

## NEWSPAPER

Olivia Brooks

The wheels on Old Man Joe's tricycle shrieked and echoed from house to house. Everyone knew when Old Man Joe was coming with a single newspaper for the single seemingly abandoned house at the end of the lane. Tree Lane was proper, its pristine homes with Spanish tiled roofs and white painted brick running down from one end to the other like a tight-knit line forming an army.

Except for the house at the end of the lane.

The house at the end of the lane got the newspaper every day except Sunday, and although no one had ever seen a living soul come about the home, the paper was always gone by dusk. No one had paid for a newspaper in decades. Old Man Joe was the last to own a printshop in town, and if it were not for his severe dementia, the town's folks would have thought him to be mad. But everyone who caught a glimpse of the elder man was always in awe at how tight he held onto his last string. He was shriveled and deaf, but he withstood life to bring that single newspaper every day.

The grin on the elder man's face as he approached the teetering house was enough for some to consider him mad. But it was obvious he just loved his job... or maybe the people inside.

The boy who lived down away from the house at the end of the lane had a perfect perpendicular view of the unpainted, red brick home whose doors looked like they would creak with any movement and the shadows seemed to constantly loom. It consumed his mind to know what creature found a way to snag whatever the old man threw on its lawn every day. The boy

watched and watched, day after day, hoisting himself on two plush pillows from his little sister's playroom and squinted as if his eyes were makeshift binoculars that could peer through the sealed shut windows that bordered the house.

He had sold fake lemonade at a stand at the edge of his driveway to try and lure Old Man Joe in to talk about the mysterious home, only to be shooed away by property management. Only to be lectured by his mother of such youth she could fit in with the big kids at his school.

But nothing ever came at the boy's solo attempts to fuel his intrigue. So today, as the wind picked up and the crisp autumn air made his nose turn a shade of pink, the boy marched through the back gate whilst the neighbors all played and scurried along behind Old Man Joe's slow tricycle to pick up the thing he threw before the rickety house could magically take it.

The little boy watched from behind a clean-cut bush and as soon as the old man had pedaled away, dropping some grocery paper bags at the doorstep as well, he pushed his scraggly blonde hair from his face and made way to the house at the end of the lane. Having more than just a newspaper to collect would take longer for the person inside the house, if he timed it right. He dodged a car and hopped into the front yard, and looked down the collar of his striped shirt to make sure his heart was not trying to escape his chest. Then, the boy snagged up what Old Man Joe had just lassoed into the yard and knocked on the black front door that belonged to the house.

And no one answered. This should not have surprised the young boy, since he had never even seen its occupancy, yet he clutched the newspaper in his hands a bit tighter. After a few more knocks, he turned to leave, knowing it was improper to bug someone more than three times if they obviously did not want to be bugged, but then the click of five locks sounded on the door and the home opened itself to the world.

The boy's eyes grew wide as he suspected magic to do the trick, maybe a genie had granted a wish like in the movie his little sister loved, but there stood a plain girl in the door frame. One that seemed young, but also looked as old as his mother. Her brows were crinkled so tensely that the boy thought she had gashes on her forehead.

He held up the newspaper. "What's this?"

"Saturday's newspaper."

"Newspaper?"

"Newspaper."

They stared at each other, a void of silence filling the space.

"Do you want to come inside?" The young lady never had company. Not since her parents had died a decade before, which she did not expect the young boy to know of them as the old mayors.

The boy contemplated the way the woman looked like his mother in age, nothing too scary about her. "What's your name?"

"Cinderella, but I prefer Sam."

"That's a weird name," the boy paused. "I'm Branderson, but I go by Brady."

She nodded. They stared at each other some more, Sam catching glimpses of Brady looking around her shoulder and into the home.

"Okay," Brady shrugged. "I'll come in."

Sam stepped aside to let him in and grabbed the paper bags while unwrapping the newspaper as he made his way to the living room. The walls were lined with leather-bound books, the rare wall that did not have a shelf occupied by photographs and paintings. There was a single three-cushioned couch the color of the night sky and an ancient-looking armchair

accompanying it. Brady made himself at home and bounced once on the cushions before making his way to Sam's desk, which sat in the space he guessed was where a TV should be. Stacked high with notebooks and papers, his face pinched.

"How do you eat?" He asked, expecting that Sam was following him, which she was.

"What do you mean?"

"I have never seen you before, do you never go grocery shopping?"

"I eat plants. And Old Man Joe makes a weekly delivery at dusk."

"Where do you get your water?"

"The sink."

"Ew."

Sam was appalled. "What?"

"How do you talk to your friends?"

"I read."

"No, I said how do you talk to your friends."

"And I said I read. I read books."

"What's a book?"

"What?"

