

Joe's Short Life

Matt Vanderpol

© 2003 Matt Vanderpol
matt@vanderbrew.com
<http://www.vanderbrew.com/joe>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs-NonCommercial License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd-nc/1.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

In plain English, this means:

Attribution . The licensor permits others to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work. In return, licensees must give the original author credit.

Noncommercial . The licensor permits others to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work. In return, licensees may not use the work for commercial purposes -- unless they get the licensor's permission.

No Derivative Works . The licensor permits others to copy, distribute, display and perform only unaltered copies of the work -- not derivative works based on it.

Joe stumbled out of the trees and saw a road ahead of him. His clothes were torn and dirty. He had scratches on his arms and legs from branches that had clawed at him while he ran from, from...he couldn't remember what he had been running from. Only that it had been horrible. He felt like he had been running for days. He was so thirsty that he would have drunk sea water if an ocean appeared before him. How long had it been since he had last eaten or drank anything - he didn't know.

He began walking down the grassy hill towards the road. Part way down, his foot slipped and he fell the 100 odd feet down the hill, coming to rest on the shoulder of the road. He picked himself up and looked, first one way, then the other. It was just a lonely stretch of two lane blacktop. No beginning, no end, no cars in sight. Joe absently reached into his pocket to flip his lucky coin to figure out which way to go. He felt a stirring of panic when he didn't find it. Find "it"? Find what? What had he been looking for? The feeling of panic passed into confusion. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he remember anything? He looked up suddenly at the sound of a car approaching.

He couldn't tell what it was at first, just a reddish shimmer, wavy in the heat rising from the road. Joe stood on the shoulder, watching it approach. The shimmer became a shape and the shape a pickup truck. The truck slowed as it approached Joe and he could see that the only occupant was the driver. The truck stopped as it pulled up to where Joe was standing.

"Gee, mister, you're out pretty far for being on your own. You lost or something?" The driver of the pickup was an old man with hair down to his shoulders and a patchy greying beard. He looked relatively fit and had glasses that perched on the edge of his nose.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"You going some place?"

"Yeah....or, at least, I think I am...I'm having some trouble remembering stuff."

"Hmmm. Well, can I give you a lift somewhere? I'm on my way home, been out visiting my daughter at The House."

"Sure, yeah, I'd like to get to a town so I can call...someone..."

"Well, hop in and I'll take you to Ferner."

Joe opened the door to the truck and climbed in. The cab was very clean, no dirt or dust anywhere. He settled himself onto the hot vinyl seat and waited for the truck to go. Only, it didn't. He looked over at the old man to find him looking back at him.

"Sorry, mister, we ain't going no where till you put that seat belt on. It's the law and it's a matter of safety."

Joe, startled, grabbed the seat belt and fastened it. The truck started rolling again.

"My name's Leroy Blackwell," the old man said.

"I'm Joe."

"You got a last name? Or is it just Joe?"

"It's...it's just Joe." Joe felt embarrassed that he couldn't remember his last name. He could see Leroy looking at him. He didn't know what Leroy was thinking, but he waited for the truck to pull off to the side of the road where Joe would be politely, but firmly, asked to step out.

"Joe then, that's ok."

Joe settled back in the seat, glad for the chance to rest and still be moving away from...what was he moving away from? He didn't know...and that scared him more than not knowing his own last name.

Frank adjusted his tie and looked at his reflection in the mirror. "Damn it, I hate this shit. Public speeches, putting on the good face."

"You know how important it is. All we need is some little small town girl to make a big stink and then we've got every acronym from the PTA to the IRS to the FBI looking into our business and that's really not something that we want."

Frank looked over at the man who had answered him. Randy Lovelace had been his assistant for almost 20 years. If Frank could be said to have a friend, Randy was the closest thing to it. "Yeah, I know, just blowing off steam," Frank replied. Randy was the only person who could speak to Frank like this without Frank exploding and firing the speaker. Randy had been there when Lockstep Enterprises started out as just a four man group, trying to build a better plastic. Now it was a multibillion dollar manufacturing giant with it's tentacles in oil, pharmaceutical research and other things.

