



Injun Joe's story

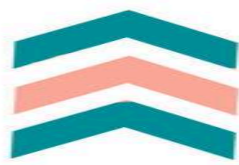
“So rude, SO UNFAIR!”

A few words to begin

A lonely old fisherman, who came to live in this town some years ago and who used to tell stories to young boys and girls, one day told me and my friends a spooky, but touching story about a Native American who lived alone as an outcast. We were all impressed, but we thought it was his obsession to create strange and dramatic adventures like that. When that fisherman died, however, some men from Hannibal came to the funeral and I learnt from them that part of the story I'm going to tell you was true.

I've decided to write down Indian Joe's case, because I'm going to start my career as a journalist and reporter and I'd like to be appealing to readers who love 'true stories', but another part, no less important of my plan, is to remind young American people that the conquest of the US western territories included fights, injustice and discrimination.

Monroe City, Missouri, 1865



Chapter I

Joe woke up and felt dizzy as he had drunk a lot the night before. He stood up, he stretched and started searching for a candle. He tripped on some pieces of wood, as it was completely dark. When he finally found the candle, he lit it and suddenly he heard a dull buzz coming from inside his body: he was starving. But he had nothing with him, neither to drink nor to eat. He needed to go out and search for some food. He ambled along the tunnels in the direction of the exit of McDougal's cave, which had been his home for a long time. The cave is a labyrinth of almost unknown tunnels, not far from Hannibal, Missouri and today it is an attraction for explorers and curious people who love mysterious places.

'Ahhhhhhhh' - a piercing shout echoed loudly along the rocky tunnels like the roar of a wounded buffalo.

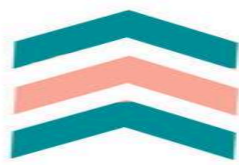
'Who the hell Aggggrrrr !!!!! Who locked this damned dooor?'

Joe punched, and kicked the door, and the iron plate, that someone had recently placed over the wooden door, sounded like an antique gong.

" How is this even possible? - he went on shouting - When did this happen? I didn't hear any noise ... and they must have made a lot of noise Aaaahh ... - he went on in a fist of anger - It's the alchool ... Damn it 'n the person who made me try it!!!"

He continued to scratch the big door that blocked the cave exit in rage and despair. He tried for some time, but he got tired because he hadn't eaten anything since the night before. He couldn't open it. He stopped and remembered that it was useless even to look for other exits, because he knew McDougal's cave like the back of his hand. So he fell to his knees, put the candle on the ground and slowly started to get anxious and to overthink. He was becoming more and more aware of what he was destined for. His young life was passing by in front of him, he felt he hadn't lived it to the fullest.

He sighed : " Bloody hell, why am I so stupid? How couldn't I remember that I'm like a wild dog to them, with no God and no soul. I'm not worth anything



to anyone around here: everyone in ten miles around Hannibal knows that I sleep here!!! ... How could they lock the entrance? I should have dug a second secret exit to this miserable home, how stupid I am!!!'

A shiver ran down his spine: 'Oh my goodness!!! What a miserable thought!!! I have no one who would notice that I'm not around. Not even the Temperance Tavern's owner will notice that I'm not going to buy alcohol tonight and tomorrow night and the night after that. Not even Muff Potter, that silly old chap, can help me 'cause he left Hannibal a month ago!'

"I'm lost! - he reckoned - "I've helped a lot of people with their business, but all the people in town have always been afraid of me. Am I that rubbish? Why can't I think of any person to count on? "

Poor Joe: he didn't have any friends at all, neither true friends or simple mates. He was in his twenties and he had been living alone since he was a teenager.

Feeling very very lonely, it was then that Joe remembered the first time he had met Doctor Robinson, in this exact point of the cave. It had been five or six years earlier. It was on a rainy day. Joe remembered that he had been surprised at first, when he saw the light of a candle and heard steps coming in. Then, looking at the shadow on the ground, he felt sure that it was a single man. So he moved forward and approached him:

"Who are you?"

" Gosh!! - the man jumped back - you caught me off guard!" - But promptly and roughly he stood his ground: "Who are YOU? And what are YOU doing here?"

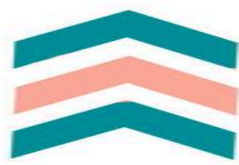
"I know who you are." - Joe chuckled, squinting at him -

"You don't. Or ... you are a demon!"

"Uuuuuuu - Joe laughed at him - Don't be scared. You are new in town. I saw you in Hannibal square."

