

The Disappearance of Joseph Roberts

Joe Roberts had lived a solitary life. He was in love with a woman once, some time ago, but it didn't last, and he was left wondering whether it had really been love in the first place. Now he was alone.

Joe was quiet, but he wasn't kind, and his silence, his soft-spoken manner, was often mistaken for gentleness. He worked in an office, in the legal department of an insurance company. Joe was not a successful man. He had been working for this company for twenty years and he was neither bored with nor engaged by his work. Dissatisfaction, it seems, is reserved for those with a sense of expectation.

Every Sunday, Joe's sister would visit him at his apartment - a small, drab, one bedroom that, like Joe, hadn't really changed in twenty years - with her kids. Joe's sister was happy, she was successful. Her children were spoiled and often rude, but seeing them was the highlight of Joe's week. It never crossed his mind, as little did, such was the weight of his routine, that he might want children of his own.

This was how Joe lived, quietly, unemotionally, in a sort of daze, living, by the winter of 2012, off of nothing more than muscle memory; his mind had, after a certain point, simply let his body take control. It hadn't even occurred to him, in any urgent sense, that the life he was living was really his own. If you were to ask Joe whether or not he was happy, he would pause for a moment, as he had a way of doing when asked a question, and realize he hadn't thought about it in a long, long time.

One day towards the beginning of the year, cold and bright blue, a young couple, newly married, moved into the apartment upstairs: the Svenssons, according to the small sign they had placed above their mail box. Joe was not altogether thrilled with this development. He liked his apartment - it was fit for purpose, he would tell his sister, who did not like his apartment - but it was cheap and the walls, and, apparently, ceilings were thin, and he could hear every word above a whisper that Mr. and Mrs. Svensson said. Most of these words, it soon became clear, were unkind.

The Svenssons argued. They argued in the morning, they argued when they got home from work, they argued over dinner, and, perhaps most of all, they argued before they went to bed. And Joe, alone downstairs, was privy to every word.

He learned a lot about the Svenssons. They had married in December, honeymooned in Hawaii, celebrated the new year, much to Mr. Svensson's irritation, with Mrs. Svensson's parents, and missed out on a much nicer, much larger two bedroom apartment not ten minutes away from the school at which Mr. Svensson worked.

In the beginning, as far as Joe was concerned, the Svenssons were simply voices. His, a very smooth baritone, which smoothness did not always translate into calmness. Hers, a surprisingly gravelly alto, seductive and sweet, one of those old-fashioned cabaret voices, but effortless, powerful, wasted, unfortunately, on the arguments with which it was largely concerned. Joe,

such was the power of this latter voice, found himself siding with it, rooting for it (for that is what his life had come to) even at its most unreasonable.

Slowly, almost unconsciously - and this, if he had chosen to think about it would have depressed even Joe - Joe began planning his day around the Svenssons. He would wake up with them, listening to their morning argument over coffee and two slices of toast; he would come home from work at the same time as Mrs. Svensson and change out of his work clothes as she complained to her husband about Ryan, her boss and Rex ("What kind of name is that?"), his secretary; he would eat dinner with them ("This salmon is overcooked."), and he would lie in bed as the Svenssons made their closing arguments, wrapped a precarious little bow on the day's disputes.

About a month after the Svenssons had moved in, just as Joe was sitting down for dinner - he was a little late this evening, the Svenssons had already begun (Salmon, again, in a voice of disgust) - he heard his own name being discussed for the first time by the voices upstairs.

"I don't like him," she said.

"You don't know him. Do you even know his name?"

"Joe, or John, or something."

"See? You don't even know what his name is."

"I don't need to know what his name is to know that I don't like him."

"You're being unfair," he said. "You haven't even met him."

"I can hear him peeing when I brush my teeth in the morning. That's good enough for me."

"That's not his fault."

"No, it isn't."

"Do not make this about the apartment again."

