

My Mate Joe

By

Michael Pudney

I thought it'd just be one of those Sundays where I'd go around Joe's house, kick a ball around, play some computer games and eat some junk food. Standard. However, little did I know that this particular Sunday would teach me more than my class teacher or parents ever would.

We were at our regular corner shop — *Ocean News* — to stock up on our daily dose of sugar. The name *Ocean News* always struck me as an odd choice. I didn't expect it would have made much money simply selling stories about the ocean. We passed the sign outside the shop notifying us that Ronnie Kray was dead, whoever he was, and there was a corgi tied up to it, obediently waiting for its owner. We entered and Joe went straight to the magazines as I went to the counter. The small Indian lady, who never seemed to age, looked over my shoulder to see the back of Joe's head.

"Is that your new girlfriend?" she said, smiling, hoping that I'd finally found 'the one' even though I was only ten years old. I turned to see Joe's long, loose blond hair. It did make me wonder why he had hair like a girl, but I never questioned it. I saved the lady's dignity.

"No, she's just a friend." I paid for my treats and we left before Joe turned around to reveal what would have been, to the Indian lady, a girl with extremely boyish looks.

Back at his house, where the sound of a passing car was rare, we were throwing a tennis ball against the wall in his garden, ensuring we avoided hitting the Juliet doors and dodged the potted plants. We'd turned it into a competitive game, which meant that I was going to lose. Joe was good at sports, better than I was. At school, he was the fastest, the strongest, and the coolest; I hated it when he wanted to play a game. Initially I refused because I didn't want to come second again, then he'd call me a chicken and a "Gaylord", so I played. As we got into the throwing-the-ball-against-the-wall game, I realised I was quite good. A frustrated Joe began to smash the ball against the red brick, so I considered just letting him win, but then my competitive side whispered words of encouragement. As I won yet another point, Joe launched the ball at my face, almost knocking me into a coma. I would have laughed at this, but suddenly he shouted, "You're such a cunt!" Joe was as shocked as I that he'd said it. The only sound around us came from Joe's neighbour, a staring, frozen Mrs Skinner, drowning her beloved petunias with her hose.

Joe huffed away his fury.

"Do you wanna watch a film?"

I said I did, mainly because by agreeing with him it would mean he wouldn't again call me a word which was as bad as turning up to school on Non-Uniform Day in full uniform. I asked what he had. He said *Trainspotting*. I asked what it was about. He said he didn't know but he'd seen one bit where a man pooped the bed, then flicked the poo all over a family's breakfast. I grabbed my chocolate drops and went inside.

In his living room we were armed to the max with sweets, Coca Cola, a TV on pretty high volume, and a VHS player. Joe smiled as someone injected themselves with heroin. I struggled to find the funny bit of that particular scene. An hour or so later, a dead baby was crawling on the ceiling when Joe's dad walked in the room. I knew we weren't supposed to be watching heroin injecting, cocaine snorting, hard sex and a bed filled with faeces, or listening to Iggy Pop at our age. We'd been caught and I expected to be in trouble. Joe blew a Hubba-Bubba bubble.

"You meant to be watching this?" Joe's dad, John, asked as a Scotsman was screaming in his bed.

"Mum said we could watch it."

I kept quiet.

“Really?” I looked up at John. All I knew about him was that he worked for Essex council, always had oil on his hands, had bad teeth, and spoke so fast I could barely understand him, although I’m quite sure that most of what he said was swearing anyway.

“Yeah.” The dead baby fell on the Scotsman and he screeched into his pillow.

“Well I guess it won’t do you no ’arm. Alright then. I’m off out.” Joe’s dad was cool; my dad wouldn’t have let me watch it.

The film finished and I had learnt about a hundred new things in about two hours. We headed upstairs.

His older brother’s door was ajar. It was never ajar, which is why it stopped Joe in his tracks. “You wanna check out some porn?” He just came out with it. No different to when he had asked earlier whether I wanted to throw a tennis ball against a wall.

“Yeah alright,” I replied while trying to recall whether I’d heard the word ‘porn’ before. We crept in. His brother’s presence was still worryingly apparent through the stench of stale cigarettes and damp towels. The thought of getting caught was thrilling.

Joe went to a drawer and pulled out a magazine: “Check this out,” he said.

Its glossy cover showed a lovely blonde lady bent double over a sofa, and a big red star where her vagina was housed. We looked at each other and smiled, though I'm not sure why, perhaps because we could now finally call ourselves men, or perhaps because we were both absolutely terrified and needed each other's smile for comfort.

I noticed he'd skipped the contents. Without the contents I was lost. It made me wonder how the hell he was going to navigate his way through the magazine without referring back to them. As we leafed through the mag as meticulously as possible, boob by boob, Joe stopped at a page with two girls lying on a bed naked (except for their high heels, which made me think of my mum. She would have gone mad if those shoes were on her bed, or my bed for that matter.) I wondered why we had stopped, but dared not to look away from the page, then Joe said, softly, eyes still fixed on the girls, "Pudney?"

"Yeah?" I only whispered because he had.

"Is your willy sticking up?"

My willy wasn't sticking up.

"Yeah," I lied.

The back end of the mag had some stories but I didn't get a chance to read them – I was gutted. Joe strategically placed the magazine exactly where he had picked it up. I felt like a secret agent, though low level. It was then that Joe sprung out of his whispering, quiet mood and nonchalantly asked, "Fancy a bath?"

"OK," I found myself saying, because, after all, he was a mate.

