

“Little Joe”

Short Fan Fiction by Shawn White

Li'l Joe arrived on a rainy Saturday morning in January. I had overslept and stepped out onto the front porch to check the mail and nearly kicked Li'l Joe right down a flight of stairs. I looked down and there at my feet was a small cardboard box addressed to me in fine, clear black letters. I picked up the small box, stuffed my mail under my arm and headed back for the house.

I threw my mail on the floor next to my seat and sat down on the couch with my little box. No return address and no postage. I thought it a little odd, but dug out my pocketknife and with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation I began cutting through the strapping tape.

Inside this tiny box (no larger than an easy read paper back book) was a tiny plastic soldier lying atop a small "bed" of bubble wrap. Li'l Joe.

I plucked the miniature soldier from his bubble wrap bed and turned him over in my hands. He was light and felt quite durable; smooth, jet-black and completely devoid of any defining facial features, just a smooth black face to match his smooth, black body.

Li'l Joe was without weaponry, but clearly a soldier. His minute black head was crowned by a black military styled helmet and his body was spotted with tiny magazine pouches. His accessories were rounded out by a perfectly scaled backpack complete with bedroll.

My awe deepened as I realized this had to be just about the coolest thing I had ever seen...

Li'l Joe was quite well articulated and it took me a few moments to get his body to stand in a proud stance worthy of an infantryman, and I set him beside my now-cold cup of coffee. My what a handsome little guy.

As Joe waited on the coffee table, I checked the box that my new toy arrived in looking for some telltale sign of where he may have come from. I peeked under his bubble wrap bed, on the backside of the lid to the box and once more glanced at the outer wrapper, but no sign was found.

I traded the box for Li'l Joe once again and shook my head in amazement at the fine detail of my tiny friend. "Gawsh...you can't be much bigger than 3 or 4 inches," I said aloud to the plastic man.

"3 inches precisely, commander, Sir!"

I made a jump as a voice filled my head and I dropped Li'l Joe to the ground. I bent over and stared at the lifeless plastic man between my feet, my eyes blinking hard.

"Wh-what did you say"

"3 inches precisely, commander, SIR!" the voice repeated, sounding just a touch irritated. The voice was just as loud as before, but Joe still lay there motionless, without a mouth to move.

And then that voice again..."Permission to right myself, commander?"

"Uh...sure"

That's when the little plastic man at my feet stirred and stood up of his own accord.

That is also when I fainted.

"Commander. Commander"

I came to a few moments later and opened my eyes to see Joe standing on my chest, his small "c" shaped hands (C-clips Joe would tell me later during our anatomy lesson) grasping the lapel of my shirt, trying hard to shake me.

"On your FEET soldier!"

I sat upright and Joe jumped down onto the coffee table, and did a crisp "about-face" followed by an equally smart salute- His small "c" shape...uh, c-clip snapped up to the brim of his helmet, snapped out towards me and then Joe clasped his small hands behind his waist, feet together in a smart "attention" stance (pretty impressive for a 3" black, plastic toy soldier, eh?)

With no facial features, Joe didn't really "talk" per se, but I could hear him loud and clear as though he were using some sort of telepathy.

"Private Joe Stikfas, reporting for duty, SIR!" the little man barked.

"Um, at ease soldier" the little man complied and I rubbed my eyes hard, but already new I was NOT dreaming.

Li'l Joe stood there, looking up at me looking down at him. C-clips on hips head up, posture perfect...and...he appeared to be waiting.

"So, uh-Joe. What are you?"

"Sir! Private Joe Stikfas, reporting for duty, Sir!"

"Okay..." My mind was drawing blanks like \$hit draws flies...

"Commander, sir. Permission to speak freely, Sir."

"Uh, sure. Go right ahead"

"Sir, pardon my tone...but- you have absolutely no idea what I'm doing here, do you, Sir?"

"Well...no, frankly. I don't know WHAT you are."

Over the next few days I learned a tremendous amount about Joe. My little soldier proved he was more than just a pretty...er, face. His athletic abilities were tremendous; unending endurance, speed, reflexes and his strength to weight proportion was nearly spider-class. And...he was a nice guy.

The oddness of Joe's arrival very quickly faded. He was a little person, a very tough little person, but sad. Joe had no solid memories prior to landing on my doorstep. He only knew that he was a soldier; a soldier with no orders, no mission, no war, no enemy. He was a bullet without a gun.

