

THE PURSUIT OF JOE KAHN

by AMY BRILL



JOE recognized the woman from the memorial service, but if she recognized him, she wasn't showing it. Studying his bare feet on a bed of warm sand, he shifted his weight, digging in. When she didn't look up, Joe limped a little closer until he was standing only a foot apart from her. The Gulf of Mexico loomed westward to the horizon. Near the promenade that bordered the beach, two kids on jetskis skidded across the surface, screaming at each other, their words taken by the wind. The air was heavy as incense because of the wildfires near Daytona.

The birds fishing in the Gulf called to each other. The woman, who was wearing a finely cut pearl-gray suit, knelt to pluck a shell from the sand and drop it into her cupped palm. Joe studied the sharp angle made by her neck and chin and wondered which of the dead couple in their fast boat had been her friend, or lover even, and thought to ask, but it seemed absurd—a morbid echo of *bride or groom?*—and so he kept quiet and was surprised when she suddenly spoke.

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"When I was a kid I only went for the ones that were perfect," she said, barely glancing at Joe. "No cracks, no barnacles." She stood and faced him, tossed one at his feet. "Now I like the broken ones better."

Joe nodded and extended a hand. "Joe Kahn."

She took it gently in her left and gripped it for a moment without offering a name. "You collect anything, Joe? Stamps? Motorcycles? Vintage pens?" He couldn't tell how serious she was.

"Just superstitions." When she didn't respond, Joe shrugged and smiled a little, hoping to appear mysterious. "Work hazard. Or I'm just getting old."

He knew he didn't even look as old as he was, which was 37. Women usually thought he was younger, though the last girl he dated seriously, a bookish producer who had legally changed her perfectly good name so that it was spelled with two a's at the end to look, she explained, less American—Saraa, it now read—had called him "scruffy," which he'd considered a compliment even after she'd left him for a younger cinematographer.

"What line of work is that?" the woman said.

"I roam the earth?" Joe said, trying for a joke, feeling a flush beginning to creep along his collar.

"And that makes you superstitious?"

"Uh, only on Mondays." She laughed. The shells tinkled from one of her pale hands to the other. Joe exhaled. "Do you want...I was going to get some coffee or something," he heard himself saying, and rushed on, "...I mean, are you going back to the hotel now, or..." He pointed across the yawning boulevard to a small coffee shop tucked in among the storefronts.

They turned toward the promenade. It had been roped off by the police for the memorial service. The metropolitan papers had all been there and the glossy monthlies sent photographers, so there was the firing line of paparazzi all anxious to capture even an instant of grief on the face of anyone who'd been close enough to the dead couple to matter.

Limping along, Joe rushed to put his hand under her elbow as they climbed up to the promenade, but succeeded only in tripping on a step, swerving in midair, and almost pulling them both to the ground.

"What's the matter with your foot?" she asked when he had stopped swaying and they had managed to make their way onto the walkway.

"I had a situation and had to do the noble thing and run away. Not like it would have done any good to stay put." He glanced sideways to measure whether she was listen-

ing at all. Her eyes were on the ground ahead of them.

"I was in Congo, the Democratic Republic of, not the other one," he went on. "In the capital. They're always in the middle of some kind of war, and I was walking to my hotel from a bar when these three guys with huge guns shook me down, you know, went through my pockets—not much there, sad for them, but...you want to cross?...Then they gave me a shove into the street and I didn't know what I was supposed to do, you know, stand still or what, and, so, but they kept yelling at me in that super-accented French I can't understand a word of, and finally they fired some shots into the air and I took off running like an idiot for about ten blocks. Twisted my ankle right when I got to the hotel."

Panting a little, Joe pulled open the door of the diner to let her pass. For a few seconds they stood by the old-fashioned register, blinking in the dim light of the empty room, which was still except for a plastic model of a Coca-Cola bottle spinning slowly on its base in mid-pour.

"Should we..."

"Do you want to..."

"Sorry," they both said, and laughed. Joe noticed that there was a dimple on one of her cheeks and not the other.

