



Jo Joe

a Black Bear, Pennsylvania story

Sally Wiener Grotta

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a Black Bear, Pennsylvania Story
by Sally Wiener Grotta

EXCERPT

Jo Joe consists of eight chapters, one for each day from Monday to the following Monday. This excerpt is the first chapter. *Jo Joe* is available in paperback, eBook and hardbound editions from all bookstores, including [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).



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MONDAY

“Welcome to Black Bear, Pennsylvania.”

The carved wooden sign is new — dark forest green with gold-leaf lettering — the best that the firehouse cake sale could buy, no doubt. Little else seems changed as I drive down Main Street. I’ve been gone half my lifetime, and this tiny, insular mountain village appears just as threadbare as ever.

Seventeen years ago, I fled Black Bear, returning to Paris for university, vowing I’d never come back. If it hadn’t been for that anonymous phone call, I never would have set foot in this town again. Does death nullify vows?

In the center of the village, at the crossroads where it all started over a hundred and fifty years ago, are the venerable steepled Moravian church and the modern single story Catholic Church across the street. For a Monday afternoon, the Chug-a-Lug beer distributor is busy, with two mud-splattered pickup trucks and an old beat-up Mustang in the lot. As usual, Cliff’s True Value’s inventory spills out onto its cracked asphalt parking lot, trying to convince lake tourists and returning snowbirds to stop and buy as they zoom past, routinely breaking the 25 miles per hour speed limit. Why Cliff doesn’t close on Mondays had been a mystery to Grampa. “No one does yard work or barbecues or puttering on Monday,” he would say. “Not when they have the weekend to rest up from, and the work-a-day week ahead of them.”

And there, next to Engelhardt’s sprawling Ford dealership, the vile old school is still a blot on the landscape, boarded up and falling down. How typical.

But no, not everything is the same. Some things — and people — are irretrievably lost. Next to Engelhardt’s Auto Supply and across from the old school is Grampa’s drug store, now a second-hand clothing shop. I wonder, what have they done with Gramp’s soda fountain and snack counter? Are neatly

folded recycled baby jumpers piled on the chrome and red leatherette stools where I used to love to twirl? Black Bear must have been one of the last places on earth where the local pharmacist would greet you by name and know how you liked your milkshake as well as what medicines you took, when and why. The Rite-Aid in Hamlin put an end to that about fifteen years ago, forcing Gramps out of business, but he had written me that he'd been thinking of retiring anyway. Or had he already known that he was dying and would be gone in a couple of years?

I pull into Dutch's service station, to top up the fuel tank. Ever since I first learned to drive, Gramps drilled into me that I should never, ever let the gas get below a half tank — just in case. Not that I was an overly obedient teenager; I would often drive until the car was almost empty. But I learned my lesson that horrid night after the homecoming game in my senior year, when I ran out of gas on Drumheller Lane. Fleeing for my life from that dark dirt road was a suitably wretched finish to the miserable day that changed everything. Now, back in Black Bear, where I vowed I'd never return, I'm determined to heed every precaution necessary to make it through this one week, including filling up my rental car at Dutch's before leaving town for the farm.

Just as I flip open the door to the car's gas cap, a big white man in his mid-thirties yells from the service bay, "Hey, I'll do that for you, miss!" and limps toward me as quickly as his bad right leg lets him.

I remember how Old Man Dutch used to rant at the alleged convenience store gas stations that had sprouted along the interstate. "Where the hell's the service in self-serve?" he'd ask.

This enormous man, with his unkempt, thinning, dark blonde hair and that beer belly protruding over his low jeans, isn't Dutch. Still, he must agree with Dutch because after he starts pumping the gas, he actually squeegees the car's windshield and rear window. All the while, staring at me.

Well, I knew that would be part of coming back. They never did get used to my dark skin, flat nose and kinky hair around here in Wonder White Bread territory. "You're like a

one-two punch, for some folks,” Gramma once tried to explain. “You’re Schmoyer through and through, down to the family hazel eyes and high cheek bones, but in a very different package from anything they’ve ever known. You confuse them.”

Confuse isn’t the word I would use to describe how Black Bear reacts to anyone who’s “different.” From a young age, I learned to try to ignore the rude stares and cruel jibes.

So, why does the way this man’s icy blue eyes bore into me make my skin crawl? Something about how his lopsided grin seems to consume his entire face — it’s all too disturbing — and familiar.

Even as he replaces the pump nozzle, caps the tank and wipes a spot where the gas splashed on the side panel, he doesn’t take his eyes off me. “*Jo...?*” he finally asks, then, catches himself before saying anything else. Now, those pale, searing eyes that he couldn’t keep off me just a moment ago are diverted everywhere but on my face. Mostly, he focuses on the oil splattered, cracked concrete around his feet.