"Look, I know how much you hate these public events. Being friendly, talking about how great the business is for their town, but it really is important."

"I know, I know. It's just that I'm bringing a huge amount of money to the community and it pisses me off that it's not enough for them. This town would be completely deserted if I hadn't come."

Someone knocked at the door to the room. Randy walked over to it and spoke with the woman there. He closed the door and returned to where Frank was standing, now checking his hair and teeth in the mirror.

"The car is ready."

"Well, we can't keep the public waiting," Frank muttered, and the two men left the room.

"So, you got a place to go to?"

Joe and Leroy had traveled about 15 minutes in silence.

"Um, not really..." Joe thought to himself, *Damn it, what's wrong with me, why can't I remember anything?*

"You know, you can come home with me if you want. Stay a few days, try to get yourself figured out."

"That's awfully nice of you. Yeah, I'll take you up on that. I've been having trouble remembering stuff."

"Yeah, I kindah thought that that might be the case. You're not the first person I've picked up along that particular stretch of road."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Oh, been a few men who come stumbling out of those woods, can't remember who they are or where they've been. I've taken them home for a bit, tried to help them figure stuff out and what to do next. They don't remember anything before seeing the road. Eventually, they just move out and head off to who knows where. Don't want to be a burden to me any longer. Don't really know what happens to them."

"That's really odd. Do you have any idea where they, err...we, come from?"

"Well, I've got my suspicions, but that's all they are."

"What do you think?"

Leroy looked sideways at Joe. "Well, I'm not sure that I should say much about them. You know, a man can get in trouble for what he says."

"In trouble?"

"Like, if he says that there are problems being caused by some big company, and the company hears about it, they can cause problems for the person doing the saying."

"So, you think that my current state is the cause of some company? Like, they drugged me or something?"

"Hey, I'm just offering suppositions here, I'm not saying anything concrete." Leroy turned his full attention back to the road.

"Hey, Leroy, man, if you know something, I'd love to hear it. I'm not gonna go talk to any company about it and say you told me. You're helping me out here, man. Last thing I'd want is to cause you any trouble."

Leroy looked back over at Joe, sizing him up. "Roll up your sleeves."

Joe did so and was surprised to see scabs and scars on his arms. "Scars?"

"Yep, looks like hot poker and hot knives. I'd say most of those are between 2 and 3 months old."

Joe continued to stare at his arms in disbelief. He had raised, red welts, ugly black areas of dead skin, angry red lines as if he had been cut by a dull knife. Oddly, none of it hurt. "But, how? Why? I don't remember anything."

"Well now, I'll tell you what I know and what I suspect and what I've pieced together from talking to other guys like you.

"There's this company called Lockstep Enterprises. They came to this area a few years ago, built a big plant doing manufacturing. No one's really sure what they're manufacturing all everyone knows is that they brought money and jobs to the area. Lots of people are employed there now."

"But, how can people not know what they're working on?"

"This town had some hard times before Lockstep came here. People couldn't find work, had to scrape to get by. Lockstep was some kinda fairy godmother, come to bring help to all the people. Put money into the schools, built a new library, provided a bunch of jobs and all with one condition."

"What's that?"

"You can't talk about your job when you're not at work. Can't talk about it to anyone."

"People went along with that?"

"Well, people like how the town is right now. They like the stability that the company provides. They like that their kids can go to a school that doesn't leak when it rains and good teachers aren't afraid to teach at."

"Ok, sure, but someone must have talked, some time. I mean, come on, it's human nature. Not everyone can keep a secret like that."

"Yeah, you're right. Someone talked. Fred Jenkins. And, you know what happened to him?" Leroy looked over at Joe to make sure that he had his full attention. "First, he was fired from Lockstep. Then his wife left him. Then the community asked him to stop going to the church. After a few weeks, some men in dark suits and sun glasses knocked on his door saying that they had a warrant for his arrest for contract violation and theft of intellectual property. Last I heard, he was just starting a 20 year visit to the penitentiary upstate."

"20 years? For that?"

"Yeah, well, you got a lot of money to buy a good lawyering team, your own judge and a few of the jurors, you can do a lot to damage a man."

