

JOSHUA



A Parable for Today

JOSEPH F. GIRZONE

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**Dedicated
to
My Mother and Father**

I wish to express deep appreciation to my friends and family, whose assistance and suggestions were most valuable.

I am particularly grateful to Maureen Conners Moriarty, Neal Merkel, Peter Ginsberg and Michelle Rapkin for their persistent faith in "Joshua," which was critical in bringing about this present edition.

This story is fictional. The characters in the story are also fictional, and any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

The author does feel, however, that what takes place in this book could very easily happen in real life.

IT WAS a quiet, sultry afternoon in Auburn. People were gathering at Sanders' store for news and the latest gossip. The weather had been sticky and hot for the past few days, just like before a thunderstorm. It was the kind of day that puts people on edge, when mosquitoes and biting flies invade from the nearby woods and annoy everyone in town.

The Persini brothers had given up laying pipe for the day; the ground was too soupy from recent rains and the site was infested with mosquitoes. Why waste time working mud? They had already left the job and were walking toward Sanders' when they met Pat Zumbar, who had also taken the afternoon off.

Pat greeted them with his usual friendly attack: "What the hell are you guys doin' away from the job? When are you gonna finish that pipeline so we can use our sinks? The women are furious you're taking so long."

"Cool off, Pat, it's too hot to work today. You took off, didn't you, and all you do is sit on a bulldozer. You should be in that mudhole, then you'd have something to bellyache about." That was big Tony. He never took much of Pat's guff. And today was no time to horse around. It was too hot and everyone was on edge.

As the men walked along the sidewalk their heavy work

boots pounded the wooden planks like rolling thunder. The men liked to hear that noise. It made them feel important. Pat reached Sanders' first. He opened the squeaky screen door and let the others enter, then followed them as the door slammed behind him. The noise startled Katherine Sanders, who was cleaning the counter. "You guys back again? I thought I just got rid of you," she said as she continued working.

"It's too hot to work today," Ernie said matter-of-factly. "I should have gone fishing like I wanted to."

"Never mind your fishing," Katherine shot back, "you better finish that water main so we can clean up around here."

At that point George Sanders came out of the back room. He was a mild-mannered man, recently retired from the county highway department, where he had worked for the past thirty years. He now spent most of his time around the store, even though his wife, Katherine, had been running it efficiently for years without his help.

This wasn't just a store, and these fellows weren't just customers. They had been friends since childhood and knew each other better than brothers and sisters. There were few secrets among them. They knew everything there was to know about each other and they were still friends. The store was the natural meeting place when there was nothing else to do, and even though the small counter was hardly adequate, the men were content to just stand around and drink their coffee or eat their sandwiches. Good-natured banter and needling was ordinary fare, and at this they were experts.

The current topic of conversation around town was the new fellow living in the old cottage at the edge of town. No one knew much about him except that his name was

Joshua and he was a plain man. He kept pretty much to himself, which piqued everyone's curiosity. Once or twice a week he would walk up the street to the grocery store and buy food and other things he needed. He wasn't particularly shy, though he didn't talk much. He just went about his business and smiled hello to whoever he met along the way. He dressed simply, wearing khaki pants and a plain, loose, pullover shirt that was a lighter shade brown than the pants. The shirt was tucked in at the waist and open at the neck. In place of a leather belt he wore a belt put together from carefully braided strings that formed a flat rope about an inch and a half wide, with a loop and large knots that hooked together in the front.

Joshua looked tall because he was slim and athletic. His long graceful hands were used to hard work and were pleasing to watch when he gestured. His face was thin but with strong, rugged features. His blue-green eyes were striking in the deep feeling they expressed. When he looked at you you had the feeling he was looking into your soul. But the look was not critical. It was filled with compassion and seemed to say "I know all about you and I understand." His walnut-colored hair was thick and wavy, not recently cut, so it gathered about his ears and neck.

Joshua was an object of intense curiosity because no one knew anything about him, and there was no way to learn anything about him. He didn't seem to have a family. He didn't have a job that anyone knew about, yet he didn't seem to be well-off enough to live without working. According to the mailman he wasn't getting any dividend checks or social security checks, no pension checks or government mail. How did he live? That's what had everyone baffled. Whenever he came into town to buy food, what he bought was meager: a loaf of unsliced French or

Italian bread, fresh fish, when it was available, pieces of chicken, some fresh ground hamburger, a few cans of sardines, fresh fruits and vegetables. It rarely varied and never amounted to much. Usually after leaving the market he would walk across the street to the liquor store and buy a gallon of table wine. Then, with arms loaded down with packages, he would walk back to his cottage.