Now it was Sam who studied the boy to see if he was playing a prank on her, but the curiosity that wavered on his face made her believe he was not. He was not frightened to be in her home as she expected someone to be. The town had turned to shambles since her mother and father had died and left the town without decent mayors.

"What are these?" Brady pointed to the walls of books.

"Books."

“What do you do with them? Why do you have so many?”

“I read.”

“And this?” Brady held up a single sheet of paper that lay on the top of her stack of printed articles and writings and poetry.

“Paper. It’s what makes up a book, like its body.”

He let out a hm sound before replacing the paper with a pen. “And this?”

“A pen. It’s how words are put on the paper.” She watched him some more as his bone skinny neck strained itself to see the tops of the shelves, which were rather dusty. “You really have never seen a book before? Or any of the sort? Do you not go to school?”

“I do.”

Sam nodded to herself, realizing the news articles about the technological takeover were true. This kid was held off from literature. From materialistic things that mattered. “What’s your house look like?” She asked him, afraid he would confirm her suspicion.

“Opposite of this, that’s for sure.” He turned and looked up at her. “Can I use your phone to call my mom really quick, I just need to tell her I’ll be late for brunch.”

Sam loved that this kid was interested in staying over longer. “I don’t have a phone,” she countered.

And that’s when his face turned to fright as all the others had.

They stared at each other again, this time uncomfortable compared to the rest. “Do you want to leave?” She asked the boy, not knowing how to confront him.

“Yes, but I want you to come.”

“What? I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I have to stay here, make sure my things are ok.”

“Can books walk?”

“What? No.”

“Then your things will be ok.”

Sam’s nostrils flared. Maybe she didn’t like this boy much on second thought.

“Just come into town with me. I have to pick up my dad’s laptop anyways at the repair shop.”

*Laptop?* Sam shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her red hair swaying past her waist and tangling into her jean belt loops. She had not left the home in almost a decade, had swallowed down almost six hundred books, and even wrote four. But she wanted to keep this friend, even if he were a lifetime younger than her. “What’s in it for me?”

“I’ll give you five bucks,” Brady said as he began to dig into his pocket.

“I don’t want your money.”

“I don’t have anything else to offer you.”

“Will you let me teach you how to read?”

Brady looked up from his pocket, his dark eyelashes shading his emerald eyes. “I don’t want to learn how to read. Mom says it is bad.”

*Bad?* “She doesn’t have to know; it’ll be our secret.”

At this, Brady sat on the couch again and seemed to scheme a plan that Sam knew would probably frighten her the way she had to him. “Alright, fine. Come to town with me, and I will learn to read. It’s our pact.”

*Was it really going to be this easy?* None of the deals in books she had read went over this smooth. Sam took a moment to use the restroom and splash water on her face that was so

cold it should have frozen in the pipes. She could not believe this was happening. She could not believe she was able to speak with such ease and fluidity. Sam hadn't spoken since her parents' funeral. Old Man Joe had helped her all these years. Their routine was great. Why did she need to change herself? Despite the weariness of going to town, something lured Sam in. She quickly unpacked her groceries and found a letter on the back of the receipt.

*This is the last Saturday, dear. We both knew it would happen soon, but too soon enough it seems.*

Sam's stomach churned and her heart plummeted to the floor.

Brady already had his jacket back on and she shimmied one on as well that had seemed to rot with time. They headed out the door, Sam locking each of the five bolts with a different silver key, and the two headed down Tree Lane to town.

Not before Brady had asked about her car though, in which Sam flinched when responding that she never needed nor owned one. But Brady seemed to expect such opposing answers now and had just shrugged and started down the sidewalk.

"I'll take you to the grocery store, then we'll go to the phone store and get you a phone, then we can go get the woman's drink my mom always makes me stop and wait with her to get..."

Sam squinted and tried to see in the large windows built into the homes that were considered her neighbors. The houses were just as Brady said, the opposite of hers. White walls, white furniture, large pieces of machinery, and technology that she could not even begin to understand.

"Hellooo," Brady waved his hand in front of Sam's pale face. "That's snooping."

Her face turned crimson. “No, it’s not, I was just looking as one does when they walk the streets.”

“How would you know what it’s like to walk the streets?”

Brady was staring forward when he said this, his arms swaying at his sides, his curiosity just pouring like a waterfall as most 11-year-old boys let on. Sam kept her eyes on him for a moment as they walked side by side and felt an ache in her chest. Maybe she wasn’t meant to be out here.