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The next weekend I was at my friend Sophie's house. We had just finished playing Etch-a-Sketch in her attic room. We were at a loose end so Sophie suggested we play Doctors and Nurses. She pulled some chairs together to turn into a makeshift bed, and she lay on it.

"OK, you have to operate on me."

I grabbed some amateur surgical tools lying around (bits of plastic and card), some broken rubber tubing, a fork sitting on our plate of mostly eaten snacks, and some tissues, obviously to wipe up the blood. I began to dab until she reminded me that it was impossible to operate through her shirt, so she took it off. I thought nothing of it; we were mates.

My operating skills were obviously very good because in no time at all Sophie had stripped down to her knickers. I was still working hard to remove that defective kidney when she suggested, "Do you think I should take my knickers off?" At this point, I knew something was up. I didn't quite know why, but I was sure that I wasn't meant to see what Sophie kept in those knickers. I mean, no more than one week before I had seen a magazine cover where the bit she was going to show me had been covered by a big red star, and I was under the assumption that if Sophie took off those knickers, a big red star was not underneath them. Although she was the one more or less naked, I felt more exposed at this awkward situation. So, after a momentary silence I chickened out.

"I'm gonna ask your dad if it's okay."

She huffed, and then reluctantly agreed.

Ian was out in the garden watering the plants in his shorts and a vest top; it was a beautiful day, so why not. I stayed by the backdoor.

"Ian?"

"Yes, Michael?"

"Is it okay if I take off Sophie's knickers?"



He didn't look up or stop watering his plants.

"No Michael, no you can't take off her knickers."

"OK. Thanks a lot!" I headed back upstairs and told Sophie the verdict. She sighed, then perked up,

"Wanna play Dungeons and Dragons?"

"Sure!"

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Throughout my primary school days, the bathrooms were a breeze to handle. You got your individual section, safe from prying eyes, and trousers around your ankles were entirely acceptable. But at my first day of secondary school, I had never been so wrong. I treaded lightly through the corridor, wearing school clothes three sizes too big for me, an oversized school bag and a churning stomach full of nerves. I needed a wee. I walked into the stinking boys' toilet and stood myself up to the basin. Down came my trousers to my ankles, closely followed by my pants. Naked, exposed, vulnerable. As soon as I'd started peeing, a pupil who looked like a man, wearing a uniform that fit, walked through the door. He burst into laughter and then spanked my arse so hard that it slammed me up against the basin; piss exploded like a

Catherine Wheel all over me. He kept laughing as he watched my trousers seep urine, and my arse cheek redden. He winked and smirked,

“If I ever see you do that again, I’ll kill you.”

If I didn’t laugh with him I would have had an emotional breakdown. I never pulled my trousers down ever again.

Fast-forward a year of using only my zip to have a wee (I now considered myself a veteran), and we were hanging out in the streets of our home town. The few hundred people that had bothered to wait around in the bitter cold cheered as Christmas had officially begun. A Z-list celebrity did the honours of pressing the button to illuminate my hometown. The few of us who had waited around were contemplating what to do next. One member of our gang was a Goth called Sammy. She was scantily clad but what she did have on was all black, including the black lipstick and black tear drawn on her face.

It was decided that the five of us go back to Sammy’s place. She was almost shaking in the cold as she explained, “I can’t feel anything. Maybe I should have worn a coat. At least then everyone would be staring into my eyes.” At that point I did my best to not look at her blatant cleavage. I succeeded, and considered it a small victory in self-discipline.

Her flat was small; we went into her bedroom where she offered vodka from the bottle to everyone. It was hard to see anything in the room because of its gothic theme. There were pictures of death and the Devil. The bed sheets represented some kind of scene in Hell. Arty, but not my cup of tea. I needed the toilet. Sammy followed me. I had my fears it was going to be another bum-slap-gate. But I was distracted in the corridor when introduced by Sammy to her mum, who wasn't a Goth, as I thought it would have been a family thing. Upon returning from the toilet, Sammy's mum had returned to her room, but Sammy was waiting. She grabbed my arm and yanked me into the coats. She began sucking my face like a plunger, pushing me deeper and deeper into the coats. I lost my bearings as she rubbed herself up against me. Her eyes were closed, mine were wide open, paranoid that her mum would walk back out of her room and catch her daughter attacking me – who would she shout at? This innocently exposed boy or her boy-eating daughter? She grabbed my hands and slapped them onto her bum as she lifted her leg up to my waist. I was old enough to know that this was supposed to be turning me on, but I was terrified. I was scared of Goths when I saw them in the street, let alone one assaulting me in her hallway. Finally, she finished with me and we went back to her room. The others had left a quarter of the bottle for us... well, for her. She downed it in one then pulled me onto the bed. She squeezed my hand onto her breast and within minutes, passed out. We all

sat there for about an hour afterwards, chatting away, me with a handful of boob, then decided to leave when we knew the host wasn't going to wake up. As we let ourselves out everyone began laughing at me, but no one let me in on the joke.

When I got home I looked in the mirror and saw that my face was covered in black. It didn't bother me, though. What bothered me was the 'banter' I was going to get at school. There would be a backlash, and I wasn't looking forward to how I would be associated with a girl whose nickname was 'Sammy the Spider'. But there it was the next day: "Did she open all eight of her legs?" I thought that one was particularly inventive, and it has stayed with me forever. I looked over to see who the jibes were coming from; it was Joe. If only the people laughing with him knew our secrets, but I would say nothing, he was a mate after all.