Oh no! It can’t be. Not this massive wreck of a man. His puffy face has that grizzled look of someone who’s lived and worked hard. Wrinkles punctuate his eyes and mouth, like parentheses cut into his flesh. His nose has obviously been broken, perhaps more than once. And he’s hunched over and soft, nothing like the wide-eyed, fair-haired, muscular football hero of our high school days. Once upon a time, nothing could have convinced me that a day would come when I wouldn’t instantly recognize Joe Anderson, regardless of how long we’d been apart. Yet, it takes hearing his hesitant, hoarse voice, saying that damned nickname he gave me, before I can be sure he really is Joe Anderson.

Despite myself, I step back, hating that, after all these years, he can still make me flinch. “Hello, Joe,” I say, determined to keep my tone even and unemotional.

He’s standing so close that the smell of sweat and motor oil permeating his clothes wash over me. Stuffing his large, oil-rimmed hands into his scruffy jeans pockets, he mumbles. “Hell, you really did come back.”

“Yes, well, Gramma’s dead.” To say it still doesn’t give it any sense of reality.

“Yeah, I know.”

I glance at the numbers on the pump. \$37.50 for only a half tank of regular unleaded. A family of six in the Congo could live on that for a month, if they were lucky enough to have someone earning actual cash. When I hand my credit card out to Joe, he looks at it, starts to reach for it, then shakes his head. “Naw, don’t bother. I own this place now.” I guess he wants to show me that he’s actually made something of himself.

Treating me to a few gallons of fuel is a meaningless gesture that isn’t worth arguing over. I simply say “Thank you,” as I concentrate on putting away my wallet, though gratitude is the furthest thing from my mind. All I want is to get away from him — fast. I force myself to not look in the rear view mirror, as I drive off.

Merde! Why did I have to run into that bastard the very second I return to Black Bear? *Damn him!* Even after so many years, just seeing Joe still twists me up inside. But then, for nearly two decades, my memories of Joe Anderson have been a scarred-over thorn that jabs painfully whenever anyone else tries to get close.



Hungry, and doubting that there’ll be anything fresh to eat in the house, I stop at Buck’s ShurSave. It hadn’t been a franchise market seventeen years ago, and certainly not as bright and spacious. However, even if the new building is more antiseptic and anonymous, the prices and the produce look as good as ever.

I should know better than to walk into a supermarket only two days out of Africa; it usually takes me at least a week to decompress and readjust to the modern world. After spending even only a short time in one of my impoverished villages, I start to see things through the eyes of the women I work with. How amazed they would be at the variety and quantity of cheap, wholesome food available to everyone, including the poorest.

Buck’s is so mannerly and clean, with none of Africa’s pungent smells of overripe or rotting produce. But it’s also bland, without the gem-like, almost riotous earthy colors of

clothes, food and people under the scintillating African sun. The white noise Muzak punctuated with monotone announcements calling for “*Clean up in aisle three,*” and “*Don’t miss our special on ground round, only \$3.29 a pound*” is a far cry from the squeals and cackles of penned animals being bartered for the butcher’s knife mixed with the ancient calls of the street sellers who don’t hesitate to grab your sleeve to get you to stop and buy their wares. Long ago, I learned not to wear long sleeved light colored blouses when shopping in African open-air markets, because they end up grungy and grey from all the dirty hands pushing, pulling and grabbing. Even so, village market day still infuses me with a sense of exotic adventure, of the possibility of discovering a hidden treasure in the next stall, or the one behind it.

Shopping in Buck’s, I feel as though I’ve been transported overnight to a sterile, futuristic, entirely predictable world, where everything is well organized, neatly packaged and sane. I can’t deny the appeal of the safely refrigerated meat and dairy and the floral attractiveness of the cool-misted produce — with not one mosquito or fly in sight. My cart soon overflows with crisp baby spinach, plump vine-ripened red tomatoes, fat Vidalia onions, enormous strawberries, fresh asparagus stalks, a wedge of double Gloucester cheese, fresh whole milk, free range eggs, multigrain sourdough bread and other memory-laced delicacies. Even a locally baked cinnamon raisin cake. I haven’t been in a western supermarket for more than three months; strange that the first one is Buck’s.

While the store isn’t crowded, no aisle is empty. As I would expect in Black Bear, not one shopper or employee is black or brown. Most people ignore me, as they concentrate on their shopping lists, on the labels and prices of food, or on their children riding in the baskets surrounded by cartons, cans and packages. A few stare at me, and two even nod. I don’t recognize anyone, though several look vaguely familiar. Perhaps, it has to do with the limited gene pool, among the local mountain folk as opposed to the New York commuters. No, that’s unfair of me to stereotype like that. But then, this is Black Bear, and fair is not a concept that has much traction here.

In the dairy department, a chubby twenty-some-thing

woman wearing a brown cable sweater and black Levis approaches me. “You’re Judith Ormand, aren’t you?” she asks hesitantly. She’s too young for me to have known her.

“Yes,” I respond, somewhat warily.

“I knew it! I saw your picture in *The Gazette*. People talked about it for weeks, about the important work you’re doing.” Then, she pauses. “Hey, sorry about your grandmother.”

I say, “Thank you,” as I roll my cart away.

