

Labours of Joe

The painted face looked wrong when Joe opened his eyes. In fact, it barely looked like a human face at all, with the man's eyes hanging too low and most of his hair piling up on top of his head in a hundred dark waves of curls, instead of hanging where his beard should be. Then a blue neon light flickered above the brown face and Joe knew him. 'It's Heracles,' he thought as he felt one more boot land on his stomach.

This was the fourth or fifth kick that had found his belly since the Dobermanns had knocked him on his back in the alley behind the Greek restaurant. Joe had decided to take the alley shortcut on his way home after football practice, reasoning that on Fridays the three boys liked to hang around the underpass instead. Of course, Joe had been wrong before.

Now, he was lying on his back, and although he knew he should curl up and cover his face, he didn't move. His jacket was thick enough to soften some of the kicks after all. It was an old jacket. He had begun to outgrow it a year ago and it was quite worn at the elbows but he couldn't bring himself to put it at the back of his wardrobe yet. It still had all the badges his mum had sewn on. It had taken a weekend's worth of pestering but she'd got round to it. She'd sewn on a Pokeball patch, and a Spider-man one, and his favourite, a Premier League lion patch right on the left shoulder. She never got round to sewing his Harry Potter badge though... Anyway, the blows still hurt but they were less painful when they landed on the jacket, and Joe was able to lie with his head on the pavement and look up at the glowing sign above him, which he knew to be 'Heracles' Thirteenth Labour', as Mr. Takis had chosen to name his all you can eat buffet Sundays.

Joe had never been there on Sundays, but he did stop for the occasional takeaway gyros after school and seeing the ad had made him look Heracles up on Wikipedia. That's how he learnt that Heracles killed the Nemean lion and wore its pelt as his first labour. He also read the rest of the labours and discovered that although some were heroic, like slaying the Hydra, others were more questionable, like cleaning some filthy stables and stealing some apples. What surprised him the most though, was finding out that Heracles was a bastard son of Zeus, and that although Hera had been tricked into nursing him she really hated him and did everything in her power to harm him. Even as a baby, Heracles had had to strangle the snakes she had sent to his cradle, while his twin half-brother had watched and cried. Joe had rolled his eyes at the brother's weakness as he read, but he grew to like this Heracles more than the cartoon he had seen on T.V. And definitely more than the man on the sign who was staring in awe at the gigantic platter in front of him, as if eating a pound of mousaka or half a lamb was harder than descending to the underworld and facing the three headed dog, Cerberus, or losing your family... In any case, Disney was dead.

The Dobermanns threw a couple more kicks at his belly and then one of them dropped on his knees next to Joe and started shoving his hands in his jacket's pockets.

'What you doing that for?' asked the oldest boy, that Joe knew to be the leader of the gang. 'I already got his phone last week.'

'Maybe he got a new one,' said the boy. The other two boys kicked a Pepsi can around for a bit, but when they saw all that their mate could find were a few small coins they shrugged and started walking away.

Joe heard the retreating footfall of their boots and held his breath, waiting for the third boy to leave him and follow. Instead, he felt his hands get back on his jacket.

'Hang on,' said the boy, 'I'm not leaving empty-handed,' he patted a chest-pocket in frustration, then, Joe felt him grip his left arm. 'Now this here...what's this here Josephine?' Joe kept his eyes shut tight.

'S just a nerds old stinky jacket for Chris' sake! Come on!' said one of the other Dobermanns. But the boy started pulling Joe's sleeve anyway.

'Not this one,' he said 'This here English Premier League patch is too good for Josephine here. I think it could be worth something. I can rip it off...maybe a collector will take it.'

Joe felt his arms getting yanked out of his sleeves. His hair stood on end when the street's rainwater began to soak the exposed thin shirt on his back.

'Goodnight Josephine!' he heard the last Dobermann laugh as he ran after his mates, his feet splashing through paddles.

