

GOD BLESS THE CHILD

In the late 20's right up to the mid 50's the building that was now the Stone Hill theater was then the Stone Hill orphanage. It stood on bare earth that became mud in the rain and dust in the dry, summer heat. Then one spring surplus crushed rock left over from a nearby highway blasting was trucked up the hill and there was enough to cover all the dirt. That's how it came to be known as Stone Hill. After a couple of years, a generous contractor offered to tar a small square of the yard to accommodate a playground for the children. A chain link fence secured the playground. The large, brick building at the top of the incline was clearly visible from the road.

John Ricci, making his way up the hill to the theater now, remembered riding past the orphanage as a child. Seated next to his sister in the back seat of the Pontiac, he'd peek out at the children scampering around the yard and at the faces pressed against the fence, fingers coiled around the metal links. Sometimes a small arm would reach through the fence opening and wave at the cars driving by. Women pushed baby carriages in single file, back and forth, as if in a procession. The very word "orphan" conjured up fearful images in young John's mind and a chill coursing through his body, chilly as January winds. He used to wonder who they called in the middle of the night when thunder rolled and lightning flashed. Who shook them awake out of a scary dream and showed there was no monster in the closet or lurking under the bed? Did anyone read them stories, hug them, hear their prayers. Did anyone love them? As the building loomed into view John would climb into the front seat between his parents insisting he just wanted a better view of the road ahead. The car was small and the front seat would be cramped with the three of them but John would pull up his knees to avoid the stick shift and wrap his arms around his shins. He didn't mind. The safety he felt sitting between his parents

was worth the discomfort as his dad navigated the long, winding road ahead. John would look back over his shoulder as the distance widened between him and the orphans. The sound of their laughter always puzzled him

They sounded happy but how could they be? If John was one of them, he knew, as certainly as he could feel the beat of his heart, that he would cry at some point every day of his life until the day he died.

That was Stone Hill orphanage then, now Stone Hill Community Theater, where he was walking up the cement steps, where a man named Rufus Lee Wetherly was teaching eager young high school students about acting. John of course could not know that was not the man's real name or that Stone Hill had once been his home, back then, back in the day when it was an orphanage.

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The caretaker, Lee, had been the first to hear the baby crying. He squinted into the darkness, pulling on his overalls and went barefoot from his one room cottage into the warm, June night, following the whimpering sounds that led him to the front steps of the orphanage. The baby was inside a wicker basket and wrapped in a blue blanket. Lee picked up the basket and made his way back to his place, hushing the baby quiet. The baby, a boy, was stained with blood from his birth. Lee washed him gently with a washcloth. After patting him dry he folded a clean white sheet, placed it inside the basket and wrapped him again in the blanket. Then he hurried across the courtyard and into the big kitchen where he took a couple of diapers from the supply closet and a baby bottle that he filled with milk. Warm, dry and fed; the baby's needs were met, at least for a while.

In the morning Lee brought him to the main house, the orphanage. After careful inspection by Doc Goodwin

the baby was duly installed as a resident and given the name Joseph. Lee said the name under his breath and nodded. "God bless you, Joseph," he murmured.

Joseph may have been blessed in many ways but his health was a liability from the start. He was sickly, given to fits of colic. Rocking seemed to be all that quieted him but at night, the resident staff was a mere skeleton crew, spread thin among so many children, and weary. So whenever Lee offered to relieve them of their burdensome new charge, they were quite willing to give the child over to him.

After tending the grounds all day and making repairs where needed there was not much else for Lee to do. Sure, he could spiff himself up, get himself into the city, to the clubs that dotted the shabby streets behind the textile mills, listen to the jazz, maybe get himself dealt into a card game, or follow some woman down into the darkness on a creaky old bed. But on his meager wages those nights out were few and far between. Still, in those days, when even white men went begging for work, Lee considered himself a fortunate man indeed. He had a roof over his head, never mind it leaked in a few places in spite of all the patches, nothing a couple of pans couldn't handle. And he was surrounded by children who lightened his heart and made him smile, who jumped up and down clapping their hands when sometimes he returned from a trip downtown and empty his pockets of 2 for a penny balloons or lollipops. Stone Hill filled the hours in the day and the children filled the space in a life that was empty of a family of his own. He was luckier than most for sure.