"This isn't about the apartment. I'm just telling you that I don't like the creepy man that lives downstairs. He creeps me out."

As usual, Joe found himself siding with her. He was sort of a creepy man to the untrained eye. All single men over a certain age attract suspicion. It was only natural for Mrs. Svensson to feel that way. Anyway, what right did Mr. Svensson have to assume there was nothing wrong with Joe? There was no need to jump to any rash conclusions.

Joe had never seen either of the Svenssons. He had caught glimpses - the back of a head leaving the front door, a sneakered left foot as it turned up the stairs - but he had never actually seen either of their faces. He had a sort of picture of what they looked like, the type of image one attaches to the characters of a book, shaped like a person, but notably lacking, clouded, vague wherever any amount of detail was really required - faces blur just as they come into view, silhouettes in the distance. Joe pictured blonde hair, blue eyes (swedish, presumably), but the voices didn't match. Mrs. Svensson was short, but not small. There was something substantial about the way she filled up Joe's mind. Mr. Svensson was of average height, nondescript in most ways really, with perhaps a beard or goatee.

It was possible, from all he heard, for Joe to piece together much of the Svensson's lives. The apartment, of course, was a problem, which suggested financial means that were more than

adequate for their current lifestyle. Mr. Svensson was a schoolteacher - history or philosophy, by the sound of it - and Mrs. Svensson worked in marketing. An unlikely couple, really. He was, for all of the common sense with which he combatted his wife, an idealist, an optimist, and seemed at times as though he thought the gentle power of his voice, which was not as innocent as it first seemed, would be enough to make his wife see the world in the same way he did. She was a fighter. Arguing, for her, came naturally, it was instinct, and he, out of some frustrated academic impulse or other was more than happy to oblige her. She needed it, in a way, and her husband couldn't deny her. On the one hand, here was this woman, frustrated, angry (at what?) and on the other was this man, this wishful thinker, paused momentarily from his own thoughts to indulge his wife, not, perhaps, for her, but as a form of personal improvement, an act of charity. They were like two boxers trying to fight each other while standing in different rings. These arguments were deeply, profoundly intimate for both Mr. and Mrs., and yet they really had nothing to do with one another. It was, thought Joe (as if he had any authority on the matter), no kind of way to live.

But were the Svenssons happy? This was the really pressing concern. This is what Joe was trying to figure out. He really believed that there was some reward waiting for him upon his successful answer to this question. It became his cause. The first cause that he had ever really taken up in his life. But why? Was it boredom? Did Joe have nothing better to do? What difference did it really make in the end? None, is the short answer, but Joe didn't stop to consider any of this. The Svensson's lives had become his own. What he listened to was no longer the conversation of strangers, not even that of friends. The arguments from upstairs had become simply an extension of his own thought. The only point of distinction between the thoughts in Joe's head and the arguments from apartment 4C was the slightly muted, dull-sounding way in which the latter were presented to him. Joe was not exempt from the consequences of his new lifestyle.

An extra pause was necessary now for him to answer even the most basic questions. Where are you from? What do you do? It started to effect the way he thought, which was, to the astute observer, becoming less and less recognizable as the thought of Joe Roberts, with its slow, common sense, non-aspirational, inoffensive connections, and had become more combative, more optimistic, like the first sentences of a writer just finished reading the work of one of his idols, a child imitating the movement of her parents. The problem was that there really was only one astute observer of Joe Roberts, his sister, and she saw him only once a week, for an hour or two, the sort of time frame in which even the most dramatic personality change can be brushed off as a temporary mood swing or momentary funk. So here was this man, Joseph Theodore Roberts, who was quickly disappearing, right into thin air, and with no one around to stop him.

