LIVING WITH THE ANGELS

JACK DeVine
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Pretty Joe Rainbow was not as pretty as his name implied. He had yellow teeth which were always visible because they lay over his lower lip. Whenever he opened his mouth to smile, which was often, one could see that the teeth were more like dog teeth than those of a man. They were pointed and spaced apart. On the tip of his tongue was a wart, and Pretty Joe liked to try to fit the wart in the spaces between his teeth. The left side of his face was swollen to about twice the size of a man’s fist; he could not see from his left eye because it was swollen nearly shut. His left ear was as large as two ears and bobbled whenever he shook his head. His hair was so long it fell to his shoulders. His right eye protruded slightly and was quite crooked. This caused him to incline his head at an angle in order to discern any object. His beard, which grew only on the right side of his face, was stained with tobacco juice. His eyebrows grew straight out. Pretty Joe Rainbow was definitely not pretty.

“Gee, I’m a lucky guy,” Pretty Joe thought, “when I found that street car ride thing. Pretty lucky, I guess, that’s what I am. Yes sir, lucky. It has been almost a long time since I kin set here on this street car and look out the windows. Yes, and go right along, too, and not use my feet. I know I’m lucky because of the ‘thems’ which stop him so they, too, kin get on and set without their feet moving—go right along.

“Lots others would have ridden in the Big Light time when the buildings and trees could be seen goin’ by. But, me, I like the Little Light time when one kin see all the little lights and see how different they each are. I like the black color, too. You cain’t see that black color in the Big Light time.”

Pretty Joe carefully turned to study the other passengers. He did not have to stare. One quick glance and he could see every thing. He knew every detail—the color of a man’s clothes, the type of hat and shoes he was wearing, and even knew the color of his eyes. Joe would than look out the window, but he would see nothing. One by one he would recall the people who were riding on the car.

“They’re are awful purty. That man was kind o big to be one of ‘them,’ though he wasn’t quite as big as me and his hands was not so big as mine. The other one is the purtiest one. His skin is sort of a white more or so, I guess. His hands, too, I liked his hands. They are white and soft. His fingers are not long but they looked long because they are skinny but it is a sort of a good kind of skinny. I liked his hands. I’ve got good hands. I can move every finger in three places except two fingers which only move in two places but all my fingers work and work good. I’ve got good hands. I can make a fist out of my hands if I roll my fingers up tight in a ball.

“I cain’t understand the faces of the men. The faces have no hair, and the hair on their heads is of such a odd shape which I cain’t understand. They are so small; never have I seen one of them nearly so large like me. Nor are they so strong like me. I’ll bet none of ‘them’ kin carry a full grown horse over their shoulders as I kin. You gotta be strong in order to do that. I

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am strong. I got good muscles. I am strong.

"I was lucky to get that street car ride thing. I don’t get to be with ‘them’ much. When I die, my soul will be a purty young man with hair shaped funny on top and no hair on my face; with soft white hands and skinny fingers. I’ll talk with them—when I am one. Funny I ain’t dead yet, but here I am on this street car right in heaven, Living With The Angels."

The street car stopped and a man entered carrying a woman in his arms as if she were a baby. Pretty Joe glanced up and saw the couple. “Why, she is sort of like me. She, too, is living with the angels. When she dies, she will come and take this street car. I will be a purty man and she will be a purty lady and I will talk to her, and she will smile and listen to what I say. She will have good legs and I will—. I’m afraid. I know why I’m not an angel. I know. I don’t know how I kin know, but I do know. Angels have told me, I guess. Angels kin say things without talking.”

Pretty Joe moved his tongue along his teeth and the wart moved in and out the spaces—moved in and out. “I got good legs, though,” Joe mused, “I can stand, walk and even run. I got good legs. I had to run when I got my last breakfast out of a garbage can. I got good legs, good hands, got a strong back, but I ain’t got good—. Some people cain’t see or hear. I can.

“She couldn’t walk. I’ll be a purty man and she’ll be a purty woman. I wish I could look at a purty woman all day, but I cain’t. Their skin is so purty. Their eyes, their eyes ain’t like nothin’ else at all. There is little lights in their eyes like there is little lights in the black color. I wish I might touch one. I wouldn’t hurt her. But, she’d be afraid; so I cain’t.

“Maybe I’m asleep and this is a dream. Maybe I ain’t Pretty Joe Rainbow. Maybe I’m—Who kin I be? Some angel, I guess. I’ll pretend that I live in their houses, ride the street cars and go places. I wonder what angels do in their houses, where they go on street cars. I don’t know. I cain’t even be one of ‘them’ asleep dreaming about me, because I don’t even know if they dream. I reckon that I’m just me after all.”

“Say, Bud,” the motorman said pointedly, “we’re at the end of the line now.”

Pretty Joe Rainbow flicked his tongue around his teeth, the wart moving in and out the spaces. “Yes sir, I just seen that I was at the end of the line. I just seen I was.”
DETAIL — ST. JEROME

by Giovanni di Pietro

John Herron Art Museum
STILL LIFE

BY EMIL CARLSEN

John Herron Art Museum