Joe slowly relaxed into the seat. He hadn't even realized that he had leaned forward tensely. "Jesus...just for talking about his job?"

"Yep, seems that the folks at Lockstep don't take too kindly to people talking about what goes on there."

"No, but, what about you? Don't you work here? Won't you get in trouble for talking about this?"

Leroy chuckled, "No, I don't work there. I've got enough money. I just think about stuff and pick up lost people."

Joe looked ahead at the road, brooding about what he had heard. "Ok, so the company freaks out about their privacy...what's that got to do with me?"

Leroy took a deep breath, "You sure you wannah hear this? You ready for this?"

"No, I'm not sure, but I need to hear it. I need to know what happened to me."

Leroy nodded, "Ok."

Frank and Randy were sitting in the back of a stretch Lincoln limousine. Frank was sipping from a glass of scotch and Randy was reviewing notes on a laptop.

"One of the dogs escaped from the lab last night," Randy spoke in a quiet voice.

"Damn It! Why can't we keep security tighter there?"

"I'm sure that they're doing the best that they can. We don't want so much of a presence that people get suspicious and start looking more closely at it."

"We're doing military research! Can't we get the military to provide some god damn security?"

Randy sighed tiredly, "It's only military research if they're paying us for it and acknowledging that we're doing it. As soon as we've got some good results and can show it to them, we both know that they'll jump on it and be interested in the applications of our technology."

"Are we tracking him?"

"Ah, no, apparently he broke the tracking device off."

"Damn it, that's what, the third one in 6 months? If we don't increase security in that lab, I'm gonna find someone else to manage the security there."

"I'll be sure to speak to the head of security there and express your concerns as well as the precariousness of his position. I'll make sure that he understand the situation."

"You better. The last thing we need is one of those things causing a panic in the town. We have got to get it back and ensure that it doesn't happen again."

"Don't worry. We recovered the others without any problem and we'll do it with this one too."

Frank turned his full gaze onto Randy, his eye's shining hotly. "And what if that old man finds out? What if he get's his hands on it?"

"We'll deal with that situation if it arises." Randy's eyes were cold and calculating. He had dealt with Frank in this mood before. He had, in fact, dealt with situations like that before. Randy's solutions were always satisfactory.

Frank nodded, "Ok. I know that you'll keep it contained."

"I found the first guy about 6 months ago. He was staggering along the side of the road, looked like he hadn't eaten in days. Didn't even know his own name - you're one up on him for that. We decided to call him Lars. I took him home, gave him some food, a place to sleep and a chance to wash up. He had scars, scratches and scabs too. Funny thing though, they didn't hurt him at all."

Joe looked up in shock, "Mine don't hurt either".

Leroy nodded knowingly, "Yep, and you'll probably never feel pain again. Lars spilled boiling hot water on his skin and didn't feel a shred of pain. He felt heat and wet - knew exactly what he had done to himself - but didn't feel any pain at all. His arms were all red, blisters appearing as we watched, but no pain. That was when I started thinking about Lockstep.

"See, they've got some sort of research facility in the woods here. From what I understand it's some sort of behavioral research place. Don't know what kind of behavior that they're trying to research though. Seems to me, they're looking for ways to block pain. Probably figure they'll have some sort of military application. Can you imagine if they were able to do this to soldiers? They could keep on fighting until they dropped from blood loss or something.

"Anyway, I figure that you and Lars are just test subjects. Maybe you were part of some special military program. Maybe you were just a homeless person on the street that they picked up, but they're still trying to work the kinks out of the program. The scars and scabs are from testing, probing, making sure that the pain is all blocked."

Joe looked horrified, "But, how can they get away with it? How can they just, just, torture someone like that? Like this!?"

"Hey, if no one's asking questions then no one's gonna investigate. And, they're a big corporation, got a lot of money to throw at a problem to make sure it goes away."

Joe was stunned. How could this have happened to him? Why would someone have done this? Who could have done it? He shook his head, trying to clear it. Some of these questions seemed to have obvious answers...some didn't.

