

Black and White

Category: Stories

written by Scott Janssen | January 18, 2022



Joe, a young Black man, has fire in his eyes as he storms down the apartment building's front steps and into the night. It's around 10:00 pm, and you can tell he means business as he heads across the parking lot toward a group of rough-looking white guys who are drinking beer and playing loud music.

I'm on the front porch talking with the minister as we wait for the funeral home to arrive to remove Joe's mother's body. Sensing something bad is about to happen, I take off after him.

I'd been in Joe's home for an hour or so after the hospice on-call service contacted me to provide emotional support following his mom's death. When the music had started blaring, Joe's sister had mentioned ongoing tension with "the white guys" who lived on the other side of the housing complex. She said they have a habit of using racial slurs, drinking in public and making veiled and not-so-veiled threats.

"Once," she'd said bitterly, "I was driving by, and one of them actually called me the N-word and threatened to run me off the road."

I catch up with Joe and size up the situation as we approach the men. Five guys standing around a smoking grill, beer cans in hand, and nearby an orange pickup truck with a Confederate flag bumper sticker. One holds an ominous-looking grilling knife while two shirtless men aggressively shadowbox nearby.

Their eyes bore into us as we come to a stop a few feet from them. In my mind, I'm picturing tomorrow morning's headline: "Hospice Social Worker

Stabbed in Brawl During After-Hours Visit." I think about saying something to de-escalate the tension, but I don't want to undermine Joe by speaking first.

"I need you guys to turn off the music," he says firmly.

The guy with the knife looks at his friends, then at us.

"Why would we want to do that?" he asks with a challenging smirk, pointing the knife at us.

Memories of attending schools charged with racial tensions percolate up from the back of my mind. As a white guy who had some Black friends, I'd seen firsthand the menace of white racism and had sometimes even felt it directed my way. I'd seen how fast things could explode into violence in hallways, cafeterias, restrooms...parking lots.

Now, standing beside Joe, I feel sweat beading on my forehead. His sister's words are ringing in my ears. *This is not good.*

"My mom just died," Joe says, with a mix of sadness and fatigue.

The man's smirk melts away, morphing into what looks like confusion, as though a script he'd had in mind had suddenly been shattered.

"Are you serious?" he asks finally.

"We're waiting for the funeral home," Joe replies quietly.

The man puts the knife aside, his face beginning to flicker with what almost looks like concern. One of the young men turns the music off. The others slowly gather around Joe, seemingly not sure what to say. There's a long, awkward silence.

"Was she the woman who used to sit on the porch and wave to kids as they got off the school bus?" one young man asks finally.

Joe nods.

"I wondered where she went a few weeks back," the man says. "She seemed nice. I'm sorry..." he hesitates, not knowing Joe's name.

"My name's Joe."

"Did she have cancer or something?" asks one of the shadowboxers.

Joe nods. "Renal cancer."

"I lost my grandpa and sister to cancer," the man says somberly.

Something unexpected is happening. Just minutes ago I'd been tense, nervous and ready for trouble. My jaw and eyes had been hard, my posture projecting a warning that Joe and I were not to be taken lightly, despite being outnumbered. Now I'm relaxed, relieved and able to muster a cautious smile.

It's as though Joe's sharing his seismic, life-altering loss has activated previously hidden reserves of empathy and compassion, momentarily dissolving divisions caused by racism or the fear of those who seem different. For now, at least, we're just human beings who understand the pain of losing someone we love.

Joe and I turn and head back to his apartment.

"We'll keep things quiet, Joe," calls the man who'd wielded the knife.

When I exit Joe's home hours later, the parking lot is empty and still. As I fumble for my car keys, I notice the red flare of a single cigarette from inside the cab of the orange pickup truck.

I decide to see who it is. As I approach, I see the knife-wielder watching me as he blows smoke into the darkness. I come to a stop by his window.

"You're up late," I say matter-of-factly.

He gives me a suspicious look.

"I've been thinking about things...." he says gruffly.

"Probably none of my business," I respond. "But you kind of gave me an opening to ask."

He blows smoke at me, and I glare back, not in the mood for games.

"My mom died from cancer when I was a kid," he says softly. He looks sad, almost vulnerable.

"It still tears me up if I think about it. It's hard to talk about it," he mutters—then quickly shifts the topic:

"Is Joe okay?"

I shake my head. "It's rough, like you said."

He looks at me as though he wants to say more, but remains silent.

I want to say more, too, but don't want to push things.

"Thanks for turning the music off," I finally say before nodding goodbye and heading back to my car.

As I drive away, I think of the poet Longfellow's words: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

I doubt that this night's events will move the knife-wielder and his buddies to scrape off their Confederate bumper stickers—but there is power in moments when we see into the "sorrow and suffering" and shared humanity of others. Moments when we feel unexpected empathy and realize that we're not so different after all.

I wonder whether such moments, if we can lower our knives and let them in, can become part of our most sacred memory—opening our hearts ever so slightly, one moment at a time.

I hope they can.