

The Best of Friends, vol. 1

ANTHOLOGY OF NEW QUAKER WRITING
PUBLISHED 1999 BY KIMO PRESS IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE
FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

An Excerpt from

Joe's Story

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I pulled up outside the old weatherboard house and silenced the engine. Bert needed a hand up those steep front steps. He hadn't said a word since we left the Meeting House, I imagined he was contemplating the host of fine sentiments Friends had expressed about his old mate.

I'd found it difficult to sit still during the meeting. I wanted to jump up and yell, cram their splendid words back in their mouths, wipe the smiles from their faces. Nothing Friends said or did would bring Grandpa back, fill the empty chair by the door where he'd liked to sit and nod his greeting each Sunday morning.

Red-raw, my grief refused to heal, exploded daily in uncharacteristic bursts of rage. Only yesterday I'd hit my brother across the mouth just because he borrowed some CD's without asking me first. And I felt such a fool

behaving like this, unable to control my emotions. Michael Evans, second year medical student and exemplary Young Friend, simply wasn't supposed to act this way.

Bert was fumbling with the door handle so I leaned over and pushed hard. The door flew open and stuck fast in the thick turf on the footpath.

"Leave it Bert," I said as Bert tugged at the door handle, "I'll fix it."

Bert nodded and levered himself out of the car.

We walked in silence to the front door and I waited politely while he rummaged around in his pockets for the key.

"Found the little bastard at last," he muttered, ramming the key into the lock.

"Be seeing you then, Bert," I said, turning to leave.

"Thanks for the lift, Michael, I really appreciate it. Would you like a cuppa? I'm parched. I didn't go much on that tea at the Meeting House, it smelt like bloody flowers."

I laughed for the first time since Grandpa's death. "You must've had the herb tea, the dreadful green stuff."

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"That's right, it looked like weak lime cordial, or something else I'd better not mention." He managed a faint smile. "It reminded me of the tea we used to drink during the war, sorta washed out, as if it'd been used umpteen times. Soaked an' dried, soaked an' dried, just like us blokes in them stinking jungles."

"Grandpa died because of the war," I said bitterly, feeling the wrath rise in my throat.

"Well they do say stress can cause heart attacks, but you'd have a hard job proving it after all these years. It would've been easier if he'd lost a leg or something."

"I meant *this* war, this madness in the Gulf. That's why Grandpa had another heart attack. He got so worked up about it, sat in front of the tv all day yelling at the screen, begging them to stop fighting. Gran tried to stop him, she turned the tv off several times, but he just lost his temper with her then."

"Joe couldn't cope with the violence," Bert said quietly, "something wrong in his head. It was easier for me, my wounds healed real quick, only a limp left now."

He walked slowly down the hall to the kitchen and busied himself with making tea. I followed him to the kitchen and sat at the table pondering how to ask the question burning in my brain.

"Milk, sugar?" Bert asked pleasantly.

"Dash of milk thanks."

He brought the tea and eased himself into a faded vinyl chair. "Ah, that's better. Good strong drop. Put some hairs on your chest, lad."

I tried to smile but my lips were frozen, a solid line taut against my teeth. So I spat out the words not caring if I opened old wounds, betrayed old secrets. "What did you mean, something wrong in his head? What happened to him Bert?"

"What's it matter now. He's at peace. No more struggle."

"Tell me the truth. I'm not a kid any more."

Bert drained his cup noisily, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Alright Michael, I'll tell you Joe's story, but don't you go discussing it with your Mum or your Gran. They got enough to worry about, they don't want to be reminded of all them troubles years ago."

"I won't breathe a word Bert, promise."

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Bert settled back in the chair and cleared his throat. "Joe came back from the war a broken man. I don't mean he had any bits missing or walked with a limp like me, nothing like that. It was kinda different with Joe, you see something got broke inside his head. Sorta snapped he said and though I listened, I never quite understood what he meant. But it changed him and somehow he was never the same old Joe I'd knocked about with before the war...."

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