Old Stoneface

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Abstract

Johnny pushed himself up off the kneeling bench, crossed himself, turned, and shouldered his way through the little crowd of people in the next room...
JOHNNY pushed himself up off the kneeling bench, crossed himself, turned, and shouldered his way through the little crowd of people in the next room. He could feel their silent stares follow him down the steps and out to the car at the curb. What a bunch of vultures! Johnny jerked the door open, dropped into the seat and slammed the door shut. Goddamn hypocrites. Talk about him all his life and then come to his funeral like they were the saints themselves. John snapped the radio on.

The music came up slowly as the radio heated up. That's no way to be, Johnny thought. Some of these people helped him. Others didn't. But Joe just took them in stride. Joe took everything in stride, his friends, his neighbors, his kids, his life. Nothing ever really mattered to Joe. Not even his nickname.

Johnny remembered hearing that nickname for the first time. It was cool and quiet on the dirty country road. The girl was sitting talking — as usual — getting ready to go home. Johnny was watching her lazily.

"Your dad was in again today. Had his usual lemon Coke." She turned on the dome light and tried to fix her lipstick. "Sally and I were talking about him the other day. She's got a nickname for him. Do you want to hear it?" She looked at him pertly.

"Yeah, I want to hear it." John pushed himself up slowly. He had never heard the nickname business.

"Well, Sally calls him . . ." She swayed down and kissed him lightly on the nose. "... 'Old Stoneface'." She giggled. John snapped his head up, staring at her.

"You're not mad, are you?" she said defensively. John relaxed a little.

"No, I'm not mad." He turned the ignition on. "Sally's just a clown, anyway." He started the car and pulled out into the center of the road. Old Stoneface, he thought. It fits him, I guess.
John watched the cars come and go. He saw people he knew and some he didn’t. He reached and twisted the radio off. He sat back in the quiet and watched the long black hearse pull into the driveway. It stopped. The driver got out and walked around to the back of the carrier and swung open the big, unglassed door. The carriage for the casket rolled out into view and the driver started to unload a little truck to move the casket. There was more chrome on it than on a new car. “A casket costs $4,000; why not add a couple hundred and be buried in a Cadillac?” John had heard it the night before on television. He remembered Father Collins telling him he should have been in saying the Rosary for his father, but Johnny had decided to watch TV instead. It was a swell show. Joe would have liked it.

No, thought Johnny, Joe wouldn’t have liked it. You couldn’t put it down and go get a glass of milk; you couldn’t sit and think about something and then go back where you left off. Most of the time, Joe didn’t like TV.

Joe liked to sit in the kitchen and read. He read the newspaper, Collier’s and Saturday Evening Post. He read the comics and cartoons, the articles and editorials. If they printed it, Joe read it. He read slowly, almost carefully. He thought about what he read. He wouldn’t follow the writer’s opinion, he’d just pick out the facts and make his own opinions.

* * *

Johnny looked up and saw Angela coming across the lawn toward him. Angel was his “little” sister. She came up to the car and leaned on the window sill.

“Mom wants you to see about them moving the casket out to the truck.” Angel didn’t look so bad, Johnny decided. Almost human.

“Mom can do it as well as I can. Tell her I’ll be out here when she’s ready to go.” Johnny slouched back in the seat and fiddled with the car keys.

“Oh, honestly! Don’t you ever try to act decently! Won’t you even come up and watch them carry your father out of his house for the last time.” She looked dramatically disgusted, then she turned up her nose and wagged her head.

“No, you wouldn’t. You just think about how smart you can be sitting out here watching. You and Joe are just alike.
I'll be glad when you go back to college.” She was really up on her haughty high-horse.

“And I suppose you're glad now that Joe's gone, too,” Johnny said quietly. Angel bit her lip in shock and looked really ashamed. Easy boy, Johnny thought. That's pretty rough on a fifteen-year-old.

“Awright,” Johnny soothed. “You go tell Mom I'll be here whenever she's ready. And if they can't get things cleared away, I'll come in and help.” Angel smiled. “Gowon, beat it,” Johnny growled. He smiled back at her.

He watched her run across the lawn. He looked on past her, past the house, past the hearse, to the green fields on the other side of the road.

