

---

Rising up from the Depths of a Sunspot  
— a short story —

Eric Madeen

# Rising up from the Depths of a Sunspot

— a short story —

*Foreign Language Education Centre* Eric Madeen

Think about how many times I have fallen  
Spirits are using me, larger voices calling  
What heaven brought you and me  
Cannot be forgotten ...

— *Southern Cross*; Crosby, Stills and Nash

Friends mirror your identity back to you so you feel less alone. Back in the mid-70s and our first year of high school, Bruce “Brute” Rogers proved, initially at least, to be such a friend. One day our lunch hour found us toking up in Reefer Woods, a grove of oaks behind Kinney Shoes opposite the school. After I exhaled and passed him the joint I gave expression to my niggling thought that I needed a job, an after school part-time one.

Brute had worked that summer at my uncle’s greenhouses in our hometown, a Chicago suburb. He eyed me with the reefer hit squint eye, then exhaled his surmise, “Go to Goldman’s Greenhouses. Joseph ... will start you ... at a buck sixty an hour.” His lungs empty of smoke, “Go talk to him. He’s your uncle. He’ll hire you. Then me again once I finish football.”

But would he hire me? To unspool this I recalled the holiday feast that went with the family reunions. The Goldmans always took their turn. We kids found their house an exhilarating obstacle course of sorts what with its two staircases, one in front and one in back, so we could chase each other round and round. When we bored of that the last time we spilled outside then inside the greenhouses which were always left unlocked.

How we spilled there ... Wild as spring hares, we boy cousins, Pollocks and Petersons, plucked from one bench stemmy plants rooted in webbed balls of soil. These made ideal clump bombs to throw at one another as we ran pell-mell up and down and around the maze of aisles of the greenhouses and outbuildings which made for the best hiding places.

Back in the mudroom/playroom and awaiting dinner we played a card game. By and by Uncle Joseph came in from making his rounds — check on the boiler and whatnot.

As he took off his coat to hang on a hook and with his back to us, he said over his shoulder, “It looked like our crazy” – he corrected himself, perhaps for clarity – “or rather mentally retarded McPhee neighbor kids got into my greenhouses again and made their mess.” He turned to face us, raking the six of us with a long lingering gaze in which we shriveled. He knew full well we’d deny any direct accusation then left, left us wallowing in our guilt,

treading water in the undercurrents of his shaming us as the crazies.

The McPhee kids, two of the three of them, were so mentally retarded that as they aged stopped going to special school. They spent the warmer half of the year, days at least, playing with pebbles in their driveway. There they made mounds and then levelled them. The lanky girl of uncertain age would tilt her head back and let trickle, from a fist, pebbles into her mouth. Only the oldest, Toby McPhee, severely autistic and a stutterer, was up to do menial work for Joseph, who'd pay him a quarter for odd jobs, such as hoeing lines for corn planting, hauling sacks of fertilizer, so on. Toby and I became friends (more later).

As for the interview I opted to call Uncle Joseph at home. My aunt Sue answered and after greeting her I asked to speak to my uncle.

"Hello, there," he said.

Getting to the point, I referenced Bruce "Brute" Rogers' conversation, summing up, "He recommended I approach you," then concluded with a garnish, "And Brute said Goldman's Greenhouses is a great place to work and I will do my best."

There was a hymen of silence that I didn't dare break since he was weighing the matter and perhaps the risk of taking on a stoner since I had the reputation of such. Then, of course, there was the hellacious mess we nephews had made.

Finally he spoke, asking when my last class ended. He stated the same hourly wage Brute had quoted. "See you this coming Monday. Clock in at 3 sharp and out at 6. Full on Saturdays from 8 till 6 with half an hour to eat a sack lunch ... Bring a change of clothes, old clothes, and prepare to get down and dirty." With that he hung up curtly.

That first day after changing out in the locker room I went looking for Uncle Joseph and wondered what to call him since I had never called him anything. Worse, he had a few names and his name, again, wasn't ever one to roll off my tongue, nor mine his. (My parents referred to him as Rainier, a sobriquet he earned from summiting Mount Rainier as a youth. But my cousins

called him either Uncle Joe or Uncle Joseph. Around the greenhouses the guys called him Joseph but behind his back the nickname *Fat Man* stuck, since he was jowly and had a beer gut.)