He enjoyed being of use, outside of the job he was paid to do. It made him feel needed. He was especially taken with this new baby and reasoned it must have been because he had found him and cared for him in the first lonely hours of his life. He had washed the tiny body clean of that troublesome and troubled birth.

Sometimes it would take most of the night to quiet Joseph. Lee would settle into the big Boston rocker in the playroom and when he was sure the baby was asleep, he'd lay him in the crib but stand around a few minutes just in case, practically holding his breath. Satisfied all was well for the night, Lee would tiptoe out of

the room, past the other sleeping children and make his way outside to his cottage, humming the last of an old lullaby recalled from his own childhood.

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It was no great secret that babies stood the best chance of being adopted and Joseph was only one of a handful. But he was usually passed over for a more rotund, animated red-cheeked baby. By the time he was three, he didn't want to be adopted and at that early age, developed his own game of pretend. He'd cough and drop his eyelids so that he looked tired and disinterested. Somebody else was always chosen and that was fine with him.

Lee called Joseph his shadow. The boy followed him around, tossing off one question after another. *What are you doing now? How do you do that? Can I help you?* As Joseph grew older the questions changed. When he was five he asked why Lee's skin was so much darker than his own. When Lee tried to explain about race and nationality Joseph screwed up his nose and asked about his own background in a simple childlike manner. *How about me? What am I?* To which Lee could only say he powerful sorry, he just didn't know. Then he pointed to the side of the road beyond the garden. "I 'spect you is kinda like them wildflowers over there. No one knows how they got started and why they keep growing, they just do. And I dare anyone say they're not as beautiful as these here roses that we plant ourselves."

"Wildflowers," Joseph said.

"Yep. Just as good and every bit as pretty as these here flowers."

"And I was born right here? Maybe over by that tree in the woods or out there in the open field. Do you know, Lee? Do you?"

Lee shook his head and touched the boy's cheek. "Joseph, I only know where I found you."

One day Joseph climbed over the chain link fence and wandered into the densely wooded area behind the building where the children were not allowed. He wasn't afraid of the woods, at least not in daylight, but every few feet he checked over his shoulder to be certain the weather vane on the orphanage roof was still visible.

Dead leaves crunched under his feet and he used a twig to move them around, searching for anything his mother may have left behind; a ribbon, a pin, a scarf. He sat down on a fallen branch, let a ladybug crawl on his hand and finger, then shook it off. He would not have minded being born in the woods, in the middle of a warm night. It was quiet, peaceful except for the occasional rush of a bird or two flying out from a tree. God, he wished he had the power to recall something about her, the touch of her hand, the scent of soap or cologne,

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the sound of her voice, the color of her eyes. Were they blue? Or darkest brown, like his? *Mama*.

He came out of his reverie at the sound of people calling his name. He'd been missed. He stood and made his way toward them. They were glad he was safe but angry that he'd broken the rule and wandered off. He was to stay inside all the next day. No reading, no drawing, no toys.

So he did and he lay on his bed, his fingers laced behind his neck, listening to the children playing outside. He dozed off and on and sometime in the middle of the afternoon Lee sneaked in and handed him a piece of paper and two crayons he'd scrounged up, one red, one blue. Lee's visit cheered him until Lee advised him to give up his searching and looking for answers about his Mama. "Best you face it sooner than later," he said. "You is an orphan little man. That means you got no folks, no kin, and that be that. But, and this be true, it don't mean you ain't loved. Hear me now?"

Joseph tried to be brave and hold back the tears. That's when Lee told him he should let them run free lest they rust his insides. "You sad, you sad. Another day, you be happy and you smile."

In the Spring Joseph helped Lee turn the soil in the vegetable garden, helped him plant seeds or have ready whatever tool he might need. Together they patted down mounds of earth, pulled weeds, and reaped a steady harvest right into Fall. They built a scarecrow from a couple of 2x4's, dressed it in a ragged shirt and pants and stuffed an old pillowcase with newspaper for its head.

