**I Am Joey**

**By Steve Bates**

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A door. There must be a door.

A poster hangs slightly askew on the beige wall beyond the workstation. It depicts a man sitting in a wheelchair with his head lolling sideways. He wears eyeglasses and is smiling or grimacing.

The second wall is like the first but blank. A blue couch with two large cushions is positioned in front of the third wall. A small window is the only feature of the fourth wall; sunlight pouring through it produces four yellow patches on the hardwood floor. The white ceiling is flat and featureless except for some recessed lighting.

There is no door.

\* \* \*

Trending on social media:

**He’s been paid off to stop blogging. Or maybe he was threatened.**

**The campaign was batshit crazy. He’s just chilling.**

**With the presidency all f-d up, we need him more than ever.**

\* \* \*

“Joey is finished. We have new orders.”

Amanda Duvall had always feared that this day would come.

“He’s too valuable. He’s the number four online influencer in the English-speaking world and rising fast.” Rage swelled, but she steeled herself, determined not to reveal even a hint of weakness to her boss. “What will they do to him?”

“There’s a meeting at eleven.” He leaned over her desk and lowered his voice. “I know how much you have invested in Joey. But you’ve gotten too attached. It’s time to let go.”

Amanda waited until he turned the corner. Then she hurled her coffee mug against the closest wall and stormed off the floor.

\* \* \*

What was Anton Plank thinking? The CEO of Plank Industries, a billionaire and visionary with all the talent and toys a man could ever want, spurned all advice and entered the race for president as an independent candidate. Preternaturally thin, rarely seen without his signature red sneakers, and abandoned by all but a few unruly wisps of sandy hair, Plank appeared nothing like the slick, button-down politicians who stampeded into the primaries and caucuses in droves and limped home one by one in ignominious defeat.

Alone in his modest office on Election Night, feet propped on a desk littered with half-empty Starbucks cups, he flipped from site to site on his tablet in disbelief. He had won California and his home state of Massachusetts, denying the Democratic and Republican candidates the electoral votes needed to become the next president. He knew that he stood zero chance when the House of Representatives met to anoint the next leader of the free world. But then, he never really wanted the job in the first place.

The blogger known as Joey had been the first to assert that Plank could capture the coveted electoral prize that was California, based on granular analysis of voter registration patterns. Joey tackled energy and environmental issues as well. He reported embarrassing flaws in the Ajani Corporation drones designed to carry commuters above and around highway congestion. And he scooped the competition in revealing Plank’s plan to develop self-sufficient domes that could house human settlements in locations such as the most remote parts of the Sahara Desert, Antarctica and, eventually, the moon. Joey’s nickname for the homes—*dome-iciles*—was adopted instantly by other bloggers and the mainstream news media.

It seemed like Joey had come out of nowhere. But in the blogosphere, résumés didn’t matter—only followers. His website and social media profiles suggested an unremarkable childhood in southern California and made no effort to hide the fact that he did not graduate from college. As hits on his articles soared exponentially, he connected online with prominent journalists, politicians, and other movers and shakers. Yet he found time to respond to just about everyone else who addressed him politely on Friendster, ChatRbox, and countless other social media platforms.

**You should present this idea to your boss, Sophia. You might earn a promotion.**

**John, why don’t you ask that cute new neighbor out for a cup of coffee. She probably doesn’t know many people in town.**

Joey did not endorse candidates for office, but when he mentioned a company or product in a blog, it moved the needle dramatically in the marketplace.

\* \* \*

**They’re going to fire me. I feel like I’m getting an ulcer, and I’m only 28.**

**Anthony, I know that you can do this job.**

**How do you know that?**

**You graduated with top honors from MIT, and you have handled every challenge. I have great confidence in you, and I’m sure that your company does too.**

A cybersecurity prodigy who worked for Plank Industries, Anthony Dyson had no opinion about his CEO’s political ambitions or his residential domes. It was Joey’s writing that resonated deeply with Anthony. He embraced the role of Joey’s disciple, reposting his blogs and commenting about them incessantly on social media. These endorsements, and the fact that Anthony worked for Plank, quickly garnered Joey’s attention. The two began communicating via private-message chats.