Sweetening my entrance of the first grand greenhouse in my search for my new boss ... was an intoxicating pungency effloresced into blooms of chrysanthemums and carnations (for funerals and weddings respectively and thus bread and butter crops) then a dazzling array of poppies, narcissus, scented jasmine, forget-me-nots, kalmias, snowdrops, German irises, African lilies, hibiscus, honeysuckle and even Adam's needle. And so on and sundry mixed with sonorousness ... of classical music coursing through. I knew it: Dvorak, Symphony Number 9 in E. Minor "From the New World" which in my walking the length of one pebbly aisle then taking a right at the middle one was followed by Massenet's *Meditation from "Tbais."*

Over time in my employ I dug on the enchantment of Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" and, of course, Mozart, Bach, Chopin, Delibes, Pachelbel, Satie and Debussy and a passel of others which together with the blooms and their fragrances collectively made me want to shed all of my clothes and in this heaven as devil do a *weany* dance ... so heady was the space that the notes helped take the edge off the drudgery, that ball breaking work of greenhouse labor in which I was a back man, a man of the soil, far below those front staff in the shop doing the glamorous dance of biz ... and close of deal with cellophane wrap.

There I stood before his turning aside while stroking a graying widow's peak. Other hand now in his pockets of bib overalls with fingers moving there made me wonder if he were playing pocket pool (eight ball in the corner!). Who knew? Then after milking a pause rattled off a limerick, goofy-like with puffed cheeks: "What you gonna do? Got a pebble in your shoe? Tell it to your teacher and ask what can I do?" He knitted his brows and fixed me with a stare.

My nervous giggle was meant to show appreciation at what I perceived as a joke that first time. But then after every day upon reporting to work and

getting the same limerick as tormenting gimmick it became a kind of torture, because there was nothing I could do ... since there was, of course, no pebble in a shoe and no teacher to ask "Whatcha gonna do?" *Nothing* ... to be done to this avuncular boss's power dealing over and over from the bottom of a deck a trump card that he relished playing. So even though he was my uncle, but an uncle once removed, I felt over time that he didn't love me but rather loved the power he had over me and how he showed it with his repetition of crude limerick.

Now in my first day jitteriness Joseph gestured me to follow. "Come," he said, then led me to my cousin Grace's rabbit cages on the front alley between greenhouses and shop. (The rabbits were a curious choice as pet. Tired of stroking them, Grace let them out and they'd run away, prompting calls to we laborers to hunt and chase.)

Joseph told me now to clean out the rabbit raisins, the overflowing mounds of them spilling like marbles from trays under wire mesh. I deduced the shit-work had to be the lowest task of the whole lot and thus took some umbrage that this chore fell under the aegis of greenhouse labor.

If that weren't bad enough he then walked me over to the cages of Grace's carrier pigeons. They cooed and flapped and fluttered at our approach. Pointing to the bird-shit-encrusted large metal pans under them, he said, "Scrub them clean with the same brush and rinse them with the garden hose over there." He pointed to spooled hose then ambled back into the greenhouse.

I sucked up my pride and did both shit jobs then found Joseph, granular in vocabulary Uncle Joseph, who thus uttered again his monosyllabic order, "Come."

He led me to a side shack which gave on the front greenhouse, a quarter the size of the two seventy yarders out back. He pointed at the three different mounds of sacks (fertilizer, potash, peat to the best of my knowledge), explaining as he patted each once, "One scoop of this one, two of the middle one then three of the peat which is this last one. All into a mix stirred in the barrel there. Fill it to the brim." His hand made a semicircle, tracing the inner

line there up top.

Okay, I thought, relieved when he was gone, playing it over in my mind while I dug into the work: one scoop of this, two of that and three of the last.

As I tore open and emptied sack after sack I figured that my first tasks, the *shittiest* of the lot, were meant to break me by showing who was boss. And this second was an IQ test. Surely, he had it all figured out beforehand by having had other menials do the same task over and over throughout the years and thus knew down to the bottom of the pillow-sized bags how many of this, that and the other it took exactly to fill the barrel to its brimming line. Just to spite him after I had measured and mixed all three perfectly, I contemplated pouring some back into the bottom corners of a few sacks and then leaving the plastic wrappings lying there to throw off his read of the measure — this to put a bee in his bonnet, my way of fucking with the boss. But then cursed myself to *Bear down*.

