

The Short Stories of Philadelphia Joe

VOLUME 1

J.R. MacDougall

*“You remain invested in your inner child by
exploding every day. You don’t worry about the future,
you don’t worry about the past-you just explode.”*

Ray Bradbury

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“What will you read-the Holy Bible? I approve the style but condemn the content. God’s name making man sinful so he could play with his hopes and terrors, has God nothing better to do?”

John Keats

“Writing for me is the hardest thing in the world, but also a thing which, once completed is the most satisfying.”

William Styron

***Thanks to all the writers that have influenced my
creative writings and I hope that they do not sue me.***

***This book is for Barbara Joyce
and
Lana and Barry***

“The best people possess a feeling for beauty, the courage to take risks, the discipline to tell the truth, the capacity to sacrifice.”

Ernest Hemingway

Foreword

I have known Joe MacDougall for all of my life. His story telling has always been entertaining and enlightening. This collection of short stories introduces readers to characters that refuse to hide behind pretense or socially accepted behaviors. These characters are raw, gritty, dirty, unrelenting, unforgettable – wonderful. They are Philadelphia with a side of Shamokin coal dust.

MacDougall forces us onto the streets with prostitutes, into smoke-filled boxing rings and pool halls, and finally, to a hospital death bed of mystery. These stories showcase a myriad of characters that at first, appear corrupt, self-centered, misogynistic and pathetic. But, they represent true-to-life individuals, and, in the end we may feel some compassion for them or at least feel their haunting presence long after reading this collection. There is no ringing of the Liberty Bell, no sign of Rocky running up the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum, no un-sung heroes. However, MacDougall does not offer-up any judgments or solutions for his players. Instead, they reek of a fighter's determination in just making it through their days or sweating through their nights. These are characters that most readers would avoid if they saw them in a bar, in a department store, or on a train platform. MacDougall imbues them with something that makes us care about the people he creates: a little bit of each of them might just be in a little bit of us. I know they are a part of the author – my dad.

Lana Evans

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The Judge

They stood in a semi-circle, rifles lowered, and their eyes staring at the two dead bodies. The dead man laid face-up, his blank eyes oblivious to the dark clouds hanging low in the sky above him. His mouth was wide open, showing surprise, and his grey teeth gaped at them like a circus clown. His body below his waist lay submerged in the icy, creek water. His hands locked around the deer's antlers. Its tongue, the color of an earthworm, rested on the dead man's leather vest. Its eyes fixed on the opposite side of the creek, where the sloped bank was covered with ice and snow.

"Is he dead?" one of them asked.

"Deader than a door nail."

"Oh my God, we could spend the rest of our days in prison."

Judge Zambelli moved around to the left side and behind the others, his mouth tightened-up like a hangman's rope, stretching toward Hell, while the body swayed in the wind. "There's not a man or a law on this earth that can shackle me, Paul."

Magistrate Paul LaStarza wore army issued fatigue pants. A red, threadbare vest protected the grey, flannel shirt he wore under it and an orange hat, with earflaps that covered his head and ears. His eyes were sorrowful. He spoke slowly. "We will be jailed for this, you know. The three of us have been standing here, around these dead corpses, for almost a half-hour, and not one of us has called the sheriff's office. We are avoiding our dead brother and God will never, ever love us for this transgression."

"Reverend Paulie, use that as your opening line in your sermon on Sunday." Pete Colletti raised his eyes, turned and walked into the ankle deep creek water. His waterproof boots gleamed in the cold water. His broad counterfeit face constricted while his eyes

The Judge

glowered at the dead man. He lifted his rifle, eyed through the scope, and focused on the trees far beyond the edge of the creek bank. He scowled at the hunters as he lowered the rifle. His cryptic, black, seamed eyes shifted and knotted on the dead deer. "I'm going back and getting the ATV. I'll trim that buck at the barn. He's a big one. I'm not going to let that venison rot here in the field," he said to them with conviction. He gave the dead man a cursory stare. "I got signs posted all around my ten thousand acres. It warns the hunters not to hunt on my property. Damn poacher was probably an illiterate."

The Judge cracked a cough. "A man's life sure is an uncertain thing, isn't it?" Thick fluids lodged in his throat. He leaned forward, hacked them up and spit them onto the snow. He studied the green-yellow phlegm closely. His eyes trailed across the snow. "Damn it, Peter, that poacher was dragging the buck over to that clearing." He pointed his fat index finger toward the West. He squatted down and placed his fingers on the man's carotid artery. He nodded his head. "Yeah, he's dead as any road kill we saw today."

"What about the buck, is he dead, too? You can never be sure of a wild animal being dead until you slit its throat. They're good at playing opossum," said the magistrate.

"Jesus is the only one that ever raised the dead," said Paul LaStarza.

