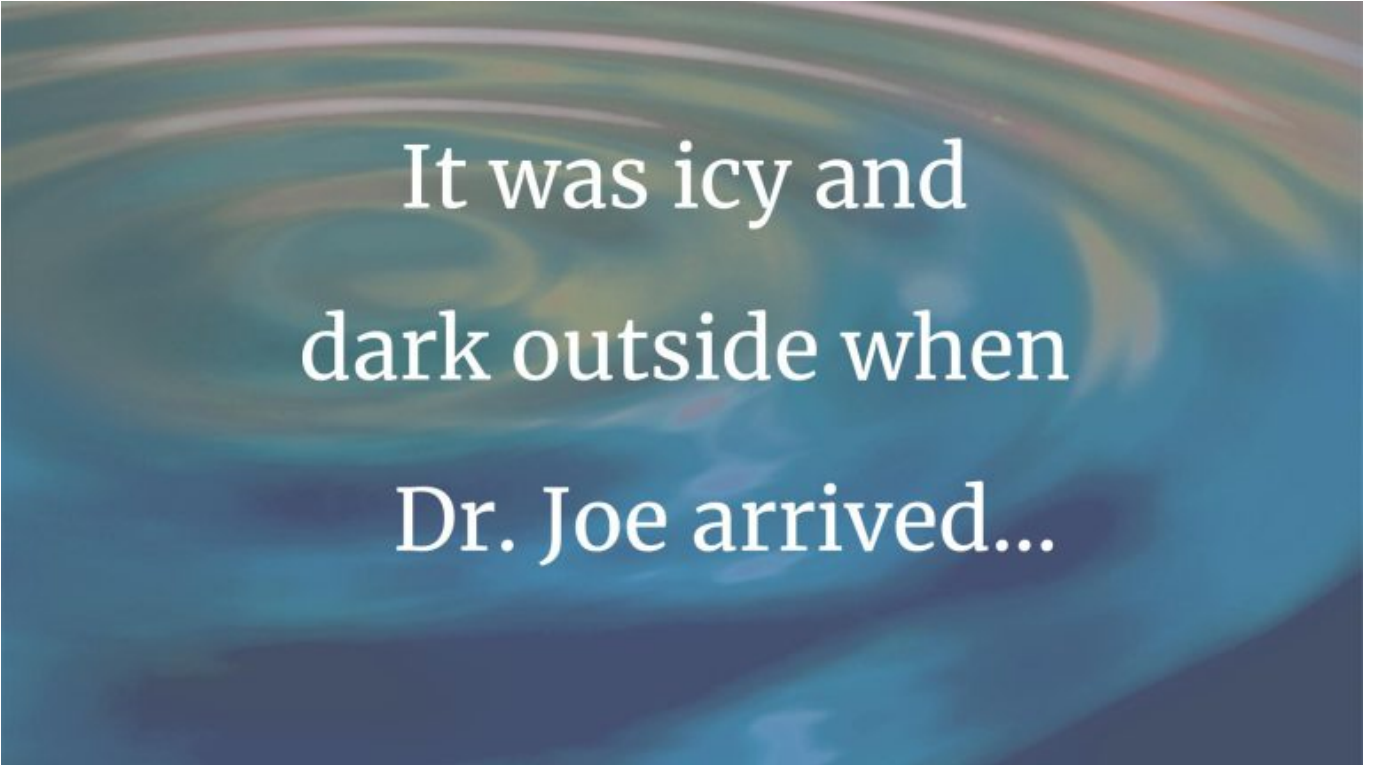


My Doctor Joe

Category: Stories

written by Tommy Vetter | December 22, 2023



It was icy and
dark outside when
Dr. Joe arrived...

Winter 1961

I recall Dr. Ulrich making a house call that night to our residential shoebox on Longview Avenue in Akron, Ohio. My parents were renting the pint-size place. My mother loathed visiting cemeteries and talking about death, so I suspect she felt edgy living across the street from the roomy Sherbondy Hill Cemetery.