"That's some funny looking creature," Joseph said.

“He surely is ain’t he? We should give him a name.”

“Give him my name ‘cause I want a new one.”

“Huh? Why? Joseph’s a good name.”

Joseph shrugged, bit into a fresh string bean and squinted into the sun. “I want a real name. First, last and all mine. One I picked myself.”

Lee wiped sweat from the back of his neck and forehead. “Well, I guess you can decide that for yourself one day when you’re older.”

“I already decided. I want my name to be Rufus Lee Wetherly.” Lee sat down against a tree and talked through a laugh. “Well, hold on now. That name’s spoken for and if you’ll be excusing me, little man, I ain’t

quite done with it yet.”

“Oh, I don’t mean right now. I was thinking I could have it when you don’t need it anymore. Not that I want you to be done with it, not for at least a hundred more years.”

“A hundred, huh?”

Joseph nodded. “At least.”

“Mmmm, yeah, well, you let old Lee think on this one. I suppose there’s a chance I could pass it on to you seeing I have no children of my own.....let me put some thought on it. In the meanwhile, help me with these weeds ‘fore they choke all the goodness out of them Big Boy tomatoes.”

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When Joseph was nine Lee thought him old enough to have the note his mother had written, the note that had been pinned to the blanket. Lee had preserved all the remnants of the boy’s birth, including the wicker basket. Joseph’s hands trembled a bit as he unfolded the paper and went off alone to read it. He would read it many times over in the days and weeks that followed but he only needed to read it once to know for certain that he loved the woman who’d written it. He wished only to find her, to tell her that he would indeed forgive her as she had hoped he would.

Lee held him close that day, his arms tight around the thin, teary-eyed boy, “Aw, little man. You will just have to find some other way to forgive your Mama.”

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The well-to-do ladies and gentlemen who had embraced Stone Hill as their favorite charity, and whose donations had supplemented the city’s meager allotment for it’s maintenance, were often rewarded with recitals or plays at the orphanage and then afterwards sipped fruit juice from paper cups and daintily accepted a butter cookie or two served by the children. In the Christmas pageants Joseph was often cast as a shepherd boy or

one of the Wise Men and the generous offering of applause had unleashed in him sparks of raw energy that stirred his imagination.

During final bows he had gotten into the habit of scanning the faces of the women in the audience. He had a sense that his mother was not among those whose coat collars were adorned with fur or gold brooches. No, she would be seated somewhere in the back where the light was dimmer, camouflaged in shadows. She

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would be on a secret pilgrimage returning to the place where she had left her son, to catch a glimpse of him. And Joseph would know her because he was certain that some cosmic current, more intense than darkness, longer than miles of road and years of separation, connected a mother and her child.

It wasn't until Joseph was fourteen, when he was chosen for the finale in a series of vignettes commemorating Lincoln's birthday, that he'd unwittingly been carving for himself a possible route to approval and acceptance. He was to take center stage alone and pay tribute to the soldiers killed at Gettysburg. At first he approached the performance as nothing more than a recitation of a famous speech. He'd memorize it, deliver it to a politely attentive audience whose collective mind would probably be racing ahead to the conclusion of yet another charitable afternoon when they could return to their lives, those lived out in large homes standing behind finely trimmed privet hedges and in yards of manicured lawns that looked more like green velvet carpeting.

At fourteen Joseph had grown too tall for the white-gloved hands that patted the heads of the littler waifs. And he was glad of it. For his part he enjoyed the pageants and plays but by then had developed a benign resentment at being paraded on stage with the other children three or four times a year as a way to engender quite sympathy and a heftier donation. Of course, he knew the money was needed but he could do without the sympathy, offered in a certain look or pat on the shoulder. On his own he decided to try and give them a

reason to keep coming back, not out of pity or social responsibility but to be truly entertained.