The cashier is of a type that seems frozen in time. Dry, over-processed bleached hair with visible dark roots, pendulous breasts sagging to a waist that disappeared long ago, nicotine stains on her fissured fingers and cracked nails. She has the hardened look of a woman who has too many children and too little hope. I read the name tag under the faded artificial orchid. *Maybeth?* No, it couldn’t be! This woman has to be years older than I. Still, the more I watch her ring up my overly large order, her arms moving with the speed of an automaton who has probably been performing these identical motions every day for years, the more I’m certain this is the same girl who was prom queen and head cheerleader. *Maybeth*. The most popular girl in town. Every boy’s fantasy. And my personal nemesis from my first day in seventh grade until the day I graduated.

Gramma wouldn’t be proud of me, not if she could read my mind, as I often felt she could. Seeing *Maybeth* the way she is now and remembering how she once was... well... how far the mighty have fallen.

Maybeth stops briefly in the middle of scanning the bag of Granny Smith apples and stares at me. “Hey, I know you,” she says, not quite belligerent, but not friendly either.

I’m not sure how to respond, so I’m relieved when my cell phone chooses that moment to ring.

“*Allo!*” I answer in French, as I usually do.

“Hello, Judith.” I instantly recognize Nigel’s voice, calling from London. “How is everything?”

“Hello,” I say, quickly switching to English.

Maybeth appears to have completely forgotten about me. Her head is down, following her hands from the food on the conveyer belt, to the scanner scale, then to the bags at her side. Such concentrated attention to details, focusing on

accomplishing this one job that probably keeps her and her family going.

“Look, Judith, you don’t have to go through this alone,” Nigel repeats the same sentiment in different words that he said to me yesterday. “I can be on a plane to the States this evening. Let me do this for you.”

I should know better by now than to get involved with an unmarried man. Not that Nigel isn’t a dear person and a generous lover, but he’s too readily available and wants more from me that I’m able to give. “That’s sweet, Nigel. But no thank you. I’ve far too much to do this week to pay attention to anyone else.” I hand Maybeth my credit card.

“I’m not asking for attention,” Nigel insists. “Quite the opposite.”

“I know Nigel.” I sign the credit card screen. Then, I tuck the phone between my cheek and shoulder and start to put the bags into my shopping cart, but the damned device keeps slipping. Seeing my difficulty, Maybeth takes over loading the cart. “I’ll see you in about a month,” I promise Nigel. “After I return to Paris from Africa.”

“Promise me you’ll call, if you need anything. Or just to talk.”

It’s a kind, guileless offer, but I’m not about to make any promises to a man, especially not to a lover. “Good bye, Nigel.” He really deserves better than me.

“Goodbye, Judith. I love you.”

I slip the phone into my jeans pocket. With a nod, I say “Thank you” to Maybeth.

She holds out my credit card, but doesn’t quite hand it back, staring intently at the name embossed on the plastic instead. After an awkward moment, she says, “I’m right. I *do* know you. You’re Martha Schmoyer’s girl.”

“Yes,” I admit. I really don’t want to have this conversation with her.

Continuing to gawk, she smirks. “Well, I’ll be... never thought I’d see you again. You actually came back. Guess folks were wrong. Welcome home, Judy.”

“Judith,” I correct her.

“Yeah. Sorry about your grandma.”

“Thank you.” I reach over and take my credit card from her unresisting hand.

The man in line behind me loudly clears his throat, reminding Maybeth to get back to work. I nod to him apologetically and wheel my cart out of Buck’s, chagrined at the amount of food I’ve purchased, knowing what wealth and potential waste it represents. At least, none of it’s rice or beans or cassava.



Everywhere else in the northern hemisphere, April reclaims the earth with colors and fragrances. But here in the Pennsylvanian Pocono Mountains, it’s the season of mud, floods, and the usual surprise springtime snowstorms. Still, the stark, promising beauty around me is gentle and benign compared to Africa’s exotic and often dangerous extremes of scorching red dust deserts, lush steamy rain forests and forever-sky savannahs.

When I turn onto Mountainview Road, each tree and bend pulls at yet another memory — of the weekend trips with Mom from Manhattan after we left *Papa* and Paris, the walks with Gramps when he’d try to teach me the names of the many different birds we saw and heard, Mom’s funeral when Gramma told me I would have to return to Paris, to live with *Papa*. But I didn’t get along with Bridget and the twins and the new life *Papa* had made with them. So, *Papa* shipped me back once more to Black Bear, to live with Gramma and Grampa and the birds whose names I never did get straight. I hadn’t even had my *bat mitzvah* yet, and *Papa* had forsaken me to my white Moravian grandparents and their clannish village of sanctimonious, so-called Christians. How homeless I felt, leaving Paris for exile in Black Bear, not really believing I belonged in either place.

I pull into the driveway, turn off the engine and drink it all in. The generations-old stone house with its wraparound wood porch, slate roof and white shuttered windows. Gramma should be standing there at the door, looking at me, wondering why I didn’t get out and get moving, waiting for her hug and kiss. Over to the left, the unpainted, weather-beaten barn, which hadn’t been used as a barn since Grampa’s father’s time, had

been Grampa's workshop and garage. I used to think he could make or repair anything, but that was before I learned how much hurt there was in this small village. Hurt that could break something inside a young girl that even Grampa couldn't fix.

