

JOE AND VERA

1. After Pearl Harbor was bombed, people headed west in the droves to cash in on war jobs. Vera rented a store front on Seventh Street in Richmond By the Bay. She bought chairs and tables from a junk store. She paid one hundred dollars to the owner of the building to rent the shop for a whole year. Vera named her little restaurant, Sweetpea. It took her all day to paint the walls and set up the chairs and tables to look like a professional place of business. She hung red and white checkered café curtains on the window and painted, SWEETPEA in large red letters across it. The next day she found Joe.

Joe was in the Salvation Army Hall with the other morsels of men holding steel cups of black coffee and waiting for work. Any kind of work Can do any kind of work anywhere. He showered and shaved. When employers came in he tried to position himself in front but was more often shoved away by those anxious for raw labor. He was not a large man so he puffed out his chest and looked people square in the eye. Most were looking for house painters or yard sweepers or someone to remove the rubbish not Vera. Vera chose him right off. He would do for washing dishes and cleaning up while she cooked and conversed with the various costumers. She had planned it all in her head before she left "the theater" in Chicago. "You're too thin skinned," the producer had told her.

Today she did not feel thin skinned. She felt cold. She rubbed her arms with her icy hands. She frowned and squinted. The smell of sweat and cigarettes permeated the dank hall. She chose her man and he followed her to the Sweetpea. Neither spoke until they were well inside.

"Now you wipe down those tables good. Anything I hate is a table that sticks to the skin." Vera checked the food again. Fourteen loaves of bread; freshly baked meat loaf; fresh salad in the fridge and apple pie.

"Yes, Ma'am," Joe answered carefully. He had never worked for a lady before. She made him nervous. He felt a slight twitch develop over one eye.

"How long you been lookin' for work?" She asked.

He looked down, too shy to look directly at her, "Well, let's see, ummm, 'bout a week."

"Guess you're glad to get a job then."

"Yes, ma'am, I sure am."

"Let's talk some things out while it's slow. Don't stand around doing nothing, never. You better always look busy understand?"

"Yes, ma'am, I understand."

"Good. I hate lazy people. When I went over to the Salvation Army, this morning, I looked around and said to myself, 'What a sorry mess of humanity.' Wasn't one man there looked healthy enough to work. All of 'em looked like they were hung over from Rot Gut Whiskey. Do you drink, emm, uh, what's yer name again?"

"Joe, Joseph Soquribeck. And I have an occasional shot of whiskey."

Vera appeared grieved, "Geez what kinda name is that?"

"Soquribeck? Don't know, ma'am. Maybe Norway or Rumania or Ireland? No one ever said. That's just the name I always had."

"Well, I'd change it if I had an awful name like that." Vera turned away from the man she just got from the Salvation Army and busied herself by polishing the coffee pot. Joe washed down the tables twice, three times, each time catching a spot he hadn't seen before.

"I'm sorry ma'am but I don't think I caught your last name."

"Vera Johnson. Doesn't look like the rains going to let up today. Funny how people, in these parts, don't like to come out in the rain. They should try living where it snows all winter and your teeth freeze when you breath the air."

"Yes, ma'am."

No one came on the first day the Sweetpea was opened. Vera told Joe it was the rain. She was sure that the weather would clear up "tomorrow, so come on let's close up. I'll see you in the morning."

They put on their coats and Vera locked the door behind them. She left in one direction and he in the other. She had an umbrella and he did not. He had a place to stay at and she didn't. He went back to the Salvation Army where he showered and ate with other men who were noisy or shy. Joe slept on a cot in a room with the snoring masses. He thought about Vera and her little restaurant and how she must have a great apartment. Maybe over the restaurant or maybe she lived in a house.

He was too broken to wish or want for anything. Joe realized he caught her eye only long enough to be hired. He had already forgotten what she looked like or how old she may have been. Her words did not bother him. After all, he had seen it all and done it all. He wondered who she was and what she was about. In the morning he arrived at eight o'clock.

"Joe, put those chairs on the table and then mop the floor."

"Why?"

"Why? Why!?"

"Well, nobody's come in to dirty it up." Joe wasn't paying attention. He should have known better than to ask why. He should have asked her when he was going to get paid. He should have asked for his pay and got out of there.

"Listen I can go down right now and hire someone else for this job. That rain is gonna stop any minute and hungry people will pour through that door. I don't want the floor sticking to people's feet." She couldn't believe it was still raining. She pretended to ignore Joe who was banging the chairs around and groaning. How would she pay him if no customers came? Was he a violent

man? She leaned against a wall and lit a cigarette. Then she remembered the ash trays. Joe cleaned them as she requested and sighed quietly.

At the end of the day, both put on coats and left in the rain. Vera walked away under her umbrella. She walked around the block, making sure Joe was gone. Then she went back to the Sweetpea. She washed under her arms in the sink. Vera used salt to brush her teeth. It was the night before that she found herself staring eye to eye with cockroaches. She went out in the rain to see if she could find something to put her bed on. She found two boxes and a fine thick board.

