



# Joey Schaff (aka Genes & Seafood)

## i

I met Joey Schaffalinski at an alcohol treatment centre in Fresno, though that's not important. Not yet, anyway. He had one of those put-upon faces. Like life had beaten him with a sack of hammers for his first few years and when you got to know him, you understood why. You'd have the same face if you were playing his hand.

In any other time, in any other place Joey would have been one of those "*one in a million*" babies that Fox News like to close on after injecting Mid-America with its nightly dose of fear, if it wasn't for the fact that there was another... right beside him in fact. Rather than see the odds of two children born at the same time both with Adenosine Deaminase deficiency SCID, as a one in a million X a million, the news outlets ignored it.

At that time in the nineteen-forties and in that particularly impoverished part of Tampa, FL, there wasn't much to be known about their shared (and *very* rare) genetic disorder<sup>1</sup> and even less that they could medically do for them. The second kid was buried in the hospital cemetery unnamed but for the purposes of recounting we'll call him Chuck. Chuck's parents came from money. Stuck in Tampa on business and in the severely neglected St. Sebastian Hospital through little else than bad luck. But even their money couldn't fend off the inevitability that comes from having zero immune system. Chuck died after thirty-one hours. His father, taking baby Chuck (deceased) from his grieving mother's arms, handed him to the nurse.

'Do something with that.'

He wasted no time in shepherding her away. Back to Kentucky, or Georgia, or wherever the hell those Stetson wearing rich folk came from in the first half of the twentieth century.

Mr. & Mrs. Schaff waited for the worst. They'd had three kids by this point, so Lorna was pretty much back on her feet by the time Kentucky Chuck went in the soil. Quiet folk, they waited for their first boy to follow suit but he didn't. If anything he got stronger. The doctors ran their tests, scratched their heads, then ran their tests on Ma and Pa. Joey's folk didn't have much in the way of scratch. To them, St. Seb's was bordering on fancy and the more the tests racked up, the more Henrik worried *How the hell am I going to pay for all this?* On the third day it wasn't just his question that was answered.

'Mr. Schafeller...'

'Schaffalinski.'

'Right,' the man said, colouring up with embarrassment 'I'm George Monroe. I'm a Professor with the University of Tampa. If I may, I'd very much like to discuss a matter with you.'

And he did. Monroe had cut his teeth at St. Seb when it was a little more affluent, a little cleaner and as such had something of a fondness for the bunker like dispenser of health care. Twice a week he'd do what he could and lend a few hours, free of charge, in order to alleviate the white immigrant guilt that seems to come with the first generation to do better than their folks. With Joey, (at that point still just Baby Schaffalinski) he'd seen something that had sparked his attention and certainly enough interest in the kid to volunteer paying the full Schaff bill with only one string –access.

'I'm going to be straight with you Mr. Schaff...'

'Henrik.'

'Henrik. Your son's condition is *extremely* rare though from what I've seen I'm not entirely convinced it is Adenosine Deaminase deficiency.'

'If it's not that then what?'

'That's what I'm very interested in; finding out.'

Over the following week Monroe ran a barrage of tests on Joey. He told me this while swigging on a cup of wine he'd made in his toilet. I got a real sense of pride from him when he told me how he stumped medicine and all of her brightest children.

In the end, Monroe was scratching his head alongside the rest of them as all the genetic markers for SCID had, for lack of a better term, eroded. Baby Joseph was healthy as a horse and ready to go home with his mother and father.

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<sup>1</sup> Think Bubble Boy.

## ii

'You're so full of shit.' I said, calling him on a crock that he'd taken just a little too far.

'Do I look full of shit?'

'Piss to be more precise.' His liver was in decline and as such had gifted him a golden yellow glow that made him look like he was made out of hot cock water. 'You don't just outgrow a genetic disorder.'

'Then you explain it.'

'I have. You're full of shit. Give me some of that.'

Joey handed me the wine<sup>2</sup> which was cunningly disguised as a bottle of toilet cleaner. I took a swig.