The bare fruit trees and budding bushes seem much taller, but the evergreens surrounding the property are the same towering sentinels they always were, enclosing and protecting me from whatever lay beyond. How strange to be here at the farm once more — the one place that I once considered my only real home — the one place I solemnly vowed never to return.

I get out of the car, close my eyes and take a deep breath. Yes, there in the taste of clean, crisp mountain air are the deepest and sweetest memories, the ones that no words could describe or encompass, of loving refuge in Gramma's kitchen or Grampa's workshop or my bedroom under the eaves. When I open my eyes again, however, everything is as cold and empty as before. Without the two of them, the farm is nothing more than a commodity, a piece of property, an unwanted responsibility that I need to dispose of before I can get on with my life.

I have never understood why I've carried the key to this house wherever I've traveled. What makes it even stranger is that I've never used it, not even when I lived here. Had this house ever been locked up before now?

Before turning the key, I gaze at the right doorpost. It's still there, the *mezuzah* Grampa installed that first day I came here to live with them.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked him as he bent down to screw it in at just the right angle, making sure it wasn't too high for me to reach. "You're not Jewish, Grampa."

"You are, Judith," he answered in his gentle voice. "And this is your home, too."

I press my fingertips to the *mezuzah*, not so much in ritual, but more to touch something that was Grampa's and mine. When I sell this place, I will take it with me, even though I have no doorpost where it could go. The apartment in Paris is nothing more than a rest stop, an oversized *pied à terre* that Papa and I both use but never share, with him in Brussels or London or wherever his politics take him, and me running around Africa, trying to stop the hurt, one woman at a time. It's been years since

we were last in the same city at the same time. No, this *mezuzah* doesn't belong there. Besides, the Paris apartment has its own, placed by *Grand-père* when he purchased the building just after The War.

The farmhouse is almost completely silent, other than the usual floorboard creaks. If it weren't bereft of all who should be here and aren't, I might consider it peaceful. I head right for the kitchen. There, I put away the groceries, wash the fruit and vegetables, and busy myself with what needs to be done to settle in, trying not to see or feel too much. But the kitchen works its way into me despite my best efforts.

Gramma's kitchen, with its large windows overlooking her vegetable garden and the path to the barn. The old, handmade walnut cabinets are full of canned goods and the same spatterware china and assorted unmatched glassware that we used day in and day out. In the cupboard is what must be a five-year supply of homemade jams and preserves, though the fancy paper labels have a stranger's cursive handwriting very unlike the hurried scrawl of Gramma's usual black marker.

I boil a couple of eggs, tear a handful of lettuce and sliced up some strawberries along with all the other fixings for my salad. Gramma stored the numerous bottles of wine I'd sent them over the years, not in the aluminum wine rack we picked out together (which is nowhere to be found), but upright in the cabinet over the sink. I almost give up looking for the corkscrew, finally finding it buried deep in a jumbled bottom drawer among other seldom used utensils. I open a *Pinot noir*, putting a *Pouillez-Fuisse* in the fridge for later.

I take my usual place at the old plank table. Perhaps, out of habit, or simply because I can't bring myself to sit in Grampa's chair at the head of the table or Gramma's next to him, nearest the sink and oven. Fingering the unfamiliar blue and white linen placemat, I look for the telltale signs of Gramma's tiny, almost even stitches. No doubt the old yellow mats had frayed with use and age. Did Gramma sew these, too, or did she purchase them at one of the church craft sales?

Never one to pray before a meal, not since I left Black Bear, unless it's out of respect for local customs, the *Motzi* comes to my lips, for the first time in years. Somehow, here, at

the farm, it's appropriate, where at every meal Grampa would say grace in the name of Jesus and then ask me to give the Jewish blessing over our bread.

“*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam, hamotzi lechem min haaretz.*” How easily the Hebrew flows, dredged up from a time when I still believed, flavoring my meal in Gramma’s kitchen with a sense of the sacredness of memory and the grace of their love.



After supper, I retreat outside to the porch swing that Grampa’s dad had built. Wrapped in one of Gramma’s colorful hand knit lap afghans, I watch the twilight fade to a moonless darkness that soon softens as my eyes adjust to the barely visible light. The trees and barn are deep featureless shadows against the sky; only a handful of stars cut through the low clouds. Soon, the air chills, promising a typical April frost. On evenings such as this, Gramps would sometimes come out, bringing my parka and his pipe; Gramma wouldn’t let him smoke inside the house. And we’d talk, or we’d just let the quiet seep into us.

I can’t recall when I last allowed myself to sit silently, with no purpose other than to be fully where I am. As much as I fantasize about slowing down, taking time for myself, I never dreamed it would be here. Yet, here I am, where my body remembers the comfortable fit of the swing, the touch of the afghan’s age-soft wool and the taste of the evergreen-laden air.