"But, there's got to be something I can do? I'm not going to just roll over and pretend that none of this ever happened! I want , shit, I don't know what I want...but I'm not just gonna leave town and act like nothing ever happened!"

Leroy looked at Joe, "You know, Joe, you're the first one who ever acted like this. The others all looked beaten down, cowed. They just wanted to make some sense of the situation and move along. I had a feeling that you'd be different." Leroy's eyes turned hard and full of hate, "and, I know that feeling you've got too. It's a desire for revenge. I know it because I've got the same feeling. Those bastards are dumping some chemicals into the earth and my daughter's been turned into a brain damaged vegetable because of it!" Leroy's voice became a roar of rage as he finished the sentence.

"Every time I see her, I burn for something, some concrete evidence that I can use to damage or destroy Lockstep Enterprises. But you know what?" Now Leroy's voice was quiet, but every bit as angry. "I've realized that you can't damage or destroy a corporation. Not when they've got billions of dollars in the bank and judge and jury in their pocket. But, every corporation has a head." Leroy began to hiss his words. "Yes, a head, and this head is named Frank Younger and someday I'll bring ruination to his life. If I can't attack the corporation, I'll attack the man who's running it."

“So, what’s the latest on that crazy old man?”

Randy closed his computer, “I had some people take a look at his house the other day. He had some notes out about time travel and the basement was locked tighter than they’ve ever seen a residence. Apparently he thinks he’s on the verge of some time machine.”

Frank scoffed, “Time travel? Right, what’s next? World Peace?”

“I ran some of the info by experts in the field. They were quite amazed and said that it was an ingenious new direction that they’d never conceived of before.”

“Well, I’m sure that he’s got a wonderful theory for it all, but thinking it up and building a machine that actually does it are two different things.”

“I think that we should pay a bit more attention to this particular idea. We know the man is crazy, but he’s still an incredibly intelligent physicist. Who knows what sort of ideas-”

“No Randy. I don’t think we need to expend any more energy and resources looking into this ludicrous time travel idea.”

Randy nodded and settled back into his seat. He wasn’t going to leave it at that, but Frank didn’t need to know it. Thinking for himself was one of the reasons that Frank paid him so much.

“You see Joe, I’ve been giving it a lot of thought lately. I know that Frank Younger needs to be killed, but I just don’t have the nerve to do it. I’m an old man and have always been squeamish about killing.” Leroy said this with an odd look in his eyes. “Also, Frank and Randy know who I am and give my picture to the security agents so I can’t get close enough to him.”

“Randy?” Joe asked.

“Oh, Randy is Frank’s assistant. Goes everywhere with him, keeps the whole operation running smoothly. Anyway, that’s why I need you. You can get in close and do the job.”

“Hang on...this is moving kind of fast for me...”

“Something wrong, Joe? Oh, it’s ok if you’re not ready for this. I understand.” Leroy’s eyes seemed to cloud over as he visible withdrew into himself. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up. You can just stay with me for a few days then-”

“Hold on, I didn’t say I wasn’t prepared to help you. I just need some time to digest it all. I mean, wow...all in the space of an hour, I found out that I’ve been tortured and there’s this big corporation run by this evil guy and everything. It’s just a lot to take in.”

“I understand, believe me. Only thing is Frank’s giving a speech today. A public speech. This would be the perfect time to do it. I’ll show up and distract his security detail and you get close and shoot him.”

“Shoot him? I’m not sure I even know how to work a gun. Plus, where are we even going to get a gun?”

Leroy grinned with an almost childlike glint in his eyes, “Look in the glove box.”

Joe opened the glove box and saw a heavy metal object sitting there. He cautiously reached in and pulled out the gun. It felt, heavy, but comfortable in his

hands. Before he knew what he was doing, Joe popped out the clip and checked for a round in the chamber.

"Hmm...it looks like you know how to work a gun." Leroy said slyly.

"Yeah, I guess...I'm not sure how I know what to do, my hands are just doing it." With those words, he put the clip back in, chambered a round and set the safety on.

