**Joe in Alba Koo Koo**

*By Jeff Lee*

The shoes. They were all wrong. You could see it in an instant. It was the only way you could see it. They were flat on the floor. No arched toes. No lifted heels. Not a thought of balancing on the balls of the feet. They were neatly shined, even the leather cracks polished, laces tidy, almost new, and perfectly placed, parallel, three inches apart, a cadet at graduation.

Which was all so wrong because the guy leaning over our table had four fingers wrapped around the ketchup bottle. He had already picked it up twice with the clear idea of bashing in Joe´s skull. The guy was high on something. Glassy eyes. Wild hair. Ranting. Out of control but with a focus. There was a flunky behind him too, also stoned.

I looked for something to stop it all and only coming up with a fork, but I was on the balls of my feet ready to dodge that fucking ketchup bottle.

That´s when I flash on Joe´s calm shoes. There was more: pressed pants over neat socks that might have had diamonds on them; Joe´s back erect and carefully pressed into the chairback; the head placidly facing the guy and the mouth speaking plain words slowly.

I knew what the uneven dialogue was about; it was all Joe and I ever talked about, almost our sole connection—Orly Jaramillo.

¨I hear you been playing out,¨ the hophead said swaying and sweating with manufactured disgust, the righteous upholder of monogamy. “Got something new?¨

¨I don´t know what you´ve been hearing from who or what you think you know,¨ Joe said with misplaced calm. Fearless.

¨Nobody knows who.¨ The bottle came off the table again. The cap in the palm. It´s neck surrounded by white fingers.

¨Maybe nobody knows anything true,” Joe said. He was not scared of the guy. He knew something I didn´t. That, or he just made it happen, certain of the moral universe he carried even when Orly was turning it to chaos.

¨Well my wife´s cousin Rosa, she knows,¨ ranted the ketchup guy.

¨What does she know. What does she think she knows.¨ This was moral judo, the innocence of calm, the calm of innocence, the superiority of presentation…or just a big bluff. Whatever it was; it worked. The deflation of outraged virtue was complete. Joe asked them if they wanted a beer as if they were old friends which they had once been. They declined and slinked away. The ketchup safe in its rightful place. Joe finished his tidily poured single beer.

He always had it; whatever it was. Joe´s face should have been on the back of the peso, Benito Juarez on the best day he ever had with bones high under the eyes, thin pointed nose, pock-marked cheeks--all earnest perfect symmetry. Pride, yes, but not arrogance unless you assumed it. A pride now jumbled and confused.

Joe and I worked together at the Albuquerque Public Schools Library Processing Center, a dull rectangular building segregated from all drama, containing mostly dying souls happy to deal with neatly printed cards in small cardboard boxes, glacial manners, and schoolbooks. Joe came to it later than I.

Albuquerque was named after a Spanish Duke in 1706, but it grew up the bastard son of the A-bomb, between eggheads in Los Alamos to the north and the technicians at White Sands to the south. Three quarters of it was Angelo by the 1970s, that is not Chicano, Indian-Spanish Mexicans from the 1840 Mexican war or the 1540 Coronado expedition depending on hard far back you went. The cultural mosaic as it was then called included the pueblos, sovereign tribal towns dating back at least 400 years and the Apaches, Navajos and other tribes with reservations. There were tensions…mostly overlooked.

By the 70s it was a crossroads for everyone on their way somewhere new, LA, Mexico, nirvana, Oz. An 18-year-old steelworker´s kid from Youngstown, Ohio, summed it up for me. Stuck on a highway all by himself and high on something, he sat crossed-legged, Buddha consciousness in a rugby body. He nodded knowingly when I told him where I was headed—"Alba Koo Koo,” is all he said. He knew.

Joe grew up there but wasn´t any longer of it. We were both veterans: he of Vietnam infantry; I of Korea admin. We didn´t talk about it much, but one day something reminded him of loading bodies onto a helicopter. They were heavy, of course, and one guy had to heave his stiff off his shoulder so it clunked into the chopper.