That freezing night in 1961, I lay in my parents' bed, a big bed that swallowed up my little-boy body. I wanted to fall asleep, but I was too restless. Squirming like some slimy earthworm on a rain-soaked sidewalk, I felt the clammy, crumpled sheets cling to me.

I knew I was sick because my whole skinny body throbbed, and my head ached. I felt hot. My hair was matted with sweat. My lips tasted salty. I must have been burning up with fever. So the silvery-white line of mercury inside the thin glass BD thermometer shot way past the bright red arrow marking 98.6 degrees.

I knew I was sick because my parents looked and acted scared. My father paced back and forth out in the short hallway, muttering to himself, maybe, in his own way, praying: "He'll be here soon. Everything will be fine."

My mother had tears in her tired coffee-colored eyes as she tried to comfort me, repeating, "Tommy, I love you," then murmuring to herself, "It's going to be all right." It all made me scared, too.

My mother sponged my bony bare back with a white cotton washcloth soaked in rubbing alcohol. It felt cold, and good at first, then gave me goosebumps and made me shiver. The sharp, pungent odor of the isopropanol filled my nose and caused my aching head to spin.

She offered me, so I chewed and choked down, three pale orange-colored, faintly orange-flavored tablets of St. Joseph's aspirin for children. Their acidic taste lingered in my mouth, even after a cup of cold tap water. Reye syndrome associated with aspirin use for childhood fever was as yet unknown, but I escaped any ill effects.

When I was a kid, Dr. Joseph Ulrich was my pediatrician. At the time, he was in his late sixties or early seventies, a stout, jovial, bald-pated man. Countless generations of families trusted "Doctor Joe." His many friends and colleagues looked up to him.

It was icy and dark outside when Doctor Joe arrived. He stood in the narrow doorway of my parents' bedroom, quietly talking with them, his back to me, his body a dark silhouette against the harsh hallway ceiling light. At his side, he held a bag that looked like my Grandmother Verlie's pocketbook, the one with a big, shiny brass kiss-lock clasp.

He came into the room, took off his thick, dark brown wool coat, scarf and gloves and sat on the edge of the bed, in the shadowed light. He had a round, kind face, like jolly old Saint Nicholas in my favorite Christmas storybook, the one with the soft red velvet-flocked cover. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, like Doc in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

The top of Doctor Joe's big black pebble-grain leather bag unfolded to make it easy for him to find his medical tools. He put his warm, soft hands on me. Before placing his stethoscope on my bare chest, he briskly rubbed its sound-gathering bell against his palm. From his traveling apothecary, he gave me a spoonful of bitter medicine—likely paregoric: morphine, mixed with 45 percent ethanol, anise oil, benzoic acid and glycerin.

He stood up, stroked my sweaty head and smiled at me.

"Tommy, you're going to be fine in a few days," he said. "Try and get some sleep."

I heard him speak once more, in a hushed, composed voice, to my parents out in the hallway.

Then, like jolly old Saint Nick in my storybook, Doctor Joe flew away like the down of a thistle, heading back into the winter night—and, I suspect, on to another house with a sick child.

My parents surely felt less scared, so I did too. My relieved mother lay down beside me. When my father stopped pacing, he joined us. Their bed no longer felt as big to me. I fell asleep in the sheltered valley formed between my parents' slumbering bodies.

There was daylight when I awoke...

The word *pediatrics* comes from two Greek words, *παῖς* (pais: child) and *ἰατρός* (iatros: healer). Pediatrics means “healer of children.”

I know that on that *schlechte Nacht* (bad night) in 1961, my little world and tribe were visited by an *echt* (genuine) healer of children—and an angel who watched over me.

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By the time he retired in 1979, at age eighty-nine, Dr. Ulrich had cared for more than 200,000 patients and had made umpteen house calls.

I first latched onto the idea of being a doctor while on my tenth trip around the sun. There was no doctor in my family. Growing up, no buddy was the son of a doctor. Looking way, way back in my rearview mirror, Doctor Joe was the reason I became a doctor. But I never got the chance to tell him so, until now.