I tried my best to encourage Li'l Joe. I sent him on mock missions throughout the house and gave him daily orders to keep him frosty while I was at work.

Although the tasks were pretty menial, Joe's size made them challenging.

"Okay, Joe. You have the soda retrieval program solid, right?"

"Affirmative sir. I also have reached peak efficiency in the areas of Dust Bunny vanquishing protocols, Ink Jet Cartridge replacement, Book Shelving, and Coffee Table arrangement. Mail retrieval is still unacceptably timely, but I'll need to update my gear to increase efficiency in this area."

"Very impressive Joe. Most impressive."

"Thank you, SIR!"

"Joe?"

Yes, sir, commander, SIR!"

"Call me Shawn"

"Yes, sir"

For the first time, I heard a smile in Li'l Joe's voice.

Saturday morning, the one-week anniversary of Joe's arrival; Li'l Joe was settling in well and I felt I had been holding out on him long enough.

"Private Joe Stikfas, front and center, on the double." I barked in an unusually abrasive tone, standing in the center of Head Quarters (uh, my living room...heh heh).

Joe, as always came running full tilt through the house, screeching to a halt at my feet, covered in dust from his recent foray into the library on a Dust Bunny vanquishment order. Joe looked up at me and saluted me sharply. That's my Joe, always the professional.

"Status report soldier!"

"It's bad, commander. They're EVERYWHERE! I'm being overrun at every turn...I don't know how much longer I can hold 'em back. I NEED reinforcements sir!"

"Uh, Joe?"

"Yes, SIR!"

"Joe, relax...they're dust bunnies, not mutant cyborg nazis"

"Yes, sir, of course, sir! Only dust bunnies."

"Joe, I have a surprise for you."

"For me, sir?"

"Yup, hop up on the couch there and face the cushion."

You could feel Joe's smile...and something else...adoration? as he looked up at me inquisitively and leaped away, taking a single bounding step that landed him squarely on the couch.

I went to the bookshelf in the next room and pulled a smallish cardboard box from the center shelf. A box that Joe himself had shelved for me during daily routines, never questioning its origin or contents. The perfect soldier in every way.

I returned to the living room with the box, nearly identical to the one that Joe arrived in. Addressed to me at my home address, printed in crisp black letters with no return address or postage. I pulled back the flap that formed the lid and called Joe over.

Joe sauntered over cautiously, yet eagerly and took one more look up at me before peering into the box.

This time...it was Joe's turn to faint.

I gently nudged Joe's small chest and he came quickly to.

"Shawn, where did you find these?"

I set the box down on the coffee table and Joe leaped over and landed eagerly before the box settled, and began removing its contents.

"I have no idea what most of this is...this isn't exactly my forte"

"No problem, sir- I'll walk you through...This" he said pulling a wicked looking pistol from amongst the bubble wrap "this is a Socom pistol with laser sight, and this is a Heckler and Koch MP5-A2" He placed both weapons at his feet and dove back into the box.

Next he brought out extra magazine pouches; pausing to look up at me and with a fair amount of sarcasm in his voice "You DO know what these are, don't you?"

I smiled back deeply as he set the magazine pouches at his feet.

Next he brought out a riot shield and then last, but not least...a sheet of what appeared to be decals.

Joe looked hungrily at the decal sheet and asked in a vacant "voice": "Are these for me as well?"

"I imagine so" I could "feel" that he was looking longingly, not at the decorations or the gas mask or even the field phone, but rather at the decals representing facial features.

"Are these what I think they are...will they really work?"

"Well, I guess there's one way to find out. Do you wanna give 'em a shot?"

Joe did of course and picked out a mouth/eye combo (still no nose or ears) and I had him lay down on the coffee table with the bubble wrap beneath him. I peeled off a set of angry-looking yellow eyes and a snarl of a mouth and used a utility knife to carefully position Joe's new features.

I put the mouth on first and then the eyes and as soon as the eyes were smoothed out on his little face, Joe's new eyes began to dart around the room.

"Oh my" Joe said aloud with his new mouth and nearly fell off the coffee table; startled by the sound of his own voice. He looked over at me and said, "Did I say that?"

"Yes Joe, and congratulations on your new look" I smiled.

Joe leaped off the coffee table squealing like a baby and ran for the full-length mirror in the bathroom.

"YeeeeHaaaaa!"

I think I made his day.

Joe came running back to the living room and jumped back on the coffee table. He walked back to his new weapons and plopped down onto his can, legs spread like a child with his new toys.