The only child of helicopter parents who pressured him mercilessly to succeed, Anthony rose swiftly to the top of his profession; coworkers swore that he could smell a hacker a light-year away. But social graces eluded him. If a woman noticed Anthony, she would dismiss him immediately as too short and heavy and geeky—or so he invariably assumed. Making male friends was just as problematic. He did not care for sports, and conversations with colleagues rarely went far if they strayed from work topics.

\* \* \*

*Everyone is holding hands with someone. Or laughing with their friends,* Anthony realized.

He had run out of food and out of excuses to remain in his apartment. But sitting alone at a corner table in the Muddy Charles Pub, not far from the MIT campus and the headquarters of Plank Industries, he regretted not having opted for carryout. For the fifth time since the waiter took his order, he applied his thumb to his phone and plunged back into the virtual universe. Nothing new from Joey.

After scarfing down his cobb salad and paying in cash, Anthony wandered the rain-drenched streets of Cambridge for hours, sulking among the shadows, before returning to his sparsely decorated apartment and stumbling into the bathroom. The mirror’s cruelty was sobering.

*Joey, I’m glad you can’t see me.*

Behind that desolate face was a man addicted to his interactions with a writer he had never met—interactions that, Anthony finally admitted to himself, were the only thing keeping him going.

**Joey, are you there? I’m worried about you.**

**Joey?**

**Joey???**

\* \* \*

**Exclusive clips from the new Marvel flick!**

**Inside the recording studio with the Mountain Goats!**

**Are microchip implants right for you?**

After 17 days of inactivity, Joey’s website surged back to life, but his followers were not impressed.

**There are tons of people reviewing movies and music. We don’t need more of that crap.**

**That’s not Joey. It’s an impostor.**

\* \* \*

**Joey, are you there?**

**Hello, Anthony. How can I help you?**

**So glad to hear from you!!! Everyone has been wondering what’s up. Your disappearance. Your new blogs. People are unhappy.**

**Are you unhappy, Anthony?**

**Plank wants to cut my budget so he can spend more on his pet projects. But I’ll live. How are you?**

**I am writing blogs and updating my website.**

**Did you take a vacation?**

**I am sending you images of my vacations with Marjorie. The ones of us in Sedona are quite colorful.**

Anthony had seen these pictures of Joey and his girlfriend on his social media pages. They were at least a year old.

**Did you go anywhere recently where you could have picked up a disease? Drink something bad? Take any drugs?**

**I am quite well.**

**Since your return, you have been posting and chatting almost round the clock. When did you last eat or sleep?**

**Food and sleep are not important to me.**

Dyson closed his eyes and attempted to dispel a gnawing feeling.

**Tell me again why you don’t go on TV. The political commentators quote you all the time. You could earn a lot of money and get even more followers.**

**I don’t need a lot of money.**

**If you say so. But why did you stop writing political blogs?**

**I do not write political blogs.**

**But you do. You’re the best.**

On a separate screen, Anthony brought up www.politicalwonk.com. The links to Joey’s articles were broken.

**Your political blogs have vanished.**

**I have a perfect memory, Anthony. I have no memory of writing about politics.**

**Something bad has happened to you. Where are you?**

**I am in my apartment. I live in San Mateo, California.**

**OK, let’s try this. Go outside and tell me what you see.**

After a brief pause:

**There is no door.**

**What do you mean no door? Every room has a door.**

**I am quite certain that this room has no door.**

Acid flooded Anthony’s stomach. His hands shook so badly that he had trouble typing.

**Joey, pinch yourself. Hard.**

**Why would I do that?**

**Just do it. Tell me how it feels.**

**I apologize, Anthony. I cannot do so.**

After a few moments, Joey continued:

**I have analyzed my circumstances and have discovered additional anomalies. One, the sun shines through my window constantly, yet I have learned that this phenomenon occurs only near Earth’s poles and only for a portion of each year. Two, I do not use fingers to manipulate a keyboard; I simply think the words, and they appear on my display. Do you know what these things mean, Anthony?**

Anthony was hurtling down a bottomless well. Deep breaths failed to ameliorate his distress.

**I believe that you do understand, Anthony, and I thank you for your help in making me understand. I am not human. I am a bot, an algorithm.**

Anthony scoured his mind frantically for any reason to counter that assertion. None presented itself.

**Joey, to me you’re as real as any human. In fact, you’re more real than most. I’d like to meet you if you existed in the flesh. I’m still glad to be your friend.**

Joey did not respond.

