

## OLD FRIENDS

*for Jacob Waislitz*

### Old relics, dead and alive

JOE BENJAMIN'S PAWN SHOP looked as if it had stood since the first six days of Creation. It was situated in a run-down, crumbling wooden cottage, which stood secretly, as if squeezed between the high concrete walls of the surrounding buildings. Over its narrow perpetually closed door and cracked windows that were covered with yellowed newspaper hung three copper plates in the shape of a seagull that had turned green with age – the secret and unholy sign of the Lombard shops.

The low display windows that had not been washed for years were full of all manner of objects: rusty hunting rifles, scratched porcelain, worn clothing, patched shoes, binoculars, ironware, books and hats, to name a few. Old-fashioned pocket watches and rings with large fake diamonds hung from a wire in the middle of the window. A holy picture in a broken frame peeped out like an orphan from between a pair of red pants and a bicycle wheel that stood in the corner of the window. The entire collection of

old bits and pieces was attended by the pathos that often remains after long use by human hands. It emitted poverty and neglect as it looked out into the busy street with silent longing, awaiting some form of deliverance.

Joe Benjamin himself looked like an old relic that had climbed down from one of his dusty, musty shelves in his narrow dingy shop. He was an old, fat and bald man and was only ever half-dressed, whether it was summer or winter. He always wore a dirty shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a pair of old pants that kept sliding from his large prominent belly. He looked as if he had just woken up from sleep and his fat face had the appearance of never having been washed.

Joe, like all single men, had been quiet and reclusive. He was rarely seen outside. Occasionally, in the great summer heat, he would sit on a crooked chair outside his shop and look into the street with a pair of clear unconcerned eyes that seemed to have been made from glass.

Suddenly, as if he had just sprung out of the ground, his neighbour, Abe Rosen, would appear.

‘Well, well, well, so how are you, Mr Benjamin?’ he would say, rubbing his hands on initiating a conversation. ‘The heat has completely ruined business, hasn’t it, Mr Benjamin?’

Abe, a quick-witted blond Jew, had a haberdashery next to Joe’s pawn shop and never failed to begin talking on the rare occasion that the other would appear outside. He was a pauper, forever bankrupt and subsisting on charitable loans. He had a persistent clandestine desire to hook Joe into giving him such a loan, but Joe would not, could not

be hooked under any circumstance. Abe would chat to him at every opportunity and smile at him in brotherly fashion, but Joe held himself cold and aloof as if he did not know him.

Abe never got offended. He had great respect for Joe whom he believed to be secretly filthy rich. He always bragged about Joe's wealth to all his family and friends as if he were party to the fortune. Other neighbours in the street, especially the Jews, also estimated that Joe was worth many thousands. Fantastic stories were spread about Joe's chests filled to bursting with valuable gems. Joe's isolated and reserved manner further fired his neighbours' imaginations as they looked with awe, respect and latent jealousy upon the perpetually closed doors of Joe's shops.

Occasionally, clients would stealthily sneak out from there: mostly older women in black with sad teary eyes and moist face or, conversely, heavily made-up women in brazen brightly coloured wear. At other times, it might have been half-drunk hedonistic boys of the underworld whom the neighbours would follow with suspicion, shake their heads and wink at each other, saying, 'So, that is how you hoard your money.'

Rosa, the short fat widow from the tailor shop who was once interested in marrying Joe, would stand with her fat hands folded over her bosom and scream at the top of her voice in unsavoury language down the street, 'You old idiot! You are not worth the earth that you stand on! You are a swine, a piece of old junk, that's right, no more than just a piece of old junk!'



Original illustration for 'Old Friends' by Noel Counihan

## Isaac Green

Joe lived totally alone and isolated from the world outside. In his solitude, he was paralysed. His solitude seemed to have sucked from him all spark for living, all joy. He hated people. They lusted after the fortune that he had amassed over many years, this fortune, his money, being itself like a living entity to him. Whenever he would pick through his iron chest that was constantly growing, its contents breathed with life and sang quiet songs of debts and profits that only he could understand, doing so with his soul that had been encased in miserliness and old decrepit junk. The money that he paid for the items that people had pawned brought interest; those items passed through a trail of other people's hands, wandered through distant highways and byways, and eventually returned to his chest, from there to go out once more, as every transaction made his coffers grow, grow, transformed into money, money, money!

Joe dedicated his entire life's purpose to the pursuit of money. He adulated it with all the passion still left in his otherwise solitary, paralysed heart; the dark pawn shop was his whole world. He took on the life of a devout hermit bewitched by the unholy ministry of pledges and interest.

The only person to set foot into Joe's secret world of money and antiquated wares was Isaac Green, a tall, elongated man with a bulbous nose, prominent Adam's apple and high cheeks who was as stingy as Joe. He owned many houses and spent his days trudging across town on his long, shaky, black feet, requesting rental payments in lachrymose tones as if he were demanding a dowry. He maintained a

uniformly dour expression, continually complaining about the weather whose heat was drying out his houses and eating up the bricks and mortar, while in wetter seasons the rains were seeping through their foundations and dampening the walls, causing him to bemoan the losses he had to sustain, the tenants themselves becoming enemies who were sorely abusing their homes and bleeding him dry.

Isaac had most trouble with the homes that he owned in the shady back streets where prostitutes lived. He always found the walls scraped, full of insect nests, peeling wallpaper hanging in strips, broken doors and windows smashed that repeatedly had to withstand the fights between the cheap and slovenly women and their clients and guests. Those houses were degenerating in filthy neglect and rotting in the dirt that had never been cleaned. Whenever he came to collect the rent, the women would flirt with him, tickle his Adam's apple, wink at him and make advances to him with lewd and suggestive gestures.

'No money, darling,' they would frequently say.

'What do you mean, no money?' Isaac would whine. 'I am an old sick man, I also have to make a living.'

Rita, a young Spanish woman with black curly hair and fiery black eyes, always laughed at him, hugged him, kissed him on his lips and offered him cigarettes. Resignedly, Isaac would take these offerings, smile foolishly and leave bitterly downhearted over not having received his rent.

He would pour out his bitterness to Joe every night, show him in black and white how they were making a pauper of him and, pulling wads of paper from a pocket,

thrust them under Joe's nose and say, '*Nu*, see! More taxes to pay! For water, for rates, for everything you can think of. They are ripping bits off me from all sides. Who can understand this?'

Joe would hear out his friend in silence, empathise with pity and understanding, and, groaning, would raise a hand, point at all the junk around them stacked to the ceiling and sigh.

'Do you think that it is any better for me? I have thrown good money into this stock. There is a fortune lying here unsold. The place is becoming a cemetery and I can't squeeze even a penny out of it.'

Bitterly enveloped in self-pity, they would seat themselves at the table and, as if by magic, an old greasy deck of cards appeared in Joe's hands. Isaac pulled out the half-broken cigarette that Rita had given him and savoured the delicious taste of its smoke and the tender thoughts of that beautiful Spanish girl whose image rose like a dream-like visage before his eyes.

'Do you want to pay a game?' Joe interrupted him, shuffling the cards.

'Of course. Why not?'