Joe's sister was Tessa and she was concerned about her brother, hence the weekly visits. She thought he was becoming isolated, that he didn't get out enough, have any real friends, engage with the world in any meaningful way. Joe was her older brother and she cared about him deeply, but, as is the way with younger siblings, felt somehow reluctant to really, on any fundamental level, question what he was doing, particularly Joe, whose quiet passivity had long been mistaken for quiet wisdom, and who had always failed to deny that he knew something you didn't. Tessa's visits were born more out of hope than expectation, hope that maybe, somehow, their conversations, her children, something, might get Joe out of the apartment a little more, engage him in something other than his routine. And so, when Tessa came over one Sunday in

March, as the daffodils were starting to bloom, to find her dear brother positively, relatively, brimming with excitement about the new construction site - they were building a school - down the road, it didn't even occur to her that this excitement was not his own, such was her own excitement at what may have been Joe's first meaningful display of emotion in upwards of a year, which display of emotion was surprising, and surprisingly welcome, enough to distract from the fact that Joe was really acting nothing like himself. Change is good, up to a point.

"The neighborhood needs this, Tess. It's needed it for a long time. Some life, some energy."

"When is it going to be finished," she said.

"They've earmarked (this was certainly not Joe's word) 2016 as the proposed finish date. So the first school year would be fall of 2016."

Tessa's kids were watching TV. It was hard to tell whether they enjoyed the weekly trips to visit their uncle. They'd been doing it for so long now enjoyment didn't really factor into it anymore. It was just done. Joe would usually talk to them for a while, ask about school. They'd watch baseball together sometimes, if there was a game on. Today, Joe mostly ignored them.

"Don't you think that's a bit ambitious, though?" Joe said, unprompted.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, 2016, that's very soon. You know what these things are like. What if they don't finish in time?"

"Presumably they'll finish eventually," Tessa said.

"But you don't understand. They'll need to start enrolling students, advertising, that sort of thing, you know? They'll need to start all that well before the school year starts. And if the school isn't ready in time, they're going to have all of these kids attending a half finished school. It's not fair to them."

"I thought," said Tessa, "that you were excited about this. I thought it was a positive thing."

"It is," said Joe. "But there's a lot of risk involved here. I'm worried that you're not seeing the risk."

"No, no, I understand. It's a big project. Of course there are some risks."

The usual topic of discussion at these meetings was family. Joe and Tessa's parents were dead, but between a few aunts and uncles and Tess's husband they had enough family to keep them occupied, plus there were the kids to discuss. And parents have a way of talking about their children right in front of them. The discussion of the new school tailed off after a while. For all Tessa's excitement at seeing her brother so engaged, the subject really didn't interest her. She had wondered, also, why it had interested her brother, but had thought better than to ask. The conversation came back, as it always did, to Tess's husband, Scott.

"How is he?" said Joe.

"You know. Same old, same old. Work keeps him busy. His parents are not in great shape so he's been dealing with that, too."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah. I mean, it's been a while now, I think he's kind of come to terms with it, but he's frustrated a lot of the time. It'll pass."

"Are you happy, Tess?" This question was certainly not Joe's own. In fact, it had a very definite

antecedent. Mr. Svensson had asked the same question to Mrs. Svensson the night before in the condescending way that so infuriated his wife: calmly, quite evenly, as if the answer had nothing to do with him. This question, more than any other, had stood out to Joe, just in the way some of our own ideas stand out. All thoughts are not created equal. There was an upside - this, too, is a relative term - to Joe's situation. He was, what was left of him, learning. Learning how to think thoughts that would otherwise never have crossed his mind. And this thought in particular had never occurred to him. Not in any pressing way, at least. Are you successful? Are you comfortable? Do you want anything? Do you like your job? These were all questions that Joe had asked himself at one time or other, and it must be admitted that they bear some resemblance, or, at least, some connection, to the question at hand, but none of them get to the core of the issue quite so directly as the question of happiness. One can answer all of those in the negative and still be happy. The worst part was that, after so many years, when the ultimately relevant question had finally occurred to Joe, he was no longer in a position to answer it for himself. Were the Svensson's happy? This he could have taken a stab at. But Joe? Not even he could say.