The sun poked a hole in the dark clouds. The bright sunlight bounced off the snow covered fields.

The Judge squinted. His pea black eyes skittered along the snow, jumped over the stream and studied the black fir tree line that yawned like the mouth of an old bear. "I am never going to die. Had Jesus accepted Satan's offer, he would have resurrected the dead for eternity. However, he didn't and he died."

The magistrate raised in voice in song. "Away with you Satan. Follow me and rejoice for great will be your reward in heaven."

"We are all killers of men," said the Judge. He thrust his heavy head backwards and laughed deeply. The trees did not sparkle when the sun slapped its rays onto the branches. The Judge took a deep breath and exhaled harshly into the cold air. He stared at his frozen breath as it shot out of his mouth like a bullet. His voice exploded over the snow. "What time is it, Mr. Magistrate?"

The Judge

“It’s five to twelve, Judge.”

“Mark the time, Mr. Magistrate.”

“I’ll do that, your honor.”

The Judge pulled a cigar from one of his jacket pockets, bit the end off and placed it in his lips. He lifted a gold plated lighter from his jacket pocket and lit the cigar. He folded his thick veined hands and rested them on his chest. He nodded and let his eyes study the dead man. He drew hard on the cigar. “Damn, this is one helluva of a Cuban cigar.”

“I’m glad that you’re enjoying it, Judge,” said Pete. “Perhaps, we should walk away and let the children of the night devour the poacher.” He raised his eyebrows at them. “My wife will be very angry if I don’t take her to the country club dinner dance tonight. Judge, are you and your wife going?”

“Why of course, and we will dance the night away. I just love to dance. I shall whirl around the floor. The other dancers will have the opportunity to listen to my trained tenor voice, as I accompany the music of the orchestra.” His white face glowed in the sunlight. “Mr. Magistrate, how fast do you think we were traveling in that ATV when Peter shot the poacher?” He grinned. His eyes twinkled when he turned his head sharply and looked at the magistrate.

The magistrate sucked on a cigarette, inhaled the smoke and let it escape through the corners of his thin lips. He grunted like a wild Sardinian pig. “Oh, I would guess we were moving along at ten or twelve miles an hour. It’s hard to say because that ATV was bouncing over every snow covered rut in the field.”

“Yes, that does concur with my judgment of the speed of that vehicle, Mr. Magistrate.” He rolled his eyes, sucked on his cigar and gave Paul a faraway smile. Peter, a military sniper would smile deeply if he had made that shot. We were at least one hundred yards away from the poacher when you pulled the trigger. Yes sir, I have not ever witnessed a better shot than the one. It was perfect.”

“Why, thank you Judge. It was instinct. I saw the antlers in the brush, and shot. The man was not wearing a bright vest and hat because he was a poacher. As far as I’m concerned, he was trespassing. He’s nothing but a common thief. Hell, a hundred years ago we would’ve hanged the bastard. I’ve been making shots like that since I was twelve years old. I’ve been living on this farm

The Judge

for forty-five years. Hell, Judge, you don't think I spent my entire adult life just being a defense attorney, do you? This farm is a firing range for me."

The judge puffed on the cigar. Smiling quietly, he turned and fixed his eyes on the magistrate, "What time is it?"

"Twelve-twenty, Judge."

The Judge reached into the inside of his vest and extracted a whiskey flask. He removed the top and took a long drink. There is plenty of V.O. for all of us. He handed the flask to the magistrate's opened palm.

Peter squatted down at the edge of the creek. He scooped up mud and sand and carefully crammed it into the barrel of his rifle. He stood up and walked toward the sloped bank, his intense eyes searching for a tool to jam the mud and stones deep into the rifle barrel. He spotted a long, thin branch, grabbed it, and shoved it into the rifle.

"What the heck are you doing, Pete?"

"I'm scoring the rifle barrel. What the hell do you think I'm doing?"

"Peter, you're tampering with the evidence," said the Judge.

He dropped the rifle into the water. "I'll call the sheriff at one o'clock, Judge. Please hand me the flask. I sure do need a drink." Pete smiled showing a row of small, perfectly aligned, arctic white, capped teeth.

They gathered close to the bodies. They stood there for a moment in silence. "Paul, do you recognized this man, whispered the Judge?

"No."

"Peter?"

"I have never seen him before today."

Then the Judge leaned forward and attempted to release the man's grip from the antlers.

Paul's predator eyes watched with anticipation as the Judge pried the hunter's hands away from the antlers. The skin on his face was as steeled as the barrel of his shotgun. His black, stubble beard bristled like the sharp points of a million needles. He exchanged a look with Pete. "Your shot knocked him and the deer down the slope and into the creek. He held onto those antlers even in death. That's amazing."

The Judge

“It’s too bad I didn’t blow his head off,” Pete murmured from the one side of his mouth.