"Should we sit?"

"Sure," she said, and tucked into a booth with her back to the door. He slid in across, and as she slipped out of her jacket Joe sharply warned himself to quit staring. The rubber whoosh of a hinged door was followed by the rhythmic squeak of footsteps, which belonged to a waiter in a large, dirty apron. Trundling toward them, he produced two menus from beneath one beefy arm, dropped them on the table without a word, and turned away.

"Ah, would you...two coffees, if you would. Thanks," Joe aimed at the man's back, and thought he saw a nod. He shrugged and earned a small smile, that dimple again, a delicate dent in the flesh of her cheek, the size of the very tip of a small girl's pinky finger. His hand rose and he just managed to point and not touch.

"What happened to the other?" he asked, and watched it disappear as her smile fell away.

"My sister got it." She pressed her lips together. "Elizabeth."

"Oh. Oh God. I am so sorry," Joe muttered, a circus of facts about the woman sitting across from him



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suddenly prancing in his head. The dead girl's older sister. Greenwich, Connecticut. Legal trouble for their father several years back on the front page of the *Post* and the *News*. Bold print on Page Six—a wedding? He glanced at her hand and saw only a pale swath of skin where a ring would be. Elizabeth Linden's sister. Heir to a cookie fortune. Or was it a hotel chain? Joe wasn't positive, even though he'd flown down to Daytona in the first place to meet with Elizabeth's fiancé, who ran the Newton-Kessler publishing conglomerate his father had built. The man had been named "Biggest Catch" several years running by *City Magazine* before Elizabeth Linden had caught him. Joe had been shocked when his agent had called to tell him that the Catch wanted to meet him, even more shocked to find himself on a private plane with white leather seats and an onboard chef, all to discuss Joe's book proposal, the same proposal that had been making the rounds for two years running without a single bid. Joe stared at Sophie Linden.

She met his gaze and he felt a powerful tug of sorrow and desire. Reaching across the table, he covered her small pale hands with his own.

"Really," he said. "I'm sorry I said that."

"It's fine. It's not your fault." She shuddered a little, like she was shaking off a dream, and gently freed her hands. "We weren't that close." Her voice had a low humming quality to it, without a lot of inflection, and Joe had to lean in to catch each word. "It's not even such a drastic change in my life, sorry to say. But the parents, you know. That's a whole *thing*." Her fingers were drumming lightly on the Formica tabletop, and then dipped into her lap and came up holding a cigarette, which she made no attempt to light. Joe looked around for matches, wondering if he should dash to the counter for an ashtray, or stay still, and when he looked back she had retreated to the far reaches of her side of the booth. "So, you're working down here? Are you covering the big memorial?"

"Oh, no, no," Joe rushed to say, then paused. "How did you...I mean, do you know me?" He felt his face start to grow warm again and cleared his throat.

She looked across the table at him. "Doesn't everyone know everyone? I mean, no, not everyone. But I work at a magazine. You write articles."

"So if you know that why did you ask me what I did?"

"Did I? I thought I asked you what made you superstitious."

"Oh. Right," he said. His heart was beating now like something was at stake. "What makes anyone superstitious? Fear, I guess."

"No, really, I'm curious. Don't take offense."

"None taken." He smiled, but she continued to look at him expectantly. Joe tried to think of something he could be afraid of for her. Sharks? Spiders? He took a deep breath.

"What am I afraid of?" There was nothing to be done about the fact that he was blushing now, on top of it. "The usual. You know. Uselessness. Being alone. Death." He glanced up to see if she was laughing at him, which she wasn't, and then stared hard at the pattern on the tabletop.

"Being alone is underrated, I think," she said quietly after a few seconds had passed. "Death, I don't know. All I can hope for is that I'm so old by then nobody even remembers who I am."

"Why would you want that?" She met his eyes but didn't answer, and just then the waiter returned with their coffee. When he had gone Joe found that something cool had moved between them and so he sat as still as he could, watching her stir cream into her coffee until it was the color of fine sand.