The rain made her want to sleep and sleep. She dreamed and was vigilant at the same time. She wanted to be sure she had time to hide her make shift bed . She did not want Joe to know she was sleeping there and loose respect for her as an employer. The theater taught her presentation and propriety so she thought she knew how to influence people.

Joe shook the water off his coat and hung it on the coat rack. Then he got the mop and began mopping the floor. He cleared his throat and said, "Another day another dollar. Another day a rain and no customers!"

"Oh, hush up! Yer gettin' paid to work not talk." Vera found smudges on the plate glass window . She got newspaper and vinegar to wipe them, when a man walked in and shook the rain from himself, much like a dog would. "Hi there." He said with a big smile, "Some awful weather we're having these days."

Joe and Vera exchanged surprised looks. It was like they couldn't quite believe there were other people out there.

"Phew, sure is," Joe said.

"Take a seat, sir, and we'll be right with you." Vera hurried to heat the grill and pull out some eggs. The man was surely here for breakfast.

"Thank you but I'm a delivery man and I just need to know where 6th and Market is." The man stood with his hat in his hands and grinned, "Am I anywhere near?"

Joe tried to suppress a chuckle after the man left. He watched Vera, whose back was to him, shake and thought she may be crying. Just when he began to feel a twinge of guilt for his hidden chuckle, she turned around and roared with laughter. He joined her only too pleased to share some emotion other than her dislike of him.

Joe shuffled the cards and dealt each of them five cards. "Seven days and seven nights of rain. How long was the rain in the bible?" He asked, not looking up. Vera sat back with her feet propped on a chair. "Don't know. Don't know nothing about the Bible. She looked at what Joe had dealt her and put a button on the table with the other buttons. She would win this hand.

"I believe it was forty days and forty nights." Joe ran his hand over his closely cropped head. "My grandfather was a preacher."

Vera emptied the ash tray. "My father had a blind pig."

"He was a farmer? or"

"You know what I mean," Vera said, her voice husky, "He made his own rotgut, whiskey! Back in an old shed behind our house."

Joe put his cards down and laughed and coughed into his hand. He pulled out a tiny sheet of paper and put strands of tobacco across it. Then he rolled it up licking the edges. He struck a match across his belt buckle to light up while he was listening to Vera.

"Paw use to say, 'Don't you go near that shed or I'll whip you 'till you're blue!' So I used to hide in the brushes and watch the lights go off and on. Couldn't really see nothing except shadows passing the spaces between the slats in the wood. Occasionally, I'd see a pickup truck and men loading it with what I guess was whisky. One night I was sound asleep and I heard an explosion V A R O O mm! Knocked me clean outta bed. Ma pulled me from the house and told me to stand near a tree. Neighbors came from all around from all directions with buckets of water, trying to put out the flames. Ma was so damn mad she couldn't stop screaming at Paw and beating him with her fists. He was a big man but he would just cower before her scorn."

"Ah Ha! So." Joe smiled, "Is this where you learned to be so outspoken?"

She looked at him with a cross between a twinkle and daggers in her eyes. The rain continued on and on. When Vera's landlord found out she was living in the storefront, he and his wife gave her a radio and some sheets for her bed. It was after days more of rain that Joe found out where Vera lived. He will never forget the night he stayed with her. Maybe that's why he never left Richmond By the Bay.

Joe stood at the window. He ran his finger over the pane tracing the path of various rain drops. He looked like he may have been holding his breath. "After my mother died," he said slowly, "my father was drafted to work on the railroad."

"Drafted?" Vera asked. She was sitting cross legged on one of her clean tables. They had been talking for days. The steady rain was soothing, the rain and the radio and the sounds of Billy Holiday and Tommy Dorcy.

"Yeah, I guess they did that in those days. Did it for Uncle Sam. You know the goverment can draft us to do anything they want?"

"Speaking of Uncle Sam, why aren't you out there fighting for our country?" Vera said, getting off the table and pulling herself quickly to a standing position. Her inhibitions restored. "Maybe I shoulda ask you that question first off." She was disturbed by what kind of awful man refuses to serve his country. The word was everywhere, on posters, in movies, news reels, on the radio. How could a man ever feel right if he didn't serve his country?

Joe pulled off one of his shoes. A lit cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. The smoke irritated his nearly closed eyes. He balanced himself against the wall and showed Vera his sickles foot, "They wouldn't take me 'cause I got flat feet, see?"

Vera took in a giant breath. Joe may as well have taken out his most private part and swung it at

her, "Okay, It's Okay, I believe you. Now, just cover that smelly thing up." She thought quickly because there was always that twinge of fear when a woman was alone with a man. She thought to redirect the conversation back to Joe's father, "Where'd you go after your father was drafted to the railroad?"

"To my aunt Ethyl's, my dad's sister." He sounded like a small boy with a man's voice. He put his foot back in his shoe. "She was constantly scrubbing my face and put little ropes up at the entrances of the rooms I was not allowed to enter. You know, just like they do at museums? When I was fifteen, I left a note on one of the ropes. It said, "I am going to find my father." I never saw her again, nor my father for that matter. I hopped freight trains all over the country. I got jobs here and there. I ask and ask people that worked the rails if they'd heard of him but no one had. So I got out here to California and someone told me about a job on a turkey farm up north."