As they pulled up to the location where Frank was supposed to give his speech, he turned to Randy. "I want you to find that missing dog and solve the situation."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

Frank chuckled as he was getting out of the car, "Yes, Randy, I know you will."

As the driver closed the door behind him, an aide came up to Frank. "Sir, the platform is this way."

"Has security checked it out?"

"Yes, sir. Security went over every inch of it and they're keeping an eye on the crowd now."

"How soon am I scheduled to start?"

The aide glanced at his watch. "You've got 5 minutes, sir."

"Good, find me a drink."

"Yes, sir."

The aide trotted dutifully off, not needing to ask what his boss wanted. Frank reached into his pocket and rubbed a coin between his fingers in a compulsive gesture. In a few minutes, the aide was back with a clear glass filled with a smokey liquid and a couple of ice cubes. Frank drained off the liquid in a few large swallows, not even trying to savor the expensive liquor. He shook his head, then rolled it around on his neck looking like a man preparing himself for an undesired but necessary task.

"Ok, I'm ready."

"Right this way, sir."

The aide led Frank off towards a platform with a podium on it. In front of the podium was a crowd of about 500 people. As he climbed the stairs, Frank's face went through a remarkable transformation. His usual look of sneering superiority disappeared. What replaced it was a remarkably friendly smile. The turn of his mouth made it look like all he wanted to do was be your best friend. It was a totally believable face - as long as you didn't look at his eyes. Frank never could learn how to change the look in his eyes and they still showed the contempt he felt for these common people.

He arrived at the podium alone, the aide having stopped at the foot of the stairs after taking the glass back. The audience spread out before him clapped half-heartedly, a few cheers scattered here and there. He could tell that many of them were here simply because their managers would be here and no one wanted to be noticed not supporting the company that employed them.

Frank held up his hands, his big smile growing even bigger and the crowd instantly fell silent. He looked out at them all, recognizing no one, but smiling at a few as if he knew who they were.

"I'd like to thank you all for coming out here today and for all the hard work that you've been doing, making Lockstep Enterprises such a great company."

There was a man standing close to the front looking around furtively, one hand deep in his pocket. Frank frowned and continued speaking, his eyes drifting over the crowd, but always returning to the guy up front. Frank couldn't shake the feeling that this guy looked familiar somehow.

Joe stood there, close to the front, listening to the crap that the guy up on the podium was spouting. Blah, blah, blah. Thanks for working hard and making me money. What a bunch of bull. Joe couldn't believe that these people were buying it. He looked around him a bit, and saw that yeah, these people were being taken in by it. The bastard was promising to put more money into the community, more schools, more libraries, more parks and all Joe kept thinking was, "yeah, more tax write offs for you, Mr. BigShot MoneyBags."

He looked around again, his anger building at what he was hearing. Damn it, where was Leroy with his decoy? Then he heard it. An airhorn at the back of the crowd.

Everyone's head swivelled to look back there.

Frank paused in his speech.

Joe didn't bother looking. He pulled the gun from his pocket and brought it up to point at Frank. "Hey you rich, bastard!" he cried. "This is what happens when you try to stomp on everyone's life!"

Frank's head snapped back to look straight at him, his face transformed into a look of terror. Joe started pulling the trigger right as someone jostled him from behind. He stumbled forward and knew that the bullet hadn't gone through Frank's heart as intended, but Frank was down and there was blood on the stage so hopefully it was enough.

No, it wasn't enough. It was just a good start.

Joe began moving towards the stage, the crowd screaming and scattering in front of him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another man with a gun pointed right at him. Joe ignored him, still moving towards the podium and his target. A series of gunshots echoed through the afternoon air and Joe felt bullets slam into his body.

There was no pain and he struggled to keep moving forward but his body wasn't responding. He felt himself falling - or, was he floating? The pavement hovered in front of his eyes, swimming up towards him, filling his entire vision.

Joe's body crashed to the ground and one of the security agents, the one who had shot him, rushed over. The agent felt for a pulse and looked up with grim satisfaction. He rose from the body and looked towards the podium where the man he had been hired to guard had fallen. The sound of an ambulance's siren was distant, but growing louder.