(As for insubordination Brute had his own way of showing contempt for authority. After doing his business in the single-stool shitter, he always left a cobra of his excrement in the bowl, curled there with nary a squid of wipe, then alas be reduced to scratching at his ass as he went, pigeon-toed, about his labors.)

Looking for more labor I didn't see Joseph in the first greenhouse so strode down the center aisle and into a magical space that connected both back greenhouses. In the glass thoroughway now I felt enchanted, since it was a mini-greenhouse in itself and held treasure in the form of rare miniature cacti shaped like butt plugs and dwarf dildoes ... and exotic hothouse blooms. In their tiny pots their blooms sprung from a spiral of kidney-bean leafage. This was his daughter's – my cousin's – Debbie's space, and the plants there were rumored to be worth thousands. How her space took light! A charged flow of it from east, overhead and westering sun made it pop. And now through its glow and the melodies of Pachelbel I strode, looking for the man.

But when I found him with a foot on a crate in the second greenhouse, a hand on a knee, beside him a bench of snapdragons, I couldn't bring myself

to say *Uncle Joseph* but only nod to him and utter, “Finished. What now?”

He gave me his litany: “Watcha gonna do ...?”

Over my tenure as greenhouse laborer it became clear to me Uncle Joseph had his sight lines and how I felt the heat of them, directed from strategic vantage points he had staked out throughout both greenhouses and beyond to outbuildings. These were places where he as boss, one who never ever did a lick of labor, saw everything, all the way down and through the length of open side windows, with views giving on either greenhouse.

When I once was carrying long pipes to weigh down the vinyl that’d keep in the heat so as to stew the bacteria out of the soil to ready it for a new planting, the tip of a long pole in its twanging hit a potted plant, knocking it to the aisle. Sensing his seeing I checked and he was – *sure enough* – there; only his front-on bulging midsection was visible through side windows through which I felt his glare, which had me ever so carefully set down the pipe, repot the plant, tamp down the soil, and set it back nice like.

Another time I was wheeling a load of stalks back to the compost heap when my spider sense tingled prompting me to swing my head around then shudder at the sight of him. One widened eye, in a corner windowpane of a back shed, glared like a gargoyle. Creeped out, I shook my head and stomped a foot to flag annoyance then wheeled the load away.

Now to slip out from under the weight of his sight lines and break the drudgery of backbreaking greenhouse labor, Brute Rogers and I agreed we needed to take five, which meant we’d meet each other behind a back outbuilding for a smoke. In our rendezvous, our backs against the white clapboard, we passed a joint back and forth then Debbie came into view to do some early planting in a back field. Bruce whispered, “Exit stage left” and flicked the roach away as we made quick time back to our stations.

High on Mexican pot, we were told to move some aluminum flats of tomato sprouts. I was on one side and Brute the other and as he slid one tray in my direction, asking “Got it?!” Not realizing how heavy it was nor taking into account how fast he slid it ... *I didn’t have it*. It slipped from my grasp



and spilled in a mound its contents, landing upside down in the aisle. In an exaggerated baritone, Brute reprimanded me, saying over and over, “You know how expensive all those sprouts are?!? Those are Burpee Big Boys!!!”

We worked at replanting but his reprimand was so intentionally loud Joseph had, of course, heard, and instructed Debbie to do the replanting.

Let it be known here that when the Goldmans, on reunions, came to our houses the Goldman kids plastered themselves to our televisions because Joseph wouldn’t allow TV; Joseph was indeed a grower and delinquent friendships of his kids were stripped and plucked off like the dead and dying leafage we were told to shuck so as energy would flow more directly to the ... flowering — how his kids flowered! Regardless, I took umbrage at cousin Tim, two years my junior, taunting me now with, “How many *marijuanas* did you have, Thomas!?” — as if they were a countable like the uncountable martinis my parents imbibed at cocktail hour, that time that stretched on interminably as we kids starved, waiting to be fed.