"Are you an only child?" Sophie asked.

"Oh, just me," he said.

She sat up and leaned a little across the table, licked her spoon clean and then placed it carefully on the table before speaking. "I'm the bad sister, you know."

"Oh, come on, now." Joe leaned closer, too, his heart thumping. "What're you, like, the dark princess?"

"Close."

"Didn't you marry an Onassis or something?" His own boldness made him grin.

"Something like that. It wasn't nearly as newsworthy as Elizabeth's wedding would have been, though." She sighed.

"Did you want it to be?"

"I didn't really care at the time. I was young. But never mind."

"No, what happened?"

"I divorced him."

She wrangled another cigarette out of her bag, even though the first one was still lying there on the table between them. "And you? Never, I'm guessing."

"Never. Weddings give me hives," Joe said. "But we were talking about you."

Producing a match, she lit up and blew the smoke out over Joe's head.

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"I lied," she said abruptly. "He divorced me. Because I wasn't interested. I tried to be. But I wasn't." She inhaled. "It wasn't awful or anything. More like a vacation. Vacant."

"The divorce?"

"All of it." She slumped back against the booth as if she needed to be held up.

In the silence that followed Joe felt a swell of panic.

"I lied too," he said. "The men chasing me didn't have guns."

"It's okay." She shrugged. "I didn't believe you anyway." She looked around the room, and Joe guessed that his time was up, pre-empting her flight by signaling to the waiter.

"Who organized the service, anyway?" he asked as she gathered her purse and slipped back into the suit jacket. "Your family? His?"

"Are you asking as a journalist or a friend? I mean, were you a friend? Of his?" She looked sharply at Joe, and he remembered that Sophie's sister had not been driving the boat in which she died.

"We met a few times," Joe lied. "He was interested in a project I'm working on. A book." Joe remembered that he hadn't even booked a ticket home yet. His agent would probably drop him. Then again, the thought came, *she* could probably get the proposal read by someone *else* at Newton-Kessler. Not that she would. Why would she? He winced at his own train of thought and shook his head.

"Right." She paused and tilted her head, squinting at him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Joe swallowed. "Just out of sorts, I guess."

"I'd think you'd hate this kind of thing." He blinked, terrified that she'd read his mind, and she stared back. "The spectacle, the press, the speeches. I don't know. It's par for the course, right? But it's not real. You've done all these other things..."

Blinking at what might have been a compliment and might have been a dismissal, Joe nodded slowly. "You would think," he said. They rose together, and Joe tossed some crumpled bills on the table. He couldn't conjure any way to keep near her, but grasped anyway. "Are you heading back? Need a lift?"

"I don't think so," she said gently. "There's nothing to see, anyway."

"I didn't mean..."

"No, I know."

They stepped out into the daylight. Facing him squarely, she held out her hand and smiled. She

looked small, and sad. "Thanks for the coffee, Joe Kahn," she said.

Joe took her hand and squeezed gently. She had a good grip. Leaning into her with a sudden burst of courage at what seemed the last possible moment, Joe put his lips against the tiny bow of her ear.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry, Sophie." He imagined for a moment that he felt her body soften, felt her neck loosen its grip on her lovely head and allowed it to rest against him. He inhaled deeply. Then she let go of his hand, striding down the center of the deserted street, shoulders into the wind.

Within two days the photograph was everywhere and Joe had received sixty-three telephone calls—everyone from *Talk* to *Special Edition* to *Hola!* magazine in Barcelona—none of which he'd taken. He thought maybe it was the wrong tactic, that silence could be construed as an admission of something that did not, in fact exist, but when people said he was doing the right thing he shrugged like he wasn't sure while knowing that if his silence was in fact prolonging the life of the story, then that was just fine with him. Not that there *was* a story. But from the angle of the camera, and the way he was bent over Sophie Linden, it sure didn't look that way.