But the town was closer than she had thought and soon enough the two were walking down the main road filled with shops of expensive flooring and decorations that told Sam the items had to be overpriced. The restaurants and cafes had most of their seating outside the front door as if in Paris and every middle-aged woman who sat at those little round tables, sipping their mom drinks as Brady had said, talking and typing into touch screen phones, was accompanied by white-haired teacup dogs. There was nothing special about this town in Sam’s mind, nothing she could grasp and form into something great as she could through literature.

Brady grabbed a hold of her bony elbow and dragged her along to a coffee shop on a corner that looked out of sorts. Its red brick had obviously been painted before but was now crusted and peeled at the edges. “I was going to take you to the café over there.” He pointed to the one with the snobby middle-aged ladies with their dogs. “That’s where my mom goes. But this one seemed more, you.”

And this café was indeed a shining mirror image of Sam’s home. Old, untouched, an artifact. The aroma caught adrift smelt like home. It smelt like the lingering stench on the newspaper wrappers every day.



People continued to eye Sam as she padded in the door which chimed a bell to the alarm of their presence. This town was small, newcomers were noticed and spoken on. But Sam wasn't new, and it made the skin heat that everyone looked at her as if foreign. She didn't order, Brady did. He ordered whatever complicated latte with three different syrups and plant-based milk his mother always ordered, and then stepped aside for Sam to pay the eight-dollar bill.

She glared at the iced coffee as if it would apologize for its payment, and the two continued to walk around town. "You don't seem interested," Brady said, head cocked to the side.

"Interested in what?"

"Interested in the town."

"What's there to be interested in?"

Brady craned his neck at the bleak buildings and their smooth walls; the thin cut trees with no fallen leaves; the metal chairs with sharp-edged armrests; the people he knew that all blended and looked the same. "See," Sam said as if reading his observation. "Nothing interesting."

And then he began to cry. He cried and cried, sitting next to Sam on the hard bench. She worried people would think she was abused or was mean to the boy, so she tried to soothe him.

"What's wrong?"

He stifled a sniff. "I'm bored."

*Oh.*

"I'm bored, there's nothing to do. And Mom is going to get mad at me for talking to you, and I don't want to go to school, and I want to have a phone like my friends because they are

never bored. They always laugh at their phones and play games on their phones and talk to their phones. And you're bored too. This pact is stupid."

"Why don't you have a phone?"

"Mom won't let me."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I don't have a phone either... what do you do for fun?" Sam turned to face Brady better within the proximity.

"I watch T.V. I sit at the window and watch Old Man Joe. I go to school..."

"Come on," Sam stood and reached a handout to Brady. He was wasting his life away.

"Where to?" he rubbed away the snot and used that hand to hold hers.

If Sam hadn't dreamt it, then she still knew where the print shop was. She nodded toward the sidewalk and led the boy down one street and to another. And there on the end, was the old print shop.

"What? No, that place is haunted," Brady said, his lightweight pulling like a fishing line on Sam's backhand.

"Haunted? How?"

"The stories that the other kids tell me, the print shop is cursed. What they do is bad in there?"

Sam was almost amused. Almost. "And what do *they* do in there?"

"I don't know, but nothing good."

"Do you know who *they* are?"

"No."

"Old Man Joe."

Brady looked at Sam as if she had three heads. "Old Man Joe doesn't work there?!"

“How do you know if you’ve never been? The print shop is where the newspaper comes from. And who passes me the newspaper every day but Sunday?”

“Old Man Joe,” he responded, dumbfounded.

So, he reluctantly went into the printshop, straggling behind Sam, halfway hiding halfway excited to brag to his friends later that he explored two whole places that they had not. But when they trickled into the shop, Old Man Joe was nowhere to be found. No, instead sat a young man behind the large oak desk, the sound of a printer whirring in the back corner.

“So, where’s Old Man Joe?” Brady asked Sam.

“Where’s Old Man Joe?” Sam repeated to the young man behind the desk.

He looked up then as if not hearing them come in the rusted door. “He’s had an accident. I think his time is running low.” The boy’s blue eyes were fogged, and his eyelids puffed as if he were crying.

“Oh,” Sam said under her breath. “Oh,” she repeated a bit louder. The young man and Brady stared at her as her eyes widened and her breath shortened. “Who’s going to get my groceries? Who’s going to print me the paper? How will I read the news? How will I keep the house tidied and safe?”

“You’re already out of the house doing it,” Brady interrupted her, simply stating what he knew.

“I can’t live out in the wild,” she said.

“In the wild?” Brady asked.

“Do you have a job?” The young man asked.

“I can’t leave my home,” Sam said in a trance.

“But you aren’t home right now,” Brady urged.

“I don’t know where the grocery store is. I don’t know how to use a telephone. I don’t even have anybody to call!” Sam began to pinch her arms. She swatted at the table and stomped on the old wood that chipped away under her feet. She was out of her home; she had been in town all day. Yet she hadn’t realized it until now.

