



Joe

Chapter 19

Prom

Spring, 1966

Boys, my friends and I were very competitive. Not only did we compete in athletics, we competed in pranks and practical jokes. We constantly played tricks on one another, and then sought revenge when we were the butt of the joke. Our motto was "Don't get mad, get even." Here's what happened.

It was Monday morning and I was at school by 7:30, thirty minutes before the first bell and an unusual arrival time for me. Normally, I was tardy, even though we lived only two blocks away at 2200 Arapahoe. My folks sold the house on 5th Street the summer before. I usually showed up at about 8:45 and just in time for the second class of the day to begin. My first class was study hall and I didn't see any reason to get out of bed for that.

I walked into the school office with a notice I wanted included in the morning's announcements that would be broadcast over the school's PA system. Mrs. Tate greeted me as I approached the counter with my handwritten notice. "Let me see if I can read your scribble," she said as she took the sheet freshly torn from my spiral notebook. "Oh my. The Prom is only a few weeks away!" she exclaimed as she read the note. "Looks like you and your class have lots to do and not much time to do it," she added needlessly.

There were two big school dances every year, Homecoming and Prom. Prom was by far the biggest. We looked forward to spring Prom from the moment the fall Homecoming Dance ended. The boys rented tuxes and the girls wore formal gowns. The dance was held in the school gym, which we decorated elaborately. A live band provided the music. The juniors put on the Prom for the seniors and both classes attended. As president of the junior class, it was my responsibility to organize the Junior-Senior Prom including determining a theme, decorating the gym and selecting a band. The PE and athletic departments were reluctant to give up the gym and begrudgingly gave us two weeks to pull it all together.

A few minutes before eight, I sat down at my desk in homeroom, a ten-minute period held first thing every day where we pledged allegiance to the flag and listened to the day's broadcast of rule reminders and club meeting notices. Mrs. Tate did the reading.

"Good morning students, today is April 12th. Please stand and join me in the pledge."

Once our allegiance was duly pledged, we sat down and she went on “As a reminder, Mr. Duncan (the boy’s dean) informs all students that no one is allowed to leave school grounds during the school day. Anyone caught off campus will be subject to a one-day suspension.” The 7-11 was a block away from school and certain students found it an excellent place to cut a class, get a coke, and smoke a cigarette. Mr. Duncan intended to bring that practice to an end.

Dude leaned over to me and whispered, “Sounds like a good deal to me. Cut a class and get a whole day off.”

I gave it some thought, but what would I do with a free day? It was April and ski season was over, and with Prom looming, I felt strangely compelled to be in school.

Mrs. Tate droned on with more announcements, finally coming to mine. “Jeff Waters reminds us that Prom is April 28th and asks that any members of the junior class interested in assisting with preparations for the Prom, please meet in Room A-2 today at 3:15.”

Then Mrs. Tate added, “If you don’t have a date lined up, now would be excellent time to ask someone.” The bell rang signaling the end of homeroom, and the start of the three-minute sprint to our first class of the day.

Shortly after 3:15 that afternoon, a large group of my classmates assembled in room A-2. My close friends including Dude, Chuck, Bobby, and Joe, the class vice president, were all present and accounted for. A number of girls showed up, too, including Debbie, Evelyn, Sofie, Cindy, and my girlfriend Kathy. Kathy and I had started dating the previous fall. I had already asked her to the Prom. I didn’t put that off. I knew a few other boys who would like to take her and I didn’t want to give them a chance.

The first order of business was selecting a theme. We debated and rejected a wide variety of alternatives. After more than an hour, Bobby, while looking through an issue of *National Geographic*, suggested, “How about ‘Mukuima?’ According to this article it means Avenue of the Cherry Blossoms.” He held the magazine aloft so that all could see a beautiful street in Japan lined with blooming cherry trees. A quick vote was taken and Mukuima was unanimously selected as the theme for the Junior-Senior Prom. We adjourned, but agreed to meet the next day to develop a plan to decorate the gym.