Joe didn't get up immediately after they had left. He didn't know if it was fear of their return, or his increasingly throbbing stomach that was keeping him still, but he lay there for a bit, exactly as he had landed when his jacket had been taken from him: hair and back soaking in what he hoped was just a puddle of rainwater, right hand over his chest, left arm outstretched and still right on top of the Big-Mac wrapping paper someone had tossed. Without his jacket's protection the cold penetrated deeper and deeper into his body and made his stomach ache so badly it could no longer be ignored. He sat up slowly and testily touched his belly, half expecting it to snap at his fingers like a feral animal. Icy droplets ran through his wet hair, down the back of his neck and under his collar. He wiped them off with his hand and stood up. His stomach wasn't quietening down but he had to start for home. He could tell it was late because of the heavy smells that had begun spilling through various backdoors, flooding the alley with the odours of burning oil and crushed garlic. Carla would have supper on the table by now and would be casting those first annoyed glances at the clock above the fridge. He allowed himself just one minute to take a few breaths in an attempt to force his nausea down. In the air of the alley, the smell of spices and melting fat from the kitchens met the smell of peels rotting in the dumpsters. Joe took one last gulp of the alley air, then leaned on the wall next to Heracles and vomited.

He felt better. He couldn't remember what he had eaten that could explain the brown chunks that were floating around in a pink goo between his sneakers and Heracles' sandals, but he felt better. The sound of approaching heavy steps caught him in the middle of wiping his mouth on his sleeve, and when he turned he saw Mr. Takis coming out of his shop's backdoor, frying pan in hand. He was a broad man with curly hair that seemed to spread on every inch of his body -as a small kid, Joe was fascinated by the multiple thick rings the stubborn hairs formed on his fingers, and by the tiny golden cross that he could see struggling to stay afloat in a sea of greying hair when Mr. Takis had his shirt's top button undone.

'Christ and Mary!' he said and lowered his pan, 'Joey! I thought I'd have to chase some drunk away from my backdoor, but you? What happened? You have always been a good boy,' he clicked his tongue and shook his head with a scowl.

'I didn't mean to make trouble,' said Joe, 'I swear, it wasn't my fault.'

'Wait a minute,' said Mr. Takis, leaning in to inspect a scratch on Joe's forehead, 'You been fighting Joey boy?'

'I wasn't-'

'Was about time too,' he said, 'Ha! I was about your age when I started getting into fights. Boys have got to fight.'

'But Mr. Takis...those boys-' Joe said, but Mr. Takis wasn't paying attention to him. He was listening intently to something his wife's voice was yelling from the kitchen.

'It's just Joey boy!' he yelled back, 'Got in a scrap with some other boys. Probably about some pretty girl.'

'Oh well,' came a muffled voice from the restaurant, 'Boys will be boys.'

Mr. Takis gave a loud, throaty laugh that covered Joe's protests. 'They sure will be,' he said, 'but this here boy is going to have to clean up his mess before he can go looking for more trouble.'

Before he knew it, Joe was given a piece of cloth and a bucket, and was left alone in the alley first to wash his vomit off the pavement, and then to wipe any splatters off of Heracles' sandals. By the time he was able to get home Carla was already washing the pots in the sink.

'I hope whatever you were doing was worth it young man,' she said without looking back at him, 'that is one cold stew on the table.'

The only thing that Joe wanted to do at this point was get in the bathtub and submerge

himself until only his eyes could be seen. He sat down, hoping his damp clothes wouldn't stain Carla's chair, and picked up his fork. He looked at the blobs of solid fat that had begun to form around the cold meat and felt his stomach twist, then, he chose a piece of meat that didn't have as much fat as the others and took a bite. He chewed for as long as he could, putting off swallowing till his tongue and the insides of his cheeks were coated in a fatty film, and the meat itself felt more like straw than meat, and swallowing couldn't be put off any more. His stomach pulsated when he forced himself to down the food, and he did try to force himself, pushing even as his body shivered and pushed back. In the end, all he could do was cover his mouth with a napkin, gag and spit the food out. When he looked up Carla was drying a cup and facing him.

'Think you can do better, Jamie Oliver?' she said, 'I spent all afternoon making that, so you can have a hot meal waiting for you.'

'I'm sorry,' said Joe, 'my stomach's not feeling well.'

