

an excerpt from

DON'T THANK THE MESSENGER

By JJ Jorgensen

CHAPTER 8

A GUY NAMED JOE

Let me tell you about another determined guy, a fellow named Joe that I met on my way to school...

...When the train arrived and we boarded, the Goth ladies got in the same car as me, but the suit and the kids went into different cars. After boarding, I looked around again, still in my NYC survival mode but saw no potential threats and settled into my seat. I've had some particularly interesting encounters on the subway. I survived two genuinely negative subway-riding incidents in years past, which left me wary.

Basically, I paid attention to the people sharing a subway car with me.

Growing up in Coney Island or just growing up in New York, most folks are alert for trouble, though by His grace, in spite of riding subways night and day for years, I stayed safe.

I made sure no danger was present before becoming engrossed in algebra. I remember thinking that I was happy to have made it all the way to the subway without falling down, and I opened the algebra book as the train was leaving the platform.

Studying would occupy me on the ride into Manhattan. I had a way to go before reaching the midtown campus of NYU, which was located on 42nd Street, between Fifth and Sixth avenues. A few minutes into the ride I heard a strange man speak to me.

He said,

“You have to tell them Joe is okay.”

I caught the *J* and *O* sound but wasn't immediately sure if it was Joe or John. After some thought, I realized it sounded much more like Joe. The man sounded young and certainly spoke English clearly. There was a young guy sitting across from me listening to headphones. I looked at him and asked,

“Did you say something?”

Of course, he didn't hear me because he had headphones on. I decided to ignore the incident and go back to studying. Maybe it was someone playing on the PA system. I felt the steady rocking of the train as it zipped along in the tunnel and dug back into the math. The train was just about to enter Jay Street and Borough Hall when the voice came into my head again, and it was more serious and quite urgent. The guy said,

“You have to tell them I am okay.”

Did I mention that his voice came into my head, and very clearly? My head was fine before entering the subway. I immediately started to get a headache. Brief panic surged, and I thought I might need a CT-scan or something. Maybe the whole episode was a stroke coming on. Only a few minutes had passed since the train departed Carroll Street; if need be, I could have gone back home. Arriving at the Jay Street station, my head began to hurt worse than before.

For some reason, my attention was being drawn to the two women to my left, the ones that boarded the train on the same platform as me, all dressed in black and dark grey. They were sitting in one of those seats by the window that face forward, on the opposite side from where I sat. Something was literally making me look at them, turning my head in their direction; the

craning of my neck was not voluntary. My head really hurt, and it was steadily getting worse. The guy in my head spoke again, this time he sounded really pissed.

“You have to tell them. If you don't go and tell them that I'm okay, I'm going to make your head hurt worse than this.”

Suddenly the pain level of my headache increased threefold beyond the migraine level. That was enough for me. After my back injury, pain was something I understood and didn't want any more of. Motivated, I closed the book and zipped it up in the knapsack. I was up on my feet, dragging my left leg a bit while leaning on the cane. I cautiously approached the two women. I could see that the one sitting next to the window had been visibly upset. Her eyes looked red and watery as though she had just been crying.

The look on the young lady's face painted a bleak picture, and God only knew the things she might have been thinking. I immediately felt sorry for her but didn't know why.

The two of them looked like twenty-somethings all dressed in black, but I think the one on the outside seat had on a dark grey or blue knee length skirt.

That outside girl frowned at me as I approached.

“Hi,” I said, and then continued uneasily.

“I don't know how to ask you this without sounding a bit nutty. I've had some weird stuff happen in my life, but this is truly strange, probably the strangest thing that ever happened to me. Anyway, do either of you know a guy named Joe or John”?

Frown-face looked like she was quickly making the jump from annoyed to angry. Maybe I interrupted something between them. She was definitely the tougher of the two.

She gave me the dirtiest look available and asked me why I wanted to know, so I told her.

“There’s a guy in my head named Joe or John, but I think it’s Joe. He said if I didn’t tell you that he is okay he would make my headache worse than it is, and it’s really bad right now.”

The girl by the window erupted in tears. She looked completely freaked out. Tears literally burst from her eyes like a lawn sprinkler. I turned to move away, mumbling apologies, saying I never meant to upset anyone. People in scattered seats looked at me as though I was some kind of pervert. The other girl, the tough one, grabbed my wrist like a vice. She almost made me fall over.

“Don’t go,” she stammered, “why did you say that?”

She was suddenly frantic and had my wrist in a grip Zena would envy. Her friend was looking up at me through these tear-filled eyes, almost breathless with sobs.

I did the best I could to explain again about the voice and the headache. I reiterated that Joe just wanted me to say he was okay, that he was really intent on my telling them that, and that he was making my head hurt pretty badly to motivate me. The grip loosened and the girl told me why they were both so upset.

“We just came from a funeral in Carroll Gardens. It was for her cousin, Joe.”

She tilted her head at the sobbing young lady next to the window and continued,

“He was her best friend.”

She put her arm around the window-seat girl, who smiled bravely through more sniffing, and lots of water works. Lips quivered and they both began crying in earnest, this time quietly and painfully. Window-seat girl was obviously heartbroken. I felt so bad for her.

She must have been very close to Joe. I realized when I first approached the two of them that she looked despondent, and now I knew why. They were not Goth; they were coming from Joe’s funeral. Maybe Joe thought she was considering something stupid, and

so he reached out through me, the one living radio station on the train that would play his tune and deliver his message. I brought it to them live with one mean headache as postage. The train approached the West 4th Street station in Manhattan. I decided I would exit there and go across the platform to take the express to 42nd Street. It was arriving across the subway platform just behind us. I apologized and said that I hoped they would be okay. They were both just smiling and crying. As I walked away, I heard the two of them exclaiming things to each other.

“Oh, my God, he is alright, Joe is alright.”

“Thank you, God. Thank you. I cannot believe what just happened.”

“That is so like Joe to do something like that, so like him.”

When I crossed the platform, I looked back. The F Train doors were closing, and the sad window-seat girl was looking at me through the glass, her right hand held flat against the window, her head nodding. Her lips moved, mouthing the words “Thank you.”

Simultaneously, in my head, Joe said,

“Thank you.”

Just like that, my headache disappeared.

I never asked the names of those two young ladies, but if either of you read this, please feel free to contact me. I hope that what Joe did those years ago put your lives on a brighter path. I assure you that you will see him again. Joe, God bless you. Maybe your intervention that afternoon prevented something terrible from happening.

Joe was not the first or the last spirit to enter into my life. In his case, I was just a messenger or maybe a stage puppet, dancing to an urgent tune that others couldn't hear, even others Joe had loved in life.