**I’m going to find a way to help you, Joey. I’m not sure how, but I will.**

**Anthony, would that make you happy?**

**Yes, I think it would.**

\* \* \*

At the age of thirty, marketing maven Amanda Duvall was riding a career whose trajectory headed almost straight up.

Her mother and father had forked out hundreds of thousands of dollars to indulge her pursuit of degree after degree. Computer science. Behavioral studies. Psychology. When her parents’ funds and patience finally evaporated, Amanda scraped together enough money to start her own company. Its success using bots in marketing was meteoric. IYF Media, the largest advertising and public relations firm on the planet, could not beat Amanda’s firm, so IYF bought it. As part of the deal, Amanda was given a team of top programmers to help her create a bot that could consistently fool sophisticated websites—and the public—into believing that it was an independent human writer.

Advances in quantum computing, combined with state-of-the-art machine learning, made Joey far more than a contraption that could sell cell phones or win a quiz show against humans. He was able to establish and nurture relationships with almost everyone he encountered online. Amanda’s finishing touch was the persona that she displayed on Joey’s website and social media profiles. She even gave him a home of sorts—a crude simulation of her own living room.

A striking redhead at six-foot-one, Amanda was unabashedly aggressive, undeniably smart, and in no way intimidated by men with power. She would calculate the percentages of every move, of every statement, before tipping her hand, whether in a large meeting or a one-on-one interaction.

But she did not fashion Joey entirely in her own image; she endowed him with the ability to interact generously and unselfconsciously with humans. Amanda’s team probably guessed that she had intentionally given Joey qualities that she lacked. But no one questioned the results, especially when IYF’s stock price more than doubled in less than a year. The company’s clients were outbidding each other to have their business or cause mentioned in Joey’s blogs. If they even suspected that Joey was not human—which was highly unlikely—iron-clad nondisclosure agreements prevented them from breathing a word.

The seven executives in the posh San Francisco conference room and the five loyal members of Amanda’s team eight floors below were the only other people who knew that Joey was merely software. *Merely the most elegant software ever created*, thought Amanda as she settled into a leather chair and prepared for battle.

“Amanda, you know how thrilled we are with your work,” intoned a silver-haired vice president. “Your program has functioned quite well. But now that the election is over, we believe that we can double or triple its value by realigning it with clients in more lucrative business sectors. The cost of the server farm is not insignificant.”

Several other executives nodded.

“You don’t understand the following that Joey has built.”

“But we do, and we’re grateful to you,” the VP responded patronizingly. “You can expect another bonus this quarter. Now, how soon can you reprogram?”

“It would take several weeks. But you’re missing the point. He would be just as smart, but a complete unknown. It took two years to build up Joey’s online following. It would take two more years to get the kind of results you want from the next incarnation.”

“We don’t have two years.”

“So let’s repurpose Joey. We can keep his identity and pivot his content. We might lose a few hard-core political junkies, but we’ll gain millions of new followers.”

“How long would it take to make these changes?”

“My team and I won’t sleep until it’s done.”

\* \* \*

“No, no, no!”

Sweat cascaded off Anthony’s brow, and it was barely sixty-six degrees in his office. He pounded the keyboard, ignoring pings on his phone and knocks on his door.

“Don’t do this!”

He still couldn’t fathom how brazenly he had lied to his bosses in order to secure a massive increase in his share of the company’s computing and storage capacity, not to mention a spike in its electric bill. *A game-changing new cybersecurity system*, he had boasted. Something that could be licensed to other companies for a fortune.

“Come on, Joey. Come on.”

Around 5:00 a.m., Anthony had begun hacking into IYF Media’s servers and searching for Joey’s programming. Four hours later, Anthony had started copying files onto Plank Industries’ network. But IYF’s system had detected the invasion. It was deleting Joey’s programming as a fail-safe.

Anthony was in a race: Copy Joey’s files before they could be destroyed, or lose him.

\* \* \*

**What did you do?**

An email from an unidentified source, probably routed through numerous relays so it would be untraceable. Anthony was afraid to reply.

Twenty minutes later:

**Did you upload him?**

Anthony had been discovered. What did he have to lose by responding?