The tiny weapons appeared fully functional in Joe's skilled hands. And Joe suddenly looked VERY comfortable. Joe popped out magazines, checked for rounds in the clips and in the pipe and inserted the empty clips back into the weapons.

"This is perfect, Shawn. How did you ever find these?"

"I have no idea, Joe. They just showed up. Just like you."

That was the first and last time I lied to Joe. I'm still not sure why I did. This box showed up similar to the first. No return address, no postage...but this one had a telltale sign of its origins. What I had initially thought to have been ribbons and shredded wrapping paper turned out to be the shredded remains of a parachute.

That bothered me for some reason, and I'm not sure why. I figured on keeping it to myself until I knew more.

Oh, the companionship of another...uh, man. Joe turned out to be a great houseguest. He doesn't eat all my food (any of it really, I'm still not sure where he gets all the stinkin' energy from), picks up after himself, helps around the house as best he can. It's just too bad he's too small to do the dishes or take out the garbage.

My dust bunny problem is under control, my books are perfectly organized, and I haven't had to get up to get my own soda for weeks. Even the mail retrieval program is up and running at peak efficiency, thanks to a grappling attachment Joe and I fashioned for the MP-5.

Joe has also taught me a great deal about himself. He still has little memory, but he knows things about himself. Much like one with amnesia knows who they are. We've even gone through an anatomy lesson with the help of a catchy little tune ("the I-bone's connected to the- H-tube. The H-tube's connected to the- C-clip"). And, most of all...we're having fun.

Joe has even begun venturing beyond the porch and into the yard on his own. He accompanies me to the store and most every place I go. The only place that I haven't taken him is work. Why? Well...we'll cover that later. It's a little complicated.

Over the next few months packages continued to come in at the rate of about once a week, a few pieces at a time. The regularity of these deliveries led me to believe this

wasn't just some bizarre, isolated incident. Someone had to be feeding some sort of operation.

The thing that concerned me was that Joe didn't seem overly concerned about where this stuff was coming from...that in turn led me to believe one of two things; either Joe had been programmed not to question (being a soldier that didn't seem too far fetched) or, the scenario I didn't like- Joe was hiding something.

This all made me a little nervous since Joe's arsenal was ever expanding. It now was comprised of a total of 11 weapons, reserve body parts such as J-pops (thighs) and T-bolts (chest), a spare cap-style hat, a ladder and some sort of device that seemed to be used for self-maintenance. If Joe was up to something and I was caught unaware...I could be in trouble. I've seen Joe's handy work with his weapons first hand during live fire exercises in the training room we built as well as his marksmanship abilities on the indoor shooting range. His firearms are small, but they pack punch. A couple rounds from his little Walther sniper rifle could blind me and leave me at his mercy.

But...alas, I don't believe that is what he has in mind...

I guess I'll just have to stay as frosty as I'm keeping him.

"Joe"

Joe stepped away from the books he was organizing on one of the top shelves in the library and craned his neck to lock eyes with me, standing in the door way.

"Shawn? You okay? You don't look so well."

"Joe, we need to talk"

Joe looked alarmed; not surprised really, but anxious. Maybe it was the tone of my voice just then, or something else...

Joe kicked a book into place with his miniature but oversized foot, unslung his MP-5 and launched the grappling device just inches above my head and swung over to land on my shoulder. The grappling hook mechanism unlatched at his apex and started to retract in mid-air. By the time Joe was in position, the MP-5 had completely coiled and was slung once more over his shoulder. He still impressed me.

I sat down in HQ, Joe standing at attention across from me on the coffee table. He looked concerned. From underneath the coffee table I retrieved 6 nearly identical cardboard boxes: Joe's arrival box, his first equipment box and the 4 others that had followed. I placed them at Joe's feet.

Joe Looked blankly at the boxes, and then up at me, anticipation building.

"I'm concerned Joe"

"About what?"

"Where you came from... And where all of this came from."

"I told you Shawn, I don't know. Why do you look so distressed?"

"I'm distressed because I've been thinking a lot about your origins and about the regularity of our little care packages."

I picked up one of the boxes at random and turned it over in my hands.

"Doesn't it bother that you don't know where you came from or who's feeding what operation? I mean come on, Joe- you're no toy...you're somebody's high-tech assassin!"

Joe recoiled a little as my voice rose on the last word. He looked puzzled. He walked around the boxes one by one, decal furrowed in thought, not saying a word. He gave one of the boxes a "tire-kicker" thump and stopped.