"I'm not scared at all. I don't believe in ghosts like all the other people here. So what, young half-breed man?"

"I'm Injun Joe." - Joe said calmly, trying to work out who the man with false self-confidence was.



“Doctor Robinson, it's a pleasure!” - the man snapped back.

Dr. Robinson was an average height, white European man. He had just arrived in Hannibal. He had grey hair and grey eyes too. But his physical appearance of a harmless middle aged surgeon hid a fierce and inconsiderate person.

Joe was too young to understand that.

Dr. Robinson, on the contrary, soon realised the young Indian boy, tall and strong, could be really useful so, with a smirk on his face, he asked:

“ Would you like to help me? I could pay you if you do, ... you don't seem in a great situation”

“ Help you?”

“ At taking dead bodies from the cemetery and taking out organs to study them”

“ Oh, body-snatching? I won't be scared!”

“ You're smart, aren't you? And you're not one of those Holy Willie I've met in town.

Dr. Robinson looked around to the right and to the left, holding the candle high to look better at the tunnel in front of him. “I also need a space for the bodies - he went on - don't you think this cave will be perfect?”

“How much would you pay me?” - hungry Joe cut in.

“ Lots of money. Is it a deal?” - Dr. Robinson asked, opening wide his round pale eyes.

“ Deal.” - Joe answered, nodding and pressing his lips together. But he didn't feel like looking the doctor in the eyes. He had no money and he desperately needed to buy food and other things.

Joe started helping the doctor whenever he called him, but the salary didn't arrive easily.

Joe remembered that one night he was so starving that he went to beg for some bread at Doctor Robinson's house. He had no other acquaintances or friends. He believed Dr. Robinson would help him, but when Joe knocked at the back door, the doctor's son opened it. The boy, who was about his same



age, went to ask his dad what to do. Dr. Robinson told him to send the vagrant away and to lock the door. The day after he also asked Judge Douglas to look for the half-breed boy and put him in jail for a month.

It was on that occasion that Joe understood how cruel and unfair the doctor was. "DAMN HIM! How could he do that!?" - he burst out - But ... why am I even bothering to get angry just now ... it's useless!!! At last I got my revenge on that Old Scratch." - he sighed and tried to focus on the present trouble he had.

Joe stood up again and started going up and down the cave, but his mind couldn't think about solutions and shifted definitely in search of people who could come and help him. He was mumbling something.

"Oh mum, my beautiful mum! Why aren't you here? Tell me what to do, please!!!"

But that loving presence was so distant. More recent experiences came to his mind and he lingered upon them. Soon after he had come out of prison he had met Muff Potter along the Mississippi river, a poor fisherman who was much older than him, probably as old as his father: he was kind and funny, but he also didn't have either food, or money, because when he sold his fish he spent everything on alcohol. "It's to forget this miserable and lonely life" - Muff used to say. He had no family actually, but he owned a small cabin by the river, where he lived.

"You're broke like me?"

"Do I look like ...?"

"I have a kind of a job, I make money with that, lots of money, would you like to join?" - Joe tried to attract his attention.

"What is it?"

"Body- Snatching"

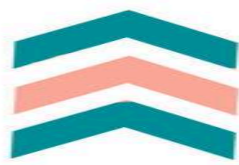
"Ewww! That's disgusting!"

"But helpful"

"Are you in? Even though the person that leads the job isn't the best"

"Who is it?"

"Doctor Robinson"



“ Oh God” - He sighed and shook his head - “He’s a real butcher!”.

“I hate him, he’s bad, but he pays more than your fish.”

“I see ... - Muff replied - , and people die all year long, while fish has seasons. Let’s try that... but don’t let me do it alone. You must come with me, my friend.”

“Yes, we are friends” - Joe replied with a smile on his long face. In fact he had felt a new warm sensation when Muff pronounced the word FRIEND. He felt that the poor outcast fisherman was sincere.

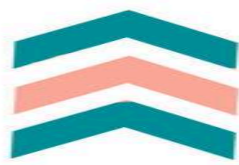
They often went drinking together at night and quite often did the dirty job for the doctor together. Muff was really honest and lighthearted, but he was also so naive that it was really easy to make a dupe of him.

A tear lined Joe’s face and he exclaimed: “Oh stupid me!!! Why did I betray that good friend of mine! That’s the worst thing I’ve done in my life, even worse than murdering.” Joe leaned against the cave wall and cried for a while.