Boys, Here's What Happened

Over the next several days, we met to draw plans and assign responsibilities. Dude took on building a dragon's head from chicken wire and crepe paper that would serve as the entrance to the gym. The plan was to enter the gym through the dragon's mouth, which led would lead to the avenue of cherry blossoms created by wooden trellises supporting tree branches decorated with crepe paper cherry blossoms. The avenue would terminate at the dance floor and bandstand. Tables and chairs would fill the spaces to the left and right of the avenue. The ceiling would be lowered to a more intimate level by suspending butcher paper from wires attached to the beams above. Some of the girls volunteered to paint the butcher paper with the moon and stars.

By Friday afternoon, everyone was painting and hanging paper, building dragons, decorating tables, or building trellises in the school shop. We had one week to finish decorating the gym. As everyone worked, I reviewed the Prom fund and identified a serious problem. We didn't have enough money to buy all the construction materials we needed and still pay for a band. I called a meeting and, after explaining the problem, a solution was found. Joe, Bruce, and Monte said they would search the dump for discarded construction materials. Joe promised to come up with something by Sunday morning.

It was early Sunday morning when I was blasted from a deep sleep by Dad's yelling. "What is all that!" he shouted as he thundered down the stairs to my basement bedroom.

"What are you talking about?" I mumbled in return, shaking the sleep from my head.

"Come look at this! Goddammit, Jeff!" Dad was angry, to say the least.

I walked through the basement rec room to the sliding door that opened onto the driveway. There, piled high, was a collection of road barriers, highway detour signs and other construction materials obviously gathered from a construction site and clearly not from a dump.

Normally Dad kept calm, but he had a fiery temper when pushed — and finding a driveway full of construction materials pushed him. And, as I learned later on, he was suffering from constant back pain, the result of a bout with polio some twelve years earlier.

“Joe,” was all I could say.

“What?” Dad answered, but before I could provide any detail he added, “You need to get rid of that stuff now! I don’t care how you do it, but get rid of it before we get arrested!” He stomped up the stairs to his Sunday newspaper, coffee, and cigarettes. I surveyed the pile of materials. It was at least two pickup loads. I knew Joe was responsible. I formulated a plan.

My first call was to Dude. After determining that he had been on a date the night before and was not a co-conspirator, I told him we had a problem and to get over to my house fast. I needed his help. Next I called Chuck, and like Dude, had not been involved with the heist. I told him to join Dude and me as soon as he could.

Before long, Dude and Chuck arrived at our house. They stared at the pile with mouths open, shocked.

“Looks like the Waters family is going in the road-construction business,” Chuck deadpanned.

“My dad doesn’t think it’s so funny,” I replied. “We’ve got to get rid of this, but first, I want to get even with Joe for getting me in trouble. We’re going to make Joe think I’m in jail and that I got arrested for receiving stolen property.”

After covering the stolen goods with painting tarps, we piled into my ‘57 Ford and headed to the police station. Walking in, we said hello to Officer Hal, who was serving as the desk sergeant. It was noisy in the station with phones ringing and cops conversing loudly. He said hello, and then asked what we wanted, eyeing us suspiciously.

“We just need to use the pay phone, Officer Hal,” I explained.

Without saying a word, he gestured to the bank of phones on the wall near the holding cells.

I picked up the phone, put in a dime, and dialed Joe’s number. When he answered, I held the phone high in the air for a second or two, so he could hear the sounds of the police station.

“Hello! Hello! Who is this?” he asked, panic creeping into his voice.

“Joe, it’s me,” I answered in a quavering voice. I did my best to sound as if I was afraid. “I’m at the police station! They arrested me for receiving stolen property. And they’ve got my Dad, too! He’s in the holding cell.” I held the phone up as Dude banged on the metal bars with a tin cup he found on a desk.

“Stop that!” Officer Hal shouted at Dude, loud enough for Joe to hear.

Boys, Here's What Happened

“Oh shit!” Joe stammered, his voice breaking. “I’ll be right there.”