He'd helped Joe in those fields while he was still in high school. Joe taught him, showed him, and when he goofed, cussed him. Yes, Joe was a cusser.

But when real trouble came, Joe was generally quiet about it. Like the night he graduated. John just handed the diploma to his mother, dodged her congratulations kiss and breezed out the door with a bunch of kids. He could see his mother was hurt, and Joe didn't think much of it either. But he went on. After all, hadn't he just graduated from high school? He couldn't just go home and go to bed while everyone else was at the dance.

The dance was twenty miles away and it was raining. They had to put on chains to get back, even on the gravel. They sat around and talked until it was light in the east. Then they started home.

John drove along the muddy gravel road, trying to keep his car in the track. He saw another car coming as he came up to a bad stretch, so he stopped and let the other guy come through first. It was Joe.

“Where you been, John? It's pretty late and you didn't tell your Mom where you were going. She thought maybe you'd piled up your car, so she sent me to find you.” Joe looked at him and John shifted away from those piercing blue eyes.

“I went to the dance over in Madison.” Johnny felt pretty cheap. “Then we sat and talked. I didn't know it was so late,” Johnny lied.

Joe slipped his car in gear and went up to a lane to turn
around. Johnny shoved his car in low and tore through the soft spot in the road.

His mother was waiting when he came in.

"Where've you been?" she said.

"I've been to the dance," John grunted defensively. He sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and looked away from her. Here it comes, he thought.

"If I were you, I'd be ashamed of myself, keeping my dad awake all night because I wasn't home. He woke me up and said he was going to hunt for you. He was afraid you'd had wrecked your car."

Johnny laughed. He couldn't help it. Good old Joe. What a guy!

"You go to bed, sweetheart, I'll talk to Joe when he gets back." He laughed again. She was too puzzled to be mad, so she just went back to bed.

He and Joe talked about it when Joe got home. They sat and talked in the increasing light. They talked about the night before and about high school and about things. Johnny was surprised to listen to Joe. He never knew his old man had so much to say. He'd never realized how much Joe got out of reading those books and magazines and newspapers. Hell, Joe was smarter than he was.

Johnny looked at the clock. It was twenty minutes to six. Well, he thought, best I get some sack. He got up.

"Where you going, kiddo?" Joe questioned. He stood and listened as Johnny mumbled something about bed. "Like hell you're goin' to bed! You grab your milk pail as soon as you get your clothes changed and get out and do chores. We've got work to do today."

Johnny stared at him, unbelieving.

"I think we'll build fences. It's probably too wet to spread fertilizer." Johnny believed him.

But Joe was wrong about one thing. It wasn't too wet to spread fertilizer. Johnny ached when he fell into bed that night. He slept till noon the next day. He wouldn't have cared if he had never waked up.

* * *

"Wake up, sleepy." Mom and Angel were sitting in the car beside him. The hearse was out on the road, waiting. He looked up stupidly.
“Let’s go, Johnny,” his mother said quietly. He snapped to it and jerked the Ford out of the driveway. His eyes focused on the hearse and a flower caught in the rear door. He sobered and slowed down so they wouldn’t have to eat the dust kicked up by the hearse. Whoever was behind him stayed right on his tail, though. Oh, it’s that old fool, Clarence Martin. The worst driver in the country. Always drives 40 mph.

Wait a minute, Johnny thought. Old Clarence has never had an accident. He’s always gotten where he was going. That’s more than we can say for you.

John winced as he thought of the night he wrecked his car. Going too fast, meeting a car at the wrong time, getting too close to the edge of a soft-shouldered gravel road. Very simple—and very fast.

Joe hadn’t said much when Johnny called home and told him about it. Just asked if Johnny was all right and then drove down and got him. They pulled the car out the next day and fixed it themselves. It took lots of work and time and cussing and money, but they got it fixed. Then Johnny sold it to pay Joe back part of his money and to start to college.

As soon as he was firmly established at college, (two and a half days) Johnny got a job in a cafe, washing dishes. He worked hard that first term, put in long hours, saved his money and really hit the books. He got $214 and a “C” average.