The photographer must have been staked out on the promenade, Joe thought, tucked behind a bench or something—*clever bastards*, he said, more than once, studying the picture. In one paper the bulky proprietor of the coffee shop appeared in a photograph clearly thirty years out of date, standing outside the door of the place glaring into the sunshine, arms crossed over his blindingly white apron. It was captioned with a quote in which he claimed that the couple seemed "very much in love."

Throwing down the paper, Joe reached for the phone and stopped himself, again. Did he want to apologize? Might she think he'd set the whole thing up on purpose? He bit down the remaining part of his thumbnail to stay his hand from the telephone. In his head, he was already on the line with her, laughing about it, unfazed as she undoubtedly was. But he could not even conjure her face without heat rising from his heart to the crown of his too-big head, ashamed of his desire to stand and be photographed beside her over and over, to let the dazzling pop of flashbulbs be the music of their courtship. Lying on his ratty couch in his boxer shorts and tube socks, he imagined that she would call him to her in midday,

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like her late brother-in-law-to-be had, but it would be with a casual invitation to drinks at the Royalton or the SoHo Grand.

He was *real*, she had said. He had *done things*. But why would a woman like Sophie Linden be interested in a skinny guy with wiry hair that grew out instead of down? And anyway, she'd have no way of knowing that he was not, in fact, an expert whitewater kayaker, or deep-sea diver, or rock climber, for that matter. But then most people didn't know that. Joe had found that he needed only to say things like, "The playboaters I was writing about in Colorado, they really threw down in the hole," or, "Huber, man. That guy free-soloed 513. Unbelievable!" for them to think of him as rugged and fit and probably someone who drank Wild Turkey at noon and didn't pay his bills on time. It didn't matter that he actually paid them almost as they slid through his mail slot rather than risk forgetting them and ruining his credit record forever, or that his wardrobe came pre-weathered from the Patagonia catalog.

No one knew, for instance, that on a small island off the coast of Bali, Joe had been haunted by a spray of dead birds he'd found on the beach, unbroken, seemingly asleep except for the stiffness under their shiny feathers. Some seaweed farmers had come along and said—or his translator understood—that there was a plague of otherwise hardy birds inexplicably dropping dead out of the sky. The farmers, who spent the fantastic hours between night and day tending their crops in the shallows, interpreted the deaths as warnings against the godless surfers and backpackers of Kuta Beach, but Joe had still turned in his article about snorkeling tours to the reef off the coast of said island.

And of course he had told no one about the jabbing terror he'd experienced in the Australian Outback while retracing the steps of a lost trekker. Waking up in the middle of the night to find pinpoints of light dancing for no one, from nowhere, Joe had crouched on the cold desert floor and wished fervently for the lights to go away, mentally trading in the myriad accolades he had not yet won if only he would be saved, and he had even cried a little bit when he found the lights still out there when he opened his eyes. At dawn he fled, deciding that he had enough to cobble together the desert section of the story, which was killed anyway when the lost trekker turned up in a Sydney squat a few days later, his disappearance explained by the constellation of needle tracks mapping his arms.

These unglamorous, unrecorded chapters of Joe's recent past didn't help him any as he lay on his couch trying to forget that only the young and rich and handsome were pursued like exotic birds through the caverns and back rooms of the city. But for three long days, every time his telephone rang and his terse voice—*It's Joe, leave a message*—rang out to the public—he was thrilled and embarrassed in equal parts.

A girl from his class at Stanford who was now a literary agent called. At a book party a few months ago he had run into her, and she'd quizzed him brutally about the status of his book proposal.

This is Joe. Leave a message.

Joe, I can't believe you didn't tell me you're dating Sophie Linden. Are you dating her? And anyway, we should talk about other stuff—I have some ideas for your proposal. Call me.

Sixteen hours later she called again.

Joe, it's Becca Bender again. We met at the Scottish guy's book party? J.C. Merritt? Okay, so, I have some thoughts on your project. Can you please give me a call at 358-9418. Thanks. 358-9418. Okay. Thanks.

