

Just Kidding; Or, Serious Joe's Wacky and Troubled Adventures in the Library in Which He  
Worked

Serious Joe hated his name. Sometimes Serious avoided boredom by imagining the conversation between his parents when picking it. (Sometimes Serious would forget to avoid the boredom altogether.) Conversations would go:

**Mom:** *We should name our son 'Serious Joe.'*

**Dad:** *Why?*

**Mom:** *Because it would be a joke, playing upon the fact that his name is 'Serious' but it is part of a joke.*

**Dad:** *I see. That is clever and won't lead to our son being bitter about this at all.*

Serious Joe wanted people to call him Joe. He also considered whether by embracing his name he could snuff the effect it had, or if doing so would further play into his parent's self-indulgence. Speaking of self-indulgence, Joe was eating noodles; or, rather, he was using the top side of his fork and knife to push his Noodles around in their Cup (of Which they Were), mimicking proper societal custom.\*

*I really hope somebody asks me about what I'm thinking right now,* Joe thought with smug hopelessness, *This would be such a great answer.*

"Joe," somebody said. "What are you doing? Your break is over. You're fired. Now you're rehired. Speak up, son."

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\* Joe rigorously followed socio-cultural customs despite their occasionally arbitrary nature—Joe had the habits of always using "whom" and "who" precisely incorrectly, never taking the same path twice, and always dotting his i's and crossing his t's (while leaving his j's and f's undotted and uncrossed).

Joe looked up from his noodles and saw his boss, a tall man wearing a pair of fake glasses double-ironically labeled “fake glasses” and holding a mug that reads “This side up” accompanied by an arrow that pointed in the correct direction of “up.” (Joe’s boss was a big believer in making the world understand the difference between truth and honesty.)

“Right, sorry, I’ll get right ba—”

“Do I have to write this down for you?” Joe’s boss cut Joe off. He had an idea and began executing it, fumbling around Joe’s desk. He grabbed a pen, some paper, and wrote a note to Joe (an apparently laborious process, as his boss’s pen-to-head tapping indicated). It read:

- Un-Re-Categorize books, periodicals, web comics, etc.
- Write “Is it still a performance if there’s no audience?” in the margin of a book then burn the book.
- Quell any and all library fights.
- Remember: don’t go in the metahumor section.

These were Joe’s daily duties. Joe glanced at the sundial in the center of the library. He couldn’t read it, so it wasn’t very helpful.

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*Books, books, books.* Joe thought to himself while placing *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the Middle* in the fiction section after it had been un-re-categorized as a parody of the classic *Animal Farm*. Joe just loathed what happened to the Dewey Decimal system over the last

decade. *It all started when they got rid of the decimals*, he recalled from his high school class, “Righting and Rewriting History.”<sup>†</sup> *Then, they got rid of Classes. They disappeared, replaced by variations on Humor.*

Joe was foremost a scholar; thus, he kept his inner dialogue fresh with a bounty of literary references. *Paragraphs, paragraphs, paragraphs*, he thought while scribbling some non-nonsense to the side of an underlined *Hamlet* quote. *Sentences, sentences, sentences*. He grabbed a match and a small trashcan from his backpack. *Phrases, phrases, phrases*. He struck the match. *Gerbils, gerbils, gerbils*.

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Shouts erupted from murmuring, grabbing Joe’s attention. Something about how somebody didn’t respect the effort put into systems constructed by their elders. More yelling, from a different person, something about defending the “right to progress.” *Hopefully this fight isn’t too brutal*, thought Joe, whom didn’t want to clean.

Most of the stains on the table, chairs, and books were from ink. Joe’s mind raced through the various idioms librarians use to break up fights and calm people down.

“You know what they say, kids: A washed pot never boils.”

This got their attention.

“I’m so sorry Sir,” a kid said, “I didn’t know how knowledgeable you were.”

“What’s your name?”

“Grace. And not because I’m graceful or anything. It’s just my name.”

“Suspicious.”

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<sup>†</sup> Joe’s remembrance of another class, “Psychology of False Memories,” however, made him doubt both these recollections.

Grace pulled out her primary form of identification. Joe snapped up that library card quickly.

“That’s not your real name. Why lie to me?”

“It was sarcasm.”

“Reasonable. What brings you tw—err, both—to a fight.”

“We’re not fighting about tutu’s, sir.”

...