I hung up.

“Very convincing! Well done,” Chuck observed.

I suggested we wait outside. “It won’t be long.”

We said goodbye to Officer Hal and strolled across the street, where we took cover behind some parked cars. Just as we crouched down, Joe rounded the corner in his father’s ’64 Ford station wagon. He screeched to a stop at the curb, jumped from the car, and ran into the station.

“Where’s Jeff Waters!” he asked officer Hal breathlessly, his eyes wide with fear.

“Oh, he was here a few minutes ago with two other boys. They made a call from that pay phone then they left. They was laughing their asses off, but I don’t know why. I yelled at ‘em for banging the bars of the cell with a cup.”

As Joe emerged from the station, we stood up from our hiding places across the street and yelled at him. “Did you confess?” I asked.

Joe responded with a volley of single-finger salutes and a barrage of names not fit for a book intended for my grandsons. A few minutes later, after Joe cooled down, he told us that Bruce, Monte, and he had taken the materials from a spot north of town where a bridge was being replaced. “It seemed like a good idea at the time,” he explained. “We thought we could take the barricades apart and use the wood for trellises.”

Later that day, we borrowed a pickup from Mike Hartmiester and returned the stolen materials to their place of origin. We put the signs, barricades and other items back as close to their original locations as possible. Luckily, no one from law enforcement spotted us returning the materials.

At dinner that evening, after Dad inspected the clean driveway, he asked where the signs and barricades had come from and what had I done with them. I told him that some of my friends accidentally removed them from a construction site north of town, thinking they were surplus and available for Prom construction. “But once they realized their mistake, they returned every item to its place of origin,” I went on.

Dad just looked at me while shaking his head.

The week before the big dance flew by. Nights and every free moment during the school day were spent finishing the decorating. Before I knew it, it was Saturday, the day of the Prom. I was relieved that all the preparations were done, but more importantly, I was looking forward to crowning the Prom Queen. Joe and I counted the votes on Friday and we knew that Suzie would be Queen. Suzie was Chuck's sister and the prettiest girl in the senior class. As junior class president, it was my honor to place the crown on her head and, here's the best part ... give her a kiss — on the lips!

I did a final inspection of the decorated gym, washed the car, struggled into the rented tux, and then headed to Kathy's house to pick her up. Her dad was the wrestling coach at the School of Mines, which gave me some concern. He looked me over without a smile, looked out the window at my Dad's car, a new Chevy Malibu. Then, apparently satisfied that I was taking his daughter to the Prom in a safe car, looked at me, and said in a low voice, "Be careful." I hoped he meant drive carefully, but I didn't ask for clarification.

Kathy and I were double dating with Bobby and Cici. We had reservations at a chichi restaurant in the top floor of a hotel in downtown Denver. Serving high-school kids was not a priority for the restaurant and service was slow. By the time we finished our Cherries Jubilee, the Prom was starting and we still had a long drive back to Golden from Denver.

We arrived at the school gym with just minutes to spare before I was supposed to crown Suzie, but to my shock, the crowning was underway as we walked through the Dragon's mouth and down the Avenue of the Cherry Blossoms. I arrived at the bandstand just as Joe wrapped his arms around Suzie and gave her a big kiss.

"Thanks for waiting," I said as the band started its version of Johnny Mathis' *Twelfth of Never*.

"I had to take action. I wasn't sure you were going to make it," Joe said with a wry smile.

"Uh-huh," I replied looking at him sideways.

Boys, Here's What Happened

Boys, you may think that Joe moved in early to get even for luring him to the police station and that was probably the case. On the other hand, Joe dated Suzie briefly earlier in the year but it didn't last for long. Joe was just a month-long stand-in when Suzie and her steady boyfriend broke up. And, I think he was still in love with her. Who could blame him? Not only was she pretty, she was smart and had a virtuous reputation.

So, I was actually OK with Joe stealing that kiss. I had a pretty girl to dance with and one thing I knew for sure; that was their first and only kiss, and he had dated her for a whole month.