The agent moved quickly up to the podium. "Sir, how bad do you feel. How's the pain?"

"How's the pain? There is no pain. I don't feel a damn thing."

"That's ok, Sir. It's just the shock. The ambulance is on it's way, it'll be here soon." The agent took off his jacket to lay over Frank and found a nearby box to prop up his feet.

Feet pounded up the stairs in the back of the platform and then there were two men in blue coveralls with identical patches on their shoulders featuring the red outline of a cross on a white background.

"What happened?" One of them asked.

"He was shot. Once. In the shoulder I think."

"How's the shooter?" Asked the other one.

"He's dead." The agent looked at the one who had asked the question and thought to himself, *Damn, this guy's pretty old to be riding around in an ambulance.*

The old guy muttered to himself.

"What was that?" asked the agent. It couldn't have been what he thought he'd heard.

"Huh, what?"

"You just said something and I couldn't make it out."

"Oh, I was just muttering to myself, it's something that I do while assessing a patient."

The agent thought to himself, *Ok, sure. Yeah. He didn't say 'good'. I just couldn't understand him.*

Frank groaned and looked over at the old guy and his eyes grew wide.

"You!"

"Johnny, get some oxygen into this guy. He looks like he's having trouble breathing." The old guy spoke quickly.

"Uh, he doesn't look so bad" the agent started to say while the younger guy moved forward with a bottle and mask.

The older guy whirled on him. "Look! You do your job and let us do our job! Are you sure there was only one shooter? Is this area secure? You better snap to it and leave us alone."

The agent rose from his crouch, hands held out in front on him "Hey, man, I'm sorry, no need to get in a huff. I'm just looking out for the client."

"Yeah, well that's what we're trying to do too."

Frank saw the mask descend over his face. He tried to speak more, to move his arms. Something. Anything. But they felt strangely heavy. He inhaled again and felt his mind start to get cloudy. His last thought before passing out was "Damnit. It's him. It's the old man and this bastard's gonna let him take me away."

Frank came awake slowly. He tried to move his hands but couldn't. He raised his head to look down at his body and saw that he was lying on a gurney. His hands and feet were fixed to it with restraints.

"Ah, you're awake."

Frank's head snapped to the right where the voice had come from. There stood Leroy, the old man who had been badgering him and trying to ruin his company for the last 10 years.

"You!" Frank spat the word. "You're not going to get away with this! Randy will find you and when he does we'll put you in a hole so deep you won't ever see the sun again!"

"My, my, such anger." Leroy chuckled. "My dear CEO, I hardly think that that will happen. Look around you? Do you see all the flashing lights?"

Frank took another look around. Yes, there were lights. Some blue, some orange but the most interesting ones were red. And they flashed numbers. Numbers that were counting down. The lights by themselves wouldn't have been as interesting. It was what they were attached to that gave them their importance. Explosives.

"You're going to blow us up?" Frank asked. "Kill us both? You never struck

me as a suicider.”

“Oh, no, Frank - you don't mind if I call you Frank, do you?” Leroy's eyes gleamed and Frank saw that there was more than just a hint of madness there. Much more. “I'm just going to make it look like I blew us both up. I'm going to take us to a, well, a *place* where no one will ever find us.”

“You can't find a place that Randy won't track you down. I've seen him work and he's never let me down. He'll find some trace that you haven't thought of and he'll come find us.”

“Oh, he may well look. But it doesn't help if you look in the wrong place. I'm going to take you to a place where it will never occur to him to look. And, even if it does, there's no way he can look there.”

Frank began to worry now. This old man had really lost it. He was speaking gibberish and Frank had learned long ago that there was no good way to deal well with a mad man.

“Where is this place, old man?” Frank asked with a sneer. Maybe he could find out where they were headed and leave some sign for Randy to find them.

“Where? Where is hardly the question. The real question, is when.”

“When?” Frank asked.

“Yes. You see, the other lights around you are part of my time machine. I've spent years on the idea and I finally have a working prototype. I've performed a few tests and it seems like it's working, but you never know for sure till you give it a shot.”