Worse was when Brute was told to work with Toby McPhee and me stacking bags of peat that the trucker had delivered in a sprawling pile. To Brute’s disliking of Toby’s and my labors, that we weren’t doing a proper job of it, Brute, knowing he was speaking well-within Joseph’s hearing line, shouted his reprimand, “Both of you! That’s not how to do it! Pick up one with each hand! Use two hands! Two bags! Two hands!”

Then he directed his invective to Toby. “McPhee, if you had a fricking kernel of a brain you’d know you’re not up to working here!”

I took umbrage at this, since Toby exuded warm vibes and meant well and we had bonded during myriad tasks; I loved his throaty laugh which he did at my tomfoolery of jokes as in my imitation of Fat Man ... running a hand over his widows peak and other hand in pocket. Toby wore large, black-framed glasses that were swollen in their curvature to improve his much challenged sight. As if hurt now, he twitched his nose which made his glasses rise on one side and fall the other ... back and forth. He was hurting and I sensed he was going to cry which made me push Brute by the shoulder. “Leave him the fuck

alone, Rogers! You can see you got to him. He's hurting!"

Brute snapped his head in my direction but I held my ground and we squared off. But it was Toby who raised his arms to separate Brute and me as he stuttered. "You ... two ... sta-pp. Just sta-pp. Now."

As was usually the case, the bully backed down as in Brute backing off, picking up his t-shirt and heading back into the greenhouses first.

The down shot of the Burpee Big Boy spill and peat haul reprimand, atop assorted butt kissing, resulted in Brute Rogers getting a raise to \$1.75 while I stayed nailed to \$1.60.

That stung but worse was the heightening dislike Brute took to Toby, always bullying him around, since Toby was something of a lurker ... and roamer. "I see you there, McPhee, hanging around like a bad smell. What is it you want!?" Then Brute would ape Toby by sticking his lower lip out and making his, Brute's, tongue loll about the side of his mouth while putting a hand under an armpit and flapping an elbow while panting like a chimpanzee which frosted me. He did it again now and I snapped, "Leave him alone, Rogers! Just leave him ... the fuck alone!"

Then I said, "Come on, Tobe. I'll walk you home." We went out the backway, and at the fence I helped him up and over then waved back to him waving at me when he reached the deck then swung open the back door and disappeared inside.

In preparation for the lesser sun of the approaching winter Joseph had me washing the floury skin of paste off the roofs of the greenhouses; it was sprayed there every spring to cut the intensity of the rays from overheating the hothouses and frying the plants. Toby was called to help pull the hose up and around to give me slack.

I used a window washing pole that sprayed water through a brush at its extended end. I pushed the pole up and applied some pressure then pulled it down, all with urgency. How the flour, in a steady line, dripped off like milk and made puddles on the shuffleboard court between glasshouses that Toby splashed through, making a game of it, as I splashed him back with stomps,

both of us laughing. Just when Toby approached a puddle, I'd beat him to it and stomp, splashing his black tennis shoes and blue jean bell bottoms. Then he stomped back, getting me in turn. We laughed and laughed; how I treasured my joyous moments with Toby, our being boys together at Goldman's Greenhouses.

Then on one fall day clouds darkened and then pattered and pinged glass. As was the custom in rains the music was turned off so we could vibe better with weather, with nature. Now as the drops multiplied, stitching us together in the glasshouses, it turned to a torrent. Lightening flashed and thunder shook panes and in the fantastic flashes of lightning ricocheting through a curious thing happened. Thrashing rain suddenly stopped and the sky turned green, a green as dazzling as gemstone. We workers stared up and out and cooed until gray clouds pushed the gemmy sky aside then dropped sheets of a tremendous downpouring that rumbled over as if we were in a car wash.

To make it all the sweeter was Debbie. After clouds had rained themselves out and slid off and limpid sunlight slanted back in she started the roll of a cassette, that of Debussy's "Clair de Lune." I swooned at the sweet notes among the blooms, carrying flats of pansies to load on a plank-covering of a wheelbarrow to push up front, to the shop.

One day word came from Mrs. McPhee who called my Aunt Susan who carried the news to Joseph that Toby didn't come home for lunch. It was now late afternoon, and we were told to drop what we were doing to go out back and find Toby who proved to not only be a lurker but also a roamer who'd go missing and prompt a search.