Tess was taken back slightly by the question, recognizing immediately the stranger in it, and paused for a long time. But she did answer, eventually: "Yes, I think so. Yes, I am."

"Why did it take you so long to answer, then?" Again, this was all Mr. Svensson.

"Excuse me?" Annoyed.

"If you're happy," said Joe, "that shouldn't be such a hard question to answer."

"It's complicated, Joe. It's a complicated question."

"Not if the answer is yes. Thinking about that question amounts to nothing more than justifying the reasons you're unhappy. That's cheating."

"So your telling me I'm unhappy?"

"I'm telling you that your answer was unconvincing."

"Oh yeah? That means a lot coming from you. You of all people. I can think of nothing more enjoyable than sitting alone in this room all day. You are certainly an authority on the matter."

"We aren't talking about me, Tess." Tessa was visibly angry now, and she lowered her voice to a sharp whisper, mindful of her children, who were still distracted by the TV.

"I am. I'm talking about you Joe, okay? What's wrong with you today? I come over to say hi, so you can see the boys, and you start accusing me with this pop-psychology bullshit. What's gotten into you? Listen to yourself. I don't know what's wrong with you, but if you're going to treat me like a...patient or something, I will just stop coming to see you. Are *you* happy, Joe? Maybe you should think about that for a little bit. You don't seem happy. You've been doing the same shit for the last twenty years. That isn't normal, Joe. I come over here because I worry about you, because I think it does you some good to see some other people once in a while, but if you're going to be like this I'll just leave, okay? I do this for you, Joe, not for me." Looking at the boys: "Come on guys, time to go. Up you get."

Joe didn't notice when Tess didn't come back the next week; he was busy listening.

Another thing about the Svenssons' arguments was that neither of them ever won. They didn't argue to solve problems or answer questions, or even just for the satisfaction of being right: they simply argued. But, and this is crucial, where their arguments stopped their lives began. There may not have been any audible victories, but there were visible conclusions: the way Mr. Svensson touched his wife on the shoulder when she was sitting down to breakfast, or the way

she ignored him (pretending to be asleep) when he got up for work; the restaurant they ate at on Friday night, the sex they had on Saturday, every look and gesture, every touch, bumping into each other in the bathroom, one going in, the other out; their lives were filled with resolution. For every word spoken in anger, there was an action undertaken in kindness, and even if it was just superficial kindness it marked a boundary between what was said and what was meant, when you really got down to it, in the long run. Of course, Joe didn't see any of this, and, consequently, his was a life filled with questions, suspense, resolution-less. In making another's argument your own you really give up on any element of closure. And this had a serious effect on Joe. He became agitated, nervous. He struggled with even the simplest tasks: buying milk from the grocery store, commuting to work, cooking dinner. Distracted, at all times, by the prospect of an answer that didn't exist. He went out as little as possible, started taking days off from work, waiting, hoping the Svenssons would provide him with something, a solution. He waited for six more weeks.

Tessa had been waiting too, worried now that something was really wrong, that whatever had come over Joe was more than a mood swing. Joe was not the most communicative man in the world by any stretch, but he would have called her, the Joe she knew, after a fight like that. He would have done something. So she called him.

"Joe, hi."

"Who is this," he said.

"It's Tess, Joe. It's your sister."

"Oh."

"How are you? I haven't spoken to you in a while. Are you okay?"

After a long pause: "Um...yeah. Yeah, I'm okay."

"I'm worried about you Joe. We haven't spoken since that fight. I wanted to make sure that everything is okay."

"What fight?"

"You do remember Joe, don't you? When I was last at your place. You were asking me a lot of questions. About whether I was happy. I got annoyed. You remember that, don't you?"

Another pause: "Um, yeah. Yeah, I guess. Were you happy?"

"Please, Joe. Now's not the time."