Now Frank knew he was in serious trouble. This old man was way too far gone to reason with. He didn't know what to do. His mind cast around wildly, looking for a chance, any chance, to save him.

“You see, Frank. I've been planning your demise for a very long time. I can't tell you how many scenarios I considered and threw away before I finally seized on this one. And boy, I really like this one.”

Leroy looked at the flashing red numbers. “Well, our time here is about up, so we better heat up this machine and get going.”

“But, what if we die in your, your, machine? What then? You're plan won't work!” Frank's mind grasped at anything it could.

“Why, then we both die. That's ok with me. You still end up dead. But, I've got a feeling that that won't happen.” Leroy looked up at Frank, his voice oily, “Trust me.”

Leroy flipped a few switches then hit a big blue button. A whirring noise filled the room. It was quickly followed by an electric smell and the sound of snapping sparks. Lights began to flash faster and what had looked like an empty doorway in the middle of the room began to glow.

Leroy moved to the head of the journey that Frank was strapped to.

“You first, you greedy bastard.”

“No! Don't do it! Don't!”

Leroy pushed Frank forward and his screams filled the air. He thrashed on the journey, trying to get free. The room rang with the harsh shrill of terror and the cold whirring of a machine.

There was no flash of light, no big boom, just a cessation of the screaming.

All at once.

As Frank's head went through the doorway.

Then the room was empty.

And the numbers read 5. 4. 3. 2. 1.

And there was no more room.

Frank shook his head wearily. Oh man, that was some dream I had. I can't believe- He tried to raise his right hand. And couldn't. He snapped fully awake and looked down. "Holy shit! It's not a dream?"

"No, my dear Frank. I'm happy to say it's not."

Frank turned slowly to look over at Leroy who was sitting near him. "Where am I?" He remembered more and asked, trembling. "Whe-when am I?"

"Two very good questions. You are in a safe place. Well, safe for me anyway. As to when, well, that's not so important. Let's just say that you're a few months away from giving a speech. The biggest speech of your life." Leroy snickered as he said this.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Look around. See for yourself." Leroy walked over to a bench and picked up something. Frank looked around at the little room. It reminded him of a torture chamber in an old middle ages castle. Knives, axes and other evil looking implements hung on pegs set in the walls.

Leroy turned back to Frank, a small knife in his hands.

"You're going to torture me?"

"Yes, I am."

"But, why? What do you want to know? It will never work."

"Know? I don't want to know anything. Nothing that you can tell me at least. We're beyond the point where you can tell me something that will make me stop."

"But, torture won't do anything. I can't feel pain!" This last came out as a wail. Indeed, Frank couldn't feel pain, but he quite liked his body and didn't want it to be covered in scars or to lose any limbs.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm quite aware of the nerve damage you suffered as a child. It's integral to my plan in fact. Now, just lie there and try to relax. This won't hurt a bit." Leroy advanced chuckling evilly.

Blood covered the floor and wall in streaks. Some old, some fresh. Leroy rose from the chair next to Frank. It had been months since they'd begun and now Frank was broken. His mind a naked husk. Now it was time for the next phase.

Leroy reached into his pocket and removed a coin. He carefully danced the coin across his knuckles, from one side to the other. Underneath the palm and back to the starting place. The motion was fluid and he felt a childlike glee to be using Frank's own lucky coin.

"Wakey, wakey."

The man strapped to the chair came awake in a rush. His eyes darted wildly around. "Where am I? Who are you? Who am I?"

"Now, now, don't worry." Leroy soothed. "Just watch this dancing coin and I'll explain everything. And then, you'll be free to go."

"Your name is Joe."

I wrote this story mainly to see how I could do at the craft of writing. I'm pleased with my first efforts and am hoping to continue to write. Currently I'm only doing it in the evening as I have a "day job" to pay for the mortgage and food and all those little necessities of life.

Please, don't feel obligated in any way to donate, but if you have a few extra bucks and want to show your appreciation of the story by passing them along to me you can go to <http://www.vanderbrew.com/donation>

If you just want to drop me an email telling me what you thought of the story that's cool too. I'm always interested in feedback on what I've written. You can email me at: matt@vanderbrew.com