I went first and instinctively to Hawk Road Bridge under which Hawk Creek ran. Sure enough; it was there I found him again. He was sitting where I'd sometimes hang with Toby on my walk home which wound down Hawk Road then up the hill then right and through the field. More than a few times as we sat together I would sit as he sat: legs over the under bar and arms stretched and hands grasping the over bar which I did now. I asked him,

“Where do you think it’ll come up, Tobe?”

He stammered — “There ... Lay ... Lay lately ... there” — and pointed to a sunspot near a rocky bank. We waited and waited, eyes scanning a sunlit tube of creek water. Then Toby pointed to the sunspot — “See?!” — and we watched the snapping turtle, the size of a platter but with a shell blotchy checkered brown like a girl’s hair comb. Its neck extended farther and farther like an accordion opening. How it rose from the depths. We watched in awe as its webbed feet spread in its float up in the sunspot. Its twin nostrils dimpled the surface where it took air ... of this world, our world, Toby’s and mine. A shared smile betrayed our bond of being boys together. After it went down, disappearing in the depths of Hawk Creek at the Hawk Road bridge I remembered the others searching and said, “Come on, Tobe. Let’s get you back.”

The next call from Mrs. McPhee reporting a missing Toby came in a bone-deep January freeze. Mrs. McPhee reported that her Toby had gone missing, that he had missed lunch and didn’t answer to her yelling out back and it was now well past 4 o’clock. Aunt Susan hustled this news to Uncle Joseph. After he sent a few of us to check down the trail into the woods and call for him there, I went instead down the dip of Hawk Road to see if he were at the bridge ... where he wasn’t since the creek had frozen over.

When we all came back with nothing Joseph called his wife and his manager in the front shop to call around to organize a line search, which resulted in a couple dozen of us. Neighbor men and boys and we workers gathered in back. In our winter coats, gloves and caps we were told by Uncle Joseph to spread out and walk through the back field and down the hill and through the lower woods and across the creek if need be. I found myself hustling toward the front of the line, crunching through icy snow and fretting over Toby since shadows were doing their stretch on this freezing day, one in which the mercury had plummeted to minus 10 Fahrenheit, with a wind chill taking it down 15 more degrees. I threw my voice, gone ragged and hoarse, in with the lot of them going up and down the bowed line like an echo: “To ...

*bee! To ... bee!*"

Descending through snow drifts down the back hill and deeper into woods we trudged while calling his name echoing more fervently between us, charging through brambles and branches. Nothing. No one. In thickening woods and crunch of snow we came to the frozen creek. It was there that the tone of shouting changed, taking up from down the line the report of "*Tracks!*"

Over and over ...

We made our way closer to the source, bunching up behind a man indicating broken holes of snow. "Right here!" he clarified, reading them and pointing, "Going down to the bend of creek!" We rushed along the banks of the frozen creek that wound through elms and thorn trees, trotting through hard drifts and scooching across black ice.

"Something!"

"Something red!"

"A jacket!"

"His!?"

There hunched up above the ice sheet the shape of head and shoulders of – *god no!* — Toby McPhee.

"The McPhee boy ..."

"Must be ..."

Frozen up to his shoulders in ice, head down and hooded by red winter jacket. A neighbor man tried to pull him up and out by the coat but the grip of the ice went deep and solid. Joseph dispatched a few of us to go back and get picks, adding urgently, "And tell the missus to call an ambulance and fire department!"

He had clearly slipped on the ice and fell, breaking through what was now shards that, in triangles, had frozen back together up around his shoulders.

Back now from the fetch we workers started toward the body but older men took from us the tools, and their taking turns at pecking little holes turned more confidently into chopping ice into broken sheets that, as shards,

were raked away with a mattock while leaving a slushy hole. Then Joseph exclaimed, "Back away!" But I wasn't having it and initiated a hand holding between men, the last two anchored on shore. I was at the precarious end, the saving end, and I called by name for the first time in my life, "Uncle Joseph, my hand ..." and he said another first, "No, Thomas ..."

This summiteer of Mount Rainier waved us back then scooped closer while bending down indifferent to the risk of creaking ice breaking. From the water in which the head bobbed Joseph balled up a wad of coat from around the shoulder then yanked up and out the drowned body dripping water as a few of us steadied Joseph who ordered: "Take him by the feet!"