I'd met a lot of bums in my day. They all had a tall tail or two and these usually ended with them needing your financial help to get a bus, or a train, or some sort of pie-in-the-sky business idea off the ground. Normally their red, veiny, noses are met with a side-step and a wide berth but we were in a gated treatment facility. There was no way out without an orderly, no financial gain to his outrageous brag. This was just for fun. An entertaining yarn to put the day in and help us forget how fucking awful this piss churd we were drinking was.

'So that's not the end of it, then?' my disbelief with its high-beams on.

'Pour another cup and shut the hell up, boy.' the now old man said.

I did and he continued.

By the time Joey was seven he had just about every ailment, rash, infection there was going. His parents put it down to his *weakened immune system*, having opted to tell themselves the hospital had *botched something*, to which Mrs. S would say (without fail) "We should have sued that stinking hospital when we had the chance." Henrik would nod, Joey would get better and the world would right itself once more.

Then one day Stephen Leigh joined Joey's class. Stephen was born without any eyes and though the school board had expressed a desire to put Stephen in one of those *special places for kids like him*, Stephen's father (and Mayor) stomped his feet and stated

'No son of mine is going to be sent to no school for dummies. The boy's smart, he'll learn just a quick as the rest of them.'

Since Stephen couldn't see it was agreed between Mayor, teacher and Principle that he should at least be able to hear the best; so Stephen was placed at the front of the classroom alongside Joey.

You'll no doubt be as sceptical as I was when Schaff told me this story but please, keep your cries of *bullshit* until the end. Over the course of the lesson Joey had trouble focusing. First on the board, then on the teacher's face and before long pretty much everything until his world eventually went black. He heard alright though, and the screeches of Mrs. Collins rang in his ears.

'Oh my GAWD! Joseph!! What in the world happened?!'

Rushing to his side, Collins went to one knee and reached for Joey's face. His eyes were gone. Missing. No blood, no tissue, no screaming from the kid. They simply weren't there. She'd feel around the cavernous, black holes in the middle of his head before rushing from the classroom, vomiting and finally calling an ambulance.

The medics strapped him into a stretcher, raced him to the back of their bus and drove off at speed.

'But my vision cleared up just before we got to the front doors.' he said with a grin.

Eyes don't just disappear. I mean they *can* be removed but they certainly can't just be put back. St. Sebastian's medical staff would run only a handful of routine examinations before coming to the conclusion that it was a mistake brought on by *teacher's hysteria*. Joey returned to school the following day, but not to Mrs. Collins' class.

## iii

'That's a good one, Joey. You know, I'm starting to think your problems are a little more psychological than physiological. Certain not as liquid based as some of us in here.'

He snarled my way, lit a cigarette and blew a smoke ring in my face. 'You don't believe me.'

'It's pretty tough to believe. That your eyes just disappeared and then what? Grew back?'

'I shouldn't expect you to understand,' he spat 'Monroe barely came close to comprehending and he was a lot more astute a fellow than you. You tall streak of shit stain.'

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<sup>2</sup> Nicknamed "Prison Wine" after the most common place that toilet wine is brewed.

'You're a flattering cunt, aren't you? Well, go on then. Educate me. How exactly are you anything more than a flabby titted old drunk with too much rot on the brain to make anything more than a gram of sense?'

I liked getting under his skin. I knew he could take it. He liked it. The crass verbal battery that comes from male companionship. According to Joey, it happened two more times to him before he figured out what it was that was causing it.

The first occasion was when he was fifteen and snuck into a movie theatre to see *Lolita*. He found himself sitting alongside any Albino man and upon exiting the afternoon screening, in the heart of Florida, without knowledge of albinism, found himself hospitalised with severe burns over sixty percent of his body only for them to clear by nightfall, leaving him with a tan that George Hamilton would be envious of.

The second occasion...

'The second occasion I was playing football. Real football, not that sissy shit you people called football.'

'That's funny because we call soccer –football and call your football –rugby for little girls and retarded children.'

'You want to hear the story or not?'

'You got any more of that wine?'

