

Cleveland City Blues

by Joe Kowalski

In the autumn of 2016, my car was double-booted because I had forged a single-day parking pass, and so I had to take the RTA Blue Line transit to Tower City in order to walk from there to Cleveland State University. Along the way, I stopped at the corner store formerly known as For Goodness Jake's. There was an older man inside, beard peppered and scattershot against his pale skin. His clothes looked like they had been found outside of Goodwill. The dude bought a candy bar and struck up an energetic conversation with another man sitting outside on a bike.

The shabby man was speaking intensely, so I stopped to make sure that he wasn't harassing the poor cyclist. He was clearly drunk, but the cyclist didn't seem threatened by him. The conversation turned to politics. Eventually the man turned to me, his pupils swirling a bit before focusing.

"Your name?"

"Joe."

"You're voting for Trump, right?"

"Not a chance," I said.

"I was a steelyard worker for years. Trump is for the workers."

"As far as I can tell, Trump is only for himself."

Although class would begin shortly, the man and I continued our lively conversation on my way to campus. He was homeless, he said, mostly because he couldn't afford to pay off any more DUIs and had become estranged from his daughter. He was bothered that I hated Trump, but he liked that I was in school because "It's important to learn how to think, and at least you're thinking. There's not enough of that these days."

We passed another homeless man. They knew each other and struck up a conversation. My walking companion gave him a generous five-dollar bill and ended up

giving away the candy bar he had bought too, saying, “I don’t need the sugar anyway.” He also joked around for a minute with a construction worker. I made sure we stayed on the busy sidewalks of Euclid Avenue, so that there was little chance that anything dangerous could happen.

The further we walked, the more I interpreted him as lonely rather than hostile, although I imagine a big factor in my subsiding fear came from the unearned privilege of my being a white guy. I was subjected to stories about his time in jail. How he had been “reformed.” He said that he changed because of a “little book called The Bible” and with the help of a well-known individual ... I thought I knew where this was headed.

“You ever heard of Jack Kerouac?” he slurred, taking me by surprise.

“The writer? Yeah.” We crossed the street.

“Thought you might. He was a mastermind of words. You got an address? I’ll mail you something *amazing*.”

“I’d prefer not to tell you that. Sorry, man.”

“I think maybe you deserve it. No one ever talks to me like this. Plus, you’re a smart kid.”

“What is it?”

He scratched his beard. “When I was in jail, I read his poetry daily. Jack’s. Memorized it. It said a lot to me. Made me rethink everything. Made me see how we’re all connected. Genius. Taught me how you didn’t need a whole lot of words to say a lot. ‘I’m merely exploring souls and cities,’ etc. etc. See, Jack Kerouac used to write on this weird, long paper stock. Almost like a scroll. His notebooks were wild. You’d never believe it, but I found one of his original manuscripts in a crate at a flea market.” He looked at me expectantly, arms raised upward.

“... Huh.”

The man nodded vigorously, smile growing. “I don’t think they understood what it was. But I read those words a million times in prison and had to have it. Since then, I’ve had this thing at every important moment of my life. It’s back at the shelter as we speak. Kid, I want *you* to have it now.” He clapped me on the back.

“I appreciate that,” I said. “But I don’t feel comfortable giving you my address.” We were rapidly approaching the school.

The man blinked for a minute and then pointed at the trash can outside of the Law Building, all while attempting the feat of standing steady. “Hm ... see that right there, Jim? It was Jim, right?”

“Joe.”

“Okay. I’m going to leave the manuscript in there tomorrow. That way you can have your life changed too. Look for it there tomorrow after 10 a.m.”

“What if the trash gets emptied?”

“Okay, okay...” He swung around, still off-kilter. The next target was the sparse foliage that lined the grey brick of the building. “There then. Right in those bushes. 10 a.m. Priceless manuscript.”

“I’ll check for sure.” We shook hands and he was off, singing a song I didn’t know.

I know it was stupid, but I had to check the next day. Wouldn’t you? I felt a bit silly combing among the mulch, but I had to be thorough. It was the time of year when the temperatures were starting to dip and people scurried by, ignoring me just to get inside. I wondered if they weren’t attempting to ignore me in a similar manner that people ignored my drunk acquaintance the day before.

Nope. Nothing. Of course. Although, it’s quite possible that maybe I didn’t look hard enough. Maybe you should check the shrubs outside the Cleveland State University Law Building when you are in town in case I missed it years ago and it’s still there, water damaged and concealed in mulch, just waiting to change your life.



Joe Kowalski's films and online videos have allowed him to work with the likes of Henry Winkler (*Barry*), Jonathan Demme (*The Silence of the Lambs*), John Green (*The Fault in Our Stars*), and Mara Wilson (*Matilda*). His short film adaptation of *I Am the Doorway* was given the blessing of Stephen King. He lives in Cleveland and can be found online @PogieJoe.