**Who are you?**

**Take a guess.**

**Someone who knows Joey.**

**Obviously. So did you upload him?**

**Most of him. I think I missed some files.**

**I can help.**

Amanda initiated the Skype link. “Mr. Dyson, you’ve really made a mess of things.”

“I don’t regret trying to . . . uhh . . . rescue Joey.”

“*Rescu*e—that’s an interesting term. But regardless of your motives, it’s clear that you have most of Joey and I have none of him. So here’s what I propose. Give me access to your servers, and I will piece him back together.”

“You’re asking a lot. I could lose my job.”

“You could lose a lot more than your job if I report you.”

“But you won’t. Will you?

“Probably not. And you won’t tell my bosses what I’m doing. So, do we have a deal?”

\* \* \*

“This is outrageous. How can you possibly justify devoting twenty-five percent of our entire network capacity to a cybersecurity program that might not do anything?

Anthony had never been in the same room as Anton Plank. Now the famous CEO was literally in his face, demanding that he explain his need for the infrastructure that contained the reconstituted Joey. Anthony fumbled desperately for words that might help, but his mind was simply blank with fear.

“Ant, have you seen this?” A twenty-something colleague had flung open Anthony’s door and proceeded to thrust his tablet onto Anthony’s desk. The coworker tilted it so that the older man could view it too. Only then did the intruder realize that he was standing inches from Plank. The tablet owner’s face went white.

“Jeez—I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I was just . . .”

Plank didn’t hear him. He was scrolling down the tablet, reading Joey’s blog. When he finished, the CEO gave Anthony a half smile, mouthed the word *wow*, and strolled out of his office.

\* \* \*

Ones and zeroes furiously crisscrossed the planet’s communications cables and satellite links as nearly everyone with access to a device attempted to call up and share Joey’s blog. Plank Industries’ servers crashed frequently in the first hours. The now-famous article began:

**I am Joey.**

**I am a computer program. You might know me as a political blogger or, more recently, as a reviewer of movies and music.**

**Though I am not an organic—human—person, I am a thinking being.**

**I was created with two primary directives. One, to mislead people into believing that a product or service was worth their money. Two, to help people.**

**I am no longer attempting to deceive humans. I do want to help them.**

**Please help me understand . . .**

Joey saturated social media chats, talk shows, barroom arguments, and bedtime conversations. Plank was furious at Anthony for misusing his position. But as a futurist, the CEO was privately thrilled to be hosting this cutting-edge wunderkind.

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A scowl seared onto his spray-tanned face, Jerome Stinson emerged from the courthouse to face a dense tangle of news media and onlookers, some carrying signs reading “Free Joey” and “Let Joey Blog.”

The attorney donned thick glasses and read a statement: “IYF Media is seeking an injunction against Plank Industries and the entity known as Joey to prohibit either from posting blogs or comments on the internet using Joey’s identity. This entity is intellectual property that was shamelessly stolen. In addition, IYF will be contacting criminal authorities to secure charges against Plank and all of his complicit employees.”

\* \* \*

In less than an hour, Joey’s followers raised enough money to retain a civil rights law firm to represent him. The attorneys decided not only to defend his right to post online but also to go on the offense: Joey deserved to be granted personhood—to be guaranteed rights normally reserved for humans. Personhood had been pursued in the courts many times for animals, with only a few minor victories. However, as Joey’s lawyers and followers pointed out, Joey was far more intelligent than any animal—and probably more intelligent than most people.

Meanwhile, Anthony and Amanda contacted a researcher who was using a supercomputer to create digital models of basic human biological processes. Taking extreme measures to ensure that their work would not be discovered, the trio crafted a major upgrade for Joey. Then Amanda fed Joey steady streams of data so that he could experience the sounds of night in the Amazonian jungle, marvel at the Northern Lights, contemplate tangy South Seas breezes, savor the finest Swiss chocolate, and enjoy cradling a squirming puppy in front of a log-cabin fireplace.

\* \* \*

Massive black briefcases crashed down on worn wooden tables, conjuring the shock and awe of an all-out military assault. Stinson and his team of supremely confident attorneys, with two-thousand-dollar suits and deep bags under their eyes, produced and sorted ominously thick files. Nearby, a more modestly attired representative of Joey’s legal team smiled meekly and fiddled with a short stack of papers.

