

## **A Sequence of Independent Events.**

Celebrities come in all shapes and sizes. In the case of Joe Stakes, he came in the shape and size of a dishevelled 196 lb man. His legend, on the other hand, was condensed down to the size of a one penny piece. While some make their fortunes with the pen or the sword, Joe made it with that small disk of bronze, the queen's half-smile guiding him all the way.

When I went to interview Joe, I found a man who sits in front of his laptop, hair thinning, sides beginning to bulge slightly through the arms of his battered swivel chair. On his face is a look of friendly bemusement, and enough wrinkles to make you forget he's only fifty-six. In the corner, beside a huge, outdated, plasma screen, sits a jar of loose change with the lid glued shut. He tells me that he rarely gives interviews, something I already know. Apparently, he says with a wry smile, I'm one out of one-hundred.

"Well young man," he croaks, toying with the façade of his age, eking out what respectability he can, "you've come here to learn my secret, haven't you?" Obviously. The man before me was one of the world's few remaining enigmas. A scoop like that would cement not only my name as a journalist, but preserve me as a new Oedipus, answering the riddle which had plagued all who tried before. Joe didn't look much like a Sphinx though. He looked old and worn like a wallet full of tarnished coppers.

"Not at all Mr Stakes, this is about getting to know the real you."

"You won't much like my secret though," he continued, as if I'd said nothing. "It's pretty anticlimactic." So I asked him to start from the beginning, and with a look that saw right through me, staring at my eyes as though peering through a keyhole, he began to unload his story.

“I was twenty-seven. It might’ve happened before that, but it really caught my attention at work.” His eyes rolled back to get a better view of his past, and I heard the intonation of a man telling a story he has told many times. Maybe he’d add an ending this time.

“My workmate Matt took break same time as me, so we chose who took break first. Tossing a coin was simple, so I did the flipping and I took heads.” A brief pause as Joe took a sip of whiskey. He made it look natural, but I could see dust on the bottle. “Now, after the first week, he was complaining. ‘That damned coin!’ he called it. I’d flipped heads every time. My pals would say ‘fair is fair’, and if luck went my way then he’d just have to wait his turn. It was a long time coming. After the second month, well...” I knew this part. Truth be told, I knew most of his story, but my article needed to be about Joe’s perspective. I’d read enough essays on the man’s life, but very little of it in his own words.

For two months, Joe had flipped the coin, any coin, it didn’t matter which one, without landing on tails a single time. After a few tirades from the blameless Matt, the workforce held court in the canteen to get to the bottom of it. They rustled up the loose change and told the poor, equally bewildered Joe to flip it all.

“Well, I flipped every coin on that table. Jack filmed it on his phone. All heads. Hell of a thing.”

I had seen the video. Joe’s workmates stood like Arthur’s knights around a table, watching a disappointing miracle. Still, even a pointless miracle is a miracle, and with the queen observing the canteen through at least forty different eyes, everyone looked decidedly uneasy.

“So we took it in turns for break after that.” I looked back to Joe, blinking away images of his past. “Bloody stupid of us really. Should have done that anyway, would have saved a lot of trouble.” I scribbled on my notepad, but it was largely blank. I’d heard nothing so far I didn’t

already know. No clue to his secret. Maybe he didn't have one. The idea that the man before me was some sort of illusionary mastermind was growing less plausible by the second.

“Well when the lady came to see me about it, I was a bit stumped.” I was trying to figure out what Joe meant by this until I realised he had sidestepped several years of his life. The video had actually been uploaded to Facebook later the same week, but it didn't attract much interest. Just a few 'shocked' emojis. Only three-hundred people saw it, more or less. Still, one fateful day three years later, my research told me, a Junior Marketing Assistant for an online bingo company stumbled across the video. It fitted his advertisement perfectly and saved him lots of work, so he downloaded the video and edited it into an acceptable format. It went on the air soon after, to the disinterest of the entire population.

The lady Joe was referring to was Katie Hodges, the host of an online talk show. She watched the new advert and saw an opportunity in it. It was her talk show that brought Joe out into the light, revealed him and his peculiar talent to the world.

