back. I couldn't look back. I smelled him on my clothes. He clung to me, still.

I called the police when I returned home. They offered to check on Joe through the night. They did so. Twice. I was glad.

I woke up with Joe. He kissed my thoughts first that morning. I closed my eyes for a while (sometimes you see better with them closed) and saw him, imperfectly perfect. I pictured his dusty, black pants drawn tightly at the waist. His shirt was white with blue stripes; in his breast pocket was a pen, and a tattered piece of paper. He carried a red jacket on his arm, and his cap was red too, it read ' Red Lake '.

I found Joe. He was easy to find. The day was better but Joe was the same.



I still wanted to know Joe. He wasn't enigmatic. He was prosaic. I was intrigued. I cared; I was taught to care.

The sky was purple, and black. A storm was in the east. I asked Joe about Red Lake . Under a bruised sky, this, is what he told me.

He had been predeceased by his parents and sisters. He lost both his first wife and his step son. (Joe was strong when he spoke). He had many interesting jobs until he could no longer work.

He married anew. He married Jane. They had been together since 1988, and resided in a "real nice apartment," he said, until it was razed. They moved into the Adam's Block. "Jane got sick," he spoke, "I stayed with her in the hospital. They let me stay there, downstairs, in that room. I was sitting with her. She asked me how this person was, and, had I seen so-and-so. Then, she couldn't talk. She could see me though. Then, I thought she went to sleep. I went to get the nurse. I told the nurse either Jane was sleeping, or, there was something wrong. The nurse told me to prepare myself. Jane, had died. I asked the nurse not to cover her. I went outside to have a smoke. I couldn't believe it."

I watched Joe fight the tears he had a right to, he fought like a warrior. I was moved he had saved them.



"Well," he continued, "Jane was buried in Red Lake . Welfare paid for me to attend the funeral. I got to stay in a hotel. You see, when I need to talk to Jane, I go to Red Lake , because, I can be with her. It takes me about an hour to walk to her grave, with the way I walk." Suddenly, he said "I showed you her didn't I ?" I assured him he had not. He shifted his cane from one hand to the other, and reached, with his true hand, for the paper. It was creased and frayed. He passed it to me with his head turned away. It unfolded, like a butterfly. I was careful. It was his wife's funeral card. She died in October. Jane was too young to die, and Joe, was too old to let her. "I come to

Kenora because this is where all of my memories are. Everywhere I look, I can see her. I see her right here! Right here beside me!" as he banged the emptiness next to him. "I need her beside me! I loved her so much! I still love her! See, I can cry, just like, that!" And, he did.

I rested my hand on his frail shoulder, and gave him the silence they both, deserved.

"I sit here now, because, I can see my friends. They walk this way. They are all I have now."

“Joe,” I asked, “If you could have one perfect day, what would it be?” He sat up straight as though by my asking, I could grant it. “Well,” he said, “a perfect day?” (The clouds were getting thicker now). “I would have my wife back! Then everything would be OK! I miss her! That, would be a perfect day!” His tears came hard. “In Red Lake , there is a hill. A hill I need to climb to get to her. I know I cannot. I pray to God. I ask God - help me make it up this hill. And He does! I always get to the top. Tell me this, though," he paused, "Jesus raised a lot of people. Why can't he raise my wife ?! Why can't he raise her, and put her here, RIGHT HERE, next to me? Why can't he raise my Jane?" He wiped his long, salty tears.

Just then, the sky cried with him. It cried, for him.

He couldn't soak the only clothes he had. He was old. The nights were old, and cool. He moved as swiftly as he could. Joe wiggled from the electrical box, and found his feet. There was a doorway under an arbor but Joe could not sit on the stairs. They were too low he said. “I'm just going to go around the corner. There is a tree there. I can usually hide under it.” (I hated to let him go).

As gently as he began, he ended “See you Honey”, and we parted. This time though, I did look back. Through the veil of dense rain, I saw, Yogi, bracing against the downpours. The one without, and the one within.

(As it turned out, Joe had several broken ribs).