Two neighbor men each lifted a leg and then by the ankles, water spilling from black sneakers, dragged the corpse, face up, across ice and onto snow then farther to a patch of sandbar where he now lay, the length of him from soaked blue jeans and red jacket from which hands were clenched in the grasp of soggy black gloves. A frozen wing of brown hair draped fogged lenses, black rimmed and askew, hiding his eyes from our seeing. Joseph touched Toby's cheek, letting his fingers resting there and his nodding say everything as he eased back then unzipped his own coat.

Another man came forward with urgency. I knew of him, Mr. Harrigan. Before he could hunker over the body to do CPR I beat him to it. I knelt over Toby and started to pump at the chest with the heels of my hands, one atop the other, to administer CPR as I had learned in my life saving class and continued at it, another series of pumps then pause and encouraged by a burp of water gurgling from Toby's mouth I went back at it, another seven, then put my ear to his nose again to check for breathing. It was then Joseph called me off. "No point in that, Thomas. He's gone." But I kept pumping not accepting that Toby had passed. Then a few men pulled me off him and I shook my elbows in a rage as if not having any of it

We formed a watch around the body, our eyes downcast and our breath coming out in smoky jags. Those with gloves held their hands clasped in front of them as if in prayer and those without jammed their fists in pockets and

all around heads were bowed. One man started to fumble out a cigarette but the mood had him slipping the pack back into a pocket. Clad in camo and mountain boots, Bill Burns, who had been out pheasant hunting here in the lower woods then got caught up in the line search, shifted his twelve-gauge from one hand to the other before stabbing the stock end into a snow drift with its barrel leaning against a tree trunk.

To speak would be too brazen. But one man, Jones, tried, gesturing while clearing his throat in a nervous cough then speculating in a breaking voice, “Must have ... slipped ...”

It was dusk now and still no one knew what to do nor what to say. So nothing was done and nothing was said. As Joseph took off his coat and lay it over Toby’s chest and face I closed my eyes and mind to any thought of him and turned around, giving my back to Toby, whose tortured passing I couldn’t face, denying it over and over with a series of no’s uttered under my breath. Only when the whoop of sirens came down Hawk Road and into our hearing did someone speak and it was Joseph ordering us workers to go show them the way in.

The Faulknerian tragedy hung over the greenhouses like a stench that was made all the more palpable by Joseph not allowing music. Long after the wake and funeral this period of mourning went on and on from one silent day to the next to the point that the guys, Cornell, Gardner, Rogers, others, yearned to – and dared each other to — challenge Joseph, to tell him that we needed to find solace in rhapsodies that had gotten us through the days ... now daze of mourning that the senior man himself commanded and was thus looked to for cues, for guidance, not only at Goldman’s but beyond to the wider world of the neighborhood, especially the McPhees where he paid a nightly visit.

Watchful, the wait for something – *anything* – to break the spell finally came on one clear day in February. Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” flooded the glasshouses with the triumphant sawing of violins up and down the scales. Joseph had cranked the symphony to full volume and how we watched in awe as he strode the center aisle with waving arms and twirling hands as if

conducting it.

Pausing our scraping dirt from a flat to flatten it or shucking leaves from carnation stems we looked from him to one another. I watched Cornell grin at Gardner who responded with a nod and smile back at Cornell ... But then the symphony turned to a lower scale. In that susurrus of violins coursing through the whole of me with their chords chiming with mine, those in my soul with sorrow plucking at my gut's tangle of nerves, memories of Toby bubbled up with grief finding its release in tears. Sitting now and rocking with my chin rattling my chest how I heard his voice and saw his finger point to "There ... lately ... there" and the grin we shared as the turtle rose to take air, an image developing in crystal clarity and strumming my soul and ceasing my chin its knocking of my chest as the symphony now ascended and took me with it ... up .... Up into crescendo as ... a deep down knowing ... that Toby was in a good place now ... that everything was going to be all right ... had me finding my shore legs as I stood, wiping my tear-streaked face with a shoulder one side, the other. Then picked up the wooden scraping lathe and got back to work.  
[www.ericmadeen.com](http://www.ericmadeen.com)

###



