

Joey

Andrea Givens

Our family adopted Joey when he was eight. Once the papers were signed and notarized, we all piled into a green 1973 Travel-all and drove from Ashland, Oregon, to San Diego, California, to bring him home. Joey had been living in an orphanage somewhere in southern Mexico. None of his caregivers could offer any information about Joey—who his biological parents were and where they were, circumstances around his birth, his early development, whether he had any siblings. He couldn't read. He was considered mentally retarded and un-teachable. This didn't concern my parents: they changed his name from Jose to Joey, gave him our last name and he was ours.

It was mid-morning when we arrived at a park in San Diego to meet Joey. Before our dad could open the car door, Joey was struggling to get away from his caseworker. He jumped into the Travel-all, spied our sleeping brother and shouted, *Don't wake up my brother!*, and then promptly shook him awake. He wiggled into the backseat between Michelle and Brian, creating a space where there had been no space at all.

Joey had skin the color of roasted almonds and large black curls that framed his face and skimmed his shoulders. His nose ran constantly—a thick, greenish, sickness he wiped away with the back of his hand, the trace remaining against his cheek. Joey was all arms and legs, gangly and clumsy. He moved constantly, touched everything, curious about the world and everything in it.

Joey's doctor provided antibiotics for the disgusting mess in Joey's nose. The foulness remained, and an x-ray showed an eraser, the pencil-top kind, shoved deep into his left nostril. The position of the eraser and the skin and bone growth around it showed it had been there for years, aggravating Joey's sinuses. There was also evidence of broken bones that never healed quite right and were likely never set.

Our family, 11 kids by then, was patched together through adoption. It created groups of kids who shared an age or age range. Joey turned Michelle, Brian, and me from a trio into a foursome. His abundance of energy made him a perfect playmate. Together we climbed the ladder to the boys' fort and chucked crab apples at each other, laughing and ducking, causing welts and bruises. We rode our bikes on the paths our dad mowed through the thistle on the hill behind the barn, paths that crisscrossed and wrapped around mistletoe trees. We went sledding in the winter and slept outside in the summer. We raided the garden for cucumbers and made secret hideaways in the brush. We swam at Jackson Hot Springs and ate frozen Charleston Chews. We goofed around on the stage at the Shakespeare Theater and dared each other to drink Lithia water, a sulfuric liquid that smelled and tasted like rotten eggs. We played foursquare and wall ball at recess, and begged to sleep in each other's rooms.

Joey was a voracious eater. He piled large amounts of food on his plate and consumed it all. He shoveled food in his mouth and barely took a breath. Afterwards, he often ran outside and vomited in the pump house, his belly overwhelmed. My parents encouraged Joey to eat slowly and chew his food thoroughly, but he never could. The rest of us learned to avoid the pump house and the constant smell of vomit.

Joey loved everybody he ever met. He hugged grocery clerks and deacons, police officers and lifeguards, classmates and teachers. At church he sang with gusto and

announced how much he loved Jesus. At home, conversations with him were punctuated with hugs and declarations of love.

In the evenings my mom taught Joey how to read. Joey's teacher, who struggled with Joey's differentness, sent reports home that highlighted Joey's unacceptable behavior: Joey was loud, he blurted out in class, he didn't line up appropriately. The bus driver would detail Joey's unwillingness to sit in his seat or keep his hands inside the windows. For each of these transgressions, my dad would spank Joey and Joey would promise to do better.

Joey did not do better. Too many negative reports, too many expectations unmet, and now Joey had to bring home two construction paper smiley faces every day—one from his teacher, the other from the bus driver. The smiley faces meant Joey had a good day. They were to be safety-pinned to his shirt. For each missing smile, Joey got a swat on his skinny brown behind. He would sob and heave and gasp for breath, and Brian, Michelle, and I would hide in the barn until it was over.

One afternoon Joey was missing a smiley face. As we got off the bus, Joey began to cry. The long gravel driveway became our green mile as Brian, Michelle, and I held hands with Joey, his tears sparking ours, and we tried to develop a story about the missing construction paper smile. The reason never mattered; there was no smile pinned to his striped yellow rugby shirt, so Joey got spanked anyway. He hugged our parents and begged them not to spank him. His behavior was unacceptable, they said, and there was no more conversation.

I don't remember watching any superhero movies or TV shows, but we must have because Joey was obsessed with ultimate powers. With a tender and dangerous innocence, he believed he could defy the laws of physics. He developed a hernia trying to show his might by lifting the back of the family Travel-all. He dived off the roof of the chicken house, determined to fly. He ran in front of a slowing school bus, attempting to stop it with his bare hands. He pedaled his bicycle up to the grove of mistletoe trees overlooking the farm and took off down the hill, going faster and faster, trying to become airborne.

It was a chilly February night, and we were there, down in the basement, where my dad had built bedrooms for each one of his kids. I was there, and Michelle was there; Brian was there, and Joey was there, and we were all seven, except for Joey, who was 11.

And there we were, on the west end of the long hallway that bisects the bedrooms, just outside Joey's room and the room I shared with Michelle. We were playing games. We were supposed to be in bed.

Our parents had left us in the charge of our older sister, Glenna, who was 12 and the most responsible among us. It was our first time alone. For a half an hour, an hour maybe, we played hide and seek and Chinese jump rope and did our best to hold our laughter in. Soon we were discovered by another sister who punched me hard in the arm and pushed me towards my room. Michelle followed me, and Brian and Joey separated and dashed into their rooms. I turned around to say goodnight but everybody was gone, and only the red jump rope was left, abandoned on the gray cement floor.

The following morning I sat on the toilet while Michelle stood near the sink and waited her turn. My mom came in and sat on the tub. She held our hands and told us how, after I had been punched in the arm and pushed towards my room and tried to say goodnight, Glenna had come to check on us. Brian, Michelle, and I were asleep, but Joey had taken the jump rope, tied it around the brown wooden rod in his closet, and slipped

it around his neck. Although my room was just a few feet from Joey's, I didn't hear the firefighters and paramedics run down the stairs and into Joey's room. I didn't hear them cut the rope, and I didn't hear them lay Joey down and try to revive him. I didn't hear the police interview my sisters and take a report. I didn't hear the pastor come and pray with my parents. I didn't hear the pastor's wife comfort Glenna. I slept through it all. I slept through it all, used to the clatter and chaos a family of 13 creates, and when I awoke, Joey was gone.

We laid Joey to rest at the graveyard near our church. Our mother played the guitar and sang a lullaby about a shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 to find his one missing sheep. Joey's bus driver stood apart from the crowd, bent and weeping, a smiley face pinned to his shirt. We grieved, and we tried to understand. We wanted Joey to come back so we could protect him from himself.

We cried. We cried. Oh, we cried, and we whispered words of love to helium balloons and let them go. They drifted into the sky where I was convinced that Joey, from a place of honor at the right hand of Jesus, gathered the balloons and the love messages they contained.