He handed me the toilet cleaner. I poured two glasses.

'Where the hell was I?'

'You were just about the tell me about the operation to become a man.'

'Fuck you, Douggie.'

'Not even with a rubber.'

'Yeah, the second occasion... I was playing football. It was in High School. I ran fifty, maybe sixty yards to complete a pass on a third-down and then suddenly BANG!' Joey slammed his hand down on the corner of a table for effect. 'Lights out.'

'The Quarterback wasn't blind, was he?'

'Funny. They rushed me to hospital. I'd had a heart attack. The medics worked on me for twelve minutes in the bus before getting a rhythm. I was taken for scans and such. The first showed some kind of abnormality in one of those chambers. I don't know which one. Anyway, they ran a few more tests, couldn't find anything and when they scanned me again the hole in my heart was gone.'

A year later this kid... Troy something... not important, anyway he dropped dead on the field. Hole in his heart. Joey had played in the same team as him for a couple of weeks.

I'd ask him; *what the fuck is wrong with you?* He'd spit some insult, I'd fire one back... it's pretty much how our relationship worked then finally he'd tell me what the score was. From what he'd been able to work out there had been one case like it in the history of recorded medicine. One case in one-hundred and seven billion, six-hundred and two million, seven-hundred and seven thousand, seven-hundred and ninety-one<sup>3</sup>. A thirty-three year-old woman presented at a hospital in Uzbekistan with an enlarged prostate (yeah, you read that right). Tests followed, heads were scratched and finally the woman was discharged after symptoms subsided and medical professionals looked around to see who they could tag for the ultimate game of 'Pin the Blame on the Intern'.

'Genetik Mimikriya.' Joey sighed, I could tell over the years of telling his yarns he had gotten the pronunciation bang on.

'Genetic what-now?'

'Mimikriya... mimicry. My body, it seems to mimic diseases. I don't know exactly how to explain it.'

'So, what? You're telling me that you *catch* diseases. Genetic diseases.'

'Genetic, psychological, physiological, biological, neuro...'

'I got it.'

'For two years I was a complete schizo because this waitress I was banging had... anyway *she* had medication to keep her evened out. I had no fucking idea but believe me, that bitch was crazy.'

'So you're *not* an alcoholic?'

'Oh no, I'm an alco. It's one of the few things that's actually *really* mine. That and a very mild allergy to seafood.'

'You know I really want to tell you how full of shit you are but at the same time, I have to say, I *really* want this to be true.'

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<sup>3</sup> If we take an approximation of two people beginning fifty thousand years ago (sorry Creationists).

I got the sense he knew what I meant. His condition presented an entire alternate universe based solely on *what if...*

'Thanks, Doug and FYI you should probably see someone about the crabs.' he threw a scratch downstairs for good measure. I laughed and then wondered if we got on well because he was good at mimicking aspects of people's personality along with their dairy intolerance.

'You know for the longest time I thought I was fucking cursed. Take this,' he said holding up the nobbled end of his pinkie finger on his right hand 'I lost this when I was diabetic back in nineteen-eighty-nine, or was it ninety-four? I've been diabetic a couple of times. That shit doesn't grow back when you normalise. But it's made me a better person in places.'

'Oh yeah, like how?'

'Well. For the majority of my younger years I was told that homosexuality was a sin, an abomination, a disease. So, naturally, I did my best to avoid anyone that looked a little... fruity...'

'Jesus Christ.'

'It seemed like a logical move. I didn't want to suddenly crave a good fucking, that's not my bag. Then one day one of my pals, a real rock of a man. He used to work the trawlers with me, told me *Joey, I'm gay. I'm moving in with my boyfriend and we wanted you to come over and help us celebrate.* Well, this was a fucking revelation and a half. If what my old man told me was right, if what those angry old Republicans and Christians told me was true, I should have been sucking so much dick I'd have eroded my front teeth. But I wasn't.'

I guessed there was something enlightened in all that.

'It makes me feel bad. There's so many of them living a double life, thinking they're wrong for wanting what they want. But they're not.'