The Judge sprang to his feet, turned abruptly as if someone was watching them. He then wiped his hands clean on the thighs of his hunting pants, trudged up the slope, sat down on a high tree stump and lit up another cigar. He moved his head slowly, lifted his eyes along the surface of the field until they turned toward the barn. The wall of the barn, half-hidden behind a gigantic oak tree, blazed when the sun burst through the darkened sky.

The Judge pointed his long, finger at Peter. “Please walk over and bring the ATV to the rim of the creek. While you are doing that, Paul and I will drag the buck up to the embankment. We’ll take it to the barn and dress it there.”

Pete stood there, hands on his lips, contempt plastering his eyes and asked, “Why can’t Paulie go and get it?”

“He’s much stronger than you. I need his strength to drag the deer up the slope.”

When they heard the motor of the vehicle start up, they climbed down the slope and grabbed the deer by the antlers.

“He’s a big one.”

Paulie chuckled. “He and his herd must have gotten fat on Pete’s ten thousand acres of government owned corn and alfalfa.”

They shielded their eyes. Pete guided the ATV across the rutted, snow-covered field. He pulled up next to the deer and turned off the engine. He stayed on the seat and glared at them. “Since you two are so much stronger than me, lift the buck onto the back of this vehicle.”

After they draped it across the rear of the ATV, they stood there and scratched their heads. The buck’s nose, antlers and hoofs dug into the snow.

“He won’t fee l a thing. Judge, you sure you don’t want to take the poacher’s body to the barn,” asked the magistrate?

“No, we tampered enough with the evidence.”

Pete jumped off the seat. He stormed back and forth on the opposite side of the ATV. He carried a bottle of whiskey in his right hand, and his eyes steamed as if he wanted to shoot another poacher.

“Paul, let’s walk down to the body.

The Judge

“What are we going to tell the sheriff?” asked Pete.

“Don’t you worry about it, Peter. I’ll take care of the situation.”

“Don’t worry about it? I’m the one who shot the dumb ass poacher.”

“Go back to the barn.”

“Is your GPS on, Paul?” asked the Judge.

Paulie held the GPS in his hand, studied the screen, and turned his back to the sun. He pressed a button and scrolled through the selections. “It’s on and working well, your honor.”

“Excellent...let’s go down to the poacher and get the correct coordinates.

Paulie called the sheriff. They climbed back up the embankment and headed for the barn. The surface of the snow had turned to slush. They slogged along, breathing hard, their heartbeats rapping angrily against their chest bones. The Judge quickened his stride and the magistrate fell ten feet behind him. He turned his head sharply and gave the magistrate an icy stare with his stiletto, tipped eyes. He stopped and waited. Then he moved on before the magistrate reached him. The Judge smiled and his booming laugh skittered across the landscape. He stood there for a very long time and studied the oak tree in the distance. A spider web of ice had draped over the branches of the tree and it glowed like a luminescent cross. The Judge lifted his legs quickly and moved forward.

“Wait for me,” pleaded the magistrate.

“I can’t save you, Paul. You’re on your own.”

“Please, your honor, I am tired.”

“It’s getting colder. Hurry up, you are well aware as to how the cold affects me,” answered the Judge in a belligerent voice. He stopped and waited for him. Calmness moved over the two of them suddenly, and they stopped and drank some whiskey.

Paul looked at the Judge. His face turned sullen and his eyes turned slowly towards the barn. “I wasn’t paying any attention when you talked to the sheriff. What did you tell him?”

“You were standing right beside me, Paul. Have you gone deaf since this morning?”

“No.”

“I told the sheriff that I thought the poacher had dropped dead right there at the edge of the stream. He asked me if we had touched

The Judge

the corpse and, of course, I said no. It's Peter's responsibility to tell him what happened."

"Why is it his problem?"

"Well, I explained to the sheriff that Peter had driven up to the edge of the ravine and discovered the body. The sheriff wanted to know why we were not in the vehicle with Pete. I told him that you and I were following some tracks and didn't want to spook the animal."

"Do you think he will believe that after he discovers the bullet wound?"

"Why wouldn't the sheriff believe me, Mr. Magistrate? After all, did you forget that I am the Judge of this county? Perhaps they might consider this as an evil act. I did not create the evil. I did not commit the murder. The sheriff would never think that I am the lawless one." He grinned and moved toward the barn.

Happy Childhoods

“**W**ould you ever tell my husband about our affair?” she asked with a smile.

The waiter stood at our table, opened his hooded eyes, and wrote our appetizers and entrées on his pad.

I studied the wine list.

The waiter opened his mouth and was about to suggest various wines that would accommodate our entrée.

I sent him a look of confidence. Please bring us a bottle of Chianti, number 68.”

“That’s an excellent choice, sir.”