"I guess..." Joe shifted his weight, like he was trying weigh a burden, "I guess I never really thought about it. I guess I've just been waiting. Ops are like that sometimes. You're sent in with no knowledge of you're target, no intel that can be compromised, just you're training...and you wait."

"You have absolutely NO idea why you're here? None at all? Not a hunch, a gut feeling, a mystical guess of sorts?"

"Nothing, I'm sorry. I don't understand what you're so upset about."

Joe sounded sincere, but I saw his eyes dip. Slight, but it was there.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were angry at ME"

"I dunno... I really don't know."

I sat up on the couch a little straighter and then hunkered down to Joes level and looked him in his glossy, decal eyes.

"If you think of anything, if you feel something, you let me know. I got a bad feeling about this Joe. You here is no accident. Somebody wanted you here in this house, with me. I'd like to know why."

Joe straightened and turned towards me once again. His feet snapped together and Joe gave me one of his trademark sharp salutes.

"You can count on me, commander, sir!"

"I hope so, Joe."

"Dismissed."

I sat at my desk in absolute shock. It had been three days since my talk with Li'l Joe and he'd been acting stranger and stranger by the hour. It was Saturday morning (fate is not without a sense of irony) and I sent Joe on his biggest task yet.

I needed the house to myself; I had to know if Joe was hiding something. I arranged the largest mock op for Joe yet. He was to practice his reconnaissance skills by making his way to the gas station two blocks down the hill from my house, memorize the prices of a dozen different products and return the information to me. All, of course, without being detected.

When I gave Joe the orders, his little decal plastered face lit up and I felt a twinge in my stomach at my dishonesty, but I had to know.

And there I sat. Joe should have been nearly completed with his mission and I had finally found what I was looking for: Joe's mission dossier.

It was an assassination.

I...was the target.

I felt a hot tear stream down my face and land on the miniature picture of myself before me. And that's when I heard a soft thud on the front porch. I pushed myself away from the desk, wiped my moist face and slipped the miniature dossier in my back pocket.

I was not surprised to find a small cardboard box sitting on my front porch. Not too small, really, a little larger than the others. As had become my ritual since my suspicions had been raised, I took the box to my study and locked the door behind me.

Seated at my desk, I exhaled a loud breath and started to work on the strapping tape. I was only half way through the second piece of tape when I heard it...but it was already too late.

The top of the box exploded outward. Bits of cardboard stung my eyes and the acrid smell of black powder and sulfur burned my nose. Tears streamed down my face as the powder and debris worked my nostrils and eyes.

Blinded and frightened, I fell off my chair and swatted the box away as I went. I heard the sound of many plastic feet hit the ground running.

At first I didn't know what had happened. I'm sure I felt the sting before I heard the blast, but it wasn't until I looked at the loose pattern of bloody holes on the knee of my jeans that I realized I'd been shot. Shotgun blast to the kneecap. These guys knew what they were doing.

Before I could get to my feet another shot rang out and my ear exploded in pain. I could feel hot blood run down the side of my face and realized that had to have been something larger than anything Joe had in his arsenal.

I was dazed, I couldn't see through the tears welling in my eyes and deep in my heart was the bitter bile of betrayal. And then another blast of heat above my right eye, as if tears weren't enough.

I gave up the struggle and lay there. I had to think fast, but that (as if you hadn't guessed) is not my strong suit. I tried to maintain control of my head through the searing pain and that's when I saw them assemble. Four soldiers lined up on the edge of my own desk...all smiling wickedly 4 submachine pistols a Walther sniper rifle and a rocket launcher (that's what damn near ripped my ear off I thought absently) all leveled at my not so pretty little head.

And that's when Joe walked in.

"So...you figured me out." Joe sneered leaping from the windowsill where he had sliced through the screen and landing on the desk next to his fellow mercenaries. "Ops HQ said you were too dumb. But I guess it doesn't matter. You were too late any way."

"Why, Joe? Why are you doing this?"

"Because I'm a soldier you pathetic human. The perfect soldier. I don't question, I don't ask. I do what I'm told and I go home."

Joe clasped his hands behind him and started pacing menacingly.

"I'm sure I'd be sorry if my programming allowed something as trite, but it doesn't and I don't."

I got to my knees and wiped coagulating blood from my brow. My eyes were clearing and I got a good look at my execution team. Joe's companions looked just like Joe had when he first appeared. I hadn't noticed until now that Joe no longer wore his mouth, just his eyes. He'd been communicating with me using the same means as he had that first week.