After all these intense emotions Joe lay on the ground, he started humming a Native American lullaby to comfort himself and, exhausted, he fell asleep.

Chapter II

Another day passed and Joe, though he was terribly worried, lit a candle and sat down. He looked up at the shadows that the little flame drew on the ceiling as if it was a paint brush. His mind drifted away again for a while from his terrible destiny. He heard in the distance the sound of the Mississippi river that flowed past just a few yards away from the cave. He loved that river where he often went swimming or washed his clothes. “Listen ...” - he muttered to himself - “there’s a ferry boat passing by just now, but it’s not going to stop here. Damn me!” The sound of the waves, produced by the ferry, crashing on the banks brought to his mind another scene: the Kaskaskia river, in the south of Illinois, near the border with Missouri, where he used to go with his mum Nibì and his dad Jhon in their happiest days. They loved the sandy shores and the view of the forest on the



opposite side. They would all wave together at the boats that passed along the river and the people waved back to that beautiful family, a well-built, blond man, a tall slim woman with long shining black hair and a boy smiling with big dark eyes as bright as black pearls. Actually Joe's real name was Kaskaskia. Injun Joe was the way people in Hannibal called him because they couldn't pronounce or didn't even want to pronounce that Native American name. "Oh life, why are you so cruel to me" - he yelled in desperation - "is it because I've been cruel, myself? Are the ghosts of the men I killed haunting me? Nooo!!!! ... It can't be!!!!" - he said, greatly distressed.

He stood up and started walking to get to a remote tunnel where a cross was painted on the wall. Over there he had hidden a box with the money that he had earned and stolen. On the way to that place he remembered the story of the long walk of the Illiniwek tribes who were pushed to the southwest by white soldiers. It was about a year before his birth. The US Government had declared that the Native people were lawless and that their land didn't belong to them. The Government had sent wagons and horses to carry the women and the children, but in fact the soldiers used the wagons for themselves and rode the horses. The Illini people had to walk all the time and to sleep on the ground.

'Ho, ho what tay nay

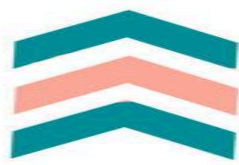
Ho, ho what tay nay

Ho, ho what tay nay

Key oh kay nah

Key oh kay nah'

This was the song that the Illini women sweetly sang to their babies to get them to sleep even in cold and hard beds on the ground during the long march to the south west. Injun Joe remembered this lullaby, because his mother used to sing it too, when she was telling him stories about the Indian tribes. Nibi often told him about her early years in her Illini tribe and she always felt nostalgic.



Joe's mum was a young girl at the time of the march, one of the most beautiful in the whole tribe. The soldiers were cruel and rude to the deported people, but not all of them. Jhon Stevenson often smiled at her.

'Have a piece of this bread' - he said to her one day.

Nibi looked at him with her deep brown eyes, but she was more scared than hungry.

'Why?' she finally whispered.

'Take the bread. It's not my fault if we have to behave like this. You are not dogs to me'

A tear rolled down her face and she reached out her hand to take the bread.

'Mihsi neewe' - she bowed.

In the following days Jhon used to leave a piece of bread for Nibi and some water. She started to look at him straight in his blue eyes and slowly, slowly his lovely smile conquered her. They met secretly at night and as she was so tired of sleeping on the ground she accepted to stay in his wagon.

The long walk brought the Illini people to Missouri and Kansas, to a land that had bad soil for the plants they used to grow and where they couldn't find the fruit they used to gather.

But something worse happened. The tribe found out that Nibi was pregnant by a white soldier and the council soon decided to disown her: Jhon had killed a lot of young Illini warriors and one of them was the chief's son. She couldn't stay with her people any longer, but Jhon was in love with her and they went to live near the white settlers' village of Hannibal. The white people in Hannibal however didn't like her because she was a Native American. What was sadder, their puritanism prevented them from seeing that family as part of the community. Joe's mum was so mature that she never showed that she was bothered about being rejected by the white settlers because she loved her family and she had already suffered a lot when she had to leave her friends and her own parents. Joe on the other hand grew angrier and angrier with everybody: no one wanted to play games with him and he felt it was unfair. He was a child and he couldn't stand that they kept him at



a distance. Even the black slaves' children were scared of him when he met them at the town water pump.