Sam was living and breathing outside her home. And she was fine.

The young man pushed Brady behind him and clasped her shoulders, his chin dipping down in line with her crinkled forehead. “Are you alright? My name’s Jonathan. Call me Johnny, though.”

She continued to shake, just under the constriction of the young man’s strong grip. Brady spoke up from behind them, introducing himself and then Sam. Sam looked to the printer; the technology that printed the newspaper. She looked to the desk; a laptop where he was typing up the articles. It didn’t make sense. The newspaper was paper, and paper was meant to be written on. Yet here it was, technology consuming it. But Old Man Joe was friends with her parents, he was like Sam, she thought. No phone, no television, no radio... just paper. Just books and newspapers. Even Old Man Joe used technology though.

Sam couldn’t think straight. And then her mind was clear.

Old Man Joe was the last strike of humanity that Sam had ever known, one last strip of memory of her parents. Without him, she was on her own.

Later that day Sam visited the single hospital in town to visit the elderly man. His kindred spirit lay on the white, clean bed as his dementia fogged his mind and made him forget who she even was. No nurses came in while she was there, no IV or sedation worked to help the man. He just lay there as if napping. Sam wondered if he preferred to live in a dire situation like this. If

the man even knew what was going on. Her chest squeezed as if suffocating by large tweezers. What if she grew old and disabled alone in her home? Would anyone care?

The next day the house at the end of the lane did not get the newspaper, which was expected on a Sunday. But the lingering grief clutched the home's air as Sam knew Old Man Joe would never ride his tricycle up to her doorstep again.

The day after that Sam opened her doors and let people browse her books and papers and "ancient home" as the neighbors called it. Some looks weary and others in disgust, calling her a hoarder of useless antiques or a collector of necessary artifacts of history.

Throughout, Brady was grounded for skipping brunch on that Saturday, but Sam saw him again the next week. She let the people take as they pleased, just wanting them to feel and read from physical books once again. She made sure to browse the cases herself first though and pick through what stories she thought would interest her newfound friend. Once ungrounded, Sam saw Brady every day. They went to the grocery store together and got adult coffee drinks that were overpriced together, except that Brady would just order Sam's, and Sam would pay.

Old Man Joe passed away the second morning that Sam had opened her home to the community. She had sat on the front porch with a lawn chair waiting for his arrival. He had not spoken to her since her parents passed away so long ago, but he had always helped her. Never did he think twice about who Sam was or that she was any less human than the rest of the town.

Sam worked at the print shop and offered whatever books Johnny wanted from her home, as he was not able to make it to the open house. She asked for a peace offering; to let her stay in the attic up above. He had just laughed and helped her move her three duffel bags of clothes up

there and furniture and books and notebooks. “Cinderella,” he had read from the embroidery on her leather briefcase.

She never liked the name, but for some reason when Johnny said it, it stuck. He was the grandson of the one man who helped Sam survive and helped her spark hope throughout her days. And she realized that Old Man Joe only ever kept the print shop open for her. She was the only one that got the newspaper. But as time went on, the town began to hum with excitement about the daily crossword puzzles on the back page and the comic strips and stories that Sam began to contribute. She and Johnny worked nonstop, the only breaks she allowed herself being when Brady came to the shop after school to follow through with the “pact.” Sam taught the boy how to read, and soon he was the dictator of a column of stories for children in the paper as well.

Nothing would ever be the same, but as Sam sat in that rickety print shop shack in the back corner of the town’s square, squished between Brady as he hummed the syllables of words and as Johnny talked out loud as his fingers smashed the laptop’s keyboard, she could do nothing but smile.

Months and months later, Sam stepped into the town’s cemetery and took a deep breath. She counted her steps towards Old Man Joe’s grave and sat on the opposite side of the bench where Johnny held a tissue to his nose but did not blow. His eyes were glossy as he peered at the tombstone as if it would speak to him. Instead, he spoke to Sam.

“Joe did not have dementia,” he muffled into the tissue.

Sam turned her attention to him. “Of course he did, the nurses said it was severe.”

Johnny shuffled in the seat and turned to face her. “He was my grandfather, I would know.” His tone was much sterner than Sam had ever heard it reach.

“So, he died of old age then?”

The young man looked back at the tombstone. “Died with my help. Wanted to die to get you to come out of your house.”

Sam stayed silent for a moment. “What do you mean your help?”

Johnny’s lip quirked up. “Old Man Joe’s not dead, Cinderella, he just staged it to turn you into the girl you ought to be and to find the boy of your dreams.”

“Wha-” But as Sam looked over at Johnny, it was no longer a boy sitting there.

A familiar cocked grin greeted her shock. It was Old Man Joe.