Joe became angry: "Well? When is it going to be the time? You can't just keep avoiding this."

"Joe, please. Stop that. What's wrong? Something's wrong. I'm coming over to your place now, okay. We'll talk about this, okay?"

"Oh, I see. I see. Avoiding the question ag—" Tessa hung up.

Joe barely recognized his sister when he opened the door for her. He looked at her as if through a fog, squinting, thinking. She appeared strange, like a memory made up of what others have told you. Scott was with her. He stood behind his wife, looming, even more obscure of a shadow. Joe just stared.

"Joe?" said Tess, "Joe?"

"Tessa," he said, eventually.

"Joe, can we come in?"

"Okay." Joe moved back out of the way of the door, extending his arm and swinging it across his

body in a crude sort of welcome gesture that wasn't intended for family. Tessa and Scott went inside, but they didn't sit down. Joe closed the door and turned back to face his sister, standing awkwardly on the doormat. Scott stood just behind Tessa's right shoulder.

"Joe," said Tessa, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Something's wrong, Joe. You've been acting very strange recently. You can tell me if something's wrong."

Joe had heard this conversation before. He'd listened to the way Mr. and Mrs. Svensson reassured one another, teased out each other's innocent confessions. He knew himself, once, in what those little rituals consisted. But all he could hear now was the sound of remembered footsteps on his ceiling as Mr. Svensson walked across the living room to hug his wife. Not knowing what else he could do, Joe followed Mr. Svensson's lead. Scott leaned forward slightly, at the ready, as Joe embraced his sister, collapsed, for this is really what it was, into her arms with the exhaustion of a man who no longer has the luxury of acting like himself. Joe started to cry and so did Tessa, oblivious to the fact that it wasn't her brother's tears she shared, but the tears of a stranger, less, a strange voice. Is there any difference to the truly concerned?

This meeting, quite naturally, was mistaken for reconciliation. Tessa resumed her weekly visits. At first, she came without her children - and she noticed when Joe didn't ask about them, she noticed that something substantial had changed about her brother - but eventually she brought them too. People change, she told herself.

Much of Tessa and Joe's time together was spent in silence, the silence of strangers. Joe still recognized his sister, that part of his memory was still intact, but the relationship he had had with her, a relationship grounded, as all the good ones are, in mutual thought, not agreement, but the sort of shared understanding that is necessary even for disagreement, was gone. Joe's thought, if you were to see it, was unrecognizable. He thought, now, like an argument between Mr. and Mrs. Svensson. And he knew them so intimately by this point that his ability to think like this was practically flawless. The pauses in his speech were gone. His quiet, reflective moments were now spent reciting arguments from memory. His understanding of both Mr. and Mrs. Svensson was so complete that he could generate, perfectly naturally, entire conversations from a single sentence, a single word. He had even, on one or two occasions, predicted arguments. He would hear Mr. and Mrs. Svensson say, almost verbatim, what he had thought days or weeks before. What made Joe's case even more strange was that he wasn't starting to think like another person, or even two people, he was starting to think like the arguments between two people, which had their very own system of rules and logic. Joe decided what to say to Tessa (who was, now, the only person he talked to) based not on what she said to him, but the way she said it. He listened to tone. He looked, always, for the emotional upper hand. Conversation, for Joe, was competition. Tessa found it better not to engage.

It was a strange coincidence - perhaps it was lucky, too - that the Svenssons were never around when Tessa came to visit. They went to Mrs. Svensson's parents' house on Sundays, Joe knew, for Sunday lunch and to see Mrs. Svensson's sister. They didn't get back until long after Tessa was gone. But, one Sunday, a few months after their reconciliation, Tessa went to visit Joe, and

the Svenssons were home, arguing.

“I don’t know what you want me to do? The car is broken, the buses aren’t running today. I’m not walking,” said Mr. Svensson.

“But Claire will be there. We haven’t seen her since Christmas. I told them we’d be there.”