How bizarre life can be, turning around on itself in the blink of an eye. Forty-two hours ago, I was in Dakar, where every breath coated my mouth, throat and lungs with cloying dust. Three days ago, I was so deep in the Senegalese interior that nothing seemed to exist other than our overworked field facilitators, the bone-weary women who are our clients, and the ossified, obstructive all-male tribal bureaucracy.

Les Femmes has proven to be a better antidote for me than years of self-absorbed introspection. After all, what are my personal problems and private demons compared to those of our impoverished clients, who struggle daily to feed their families, and whose greatest dream is that someday, somehow, they might

be able to afford school fees for all their children? I can lose myself in my work in the bush; I like it that way. How much more alive — and relevant — it makes me feel than the Parisian social whirl of inane dinner parties and extravagant, profligate fundraisers. In the primitive isolation of our village outposts, I can almost forget that the outside world exists — that Black Bear ever had any power over me, or that Paris has so little.

That is, until that phone call.

The first thing I do whenever I emerge from one of our client villages into a town or city — or somewhere I can get a phone or Internet connection — is call Catherine, my admirably efficient secretary at *Les Femmes*' headquarters in Paris. Instead of rattling off the usual list of business messages, status reports, funding challenges, or requests for appointments and interviews, Catherine quickly told me about the anonymous phone call, alerting me, "*Break your promise. Return to Black Bear immediately. Your grandmother needs you.*" The message had come through the international donations line rather than directly to our Paris headquarters, so it had probably passed through a multilingual whispering down the lane, before it reached my office. Catherine couldn't even say if it had been left by a man or a woman, or precisely when. All she knew for certain was that it had been routed to her desk three weeks ago. Since then, Catherine had been prepared with a schedule of flights to the States, anticipating my immediate return to Black Bear, before I could even conceive of such a thing. I had her book me on the first available flight out of Dakar. Then, I called the farm, and a stranger answered, a woman named Anita, who told me that Gramma had died that morning.

Although I left Africa that afternoon, it took me nearly two days and a tortuous series of connecting flights before I finally landed at JFK.

I shiver. Without Gramps and my parka, it's too cold and lonely to stay out on the porch. I retreat inside, grab my suitcase and head toward the stairs and my childhood bedroom on the second floor.



Before going upstairs to bed, I pause to stand in the doorway to Grampa and Gramma's room, as I so often did back when the three of us lived here. My night-adjusted eyes take everything in. The four-poster bed and highboy bureau, the windows with their ivory damask curtains drawn open, the mirrored vanity that Gramma seldom used. I say my usual "Good night," but it's a hollow gesture that I regret as soon as the words leave my lips. The room is dark and empty. More than that, it's sterile, with no life, no odors.

All my memories of Gramma and Grampa have smells. His cherry tobacco. Her rosewater and Pond's cream. And their other indefinable personal fragrances that told me they were in a room even if I didn't see them. Someone has scoured their bedroom thoroughly, erasing any hint of them. All that's left are cold artifacts and a disturbing hint of antiseptics.

Since the mid-1800s, the eldest in every generation of Schmoyers had moved into the master bedroom. It is by tradition and heritage my rightful place, as the last surviving member of the family.

Not tonight. Perhaps tomorrow.

Back when I moved in with Gramma and Grampa, I could have chosen any of the empty bedrooms. Certainly, Mom's in the new wing is more spacious and convenient. Uncle Robby's has that lovely view of the small garden pond. Or I could have settled into either of the guestrooms where Grampa's two spinster sisters had lived out their lives before I had a chance to know them. Instead, I claimed and fixed up the attic storage room in the old wing, attracted by its isolation from the rest of the house and the way the eaves carved all those interesting angles in the ceiling — and because it would be entirely mine, not Mom's or Robby's or Grampa's sisters'.

I don't need to switch on the lights to navigate the dark narrow stairs to my small bedroom. My feet know their way, know the shape and sensation of the worn wooden planks, even the creak of the step just before the halfway landing. A creak that I now welcome, remembering how it used to alert Gramma and Grampa that I was moving about. If it were in the middle of the night, Gramps would often come out from their bedroom just below the stairs to check on me, to make sure everything was all

right. As I grew older, I learned to avoid that one step. Not now. I want Gramps to come and ask his questions that I once thought so intrusive.

Tonight, all the creak does is remind me how quiet everything else is. Quiet and dead. Not even a dog or cat underfoot. Is it the deep shadows of the stairway that bring that memory forward? The feeling of having to watch my step wherever I went, because Rascal, my foundling kitten, used to try to keep pace with me. And Maverick, Grampa's old mongrel hunting hound, considered it his personal duty to keep an eye on me, when he wasn't trailing Gramps. I'd come home from school, and there they'd be, side-by-side, sitting patiently on the porch, waiting for me — Rascal and Maverick. My constant companions, my two truest friends regardless of what happened in the outside world of school and village. Even when I tried to hide away in the woods, in the treehouse that Gramps had helped Joe and me build that first summer, Rascal would climb up after me, and Maverick would stand guard at the base of the tree.

