

My Name Isn't Joe
Written by James Thomas

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FICTION

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For Malachi

'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.'

Henry David Thoreau

“I think that what made your writing stand out for me is that you demonstrate such a clear and deep understanding of the human condition and are able to convey that through some very elegant writing. Although much of what you write is quite introspective, you never allow the narrative to become ponderous or self-indulgent but maintain a pace which is easy to read but also never hurried. Your writing doesn't merely describe a sequence of events, it is much deeper than that, and it is that which I think really sets it apart from that of so many writers. I feel that you write with honesty, freedom and without fear, as you so clearly depict a young man dealing with his innermost struggles - I really found it extremely moving.” **Bill Goodall – Bill Goodall Literary Agency**



Introduction

They say that “you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone”; well, sometimes, you really do.

Today - (Who am I?)

I'm the person you see every day – you sit next to me on the bus, ride beside me on the train and walk past my desk at least twice every afternoon. I'm the person whose witty and well-rehearsed quips go unheard, who prematurely apologises, who smiles too often and regularly mistimes when to laugh. I'm the one who doesn't seem to mind not being thanked and rarely congratulated. I'm the one who makes up the numbers, and at the same time, is never *really* missed. Yet, I'm the reason why there's always milk in the office fridge.

I say it isn't fair – as if I were put in this position, as if those twins of time, fate and destiny, had conspired to make me the person I am. I love passing blame like a naughty kid loves passing wind, but I'm not so naive as to really believe that I had no choice in how I ended up here.

My name is Joseph Bogart, like the famous actor, but for some reason, everyone chooses to call me Joe Bloggs. I work a nine-to-five, earn a decent wage and rent a one-bedroom flat in a reasonable part of London. That's my whole life in a sentence.

I've always been described as a 'pretty average guy', but average in what way? In the mathematical sense of being in the middle, being the mean, that with all things weighed up I'm neither hot nor cold? Great nor terrible? Or is it in terms of perspective, and if so, whose? To a 10 I'm a 2, to a 1 I'm a 7, so to whom am I a 5?

I was too scared to ask myself the more important question - what am I to me? But yesterday, I was forced beyond my comfort zone and pressed hard from within to seek the answer, to what it was I was so afraid of.

Yesterday

I sat in a busy West-London Park during my lunch break, eating a supermarket sandwich and trying not to get any salad cream on my supermarket suit. As I wiped the drop that got away from my chin, I glanced up from my light meal. The sky was a dull, tarnished silver and reminded me of the sparse cutlery in the office kitchen. The grass a few feet away had more patches of brown than green, so most people were looking for a free seat on a bench. A black-cab stuck in traffic was playing *Take the Box* from Amy Winehouse's first album. As I cocked an eyebrow at the aged cab driver's good taste, a couple, after checking the space for bird poop, sat down next to me. I smiled and they smiled back in that genuine 'we don't think you look like a pervert' kind of way.

I guessed they were a little younger than me, maybe mid to late twenties. They talked, held hands and it was clear they had seen *Annie Hall* recently as they made quirky observations about the people walking past; it was cliché but cute.

Then he kissed her.

I glanced over to a great oak in the other direction, but I could feel the kiss lasted a while. I contemplated leaving to give them privacy, but there were no other benches free. When I glanced back, they had finished. They were smiling. She was drinking Coke out of a can with a straw, and he couldn't take his eyes off her.

Usually, when I see couples in love, instead of covetousness, I feel a content envy filled with promise – I don't want what the other person has, as I know one day I'll have the same for myself.

Then, ever so gently, she removed the straw from her lips, brushed the hair from the side of his brow and pressed her cheek against his, whispering in his ear. A look of joy, a stone's throw away from bliss, brightened his face and turned my content envy into the most bitter of jealousies. I didn't want to be with her and I didn't want to be him – I wanted *him* to be *me*. My lips pursed into a grimace, disappointed in myself for feeling this way.

Then, like when a close friend or family member buys a new car and you start to notice that make and model everywhere, I began to notice how many other couples there were around me – in the park, on the street, and when I returned, even in the office. And then, without prejudice, my eyes began to fill with contempt and cold disdain for every single one of them, but I didn't know why.

Later That Evening – (The Moment)

I was on the bus on the way home from work; it was around 7pm. The days had become shorter and the nights colder, so it was already dark and the streets practically empty.

As my bus slowed at a red traffic light, I saw a woman. She looked Eastern European, very pale, thin, her face gaunt and cheekbones sharp and harsh, but her eyes wide, a sea of white surrounding the dark island. She was alone.

All of a sudden, a man dashed across the road in her direction with seeming ill intent. Her slim legs wrapped in skinny jeans shook as her knees collapsed onto each other. A pure, black fear gripped her face and captured her features, holding them tight. Weak and without hope, she clutched her bag. Fragile and feeble she stood; ripe for abuse.

The man slowed, and walked off in the opposite direction, oblivious, focussed on his journey.

Still trapped in shock, her eyes flickered over to me; watching me watching her. In that moment I caught a clear sight of her fear, that overwhelming fear that devastated her, that filled her large eyes, that drowned them and turned her pale skin white. I could taste her fear, the absoluteness of it.

She jolted away as my bus drove down the road, our connection broken, but our thoughts shared. We both knew that if this was another time, another day, another place, that... well, we both knew what could've happened.

Frozen in the fear that gripped her, she wouldn't have been able to scream, her body would've refused to fight back and her eyes, wide with innocent horror, would never close to the atrocity. All she could do was pray that it would be over soon. That picture of fear hung in my mind thick and ominous like a winter mist over a marsh, and I couldn't help but think, in fact I thought against my will, of the other times and days and places around the world where that man's intent was not so innocent, and where that woman would find that the only thing by her side, was her fear.

In that moment, I hated this world. No one should ever know such vulnerability, should ever be so scared. No person's face should ever resemble what I saw.

As the bus continued along a darker road, my eyes refocussed, and I saw my own reflection. There was no potential attacker approaching me, no impending danger about to strike, yet in my face, I saw so much fear.