“Yes, thank you.”

She buttered a small piece of bread and ate it. She lifted the wine glass to her lips. The dark color of the Chianti echoed her painted lips. She edged forward to the edge of her chair. She took a soft sip of the wine. Her wolfish, evergreen eyes stared at me with triumphant faith. “I can’t take confession or communion until I end our affair. The church frowns on adultery. Considering the circumstances, my husband being in Vietnam for almost year, that certainly warrants my right to have this fling with you. My priest agreed. Celibacy isn’t natural, for anyone, especially a woman of twenty-two.” She finished the wine and placed the glass on the table. She watched me with feral attention. “Of course, I’ll do my penance, the Stations of the Cross, etc., when my husband notifies me that he’s coming home. If he gets killed then it really doesn’t matter, does it?”

The waiter showed his Chiclets white teeth smile as he lifted the bottle of wine from the bucket and refilled our glasses.

She glanced at me with a sensual awareness that had no concern for her exile from confession or communion. She was wearing a short, spring dress, opened wide at her neck and accentuated to

Happy Childhoods

direct everyone's eyes to her wildly unrestrained breasts. She smiled widely; white teeth dazzling between her parted, full lips. This North Carolina woman was quite beautiful, an authentic Southern Belle in the pure Anti-Bellum Scarlett O'Hara mood. The serpent, looking into those sensual, wide eyes, and tasting the pleasures of her lips, certainly would eat its own tail.

I shifted on my chair and sent her a look of concern.

She leaned forward on her chair, responded with a carnal expression on her hardened face. "My God, Michael, I hope that you're not falling in love with me. That would make the sinking of the Titanic trivial." She placed her one hand on her breasts. She laughed humorously. Her eyes watched with raptor intensity.

I probed her face in silence. "Did any of your English High School courses introduce you to Greek Mythology?"

"Not really."

"Well, Cupid, that chubby, little boy who flies around naked with a bow and arrow, discovered that his mother had many lovers; therefore, he bribed Harpocrates, his mother's most ardent lover to silence with the first rose ever created. Harpocrates, since that moment on, has been known as the God of Silence."

"I don't understand," she said, a frown forming on her lips.

I stood up, slid my chair backwards and headed toward the lobby exit.

When I returned, I handed her a single, long stem rose, encased in delicate ferns and a blanket of Breath of Spring flowers.

She accepted them. A puzzled look streamed across her face.

"Caroline, that rose represents my eternal silence about our relationship."

"Thank you."



In the early morning, I lay on the bed, uncovered and naked. The radio, on the night table, beside the bed, played the music of Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings. Softly, the instruments weaved their notes through the death throes of the Adagio. The chorus of woodwinds attacked my unconscious and conveyed me to the pomegranate water and ivory body parts floating on the surface in the rice paddies of South Vietnam. The sounds of the cellos hovered

Happy Childhoods

over the bodies piled on the roadside. We had stacked vertically, the dead Vietcong, in neat rows like stacks of artillery shells. We wired them with C-4 explosives, stood back, ignited the explosives and watched the bodies explode into a bloody mist. The flesh erupted into a demonized cloud of red flies. The air rained blood and body parts.

Earlier that day I had celebrated my twenty-fourth birthday in silence. The teenagers in the platoon, screamed, “Fuck those gooks.”

*

I lay there and listened to the mice scratching and gnawing on the wooden studs and plaster on the far side of the wall behind the bed. The Adagio ended. I turned off the radio. I envisioned the mice grinning, their long black whiskers sliding across the studs as they climb upwards and across the support beams; their noses twitching, and their beady eyes shining in the darkness, as they continued to scratch away at the plaster and wood.

Caroline, sleeping next to me, stirred. She inched closer to me. Her nipples hardened and felt like the points of stilettos. Her eyes remained closed. She drew in a soft breath, relaxed, and allowed it to escape effortlessly. Her warm skin smelled of green apple lotion. There was a loud thump behind the wall.

Caroline’s body shuttered and she sat up, threw the covers aside and turned on the light. She rubbed her eyes with the knuckles of her index fingers. She stretched toward the night table, opened the drawer, and pulled out a pack of Salem’s and a gold-plated lighter. Her face tightened as she lit the cigarette and a veiled look greeted me. A stony silence surrounded her. She shifted on the mattress, took another drag on the cigarette, her full lips twisting into a wolfish smile. “What was that noise? It startled me from a wonderful dream.” She laid her free arm around my shoulders and pressed the edges of her fingernails into my skin.

“I have no idea,” I answered.

“Was it one of the mouse traps going off? We have so many of them scattered throughout the apartment.” She blinked inquisitively at me. She shifted on the bed to get a better look at me. Her dark green eyes filled with suspicion. She frowned, and, her full lips thickened into a sullen expression.