Joe did not call. He listened to *Some Girls* a half-dozen times and didn't shower or do any work on the Balkan thing, even though he'd given the pitch of his life to the *Discourse* editor, and if he nailed this piece maybe his agent wouldn't dump him after all, but it was impossible to get any work done with dozens of strangers clamoring after him day and night. He was astonished by how delightful and distracting was the incessant pursuit of Joe Kahn.



BY THE end of the week, the chase was mostly over. Every day that Joe didn't call Sophie he felt like he had scored a point, and also like he died a little. When she didn't call either, by the 10th day, he put his passport and his foot cream and his minidisk recorder into a battered black backpack, along with a box of Maalox, a dozen crumpled T-shirts and cargo pants and sweaters, and a paperback copy of Jon Krakauer's latest best-seller and took a taxi to the airport. After a harrowing sixteen-hour flight in which he drifted in and out of uncomfortable, Valium-induced sleep, he spent the remainder of the day on a rickety bus that stopped in front of what seemed like every single house on the dusty road to the

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village Joe was headed for and beeped its horn, as if the teenage driver were out cruising instead of in the employ of the publicly owned bus service.

Finally, sitting in the hotel bar—the only bar—in the town, which consisted of a jumble of mismatched tables and chairs, nursing a warm Balkan beer for the better part of three hours, Joe connected with a cousin of the rebel leader he was to interview. He needed money, the cousin said, for the interpreter, and after smiling a hundred gold-toothed smiles at Joe he decamped with a wad of cash. Two days later the interpreter rolled in, swearing never to have met the friend in question. The driver's car had been stolen and so they all had to wait for his brother to drive another one up from the city, and another two days went by while they waited for reports that the skirmishes in the border area they were heading for had slowed to a passably distant thunder.

During the time that he waited, Joe shared the cobbled and mostly empty streets with a couple of goats and people who did not seem especially interested in him or in the political situation, and placed two international calls. The first was to his voicemail, which told him he had five new messages. As he waited for the first one to play he caught a glimpse of himself in the glass of the phonebooth. *Fuck you*, he muttered at his reflection, and hung up. After standing there for a few seconds, he picked up the phone and dialed himself again, and listened to the messages through. Becca Bender, sounding pissed. His mother. His friend Jackson, who lived in a cultural bubble, asking where the hell had he been. A fact-checker from a magazine he'd never heard of. One tabloid reporter.

He composed a note to Sophie in the back of a spiral notebook he used for reporting.

I'm traveling to a town just at the border tomorrow, Joe wrote. Right now there's heavy fighting in that area so we're hanging out here in town one more day. The situation is tense as hell, and I've already had a bunch of very close calls...but even worse, the food tastes like it was seasoned with chalk. I will tell you the rest when I see you, assuming I make it back in one piece. —Joe

He ripped it out and folded it and put it in an envelope he wrangled from the desk clerk at the hotel, and then realized he had no idea where to send it. There were people that might know how to get it to her but it would seem really dumb, Joe thought, or desperate,

extreme high school, sending notes by courier from the other side of the world.

The next morning, waiting for the driver, he decided that he *would* send a note, but it would be a different note, more cryptic. A note that a third party could deliver without embarrassing anyone, and then the week that the article came out he would call her and reveal himself and, he imagined, her green-gray eyes would widen and she would say, *Was that from you? I've been thinking about you....*

Dear Sophie: Joe wrote. Then the driver came and for a couple of hours they catapulted over the rocky landscape and he couldn't write anything, so he prayed for them not to hit any mines—even though he had no idea how heavily mined the region they were driving through was, actually—and flung insults at himself for not being better prepared.