'Probably had too much junk with your friends again,' she said, picking up his plate, 'Is that why you were late?'

'No, I just had to-'

'Look at you, you didn't even bother washing after rolling around that filthy pitch,' Joe avoided her eyes, 'Well, it's no use. If you aren't hungry, you aren't hungry.'

'I am,' he said, this being only partly a lie, as his newly emptied stomach was beginning to groan its complains.

'Just not for my cooking?'

'No, I like your cooking. I just...I can't have stew right now. Maybe a bit of soup...or some toast...I just can't have stew.'

'It's not my fault if you spoiled your appetite, and that's exactly what I'll tell your father.'

He watched her scrub his plate. When she didn't say anything more he asked if he could go wash up. She waved him off and he stiffly walked up the stairs.

In the bathroom, Joe took off his shirt under the cold light and looked at himself in the mirror. His face was pretty much alright. The Dobermanns usually avoided leaving visible injuries. His torso wasn't so lucky. His body was cooling down and red patches were beginning to pool in around his navel and over a couple of ribs. He felt the marks with cold fingertips, knowing that by morning he would be looking at larger, purple patches spreading around the pale skin where the blows had fallen. He gingerly prodded at his ribs, but they didn't hurt as much as his stomach. His jacket had kept them safe. They were alright.

Joe looked at the bathtub for a moment before turning the washbasin tap on until the water was warm. He ran his hands through his hair and splashed some water on his face, wincing when he touched the cut on his forehead. Then, he touched his left shoulder, his hand warm on the raw skin, and walked to his room.

As he walked by the stairs he heard the front door open downstairs and his father walk in with Richard. Richard was blubbering on about his judo exams and the new Lego movie he wanted to watch. Carla came to greet them and Richard jumped up and down as she tried to hug him. Joe sat down on the carpeted floor, pulled his knees to his chest and looked through the wooden rails.

'But I must get the yellow belt mum,' he was saying.

'I'm sure you'll get it sweetie,' she said, 'now come and have your stew. You must eat to be strong.'

'Teacher said he'll get it with ease,' said his father, 'I'm going to my study.'

'Aren't you hungry?'

'I ate at the office. I have a lot of work to do.'

'Like father like son,' said Carla.

'Joseph didn't eat again?'

'He stopped for take away after football. He doesn't admit it of course.'

'He's probably just going through a phase. I did the same as a boy,' said his father and kissed her before leaving.

'But mum, I don't like stew,' said Richard, 'it's too heavy and sticky and yucky!'

'Fine,' said Carla 'you just have a little bit and I'll make you something else.'

'Fish fingers!' said Richard, but Joe didn't hear Carla's response, as they had walked in the kitchen and he got up and made his way towards his room.

He quickly opened the wardrobe, chose a dark hoodie and slipped it on with a little difficulty. Moving was beginning to hurt, he noticed, as he rummaged through his drawers. Soon he had a row of objects lined on his desk: a set of green headphones, a pile of coins and small notes, a power-bank, a new Nike football, and an old mp3. Everything of value that he could find. He studied them for a moment, then picked up a backpack from under the desk, emptied it on his bed and put the mp3 and headset inside. He flung the bag over his shoulder and left, shutting the door behind him.

When he reached the staircase he stopped and listened. It was quiet enough. He took the first step down and stopped again, looking back at his room, then glancing at the blue and red letters on the door next to it. 'Richard's Room!' it read. The door was ajar.

Richard's room was similar to his, only the floor was covered in Lego pieces, and dinosaur toys, and you could get Play-Doh stuck on your shoe soles. Joe looked around disinterestedly and opened a couple of drawers. Then something caught his attention on Richard's night-table. He lifted a comic book and uncovered the Nintendo Switch that Richard had got for his birthday. Joe didn't hesitate as much as he would have liked before pocketing the game and quietly walking down the stairs. He could hear his father talking to someone on the phone in his study, and Carla frying something in the kitchen. Probably fish sticks. If he were really fast he could get away with it.

'Where you going?'

Joe jumped a little at Richard's voice. 'Nowhere,' he said.

'But you have your bag,' said Richard in a whiny voice.