“She came to my house, asking me about the coins.”

“But what did you think about your talent before you met her?” I asked, curious about how he'd first adapted to his strange knack. My pen was actually at the ready when he answered.

Joe looked a little awkward. “I went home after the test and tried it out there.” I imagined the single light above his dining room table fluttering, the hands weighing heavy on the clock as Joe flipped coin after coin. “No use. All landed on heads.” He grimaced. “I didn't really do anything. I stopped carrying small change is all. I used to wince if I heard a jangle come from someone's pocket. I tried to ignore it. Then she, that Katie, she came along and plucked me for stardom.”

It was a strange kind of stardom. The sort reserved for children who saved people from drowning, or for particularly talented cats. The sort that is celebrated in as much time as it takes

to start a conversation with your grandmother but fades into static swiftly after. Nevertheless, Joe didn't go away.

“So I went on her show and after that, everyone wanted a piece of me. The news, daytime T.V. and game shows. Everyone.”

“Why?”

“They wanted me to fail. Wanted it to be on their show when my ‘trick’ flopped. I spent a lot of time doing the rounds like that. Then it went international, and all the normal stuff fell away.” He began to almost deflate in front of me.

“Everyone knew who I was.” He was getting heated now, and I worried that I might actually have pissed him off. “Do you know how many people share videos of pointless crap? Do you? Or how many people will walk up to you in the street asking for you to flip a coin, just so they can film it and show their mates? Do you know how many people carry a bit of spare change?!” He was shouting now, and I was cringing back from him, folding into the recesses of the armchair he had offered me. He wasn't shouting at me, but at the world. It was the pent-up frustration of a lifetime in the spotlight, but without any of the respectability fame is meant to bring.

Joe's was the worst form of fame. A glorified party trick which barred him from any social occasion, knowing as he did that he'd be asked to perform. One reporter aptly coined him as having “the most uneventful eventful life ever lived.” Actors and politicians would greet him with a smile, copper penny in the hand and photo-op on the brain.

“I wanted it to stop. Scientists studied me. I flipped the coin in the dark, in blinding light, from different heights, everything. Always heads.” The anger had subsided. We returned to the pretext of an interview, but it was clear to us both that it would be cut short. An outburst like that, it soured things.

I'd entered the interview hoping to unveil a magician's trick. He hadn't elucidated me. Instead, I had found a man at the mercy of the most mundane impossibility ever afforded to man. There could be no conclusion to this which would satisfy my curiosity. All I could hope for was to understand the man; ostensibly what I'd come to do in the first place.

"So, Joe, how do you feel now that it's all over?"

Joe had retired. He'd given his notice of resignation to a half-full auditorium, making headlines in the quiet nooks of the world. "They said I'd lost it. The plot or the knack, either or. Good riddance." At the time, he encouraged the idea that he had landed on tails. He hadn't been in the mood to prove it, however. "I'm glad it's done with. I've settled now, and I can look back and feel alright." He might have been more concrete on this point if not for his outburst. "It's just folks like you who bother me now," he smiled, "and I've got the answer to your question, whenever you want to ask it."

My heart pounded. He was giving me the key. I'd given up hope, but here he was, offering me my dream, an international story, the solving of the conundrum, king of Thebes at last. My mouth dry, I asked him, "What do you mean?"

"Well lad," he started, a wry smile playing on his lips, "people always used to say I was impossible. That's their mistake. They said, 'It can't be done!' and that's their mistake too." He took a gulp of whisky, tongue licking his chapped lips. "You see, I've a lot of time to think now. Obviously, the odds of flipping a coin are fifty-fifty. The odds of it landing on heads twice in a row are twenty-five to seventy-five, and so on. Eventually, the amount of times I flipped the coin, the odds can't be anything less than one-hundred-trillion to one."

"Sure," I stated, wondering what he was getting at. "It's impossible."

"Well not exactly," he said, voice smug, face taking on a nearly maniacal grin.

“How so?” I asked.

“Because I was the one.” And he laughed, and I watched as my dream evaporated before my eyes amidst the vapour of whiskey and mundanity.