**[This section of the story, which consists solely of banter, has been removed to save space, as well as that other critical piece of information used to determine setting.]**

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The kids explained to Joe how they were discussing some really deep things about existence and purpose and the importance of balancing clear expression with density of content, all while not getting distracted by cheap jokes or “novel” ideas.

“Novel ideas, that’s it!” the character who is not Grace said. “We need a book to sort this out. Can you get us a book, Mr. Serious Joe?”

The feeling of actually being of service to others began coursing through Joe’s veins. In order to find this book and possibly save the life of a youth, Joe went to the library’s garden, a place filled with book worms, allusions to famous gardens, and, most relevantly, binary search trees.

“Help. Is that what you need?” said the cloaked figure from behind the garden’s enormous computer, fingers clattering about a keyboard that took yards (the imperial unit) to measure.

“Yeah, can you find a book for me, a book about library history?”

“Books. Is seeking lies what you...you seek?”

“Is that a bit, what you’re doing, with the single word followed by a cryptic-ish question?”

“No. But should it be?”

“I guess. I don’t really care, so long as you can help me.”

“Commitment. What else could shield us from fate?”

Joe was familiar with impatience, but being on a mission drove him to try to communicate, however possible. “FATE. Is that the code of a book that might be useful?”

“Brevity. Is that what you really want in a situation like this?”

Joe did not last long. “Of course not,” said Joe, “Brevity hasn’t been useful since that rogue publishing company used up all the ISBN numbers trying to get a ‘monopoly on ideas’ by permuting all possible strings of characters under whatever arbitrary length it was that they chose. And unlike you, I remember the days when a baker’s dozen numbers could tell you what book you were looking for and you didn’t have to deal with bullshit like this to find a simple story.”<sup>‡</sup>

The cloaked figure took off his hood. “Sorry.”

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Location of his desired book in hand, Joe entered the main section of the library, the section with all the books in it. *I need to get back before those kids forget where we were in our conversation.* Joe rushed ahead, barely noticing the small section on observational comedy, so fast that he tripped over some books that had fallen from the physical comedy bookshelf. He skipped right past the Biting Satire Café.<sup>§</sup> The journey was a slog. Joe got lost for a bit when a stranger swung a skillet at him and he

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<sup>‡</sup> Joe is referencing the Great Gutenberg Publishing Company Catastrophe of Some Year. It is [often cited](#) as one of the catalyzing events in the antinumerist movement. While going “number free” was much more than a mere fad—it has touched everything from pet store cash registers to the military—nobody was ever quite able to accurately gauge its popularity.

<sup>§</sup> Joe was worried that if he stopped to get a coffee, the conversation might go:

**Self:** *Can I have a decaf coffee with milk in it, please?*

**Barista:** *But, but how will there be milk if it’s de-calf-innated?*

(Or possibly a conversation with an even more ham-fisted pun.)

wasn't sure if he was in the slapstick or deadpan section. Shock humor—or was it incongruity?—interrupted Joe as he finally approached the metahumor section. The slog continued.

The metahumor section contained all books about metahumor, books about books, books about words, books about libraries and library science, and even some books about lists. Of course, to enter the section, Joe first had to pass a test. There were no doors in the library, despite there being rooms. Rooms, instead, were joined by revolving bookcases, activated when specific books were pulled down. Then—Woosh!—the bookcase would rotate and you'd be in another room.\*\*

On the shelf, Joe saw: *Self-aware-wolves: An Irrationality Fan Fic*, a mirror, *Fractions: A Play in Half an Act*, a list of Douglas Hofstadter quotes, and a tiny scale model of the library (complete with a miniature Joe). Despite seeing these, none of them stuck out to Joe. *This is a surprisingly disorganized section*, thought Joe right before everything around him began shaking, falling apart, rupturing, popping, squeaking, and sizzling.

*I shouldn't be surprised anymore. Nothing should surprise me.*

The shelves and indices and books and ancient book holders settled. A flyer fell out of the mess:

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\*\* Joe was used to finding both scholars and extreme sports enthusiasts lost in the library. Cafés were common enough for starvation to be a rarity.

**Organization Enthusiasts Meeting ~ Library of Congress ~ Always**

Sick of electing politicians based on meme potential?  
Tired of ambiguity in communication?  
Bitter about the arbitrary and chaotic?

We're a non-conformist organization seeking members interested in fixing the world.