But all this revealed little about the man except that he was orderly in his schedule, regular in his diet, and moderately well-disciplined. Beyond that he was still a mystery.

The cottage he lived in was small, not more than three rooms: a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom. There was a back room off the house that Joshua used as a workshop. In front of the cottage, near the street, was a homemade mailbox. There was nothing like it anywhere. It was made of wood and constructed like an old-fashioned fishing boat in such a way that the keel could be pulled out like a drawer and letters inserted. There was a fish net hanging down the side to collect small packages.

Along the front of the house was a white picket fence, broken by a gate in the middle, which turned at the corners and went partially down along the sides of the property. Joshua had removed sections of the fence at the rear of the house so that the backyard opened out into a sprawling meadow, which was part of the nearby farm where sheep and cows grazed. Joshua never had to mow his lawn; a few stray sheep wandered regularly into his yard and did the mowing for him, leaving only clumps of wildflowers here and there which created a natural, attractive setting.

These were the few obvious facts about Joshua that were familiar to the townsfolk—just enough to whet their appetite to learn more about him.

It was George who brought up the subject of Joshua. "That new fellow from the *Little House on the Prairie* came in just before you guys got here. Katherine gets butterflies every time he stops in for a cup of coffee. I think she's got a crush on him," George said, with a big laugh.

Katherine was furious. "That's not true," she retorted sharply. "I just get nervous when he's around. He's not like other people, and I get tongue-tied when I try to talk to him. And George is no different. He just stands there gawking at him like a fool." George just laughed good-humoredly.

"You know, he really is a likable guy once you get to know him. And he's not stupid either," George went on. "I asked him what he thought of the Israelis invading Lebanon, and he answered that everyone has a right to live in peace. That was a shrewd answer. He wasn't taking one side, but he took both sides when you think of it. He knew I was feeling him out, and he was polite in answering but didn't reveal a thing about what he really felt."

At that point Moe Sanders came into the store. "All right, you guys, how come the water main's not finished? Everyone's wondering where you went. I tried to help you out, so I told them you probably went fishing. Are they mad! They said they haven't had running water since yesterday afternoon."

"You're a big help," Tony Persini said. "We worked in that hole all morning and couldn't get a thing done with all the mud. The pipe is broken in six different places. If the pump works and it doesn't rain, we may be able to get it finished by tonight."

Changing the subject, Moe remarked that he had just bumped into that new guy, Joshua. "He was leaving the liquor store and was on his way home. I walked over to

him and started a conversation with him, and, you know, he's not a bad fellow. He's got a good sense of humor too. He wanted to know who the roly-poly fellow was with the big mouth. I told him he must have been talking about Pat."

"He didn't say that," Pat burst in. "He don't even know who I am."

"He didn't actually use those words," Moe said, "but he did describe you so there was no mistaking who he meant. You do make a big impression on people who don't know you. And there was no way he could have missed you coming down the street. I could hear you all the way around the corner."

"We were just talking about him ourselves before you came in," Tony interjected. "George had been talking to him. He seems like a friendly guy."

Moe agreed and added that Joshua had even invited him over to his house whenever he's free and told him to bring his friends too. "I asked him where he works, and he told me he just repairs things for people, wooden objects and things around the house. It doesn't bring him much income, just enough to pay his bills. He doesn't need much anyway, he said."

"Boy, what a way to live! I wish my life was that simple," Ernie said.

During this exchange George was looking out the window. "Looks like it's going to rain," he said.

Ernie turned and looked out the window. "We'll never get that pipe fixed. I'll see you guys tomorrow," he said as he walked toward the door. One by one the others followed. Katherine took their cups and cleaned the counter as the squeaky door slammed shut.

The main street was quiet. Everyone had gone home

to escape the impending storm. There were only a few cars and pickup trucks along the wide street. Auburn was an old town, built around the late 1700s, tucked away in the foothills of the mountains that sprawled out into the distance. The village, with its surrounding fields and hamlets, had kept its own identity. Its six churches attested to the varied backgrounds of the inhabitants, the names on mailboxes graphically pointing up the wide diversity of nationalities, and the antique houses and stores painted a vivid picture of life here two centuries ago.