“Yeah, well why don’t you tell them to come pick us up?”

Tessa and Joe sat in silence, listening.

“God,” said Tessa after a few minutes, “that’s annoying. How long have they been living there?”

“Seven months.”

“You must be sick of it.” Joe didn’t respond.

If Tessa were listening carefully she would have heard the similarities between Joe’s voice and the voices upstairs. In fact, she did notice them once or twice. The upwards tilt at the end of Joe’s sentences, the loud, quiet, loud, quiet back and forth of his answers and his questions. Did Joe really spend all the time he spent talking to Tessa talking to himself? It’s unclear. It is certainly true that by this time Tessa didn’t really know who she was talking to. It was enough for her, she realized eventually, to simply sit with her brother, to see him, and to see her memory of him. Did she try to save him, to bring him back? She did, of course she did. But how could she be successful when she didn’t even know where she was bringing him back from, what, exactly, she was saving him from? Who was she to judge whether he needed saving? People change, she kept telling herself. Not like this.

On August 13th, the Svenssons moved out. Joe had listened to them planning, listened to them discuss the pros and cons of dozens of apartments, listened to their eventual back and forth between the two favorites: natural sunlight, modern kitchen vs. high ceilings, child friendly. They disagreed, naturally, but Joe knew (how could he not?) which one they would choose in the end. He could have picked it for them, saved them the trouble. Joe knew the Svenssons better than they knew themselves because he didn’t really know them at all, just their reactions to one another. The really tragic part was that Joe didn’t know he was doing any of it. All of it just crept up on him. If you asked him who he was, he still would have answered Joe. But he would have thought that was enough.

Joe listened to the Svenssons tell the movers what to take and what to leave. He listened to them argue about how much to tip the movers once they had left. He listened to them all the way out the front door. And then, again, he was alone.

It took a few weeks for the change to take its toll. At first, he was able to replace the Svenssons in his head. His thoughts still worked on their schedule. But the thoughts were beginning to run out. No input, no output. The form of their arguments was left without any content, abstracted. Joe stopped going to work completely.

Tessa kept up with her visits, kept bringing the kids, but Joe barely recognized them. They would sit quietly watching the TV while Tessa talked to Joe, tried to talk him out of whatever funk he was in. He sat down next to them once, near the end.

“Hi,” said Joe to the younger boy.

“Hi Joe.”

“What are you watching?”

“Simpsons.”

“Do you think we need a bigger apartment?”

“I like your apartment.”

“We can afford something bigger, honey.” The boy looked confused. “I think it’s time to get a new place. We’re ready.”

“I don’t live here.”

Tessa was watching. She remembered how much Joe used to like to see her kids. It was the best part of his week. He told her that once. Tessa started to cry. Joe turned around to look at his sister.

“What’s wrong?” Tessa didn’t respond.

“Come on, what’s wrong Kate?” said Joe. “Kate?”

“Who’s Kate, Joe?”

“You are. You’re my wife. Come on, don’t you want to start looking for a new place?”

Tessa stared at Joe. For the first time she didn’t recognize him; the Joe she had been holding onto was gone. She didn’t know what had happened to him, but he was gone.

“What’s your name?” she said. Joe paused, not the way Joe used to pause. Confused, not thoughtful.

“Jack,” he said. “It’s me, Jack.”

Tessa was scared now. She was trying, through her tears, to tell her children that it was time to leave. They stood up, but they were scared as well and Joe was confused and he kept asking what was wrong Kate and saying that it was time to look for a new place and that she shouldn’t be scared because it was time to move on. Tessa scrambled toward the door, pushing the boys ahead of her. “Goodbye, Joe,” she said, “We’ve got to go. I’ll be back soon, okay. I’ll be back soon. Very soon. I’m going to help you, Joe. Joe. It’s still you, Joe.” Tessa closed the door.

Joe turned back around, surveying the apartment. “We really need a bigger place,” he said.