"The problem is, Shawn. My employer sees the work that you're doing at Gen Corp to be a real threat to national security. If you were to succeed in your work the government would have the ability to create an entire army of super soldiers. And I can't allow that. You see I am the future. Nano-Technology at its prime. The future looks very bright for me, Shawn. I can't allow you to interfere with the future."

Joe unholstered a pair of Uzi's I hadn't know he had and began to pace again.

I just held my position, shocked, hurt, bleeding. None of it compared to the pain in my heart. The betrayal.

Joe had made his way to the back of the pack of mercs and they spread just slightly giving Joe a clear shot at me.

Joe raised his twin Uzi's.

"I guess this is good bye"

Joe paused, seemingly for effect and opened fire. I recoiled and before I could squeeze my eyes shut against the incoming fire- I saw four small plastic heads explode in a cloud of dust and debris. Joe squeezed off two double bursts with each of his machine pistols and his comrades fell.

Damn am I GOOD!" Joe exclaimed. He then touched the side of his helmeted head and looked off to the side, listening.

"Yes. This is agent D. Operation Nail The Dog successful. Med ops needed ASAP. Four downed synthetics, one wounded civilian human. Yes sir...Not a scratch.... Affirmative."

I looked up bewildered. My heart was still racing, my mind locked; still waiting for miniature 9mm armor piercing bullets to rip through my cornea and into the gray matter behind my eyes.

The small soldier looked at me and nodded, and then that voice inside my head again.

"My name is Agent D. I work for Gen Corp Security. They'll be calling you any moment to confirm what I'm about to tell you.

"First of all, I'm sorry for the scare, Mr. White. It was the only way to ensure the safety of you and your project. Li'l Joe and his horde had singled you out for termination. The work that you're doing at Gen Corp is vital to the survival of our human soldiers. Some of the splinter groups of the Rogue Nano-Synths feel that their existence is threatened by your research. That they'll become obsolete if you succeed. But we need humans out there on the field. I can't do what you can do, Mr. White. I'm just programmed plastic, nothing more.

"Gen Corp learned of Li'l Joe's operation to infiltrate your home and set you up. Give him time to gain your trust and hopefully, eventually get inside Gen Corp with you, access and destroy your files and finally, terminate you.

"We were able to take Joe out of the picture and his presence was replaced by me. I was sent in to keep things looking on-track and to protect you. We knew it was only a matter of time before Joe's Scorp CORP learned of the switch and came to finish you off.

Agent D. leaped down from the desk and marched to my feet. His C-Clip snapped to the brim of his helmeted O-Cap, snapped out towards me and then returned to his side.

"It has been a pleasure and an honor to work with a legendary Bio-Engineer, sir. I will miss your company."

"But-"

Just then my Gen Corp emergency line rang.

"You'd better get that sir. HQ is going to need to debrief you ASAP."

"Hello, this is Agent White" I turned around to ask Joe what was next for him, but he was already gone. The automated voice on the phone instructed me that I was to vacate the premises immediately, taking only my Gen Corp Emergency Case with me...a debriefing team would catch up with me and a team would be dispatched to torch the house.

I guessed my adventures with Li'l Joe (uh, Agent D.) had come to a close.

Boy was I W-R-O-N-G

--EPILOGUE--

Well that's all there is to tell really. I got my debriefing and my house got torched to cover. I had to be reassigned to protect both the project and myself. The official story of course is that I died when Joe's rouges torched my house and that the project had to be scrapped.

In truth, I'm not dead (duh) and Gen Corp had the Super Soldier project taken over by the US government.

I have been reassigned to the best job in the world. I have been promoted and given field agent status. I now work out of a secluded mini-fortress where I work entirely with my plasticised nano-synths (code name Project Stikfas...don't ask me where they came up with such a silly name). I work with a team of 5 other Op Techs in the field. We receive regular shipments of the CAM's (Classic Alpha Male is the designation for this body frame) for outfitting, training and assignment. We also do a fair amount of testing on new models and equipment. Having high rank in this installation means that I call all the shots

in regards to the operational status of all units and all missions in the nano-synth army...way cool.

I love my job. My experience with recombinant DNA has proved very useful in the field of nano-tech. I get to play with the coolest [d@mn](#) toys on the face of the planet, am always the first one in on new nano technology and best of all...Agent D. volunteered to be transferred to my unit as lead instructor.

And he still gets me my soda and mail...

That, friends...would be...

THE END