Joe threw his head back. Vera watched as a distinct glow from the gray, rainy light outlined his Adams apple. Joe began to gobble imitating the turkeys he hated. "Ya gotta herd 'em inside when it rains 'cause they open their mouths and drown." He put his hands under his arms and raced around the room. If he was trying to amuse Vera it worked. She laughed. She pressed her hands to her stomach and bent over in a dance of laughter.

"It can't rain forever, can it?" Joe said not wanting anything to change. He liked Vera more and more. And now he was imagining she probably liked him too.

Joe and Vera slept on the same make shift bed in the middle of the Sweetpea café. There was no one left in the world. The rain kept them all away. Vera hoped it was all right. Hoped she wouldn't regret this. Hoped Joe would never leave. She began toughening her psyche when dawn outlined the curtains.

Vera turned the radio on. She stood watching the tubes glow while the radio warmed to a mellow song by Frank Sinatra. She fried some eggs with long thick strips of bacon. Vera toasted bread and used plenty of black market butter. And plenty of black market sugar went into the coffee. War years would never end, she thought, just like the rain. Later she told Joe about her theater years.

"So I left vaudeville took my money and ran. Bought all the stuff in this restaurant and paid for a year's lease."

"You left vaudeville just because some guy "

"Some guy that guy is famous now!"

"That didn't give 'em any right to call you thin skinned," Joe said, wishing he could rectify her troublesome past. Vera stared at the steam in her coffee cup. She was studying the curves as they trailed off into the distance. "Yeah, yeah. Maybe I'll go to Hollywood. I'd surely like to be in pictures."

Joe heard this and felt rejected. He had just spent the night holding her in his arms listening to her breath her heart beat..."she seemed satisfied to me," he thought, righteously. So what was

this all about? I mean, Hollywood?

"I, ah, I hate to bring this up now, but um, you think you can pay me sometime soon?" Joe stood over her with his arms folded. He wanted her to fear him. He wanted her respect, her love. And all he had the right to demand was a pay check.

"Pay you for what?" she knew she should not have let him stay. It wasn't her fault the sky decided to fall just as she started a business. What was he complaining about? He could stay over there at the Salvation Army. She stood up and looked him in the eye, "Listen fella, you better start wiping them tables! You been sittin' around here long enough."

Joe pulled a chair out and sat on it backward. He rested his arms over the back, "Sure, sure, whatever you say." Joe went back to the Salvation Army that night and slept fitfully. The next day he showered with ten men and ate breakfast with ten men, and he grunted loudly like ten men and at ten O'clock he went back to the Sweetpea. Not because of any residual love for Vera, he told himself, but because he knew what was right. What was not right was that he had not been paid. He refused to let his heart control him. He refused to think of her touch or the way she lit her cigarette and blew smoke dreamily his way. But when he got there she was everything.

The radio announcer said, "After 20 days in a row of rain, Richmond By the Bay is finally enjoying clear skies and a light breeze from the west. Now, Jimmy Dorsey and his band." The door to Sweetpea was opened and music lifted to the streets. Joe and Vera began dancing slowly and sadly between the clean tables over the clean floor.

Joe pulled her closer to him, "Do ya hafta go?"

"Yeah Joe, It's time for me to move on. Whatja say your last name was?"

"Soquribeck."

Vera pulled away from Joe and said smiling, "Well, my last name use to be Worm."

"Worm? Like worms used to bait a hook ta fish with?"

"Yeah, yeah. But I changed it when I left home."

They stood at the door. Joe would have cried if he hadn't been a man. If he had been more of a man he would have told her she couldn't leave. He would have yanked the suitcase from her hand, shallowed her car key and forced her to stay. He would have thrown her across a table and forced himself on her. But he didn't and he couldn't. There was a moment when he was frozen in time and he could not move. Maybe if he had said she really didn't have to go and that whatever was wrong with life, they could change together and make better.

"I can't seem to stay in one place for very long." Vera said, walking through the doorway into the bright sun. "This place was dreadful. Not a single customer in 20 days."

Joe put his hands in his pockets and looked at his feet, "If you change your mind, well, I'd be right honored to have you stay on as a partner."

Vera held her bag in front of her with both hands and looked away from Joe to the streets that were populated with folks like flowers after a spring rain.

"Like I said earlier, Joe, the rent's been paid for a year and everything here is bought and paid for."

"Yeah, Yeah. Thanks."

"Oh an' don't change your name. I'm getting use to Soquribeck."

"Write to me, Vera, an' let me know how your doing. And let me know where you are so I can write back and tell you how much you're missed." He couldn't believe he said that. That he told her. But then seeing her in the sun and imagining himself as the proprietor of the Sweetpea changed him some. He thought she would come back soon. Maybe even a week from then.

She didn't. She didn't write either. He never saw her again, although, he suspected she may have been the actress he saw in the movie, "Call Me". She just may have been the bleached blond who drank herself to oblivion in the film. No. She would never play a part like that, would she? He still remembered the resonance of her voice as she opened the car door, "You betja I'll get in touch."