The idea was raw, rootless, lacking clear definition. He knew only that it had to begin with him, inside him, on some level he knew almost nothing about. First, he tried to think of ways he could feel like Lincoln and finally decided it would help if he could dress in something other than his own secondhand white shirt and faded brown corduroys. He wanted a *costume*. Actors wore *costumes*, even if they were ordinary street clothes or dress clothes, they were *costumes*. He sought a certain appearance, one that would lend itself to the reality of Mr. Lincoln. He pored through some old history books, reading all he could to try and develop an impression of what the man might have been like, not what he *looked* like, but what he might have been like in his own time and surroundings. The more he read, the more he wished he possessed some magical power that would allow him to go back to any time in history, walk the streets of another era, talk to the people or just watch and listen. It was a favorite daydream.

He pointed to pictures and hounded Lee to please find him the proper clothing. “Please?”

Lee balked, asking the reason for going to so much trouble. “All you got to do is what you done maybe

a hundred times before. Just read out some words and smile. When they clap, you is done, take a bow, and that be the end of it. Now, what's all this sudden fuss and bother about, you mind tellin' me boy?"

Joseph was at a loss to explain what he himself didn't fully understand. "Please?"

And the next afternoon didn't old Lee take himself down into the dingy cellar and then up into the dusty attic, pushing away cobwebs, searching until he found what he hoped would pass as a bloody costume. "I am cursed with a soft heart," he muttered, handing over a battered top hat and a baggy black musty smelling suit. "And a little luck, huh?" Joseph was pleased. The clothes would do just fine once they were washed and aired out.

The speech was memorized but something was still wrong. Even with his costume he still didn't feel the part. Whatever he was reaching for was just out of his grasp right up until the moment he took his place on stage, folded his fingers under the lapels of his coat, and paused. During that brief pause he found a way to feel more like the character he was portraying. The idea came so suddenly that could almost hear an audible click in his brain. He stared out at the audience that was no longer an audience but relatives and friends of the dead soldiers in whose memory they'd gathered and in whose honor their President would now dedicate a memorial.

And then it felt right.

Behind him the children's chorus set the mood by humming the Battle Hymn of the Republic. He waited a beat the stepped forward and began.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.....

He continued with an earnestness he didn't even recognize as belonging to him. He emptied his heart, embracing words that inspired beauty and attention: *dedicate, consecrate, these honored dead.....* Joseph paused, stepped left, lifted his chin. He was trying to move as a man of dignity, think as a leader might in that moment, a Commander-In-Chief paying homage to his brave, fallen soldiers. *These dead shall not have died in vain. That this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom. And that government of the people, by the*

people and for the people shall not perish from the earth.

He pulled in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He had finished without faltering and now stood still, waiting for the applause he'd come to love and appreciate. Waiting....waiting, frozen in place, inside the silence, mouth and lips going dry, hearing murmurs. He quickly surmised he'd made a complete fool of himself

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and the audience was stifling their mockery. Sweat beaded on his forehead and the back of his neck was damp. He'd flopped. Perhaps he'd been too theatrical in his performance, too affected. Who did he think he was, Barrymore? If they broke into laughter he would bolt from the stage.....if he could loosen his body out of the terror. He'd run and keep on running until he was far away from Stone Hill. He wanted to run, he did. He stole a sideways glance backstage and saw tears glistening on Lee's dark, wrinkled cheeks. Those few unsettling seconds seemed long minutes. A man stood up in the back and Joseph thought now they would all start leaving but.....then it came, slowly at first, rippling over the proscenium, then full blown and sustained. His breath came back normal, his body relaxed. Okay, he thought, it was okay. He removed his hat, held it by his side, crimping the brim and pressing it to his thigh. He bowed deeply, accepting their praise, then stood tall and straight and felt pride as he smiled back at his audience.

Lee tugged on the stubborn cord, jerking the heavy old curtain closed. He placed a firm hand on Joseph's shoulder as he walked by. "Good work, son," Lee said, the words almost whispered and catching in his throat. "Mighty good."

Joseph hung back for a moment, silent. Tears pinched his eyes at the word *son* and at the sudden realization that for the first time, he had forgotten to look for his mother in the audience. He ran off, folding himself down into an isolated corner where, after his weeping subsided into quiet resignation, he decided she was not there,

never had been and never would be. It was time to lay his childish fantasy aside. He wiped at his eyes with his coat sleeves.

“Mama,” he whispered, then again, and then once more and for the last time.

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