¨Hey, watch it!¨ Joe said , “Have some respect!¨ It still upset him. He had places where what was right was clearly so, unlike we who only thought we had such places.

There was a big table at work where pockets for cards were pasted into books and they were stamped as school property. Part-timers often worked there. Joe and I found reasons to be there too. About ninety-five percent of employees were women. One of them was Orly, fresh-faced, open, funny, innocent, smart and with a rack that wouldn´t quit but that she seemed unaware of. I liked her right away, a soul alive in the warehouse of the tepid. I hung around the big table for a beautiful, wise widow who was always trying to do good, a Christian. Of course, it didn´t end well.

Joe had business at the big table carrying boxes of books to the delivery room. He was an immediate sensation there, not just for his Charles Bronson looks, but for his polished manners, curated wardrobe and radiating dignity. He was late twenties, married with two kids, respectable and respected. Orly was 18 unspoiled, eager, ready for what came next which was almost certainly the University of New Mexico.

So Joe came to me which was a surprise, he was obviously a much better, at least a much different person than I was. I had issues with the guy he now supervised, Miquel, who was lazy, unambitious and happy with an easy government job. I once wrongly accused his little brother of stealing some dirt weed, but it ended in handshakes and an apology. His brother was better than Miquel who Joe had no time for. But he did have time for me.

Slowly he revealed his unpublic side, like the time in high school when he and a buddy met two girls under a bridge and had sex with them and then switched and had sex with the other one. We shared some things.

It was a long time before I realized something was bothering him, really bothering him. It was mostly shame or a variety of it but also doubt. Gradually, very gradually, it came out that it was Orly. ¨I don´t know what it is,¨ he would say in sorrow. ¨There is something about her.¨

It was beyond lust, though there was that too. It was loss of control, of Joeness, of good manners, good desires. He couldn´t stop rolling it over and over. I got it all. He needed someone other than himself to consider it, because he was utterly lost. His was the voice of the rock and roll teenager so in love who doesn´t understand what has happened. He was married with children, an extended family and pride and rules and what was Right.

“I can´t understand,” he would say. “She is so young, so smart, so cute. She is a really good person.” I think he considered me as someone fallen who would understand his dilemma but ultimately approve his desire, or possibly someone with just enough guilt left to see the depth of his problem. Maybe he was right. I don´t know.

But I heard about it over and over for weeks. Sometimes I had difficulty coming up with an original response. He didn´t care. He could not stop arguing with himself and needed a witness to the heartache. Occasionally I would tune it all out or make outrageous suggestions just to see if he was listening. “Just do her, man. Everything will be better even it ends in a terrible divorce with your children homeless and hating you.”

If he heard such things he might briefly smile but then go right back. “You don´t know how hard it is. I go home and with my wife I am thinking of her. What do I do? It´s terrible.”

Maybe I didn´t know. Or anybody else either. Albuquerque in the 70s was miles from Joe, miles from the recent past and a sense of what was once OK. It wasn´t exactly that anything could happen there, which was true enough, but that what did happen was beyond comment, beyond good or bad.

Nixon after 2 ½ years finally resigned. The war had been ending for five years. Abortion was legal. The divorce rate doubled. Women worked everywhere and had brand new options. The pill was old news. Marijuana was around. Hallucinogens were too. Communes sprang up. Back to the earth. But good jobs were rare. Rent and food cost more. Stagflation was the word for it.

Everything seemed possible but wasn´t.

A knife fight broke out among the hippies in front of the university. Hitchhikers on the interstates began to disappear--home, dead, somewhere in between. People stopped guessing.

Mexican heroin started landing in Las Vegas, not Nevada, New Mexico, home of the state mental hospital. Burglary was a new norm in Alba Koo Koo. Car steres were still worth stealing. The common crime--losers high in the South Valley and out of money jack up a cousin´s car and sell the mag wheels for drugs. Joyful amoral anarchy.