He got discouraged then and tried just studying. He’d had B’s and plenty of A’s in high school. But he felt kind of guilty about not working, so he still only got “C”’s. Then he decided he would make a good enlisted man in the Navy. He wrote Joe. Joe said stay where you are. They wrote back and forth. Johnny argued and Joe explained.

Then it was summer. All Johnny’s classmates were back with cars and girls and wives and gradepoints. Johnny spent a very lonely summer.

Then it was fall. Johnny switched curriculums, found one he liked and, after he had a solid “B” average in the bag, told Joe about it. Joe liked it. He liked the whole idea. Johnny thought “Perish the Lord” and went ahead in earnest. Second session was in full swing. Johnny was studying hard, and working a little on weekends. Then Joe got sick.

Johnny waited a week and then went home. He thanked
the neighbors for doing chores and started doing them himself. It was tough to get up at six when you were used to eight. It was easy to stay up too late reading because you were used to it. It was tougher eating your own cooking because Mom was up at the hospital most of the time.

Finally the doctor figured it out. Cancer and pneumonia. Too many cigarettes and too much shoveling corn. Might last a week, might last a year. Never can tell. He lasted eight days.

Joe lay there and looked up at them. Johnny didn’t say anything. He couldn’t think of anything to say. So he let the rest talk.

Mom explained how the doctor felt and how she thought it would be a good idea if he would put something down on paper about money or something. Joe said a will would be a very practical thing to have.

So they called old Lum Nelson in from the hall and he drew up a paper and asked Joe how he wanted it filled out as far as the shares were concerned.

Joe looked at Johnny.

“50-50.” Johnny said. “Mom and Angel.”

Joe nodded and so Lum wrote it down.

“Angel,” Joe said hoarsely, “You take care of Mom for me now. That is—if I don’t make it.” Angel bawled.

Mom led Angel out into the hall.

“You want to help her with Angel, Lum?” Johnny nodded toward the hall. Lum took the hint and left. Johnny stood at the foot of the bed, watching the man who was stretched out before him.

“Johnny,” the man said, “John, I’ve always been going to talk to you about things sometime, but I never got around to it. You’re a pretty good kid, I guess. You’ve got some growing up to do, but you’ll more than likely make it. But I want to tell you about some things. You got to believe in something, kid. It doesn’t make much difference what you believe, just so you believe something. A man who doesn’t believe something has no aim in life. He has nothing to work toward. He just ain’t worth a damn. So make sure you got something to believe in. Now I’m a Catholic. So’s your Mother. You and Angel are both Catholics. If that belief suits you, fine. I’ve had to make some modifications in it to
suit me. I never told your mother—or my mother for that matter. But that's not important, I guess."

The man in the bed stopped and looked around. He seemed to be searching for something. He didn't seem to see Johnny. He seemed to talk to the whole room, the whole world, the streetlights in Heaven.

"One other thing. Live." He paused. "Live it up. Live it full. Living and believing are a lot alike." The man in the bed relaxed slowly and Johnny relaxed with him.

"Well, John, I guess you better find your mother. She probably wants to head for home—or something."

Johnny watched the figure fiddle with the covers, his big brown paw almost lost in the white folds of the sheets. He looked into those deep blue eyes. He hoped they couldn't see his. He blinked and blinked.

"Goodby, oldtimer," Johnny said.

"Goodby, John," said the figure.

John walked softly out of the room. He opened and closed the door quietly. He walked gently down the hall and turned the corner.

He stood crying in the middle of the hall, his hands clenched at his sides, his eyes closed, trying not to see the nurses who stood watching and wondering.

"McGuire, you sonofabitch."

*   *   *

"Johny McGuire! What an awful thing to say in front of the church!" His mother glared at him. He glanced quickly out the window and pulled the Ford into a parking place.

He sat there for a minute while they moved the casket out of the hearse. Then he went around and opened the door for his mother and Angel. He slammed the door and started toward the church. He glanced upward toward the shining gold cross up on the steeple. He heard the bell tolling. He saw the sparrows in the trees, heard the soft whistle of the morning air in the tree tops. He heard his mother call him again.

Johnny walked up the church steps to the last public appearance of a man that a laughing high school girl had once called Old Stoneface.

—P. J. O'Connell