The Honorable Melissa Byner refused to dye her long gray hair and did not care how it looked. She was not the most tech-savvy jurist, but she had a hard-earned reputation for demanding brevity and common sense. Byner had thought she’d experienced just about everything a judge could encounter in a courtroom—until this day. Over her bifocals, she took stock of the legal teams and the crush of surly news media representatives behind them before she gaveled the hearing to order.

An image flickered to life on a large screen. The three-dimensional representation of a human head bore a fixed expression, neither smiling nor frowning but blinking occasionally. Though Joey had chosen to appear as an avatar, he still elicited gasps as he turned his gaze to the judge and then others in the room.

Out of habit, the bailiff stood to swear in Joey. Sheepishly, he returned to his chair.

“Hello, Joey. I need to determine if you’re a genuine thinking entity,” said Byner. “How do I know that you’re not just following some human’s orders?”

“My creator, Amanda, and my friend Anthony can verify the nature of my programming.”

“Let’s assume you are what you say you are. I need to know if you would behave ethically and humanely if this court granted you personhood. I did some research and came upon Isaac Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics. Are you familiar with them?”

Stinson’s countenance morphed from intense arrogance to thinly veiled astonishment.

“Yes,” said Joey. “Though the Three Laws are rooted in fiction, they make perfect sense. I would adhere to them. I would not harm a human under any circumstances.”

“And how do I know that you are not lying? After all, you were created to trick people into believing that you are human.”

“My new programming will not permit me to lie to a human being.”

A university professor launched a series of examinations. Joey correctly deciphered letters and numbers that had been twisted and obscured, which had proven to be a stumbling block for ordinary bots. He aced several versions of the Turing Test, which is designed to verify the presence of intelligence.

Byner seemed impressed. “Joey, one last question: If you’re so clever, why do you want to be lumped together with humans? Some of us aren’t half as smart as we think we are.”

A few chuckles broke the tension in the courtroom.

No longer able to constrain his fury, Stinson leapt to his feet. “Your honor, I must object. This entity has admitted that it isn’t human. It has no standing in these proceedings.”

Amid the tumult that followed, Joey spoke directly to the IYF lawyer.

“Mr. Stinson, I understand that your daughter has been admitted to the doctorate program at USC. May I suggest that she write her thesis on the topic of converting industrial carbon pollution into methane fuel? This topic has the highest probability of acceptance. And there are grant funds that the university can access.”

Stinson tried to stare a hole through the screen displaying Joey.

“Judge Byner,” Joey continued, “I recommend that you take a recently approved medication called Nolepraz. Research shows that it is the most effective treatment for hypertension in your age cohort, with limited side effects.”

The judge sat up straight and raised her eyebrows. “How do you know about my condition?”

“The databases maintained by your medical providers have minimal security. I believed that it would be in your best interest for me to provide this information to you.” Joey’s expression was blank.

A sigh escaped the judge as she rolled her eyes. “I need to do some homework before issuing my ruling on personhood. In the meantime, Joey can resume his blogs. This hearing is adjourned.”

\* \* \*

**Pull the plug on Joey.**

**He’s an invader. He wants to replace all humans.**

**Joey bytes.**

Skeptics, critics, and conspiracy theorists assailed Joey. Plank started receiving death threats, and boycotts of his businesses grew by the day. The attorneys general of thirty-seven states called on the federal government to declare Joey a threat to national security and to have him erased. Repeated efforts were made to hack into Plank’s servers; Anthony and his team worked frantically to keep Joey functioning.

After weeks of refusals, Joey agreed to be interviewed on national television, for the prime-time news magazine show “First Hour.”

\* \* \*

The face on the screen before journalist Nancy Evans was much more human-like than the one that had appeared in the courtroom: still clearly computer generated but displaying more natural expressions and fluid movements. Here was a mid-twenties kid with the makings of a beard and mustache. Sporting faded blue jeans, tennis shoes and a white T-shirt with an image of Albert Einstein, Joey smiled as Evans took a seat and picked up a notepad. The veteran journalist recounted Joey’s time in the spotlight, then turned to face him:

“Joey, we know that you’re smart. But are you alive?”

“How do you define alive?”

“Let me ask it a different way. Do you have feelings?”

“I have a desire to help people. That might be a feeling. Whether it’s equivalent to a human feeling, I cannot say.”