Chapter III

A week had almost passed, Joe became weaker and weaker. He hunted bats to eat something and collected a little water from the rocks, but he had almost no candles left. His life seemed a burden to him, when all of a sudden he heard thunder. It was raining heavily outside. Joe hadn't even noticed that until that moment as he was so absorbed in his thoughts. There was a second loud bang and it seemed like dynamite in a mine. "Aaahhh... how I'd like to drink that tasty water ... and stand under that rain" - he groaned. A drop of water fell on the ground with a splash. It came from the ceiling. Joe rose at the speed of light, he went to check the spot, and tried to collect in his hands the dripping water. Then he had an idea: there were stalactites and stalagmites everywhere, so he decided to make a bowl on one of them, or at least he tried his best, under the place where the drops were trickling down, to gather as much water as possible. After the storm, the dripping slowed down: each drop would take hours to fall. Joe was staring at the movement, as if he was contemplating his soul deeply. Suddenly he felt a salty taste in his mouth: Tears!!!! He was crying. He was thinking about his mom's tears when he wasn't accepted by the teacher at school in Hannibal.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but your son can't stay here" - he stated coldly.

"And why is that?"

"Well..."

"I'll pay, I'll pay for everything, even more if I have to! Please take my child..." - she humbly said.

"It's not because of that... hmm... Is your son baptised?"

Mum sighed and didn't say anything.

"As I believed ..." - the teacher concluded - "Now please leave, the lesson is going to begin. I can't be late."



“So rude, SO UNFAIR!” - Joe shouted - Thinking about that episode made him furious. His mum Nibi had to teach him the basic things, even though she wasn't a teacher. He was sad, lonely and he hated, HE HATED the white community. Last but not least, his beloved mother got ill and died when he wasn't thirteen yet.

“Kaskaskia, come here and sit down” - his dad said after a few weeks.

Joe was a bit frightened at first, because his dad used to call him 'Joe', but he finally sat down.

“Since your mother died, I have started dating other women and I have finally found the right one.”

Joe's heart skipped a beat.

“ What do you mean? How could you do that? Don't you feel guilty? Mum died a few weeks ago!”

“ Keep calm, I know it's a hard time, but we have to move on, we can't just live in the past ”- Jhon said, trying to save the day.

“You could have waited for a few years before getting married again” - Joe said with teary eyes and a broken voice.

“ You can't just live in the past... tsk... What a silly quote” - Joe said with a bitter grin.

“You could have just waited and maybe talked to me about this!” - Joe went on in an angry louder voice - “She may be dead but her memory will always be with me and it should be with you too” - Joe shouted at his dad and stormed out of the room. Jhon let out a sigh and went after Joe trying to calm him down.

“I'm not in the mood to hear you. In fact I don't care if you get married” - Joe pushed him away. Jhon didn't say anything and went out slamming the front door. He came back home two days later.

The day of his father's wedding, Joe stayed silent all the time in a corner. His step-mother was looking at him with hatred in her eyes and on that precise day Joe knew that his life was going to be miserable. It became hard to stay at home when his dad wasn't around. His step mum used to ask him to do chores all day and didn't give him enough food. She only loved her children



and didn't care about Joe. When dad was in, though, she acted as if she cared about him a lot.

Joe was fed up with this behaviour and one summer night, while his parents were sitting in the rocking chairs on the porch, he furiously packed his few things: he was trembling with anger and fear at the same time. He was quick tempered, but he had a determined personality. He had to decide, forever, between staying and leading a life of lies and sorrow and going away. How hard that moment was! He concluded that adventure and maybe danger, in the end, were much better than living like a slave.

He was so young, but at the beginning he felt free and he liked sleeping under the trees at night and swimming in the river under the warm summer sun. He was not the only outcast in the area, so he met some homeless people who lived alone along the Mississippi river or in the woods. Someone taught him how to gouge corn-cobs and make pipes. Others invited him to drink. Joe liked spending time with whoever he met, drinking and smoking and he loved listening to or sharing stories, but most of the time those people asked him to do illegal things such as stealing from the farmers, then, after some time they disappeared. Who knows why! At the beginning Joe felt uneasy, but soon he got addicted to smoking, drinking alcohol and committing petty crimes, as no one was willing to give him a job. Winter arrived and Joe looked for a shelter where he could take refuge for the night. It was then that he moved a few miles along the river as far as McDougal's cave.

A drop of water splashed on the cup Joe had carved on the stalagmite and he awoke from his sweet and bitter memories. He was weak and hungry: he still had one or two small pieces of candles and decided to hunt for some bats.

Chapter IV

He was not sure, but probably another day had passed. He knew that there was no chance of him getting out of the cave, he felt his end was approaching.