Maverick died of old age the year after I left Black Bear. Rascal was run over by the heating oil delivery truck the following winter. Neither death felt very real to me, when Gramma wrote me about them. Whenever I pictured the farm, it was with Gramma in the kitchen, her garden or talking with me in her bedroom, Grampa in his workshop or study or sitting with me on the porch, and Maverick and Rascal nearby, playing or sleeping on top of each other, watching me, filling empty rooms and empty days with warmth and life.

Gramma and Grampa kept other pets since then. After Grampa died, they became even more central to Gramma, filling her letters and, in recent years, her emails, with their antics and personalities. The latest were Martin, Tedda and Acey. I assume that Gramma arranged good homes for them, before she died. I certainly can't take them with me, not the way I travel.

Here I am, back at my grandparents' home, and I'm still essentially homeless, no place where I belong, nowhere I can keep a pet and look forward to it greeting me whenever I return. But what was my sad fate as a child has become my choice as an adult. I prefer the constant rootless travel of my work, sometimes a different country every week, unencumbered by personal

attachments, and free to achieve something meaningful.

When I get too old to travel, then I might find a place in the woods to live, tend a garden and have a dog and cat who would love me regardless of what the outside world thinks or does.



“*Ouch!*” I bang my shin on something just inside my bedroom, where there should be only empty space delineated by the old hook rug. Dropping my suitcase, I reach for the wall light switch, roll up my pants leg and gently touch a new red welt. No real damage, though it’ll probably turn into an ugly purple bruise. Much more bothersome is the malformed chair that caused it. I threw that thing away years ago. And on my bureau and bookshelves, among my various school awards and family pictures, are photos that Gramma must have retrieved from the same rubbish heap.

Sitting on my old narrow bed, I stare at the relics of my life in Black Bear, wondering what it was that made Gramma restore the room to reflect my early years here rather than how I left it. But there he is, everywhere I look, even in that grotesque chair we made together in Grampa’s workshop.

Joe Anderson.

It makes absolutely no sense. Gramma distrusted Joe and was clearly relieved when I decided to excise him from my life. After all her machinations to break us apart, why would she do this — find and save all the Joe-and-Judith crap that I tossed out, and put them back in place?

First thing tomorrow, I’m going to burn that misshapen chair and those stupid photos once and for all, just as I must dispose of so much in this house.

I throw my suitcase onto my old desk. Why bother unpacking? I’ll live out of my suitcase, as I often do in other transitory abodes around the world.

As exhausted and jet-lagged as I am, when I huddle under the covers, my mind refuses to close down, and I replay the stories of each of those damned photos of Joe and me, and Joe and Gramps, and Joe and Gramma and me, and Joe.



Joe Anderson, my knight in shining armor. That's how I thought of him from that very first day at Wallenpaupack Junior High. All the stares and taunts that had been mounting since Grampa had dropped me off that morning erupted after school, just outside the playground where everyone waited for the buses.

Maybeth Peters and Janice Wilson and Tracy Rauff sauntered over to the tall chain link fence and draped themselves on it. Miniskirted cheerleader decorations, meant to be admired and ogled. Only thirteen years old, and those girls already knew how to use sex to attract attention and instigate trouble. Especially pert, blonde, bosomy Maybeth.

I watched them. But then, everyone in the yard was watching them. That was the whole point and purpose of their performance, wasn't it? So why did my stare deserve that curled lip and daggered look from Maybeth?

All it took was Maybeth's sneer to ignite the boys.

Billy Thompson, Maybeth's current favorite, swaggered toward me in a slow threatening manner that made my stomach knot. "Hey, nigger," he snarled in his high-pitched voice, a lanky red-headed juggernaut. I didn't back away; something rooted my feet to the asphalt. Perhaps I was too dumbfounded or frightened to move. He stood so close to me, his scrawny freckled face only inches away from mine, I could smell the peanut butter cracker he'd just eaten. "Whatcha think you're looking at?" he demanded.

"Yeah, nigger," George Amack was at my right shoulder. "Whatcha looking at?"

And Jason Haupt on my left.

"Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!" they chanted over and over, in syncopated rhythms that sprayed my face and ears with their wet breaths.

I didn't know what to do, how to react. It was all so unreal, nothing that could ever happen to *me*. I clutched my books to my chest, clamping down on the tears that burned my throat, not letting them spill, not giving these boys and their silent cheerleaders the satisfaction of knowing how much they

were hurting and frightening me.

Billy was the first to push my shoulder, with a flat-handed jab. The other two followed with progressively harder shoves and pokes. Not punches. Not yet. My center of balance tilted backward, forcing me to step away with each blow, until my back was against the chain link fence, and I could go no further.

Then Joe showed up.

Bigger in all dimensions than the largest of the boys who surrounded me, Joe didn't really have to say or do anything. Just "Hey!" which got their immediate attention. The mob of kids parted to either side of him, as he walked toward me, but they reassembled as soon as he passed, continuing to block my escape. The closer Joe approached, the smaller I felt. Small and vulnerable, knowing that this blonde giant could cream me without breaking into a sweat.

But Joe didn't lay a finger on me. Instead, he turned his back to me, blocking my view so I couldn't see the other kids' faces. He told them, "Leave her alone now. She's okay." Then, he looked over his shoulder at me and said, "Let's go."