We'd be happy to accept any professional or individual interested in order and organization. In alphabetical order, we're looking for: Accountants, archivists, [occupations omitted for brevity], librarians, mathematicians, [occupations omitted for brevity], writers, and zookeepers.

Joe's mind flooded with easy jokes this group could've fit into their flyer. They could have called themselves the "Order Order" or (if they took food requests at meetings) the "Order Order of Orders." They could've called their group "anti-conformists," thus not conforming common identity of "non-conformist." They could've had their third question be a sly reference to the comedic triples. Nope. *This flyer is completely humorless.*

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Joe returned with his book, but couldn't find the kids. *No. No, no, no.*

"No."

*They didn't leave. They must've fallen asleep and sleepwalked off. Or discovered a trail of breadcrumbs that led them unwittingly away. They were so interested. So genuine, deep down, despite their coat of sarcasm and deflection.* The table was empty, except for the stains and crumpled papers and eraser or food crumbs scattered about. *Did they not respect me? Not like me? Could I have known?* The chairs weren't even pushed in. They had ditched Joe.

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Joe checked the flyer, and read it again. It promised: *Always*.

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The first meeting in the society was going well. A piece of paper was used to record arrivals and departures. A man named Robert was the leader. Attendees were punctual. Delegation was fluid. Joe had finally found his people.

Joe raised his hand, a flag, indicating that he had a question.

“Yes, Joe.”

“Simple question: Why were people waiting quietly and looking at each other’s backs before writing their name on the, what did you call it, the ‘sign-in sheet?’”

“That’s called a line. It is an implicit societal agreement to avoid the chaos that would result if everybody attempted to be first.”

Joe nodded in earnest affirmation. *I’ve never seen such direction, such drive, such purpose. Nobody’s reminding of all my choices and all my untapped creative potential or asking me to question the world.* Joe smiled.

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The meeting was nearing conclusion when a pair of children walked in. Heads turned and hands greeted them. They were the girl whom lied about her name and the other kid she was with.

“Mr. Serious Joe!” they exclaimed in imperfect unison upon seeing him.

Serious Joe was too exhausted to feel the hope leave him. He began packing up. Joe threw his things—a pencil with an eraser on both ends, his wallet (which contained money printed on the dried and refined skin of deceased political leaders), and his numberless calculator—into his backpack without care for which pockets they landed in. Joe took his backpack, which was actually a



sack of all-purpose flour, into his car, which was also all-purpose flour.<sup>††</sup> Sincerity was a sham, and Joe knew it. Joe left the library<sup>‡‡</sup> to visit his parents and say goodbye.

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Joe listened to music<sup>§§</sup> on the drive to the place where his parents' urns were cryogenically frozen. His parents explained to him what would be done with their remains before orphaning him: "We are having our ashes frozen," they said, "in case humanity ever discovers a cure for what we die from...as well as cremation." Joe knew his parents were kidding, trying to apply levity to the situation which was their impending deaths.

He drove up to the mausoleum's drive through.

"Hello, would you like to checkout an urn?" said the attendant.

"Yeah, my parents." Joe said while producing his library card.

"I will need them back in about a quarter hour—don't want them to thaw. Fancy urns though, were they important people?"

"They were important people," said Joe. "My mom was an architect and my dad was a sexy librarian. They helped build the library. To use their words, they died laughing, and wanted to tell them that I won't be able to forgive them for that."

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<sup>††</sup> Swiss Army knife salespeople, like most salespeople, were put out of business when tool-buyers realized that they could use all-purpose flour for more than just making their windowsills and gardens and hair-wreaths look prettier.

<sup>‡‡</sup> It should go without saying, but Joe never leaves the library, not physically at least. Nobody ever leaves the library. The library is everything. It is you and me, and banana pie cream. It is leprechaun exercise equipment and the faint scent of greed. The library is control and power and desire. It is everything. But yeah, Joe leaves the building.

<sup>§§</sup> Joe's first good joke was about the declining discography of indie rock bands. He told people that he listens to every band, but only their earlier albums.

Tommy Schneider  
Round 1 Rewrite  
12/21/2016  
Page Count: 10  
Word Count: 2431

Joe left, drove around haphazardly until he found himself in a Walmart parking lot. He wandered about the twisted aisles until he happened into the Gun 'n' Grocery section. He only found guns that shoot short flags with the text "BANG!" on them.