'I'll just be out a minute.'

'Why?'

'There's something I forgot to get.'

'Is it candy?' said Richard and approached him excitedly.

'No,' said Joe.

'Oh.'

'Listen,' said Joe, 'I forgot my jacket. I need to get it back.'

'Or you'll be in trouble?'

'Yeah,' lied Joe, 'lots of trouble. So you can't tell your mum, or dad.'

'I wasn't going to.'

'Ok, now go and have supper.'

'I already had a bit of stew,' said Richard and twisted his lips as if he could still feel the food offending his tongue, 'I'm waiting for my fish sticks!'

'Then go wait in the kitchen. Carla will come looking for you and find me if you don't.'

'Ok,' said Richard. He reluctantly began dragging his feet towards the kitchen, then stopped. 'I can sneak a couple of fish sticks in your room if you want,' he said.

'What for?' asked Joe.

'Mum said you didn't eat,' said Richard, 'she says it's because you had kebabs and burgers, but I think it's because the stew is yucky!'

Joe looked at his brother for a moment. 'It's ok,' he said, 'I'm not hungry, that's all.' Richard shrugged and hopped towards the kitchen practising some judo move on an opponent made of air. Joe listened to the house noises for a little longer before opening the door and slipping out quietly.

It was almost entirely dark on the street and much colder than before. The cold made his muscles tighten and his abdomen hurt as he walked, especially when his left foot took a step forward. Luckily, it was only a five minute walk to the underpass.

When he got there he could hear the Dobermanns laughing even as he struggled down the stairs. He closed his eyes when he stepped inside, then opened them, and the three older boys were standing in front of him.

'Missed us already, Josephine?' said one of them.

'Maybe he liked it when you searched him,' said another, 'wants you to touch him some more.' They all laughed. Joe ignored them and looked behind them. His jacket was lying on the ground among some cans of beer and cigarette buds.

'Listen,' he said, 'I've come to make you a deal.' The boys didn't hear him at first. Joe repeated his words.

'Josephine wants to make a deal,' laughed the first boy.

'What deal?' said the other boy, nudging his friend mockingly.

'I'll trade you,' said Joe pointing at his jacket, 'I'll trade you something more valuable for it.' The two boys laughed.

'Rubbish,' said the leader, 'you don't have nothing we need.'

'I do,' said Joe. The boys studied Joe for a moment. Joe took it as a good sign. He unzipped his bag and looked inside. The three boys were watching him carefully. Joe reached inside to pull something out, but stopped for a second and glanced at his jacket. The lion on the shoulder was barely visible under a can, but he could see it. He could feel it as if it were still on his left shoulder. He briefly looked at the Dobermanns, then reached in his bag and held out something for them to take. 'It's an old mp3 and headset,' he said, 'but they are still worth more than my jacket.'

The two older boys took turns staring first at Joe and then at their leader. The leader himself looked dumbfounded for a moment, then bent and picked Joe's jacket off the ground, dusted it off and offered it for Joe to take, outstretching his other hand to receive something. When Joe tried to hand him the mp3 the older boy grabbed and held his arm instead.

What happened next was too quick for Joe to remember properly. He recalled the sound of the mp3 hitting the floor when he dropped it, and he recalled pulling to get free and grasping for something to hold onto when he fell after feeling something like a knee hit his face. Then he felt the back of his head crush against a cold, hard surface, and something warm pool around his head. His hands twitched, some fingers wrapped around something, others wildly dancing in the air. In the distance shadows of people were moving; some running away and swearing, howling about getting caught; some approaching him and calling for help; some just standing and looking on. He briefly opened one eye and saw a woman sitting over his head. He didn't answer her questions. They weren't important. But he did manage to ask her something.

'Am I holding a jacket?' she heard him say.

'No honey,' said the woman, 'you are holding a video game. They are gone. No one is going to try and take it from you now. Please relax. Help is coming.'

Joe let his head rest against the bloody tiles of the underpass and looked up at the sign that was hanging above his head. It was upside down and the fluorescent lights weren't very strong, but he figured it out. 'Underground' he read. And then he smiled.

Words: 3483