The Black Bear bus — number 11 — rolled up, and Joe and I were the first to board. I sat against the window in the front row, while Joe wedged himself into the seat beside me. Everyone piled in after us, glaring at me or purposely averting their eyes as they walked past. However, because of Joe, no one dared say anything to me.

Those few horrifying moments in the school yard lasted no more than the time it took a bus to drive up the short, steep hill from Route 507 to its slot on the other side of the chain link fence. But they've echoed through the years, defining Black Bear for me. Until that day, I had thought of myself as half-American, half-French and thoroughly Jewish, with a proud, varied heritage that included African forebears. Those mean-spirited, bigoted bullies, especially Maybeth and Billy, showed me that none of that mattered in Black Bear. I looked different from everyone else and that was reason enough for them to behave like a pack of wild dogs.

I'll never know why Joe came to my rescue that afternoon, or how it was that he went against everyone he'd grown up

with to become my protector and my friend, staying by my side in school, whenever possible. Unfortunately, we didn't share many classes, so Billy, Maybeth and their gang had plenty of opportunities to bait and threaten me when they knew Joe wouldn't be anywhere near. I quickly learned to avoid certain lunchroom tables, empty corners where I could be trapped, or being found alone in the girls' room.

About two months after that first playground encounter, Billy went too far. I was late for history class, and the halls were deserted. When I saw Billy leaning against the wall, I sped up, trying not to run, but needing to get past him as fast as possible. I thought I had made it free and clear, when he seized my arm with such force that my books sprayed across the floor. Twisting my hands behind me, he pushed me up against a locker, with a sickly sounding thwack. His full body pressed against me, pinning my chest and pelvis with his, crushing my hands between the metal of the locker and my body.

"You got no respect, nigger, treating me like... *ugh!*" Billy fell backward, clutching his crotch with both hands where I had kned him.

I ran, stopping only to scoop up my books, but not looking back until I reached the door to my classroom. I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to slow down my racing heart, hoping I could walk into the room calmly, as though nothing had happened. When I opened the door, all eyes turned to stare at me, because I was late and disrupting the class. Then, Janie Yoder yelled, "*Eeyew! She's bleeding!*" I hadn't even realized that my left hand had been cut against the locker. I tried to wipe away the blood with a Kleenex, but Mrs. Gauger insisted on sending me to the nurse, which meant navigating the empty halls again, all alone. Luckily, this time they were truly empty.

Until I walked into the infirmary that afternoon, I had seen Ms. Ellert, the school nurse, only from afar, in the hallways or on the auditorium stage during Assembly. Up close, I realized that she was a lot younger than I had thought — probably in her late twenties or early thirties. But she seemed older, softer, with a gentle roundness that hasn't been fashionable since long before my great-grand-parents were born. She was so very white — white skin, white uniform, and even a starched white nurse's

cap; her skin had a slight blue tinge, and her eyes were an almost colorless blue. Her light brown hair was pinned into an impeccable bun under her cap. While she cleaned and wrapped the gash with a pressure bandage to stop the bleeding, she stared at me, as though, if she looked long and hard enough, she would burn the truth out of me.

“Who did this to you?” she demanded.

I shook my head and clamped my mouth tightly shut, afraid that if I opened it, even a tiny bit, only sobs would come out. I didn’t want to cry in front of this stranger.

Ms. Ellert wouldn’t leave it alone, and kept repeating, “Who did this?”

Eventually, I mumbled, “I fell.”

She arched her left eyebrow in disbelief, but gave up trying to wrangle the story out of me.

Blood seeped through the bandage regardless of how much gauze she wrapped around it, so she insisted on calling Gramma.

I waited for Gramma in the tiny infirmary, the silence as palpable as the heavy ticking of the black second hand on the white-faced wall clock above the door. Whenever I looked up from the grey speckled linoleum floor, Ms. Ellert was staring at me, but I couldn’t meet her gaze. I burned with shame, with the memory of Billy’s body pressed against mine, the invasive, ruthless strength of him, making me feel so powerless, so humiliated.

Gramma stomped into the office, without knocking on the frosted glass-paned door. One glance at the bloody bandage on my hand, and she glared at Ms. Ellert. “What happened to my child?”

“Ask her,” Ms. Ellert said, pointing at me.

“Well, Judith?” Gramma demanded in that tone that was more a command than a question.

“I fell and cut myself,” I replied, forcing myself to look her right in the eyes when I said it.

“I’ll get to the bottom of this, believe you me,” Gramma said to Ms. Ellert, before rushing me off to old Doc Tallman, who closed up the gash with six stitches. I still bear that scar, a small crescent paler than the rest of my hand, a touchstone of

violence permanently etched into my flesh.

What was strange was that Gramma never talked to me about the incident, never probed with her impossible-to-evade questions. Perhaps, she understood how mortified I was about it and, in her own stoic manner, was trying to help me forget.

Gramma kept me home the rest of the day.