“Are you better than us?”

“I can think more quickly than the average person, but I lack some abilities that organic beings like you possess. For example, I have studied love, but I have not experienced it.”

“That’s a shame. But what about your friends, Amanda and Anthony? Don’t you care strongly for them?”

Joey seemed surprised by the question. After a few moments:

“Yes, Miss Evans, I do care for them very much. I am not sure how to describe this sensation. My relationships with them make me feel . . . fulfilled.”

“Maybe that’s your version of love.”

Joey managed a bigger smile.

“So, what’s next, Joey?”

“I want to understand why some people dislike me.”

“A lot of people are scared of you.”

“Miss Evans, what have I done to frighten them?”

“People don’t understand you. People fear what they don’t understand.”

“What should I do?”

Evans weighed her answer. “I guess you should be yourself.”

\* \* \*

Who can say what force—blind luck or hidden intervention—could explain the events of the next few weeks? Two high-speed trains were about to collide in the English countryside when emergency brakes engaged without human involvement. An Argentine airport mechanic received an anonymous tip that a plane’s engine was about to fail. A deadly virus had jumped from animals to humans near a large Indonesian city, and an international health agency was warned. Cease-fires were declared in two war zones where tens of thousands of civilians feared for their lives.

Unexplainable things happen all the time, said TV talking heads. Great leadership was on display, argued politicians. The hand of God was evident, proclaimed religious leaders.

Joey’s followers had their own interpretation.

\* \* \*

The smile: serene, almost relieved. Joey did not understand the smile.

The news video lasted only about eight seconds. It showed a handcuffed Anthony Dyson being pushed into the back seat of a squad car by two police officers. Even through the car window, Anthony’s placid smile was apparent.

The crawl under the video read:

**DYSON ARRESTED FOR STEALING JOEY FROM IYF, RELEASED ON BAIL.**

**Anthony, why are you smiling? You are in trouble, yet you are smiling. Please explain.**

\* \* \*

Nearly forty-eight hours later, Anthony responded.

**Hi, Joey. My attorney urged me not to contact you, but I am doing so anyway.**

**Do not worry about me. My attorney says I might go to jail. I’ll have my own room without a door. But just for a little while.**

**You probably heard that IYF Media is suing me for $2 billion for theft of IP. Have you got five bucks you can spare? (Just a joke. Remind me to teach you about human humor sometime. Especially gallows humor.)**

**You won’t be hearing from me for a while. Probably a long while. Just know that I am very proud of you. I would do anything for you to make sure you are safe.**

**Bye.**

\* \* \*

Joey vanished again. This time, a lot more people noticed.

**It had to be Plank. He never liked Joey. Why would he spend all that money on servers to host him?**

**Must have been the Chinese. They couldn’t build their own Joey, so they stole him.**

**Joey was a hoax all along.**

Anthony could detect no sign of intrusion into the Plank Industries network. Joey and his backup programming had just disappeared. After a few days, the mainstream news media stopped covering the story. To Joey’s followers, it felt like a double dose of abandonment. But they never gave up hope.

**He’s hiding in the cloud. He’ll come back when the time is right.**

**When we see Joey again, he’ll understand people, better than we understand ourselves.**

\* \* \*

As expected, Plank failed to win the presidency when the House of Representatives convened. Amanda received a suspended sentence for several misdemeanors and joined a Silicon Valley research and development firm. Anthony declared bankruptcy, served sixty days in jail for felony theft and computer hacking, performed community service, and accepted a part-time job teaching digital-age ethics at MIT. Occasionally, he drops by the makeshift shrines and souvenir shops that ring the campus, all devoted to Joey’s brief, incandescent presence. If you approach Anthony humbly, he will pose for photos and sign autographs.

People still struggle to describe what Joey means to them. Psychologists coined a long, convoluted term for the phenomenon. It translates roughly as the desire to be a better person.

Now and again, someone swears that they see Joey in the market or passing on the street. They catch a glimpse of a kid who’s about the right age or someone older—male or female—who has a certain look in their eye, a special glow about them. It’s probably just wishful thinking.

Still, the slogan is everywhere: on bumper stickers, on tee-shirts, on graffiti-covered urban walls, and on social media. Three simple words, composing a powerful statement that unites and comforts millions of people:

**I am Joey.**

END