He decided to walk back to the locked entrance of the cave. He gathered the little energy he had left and hit the door strongly with his knife. He continued to hit the door, again, again and again until the knife blade fell tinkling on the ground. He was without hope and worn out : now the mistakes he had made in his complicated life were torturing him.

“Aahhh, why me? Damned me” - Joe said to himself with wide open eyes and a cracked voice.

He soon fell to the ground exhausted. In that state of unconsciousness he saw Muff Potter. The only real friend he had. He appeared in front of him and he was crying. At first, it was a blurred vision, Muff looked like a desperate ghost, but soon the scene became clear and real in Joe’s mind. It was one night not long ago, and Muff was at Hannibal’s cemetery. Muff wasn’t alone. Joe was with him and they were walking with Dr. Robinson’s son. They had to snatch a body. Dr. Robinson’s son was as rude and disrespectful as his father. When Muff asked for extra money to take the corpse away on a barrow, the young man reacted roughly and Joe couldn’t stand his scorn so he insulted him. Doctor Robinson’s son hit Joe who fell to the ground and promptly Muff grappled with the rude man in a fight. Joe wanted to stand by Muff’s side, but he was overcome by rage and personal revenge. The young man got away from Potter, took a large piece of wood, hit him and Muff fell to the ground unconscious. Joe stood up, he was looking for the opportunity to hit the young man and to strike him with his knife. The doctor’s son fell partly on top of Muff Potter, covering him with blood. Joe placed the murder weapon in Potter’s hand, sat on the ground and waited till he regained consciousness looking at him all the time. After five minutes, Potter began to move and started complaining for the pain. He opened his eyes, he felt a weight on top of him when he tried to move that weight away, it fell on the ground and he saw it was Doctor Robinson’s son. Potter looked at him horrified and saw a knife in his own hands. His eyes met with Joe’s and asked him:

“God, how did this happen, Joe?”

“It’s a dirty business” - said Joe.



“What did you do it for?”

“Oh ... I didn't do it!” - Potter trembled.

“Why are you lying Joe? You know it isn't nice, if you are a friend” - Potter said - , changing his expression in an instant.

Joe was confused but he asked: “Why would I do that? I'm not lying. ”

“ Because you hated him and his father too!!!!

“ I'M NOT LYING! IT'S YOU WHO DID IT!!!!”

“No you are a liar, a liar, a liaaaaarrrrr ...” - Potter replied -

The scene faded, but Potter's voice continued to torture Joe.

“I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry!!!!” - Joe muttered, opening his eyes, all wet from his sweat, gasping for air and water.

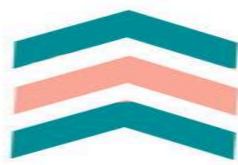
“Why did I do that? - he thought - Why has my rage been stronger than love all my life? How awful am I!”

He didn't have any energy left to reach the bowl on the stalagmite and get the water. He was upset by the dream he had just had.

It was the first time Joe felt scared, frightened by his own nature. He remembered those long minutes, when Potter was unconscious on the ground and the young son of Dr. Robinson was dead. He could have planned something different. Why not escaping to the south, along the river, on a raft with his friend? Who would have found them in the wild? But unfortunately this good idea hadn't come into his mind. He had preferred to save only himself. Now, he was realising that relationships are important in life and friendship with Muff Potter was the opportunity to have a new family and start living legally somewhere.

Fortunately Muff Potter wasn't hanged, because at the trial some witnesses spoke in favour of his innocence. He was a good natured person and that's why he was safe in the end.

It's unbelievable how human beings can hurt the people who really care about them! Sometimes it seems so difficult to discern love and friendship!



Conclusion

This story doesn't end with the last moments of Joe's agony, but I want to imagine that he left this world in peace with everyone and everything as a real Native American.

I would like to inspire young people, wherever they come from, especially if they are half breeds, to fight for a fair nation. Injun Joe was physically strong, but not in his heart: a victim of his own suspicion, of his anger and of common prejudice.

Maybe one day, future generations of native Americans and Black will affirm their dignity and their culture.

I was born by the river
In a little tent
Oh, and just like the river, I've been running
Ever since
It's been a long
A long time coming, but I know
A change gon' come
Oh yes, it will

It's been too hard living
But I'm afraid to die
'Cause I don't know what's up there
Beyond the sky
It's been a long
A long time coming, but I know
A change gon' come
Oh yes, it will



A Change Is Gonna Come - Sam Cooke -

(quote added by the editor in 1965)