The interview itself was a letdown, made up mostly of posturing and pacing by the hidden rebel soldier, who turned out to be 19 and who wore a fake Tommy Hilfiger shirt—it said Tommy Hilfiger—and kept poking himself in his red, white, and blue chest for emphasis every time he mentioned America, mostly as part of the phrase “Not like in America.” In his hideout he had a cassette player and dozens of guns that he insisted Joe pick up and sight and caress even though he had never shot a gun, and didn't really know which parts to touch and which parts to heft knowingly on his shoulder, and cases upon cases of Spaghetti-Os and industrial sized vats of Atomic Blast flavor Kool-Aid drink mix. The whole thing seemed absurd to Joe, except that the soldier truly was among the most wanted fugitives in this country, and would probably be tortured and then executed if captured. Also, he was very serious about enacting the will of his people, which was to pretty much live in peace on their scrappy parcels of land with their goats and their families without a lot of hassles from soldiers of any stripe.

Joe wrote down what the soldier said and wore and smelled like and said “I understand” and “Of course” a lot. Maybe two dozen times. The soldier ignored many of Joe's carefully prepared questions. He said what he wanted to say. Then Joe was escorted from the cave, blindfolded again—as if he could possibly identify this particular hole in the ground in the middle of a thousand square miles of equally rocky, desolate landscape—and, late that evening, dropped off down the street from his hotel in town. There was blackout on all the windows so he crept along,



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remembering the Australian kids who'd stolen his shirt, laughing. Joe had lied to Sophie about that. He hadn't ever been to either Congo.

On the dark street, he thought he heard footsteps behind him and ducked into a deep stairwell, heart thudding like he'd swallowed it. He listened carefully. It would be ridiculous if he died here, he thought, then reconsidered: It would probably make him more interesting. Hiding, Joe imagined what would happen if he *were* to be killed. There would be a memorial service, definitely, maybe in Westchester, maybe in the city. Everyone he had ever known, and a lot of people he probably wouldn't remember would all show up and cross a blue wall of police officers—or maybe just a few, to keep order—having read in the papers that Joseph Kahn had been murdered while on assignment in the Balkans. The obit would list his writing credits, he figured, and one of the glossies, probably not *GQ* but maybe *Details* would send somebody sniffing after what really happened to him out here, and they would dig up fuzzy pictures of him grinning next to some poor seaweed fisherman whose life had been totally fucked by Joe's article about how much fun it was to hang out on his island.

People like Becca Bender would show up wearing black shoes with a million little straps and offer condolences to his mom—his poor mom!—who would have to be restrained from requesting an autograph from any celebrities who might attend. And they might attend, because PR people would try to get famous people to go to anything, even a funeral. Who would organize it? Maybe his agent, who'd be dusting off Joe's book proposal because of course a dead guy's story, whatever it was, must always be told.

And what would Saraa with two a's say? And what would Elton Epstein—composer of pub-

licly declaimed schoolyard limericks of which young Joe Kahn had been the perpetually shrinking subject—say, when he discovered that he had to cross Fifth Avenue because of Joe Kahn from White Plains, Joe Kahn who blushed like a girl, Joe Kahn who had become, against all expectations, a guy who dated women like Sophie Linden, a guy who had landed in the velvety chambers of the city's graces, who had become, through some winning combination of wit and talent and roguish good luck, famous after all?

Joe held his breath until the thud of footsteps swelled, and a dark shadow crossed above him, and, without breaking pace or even pausing at the stairwell, fell away. In this quiet Joe waited a few more seconds, listening, and then exhaled and rose stiffly to his feet, rubbing his bad knee. He listened again and heard nothing. Nobody was going to kill him. Joe kicked the lowest step, jamming his toe painfully and felt nauseous. Wishing for his own death—his own *death*, for Christssake!—had brought the familiar heat of mortification to his cheeks and he knew that he was pink as a tulip, except of course there was no one there to notice.

Straightening up, he reached into his pocket and drew out the crumpled paper on which he had begun his first note earlier in the day. Pale and innocuous as a cookie, it lay there in his palm taunting him with his own falsity until he cursed out loud and tore it into as many pieces as he could, holding them up for the first breath of wind to scatter. When no such wind came, he filled up his chest and stared at his outstretched palm. Silently cursing a lifetime's worth of birthday cakes, dandelion clocks, cracked wishbones, shooting stars, and plinks of coins in ornamental pools, Joe closed his eyes, and blew.