'You ever think of speaking at Pride?'

'You ever think before speaking?'

As the drinks kept flowing the questions kept coming. I had one; I had a real want to know but I was waiting for the right blood alcohol level.

'So what about aids?'

'Had it.'

'Rabies.'

'Had it.'

'Gynecomastia?'

'What's that?'

'We'll put it down under *need it.*'

'OK.'

'Cancer?'

'Stomach, lung, colon AND brain.'

'Wow.'

'Yeah.'

'So is that why you never had any kids?'

'Sure, that and I'd want to be around for them but I'm not entirely sure I wouldn't end up drinking for two.'

'What?'

'You look up the definition of parasite and tell me it doesn't sound like the pitter-patter of tiny feet. I've had brain and bowel parasites and there's no room down there to push out a little Joe-Joe.'

'What about Paedophilia?'

His face grew hard, cold. Setting his cup down, Joey wiped the wine from his chin.

'What about it?'

'You think that's biological, genetic, a disease?'

He watched me dance around the question I wanted to ask and I suddenly felt bad for the guy. He was either beyond delusional and had slipped through the cracks of the Health Care system (read machine) or was on the level and living life from the other side of a shop window. Isolated from humanity in fear of catching a stroke, or tumour the way the rest of us do a head cold.

'You ever wonder *why me?* I mean, it's a pretty shitty stick to be hit with.'

'Having Cerebral Palsy for half an hour makes you pretty thankful that you don't have to deal with it for the rest of your life. You appreciate the sunset more when you've had to do without it.'

He had a way of looking at it that made me sad for the rest of us. The things we take for granted. The roads we fear to travel because it's outside of our comfort zone.

'You realise you don't belong here?' Joey said. 'I know what you have inside you. I can feel it as sure as you can. The only thing more saddening than the man who physically can't stop drinking is the man who emotionally can't. You keep drowning your demons son and they're eventually going to take you down with them.'

'You never answered me about Paedophiles.'

'I'll be honest with you when you're honest with yourself.'

#### iv

The bus picked me up from outside the treatment centre and drove me into town. From there I caught a train back to Los Angeles in time for the renaming ceremony. John Fante was finally being recognised as one of the celebrated adopted sons of Los Angeles.

I wrote to Schaff off and on for two years and change. He'd leave the treatment centre six weeks after me before developing a cyst on his spine that would leave him paralysed from the waist down (albeit for the grand total of six days). Then one day he stopped responding.

It wasn't until I returned home to Belfast, Northern Ireland that I read about a man in his early seventies walking hand-in-hand through Ghost Town with an escaped dementia patient. Upon testing the man, later identified as Joseph Henrik Schaffalinski, was found to be suffering Korsakoff Syndrome<sup>4</sup>.

It took a bit of digging but eventually I got the number for the care facility that was taking care of my old pal, Schaff and gave them a call. I told them he'd be fine if they removed him from the company of others.

'Excuse me, sir?'

'Isolate him. Put him in solitary or something.'

'Solitary? Sir, this isn't a correctional facility...'

'Yeah, but you must have somewhere you put the chronic masturbators and the shitters and the spitters. If you put him there for the night he'll come good. Trust me. I know him, he's like memory foam with a bad attitude.'

I was met with the dial tone and then quickly they learned to avoid my calls. I kept an eye out for stories about *the incredible recovering man* but nothing hit my Google alert. I guess that was all him; that and a mild allergy to seafood.

## Author Biography

Belfast native David Loudon is the author of the roman á clef neo-beat novels *Lost Angeles* and *Bone Idol [bohn ahyd-I]* chronicling the life of his alter-ego Doug Morgan. His major influences in literature have been cited as Charles Bukowski, John Fante, William S. Burroughs and Brendan Behan. Reoccurring themes in his work include alcohol & drug abuse, death, sex and catholicism.

At present Loudon is developing a Noir project for television set in Belfast which he hopes will go into pre-production within the year.

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<sup>4</sup> A chronic memory disorder caused by severe deficiency of thiamine most commonly found in alcoholics.