But there was more than that. Everyday life, at least for me, was becoming uninterpretable, surreal. My best friend from Denver and I show up at his aunt´s place in Koo Koo in the summer of 70. His uncle meets us in the driveway and tells us to take his daughter with us to Mexico. We try, in an un-airconditioned ´63 Porche. Mexico won´t let us in. At San Carlos Reservoir in Arizona they fall in love. Two kids and a grandson.

A year later running away from a bad relationship in Denver, I stay with his brother and his girlfriend in a two-room adobe on an Indian reservation north of Santa Fe. The girlfriend leaves for Australian and the brother begins to think he might want to shoot me.

I didn´t miss the place because the old women next door turned into a bald cat at night, or might have, at least behind a tab of window-pane LSD. I´m still not sure.

I ended up at his aunt´s house in Alba Koo Koo where I found refuge until she discovered her 17-year-old daughter and I kissing in the geodesic dome. I ran away to a cave above a failed commune and read The Andromeda Strain for two days before slinking back.

Sex, drugs, violence—it wasn´t me. I always thought I was reacting in Koo Koo, not starting anything.

I fell in with a good group of three couples, multicultural, professionals, folk dancers. We did a lot together. For some reasons unclear, I used to hit bars with one of the husbands when his wife was visiting home in another state. We chased women. He caught one, but she just wanted the sex. It bothered him. His wife was a very attractive. Two years later she and I were living together in that other state which all came after one of the other husbands kicked down my door one night because his wife was determined to demonstrate her infidelity.

Sociopaths he called us. Fair enough. It was almost the only personal criticism I heard in Koo Koo, and lord knows I deserved more.

Women were saying ´yes´ to me who I hadn´t even asked. A Jewish woman from Dallas, divorced from a husband who dropped so much acid his hair turned white, pursued me. Yes, fine, outrageous sex. She slept with our Restoration Drama teacher for an A. We did it outside at her birthday party while 12 friends had cake in the living room.

I fell for my first yoga teacher. She smoked. She also had a boyfriend who broke up a gangrape sending five guys away. What happened to him? He went back to New England to live with his mother.

A sweet Punjabi woman taught a seminar on Gandhi. Her questions about a cast on my wrist one day revealed I had bought a nine-shot Ruger revolver the day before, my non nonviolent version of Satyabhama, truth force.

The piece was stolen before I left town, but not before I found myself sitting with it and an Irish ex-con armed with a baseball bat in a girlfriend´s darkened kitchen waiting for the neighbors to break in as they had so many times before.

These things just happened in Alba Koo Koo. They passed for normal. But not for Joe. That´s why I liked him, he was so different, so odd. “You know I can´t get her out of my mind,” he went on. I did know. “There´s just something about her. I don´t know what it is. She is so…pure…no, not like that...fine...no, nice.

It had to end somehow. The guy couldn´t be tortured forever. Could he? I left the Albuquerque Public Schools Processing Center to be a short-order cook again. Joe and I meet up later. He was less troubled, more just disturbed.

What happened, I wanted to know.

“We decided to do something about it.”

“What?”

“Arranged a room at this fancy hotel. She was excited, bought a special nightgown for it.”

“And”

“We had this real nice dinner and talked about things and what we were doing – going to do.”

“And”

“She comes out in this real silky thing. She is so beautiful and sexy. I just loved her.”

“So?”

“We didn´t do anything.”

“What?!”

“We couldn´t go through with it. Too much against it.”

I still don´t know what that meant. Maybe they don´t either. But that is what didn´t happen, an oasis of shame or something like it in a sea of what-the-fuck,-we-don´t-know-or-much-care-what´s-right.

Everything could happen in Alba Koo Koo.

I left for North Dakota where the biggest tribe was the Lutherans—almost as confused, fewer guns, way less drugs, hardly any sex and absolutely no Joe.