The people were warm and friendly, once you got to know them. Being off the main flow of highway traffic, the village was isolated and well insulated from the current of change that was sweeping the big city. The people were more true to the old ways, and change came slowly, if at all.

THE RAINS came hard and furious and finally broke, allowing the Persinis to finish their work. It was a big relief when the sun appeared and blue sky replaced the heavy, leaden clouds. The feel of dampness still clung to one's bones because the long rains had left the ground wet, but it was warm and one could smell summer. The birds started singing and the flowers in everyone's gardens were bursting into bloom. The sweet aroma of lilacs pervaded the whole town, causing delight to some and asthma attacks in others. Customers who came into Sanders' store to transact their daily business were in high spirits, like school kids who are given a day off.

Even Charlie, the testy mailman, was in a cheerful mood and got the courage to knock on Joshua's door one day under the pretext of asking what he should do with any large packages that he might have to deliver. Joshua was so friendly that he caught Charlie off guard. He even invited him inside to have lunch with him, which made Charlie forget why he had gone to Joshua's in the first place. And even though it was against regulations, Charlie couldn't resist. He accepted Joshua's invitation and followed his host into the house, where he eyed everything in sight, cataloguing them and tucking them away in his memory so he could tell every detail to the folks at Sanders'.

What Charlie actually saw wasn't much, but the very simplicity of the furnishings was a story in itself, and with Charlie's vivid imagination that would provide enough to create a whole story. Charlie could hardly contain his glee over what he had accomplished.

He followed Joshua through the living room and the little hallway into the kitchen. It was a simple kitchen. The first thing that caught your attention was the handmade, square wooden table in front of the picture window. It was solid and strong, and the top an uncovered two-inch slab of wood. The three chairs around the table were also handmade, and though not fancy, they were sturdy and expressed the personality of the maker. The chair facing the window was the one most used, as that was pulled away from the table while the others sat snugly in place, with a towel draped over one and a rope slung over the other. In front of the table the picture window gave a view that opened out onto the vast meadow, spreading out as far as the eye could see.

Joshua pulled out a chair and offered Charlie a seat. He sat down and continued to eye everything in sight, much to the amusement of Joshua, who knew he was being given a thorough going-over.

"Would you like a bowl of soup?" Joshua asked. "I'm just having lunch, and I'd be happy if you would have some with me."

Charlie was shocked by this casual familiarity of someone who was almost a total stranger. "No, well, yes, I think I will," Charlie stammered as he rubbed his chin and cheek with the palm of his hand.

The aroma of fresh chicken soup filled the kitchen. Joshua took the loaf of bread lying on the counter, cut two thick slices with a sturdy butcher knife, and placed them

on the table with no dish. He dished out the soup in two heavy pottery bowls, then took the jug of wine and poured some into two water glasses. Not used to repressing his curiosity, Charlie asked bluntly, "How come you had everything ready? Were you expecting someone?"

Joshua chuckled. "I had a feeling someone might stop by so I thought I'd put on a little extra, just in case."

"You're beautiful," Charlie said in bewilderment as he sipped his soup. "You don't put on airs or act like a snob, and everybody's curious. Would you mind if I brought some of my friends over to visit sometime? You'd like them; they're real people. They're related to practically everybody in town, and if they like you, you're really in, if it means anything to you."

"I'd like that very much," Joshua said with an appreciative smile. Joshua took a piece of bread as Charlie watched. He broke the bread in half and offered a piece to Charlie. The mailman was amazed. How unusual! Here was a total stranger offering a piece of his own bread as if he had been a friend for years. Half embarrassed at the intimacy of the gesture, Charlie took the bread and blurted out, "Thanks, Josh," as if Joshua had given him a hundred-dollar bill.

"Like being a mailman, Charlie?" Joshua asked.

"Most of the time. The pay is good, but the bosses are miserable. They're always on your back for something or other."

"But you make a lot of people happy, and that's a wonderful thing. That's more than you can say for most jobs."

"By the way, Josh, everyone in town is wondering what you do for a living. Do you work?"

"Of course I work. How do you think I feed myself?"

"What do you do?" Charlie asked.

"I make things for people and repair wooden objects