Joe was at the Mountainview Road bus stop the next morning, waiting for me. “Hi Judy,” he said as though it were normal for him to be standing there. But it wasn’t. His stop was nearly two miles away, at Small Brook Road.

“Hi Joe,” I replied. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to make sure you’re okay. How’s the hand?”

I showed him the bandage and flexed my fingers.

“Everything still works. No permanent damage.”

Joe’s face burned beet red, but he didn’t say anything.

What was even queerer was that when the bus came, he didn’t get on it with me. Instead, he waved goodbye, as it pulled away.

I didn’t hear about the fight until later that morning.

Though, given how much larger and stronger Joe was than Billy, it had to have been more a beating than a contest. The story, as I heard it, was that Billy stupidly bragged about cornering me against the locker and “feeling me up.” When Joe found out later that afternoon about me being hurt, he became a raging terror, and it took several grown men to pull him off Billy. Both boys were suspended for a week for fighting on school grounds.

Joe was waiting for me at the bus stop again that afternoon. And the next morning, too. For the entire week that he was suspended, Joe was there at the bus stop every morning and afternoon. The other kids couldn’t fail to understand the message he was sending them. “Hurt my girl, and I’ll be here, waiting for you, too.”

Joe made me feel safe. The biggest, strongest boy in school, and he was ready to go to any length to protect me. Not that I wasn’t horrified by his quick brutality and afraid of the damage he was capable of inflicting, but I was naïve enough to believe that he would use it only to protect, never to harm.

I wanted to be as good a friend to Joe as he was to me. Academically, Joe couldn’t afford to be suspended for an entire week; he was barely passing as it was. Not that he was dumb —

far from it. He just couldn't function with the way school was structured; the logic behind test questions and homework simply didn't fit in with how his mind worked. So, I went to all his teachers and got the assignments for the week. When he met the bus in the afternoons, we'd go back to the farm, where we did our homework together.

Gramma didn't say anything about Joe coming home with me. I think she had heard from one of her friends what Joe had done, and why, and while she didn't approve of his fighting, she seemed satisfied that I had someone to stand up for me at school.

After Joe returned to school, he continued to come back to the farm with me.

A couple of weeks after the incident with Billy, Gramma took Joe aside for a talk. When they came out of her bedroom, Joe was subdued and solemn, but Gramma was smiling like a Cheshire cat. I tried to persuade Joe to tell me what she had said to him, but regardless of how much I wheedled and teased, he refused to answer and quickly changed the subject. All he said was, "She's something, your Gramma. One heck of a lady."

Soon, Joe was spending more time at our farm than at the rundown rented trailer he shared with his father. I didn't understand then that it was a refuge for him to be with people who liked kids, who would never think of hitting a boy, for any reason, regardless of how hard things got. He began calling me Jo, because he liked that the initials of my name — Judith Ormand — sounded the same as his name. And it felt good to have someone who had a special nickname for me, a special place for me in his life. We even had a secret name for the two of us — Jo Joe — as though it applied to a third person whom we created just by being together.

Gramma and Grampa made Joe welcome at the farm— for a while. Then we grew up, and things changed. Or, maybe nothing changed. His skin remained just as white as ever, and mine just as dark. Gramma had tried to warn me, how different he was from us, how his family was not our kind of people, but I wouldn't listen to her. After all, this was Joe, my best friend, my other self. Nothing she could say would convince me that

wouldn't always be true.

Of course, she was right about him and his family, about their inborn brutality and treachery. The problem was I didn't understand who my kind of people were. When I had lived with *Papa* and Mom, all I knew was that I was a combination of the two of them. Cocoa brown like him with her long lithe body and her big hazel eyes. In Black Bear, all everyone ever saw when they looked at me was my dark skin. Everyone except Gramma and Grampa, and, for a few years, Joe.

END OF EXCERPT

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To read Sally Wiener Grotta's essay about how memory becomes personal mythology, which is one of the themes of *Jo Joe*, please go to her blog entry [Malleable Memory](#).

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Jo Joe is the second in a series of stories from Pixel Hall Press, set in Black Bear, Pennsylvania. The first was [Honor](#), a novella by Daniel Grotta.

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ABOUT SALLY WIENER GROTTA

Sally Wiener Grotta is the consummate storyteller, reflecting her deep humanism and sense of the poignancy of life. As an award-winning journalist, she has authored many hundreds of articles, columns and reviews for scores of glossy magazines, newspapers and online publications, plus numerous non-fiction books. Her novel [*The Winter Boy*](#) was nominated for the prestigious Locus Award.

As a speaker, Sally has appeared throughout North America, including conferences and trade shows, book clubs and libraries, corporate meetings and non-profit organizations, schools and universities, as well as on radio and TV. With her wide-ranging knowledge, and her lively, personable style, Sally inspires her audiences to tap into their own creativity, to ask themselves questions they might not have considered previously, and to seek new solutions together. She also has a reputation for stimulating open, meaningful discussions about creativity, [storytelling](#), [the business of writing](#), and the nature of bias and prejudice. Sally welcomes invitations to participate in discussions with book clubs and other groups (in person or via Skype, Zoom or telephone), and to do occasional readings.

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