

**SHOTGUN**

**JOE**

**BOB MANN**

Shotgun Joe  
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*To the memory of Joseph Bernard Robinton,  
my grad-school roommate, who inspired me.*

*Rest in peace, roomie.*

# One

I'm Joe — Shotgun Joe to the media — once the last man standing in a room of bloodied walls and gunsmoke haze, slashed-up, bleeding out, brains on my shirt. I've seen devils cavort, and dead men stand and fight. I've killed monsters.

The powers called me a hero. They lied. The events of July 2005, the Trailer Park Massacre, came about through circumstances I neither engineered nor enjoyed. I want no more of them, or of the fleeting national attention they gave me.

Then why, if I'm not a limelight-starved loser going for a sixteenth minute, am I putting fingers to keyboard to pound this out? Someone I trust suggested it as an investment in my sanity. Catharsis through semiconductor. Maybe it'll work.

I'm five-ten, blond and blue, one-sixty, no distinguishing tattoos, but some distinguishing scars gotten during my single night of notoriety. Two short nicks at the hairline, one above each eye (to those who ask I say, "That's where the doctor removed the horns"). A thin jagged horizontal stripe across my left ear ("Don't ever try to pierce your own ears when you're really drunk"). A little cut over the left collarbone, barely noticeable. A red streak along the sternum that looks like open heart surgery but isn't. A straight red line on the inside of my right forearm that looks like a suicide attempt but isn't.

I'm owned by a large tomcat. We met during a night of self-medicating on my part (did I mention my broken heart?) and near-starvation on his.

Bong in one hand, beer in the other, Frank Zappa's "Wonderful

Wino” wobbling the windows, my thoughts bounced pinball-style between buzz and heart-wrench:

*It don't get much better'n this—If only Linda were here to share it—Dammit, stop thinking about her—What's that squeak?*

The song ended, I took a swig and a toke, and in the silence between tunes, heard the squeak again. It came from outside, and with its acoustic competition silenced, became identifiable: a kitten's cry. I shut off the music, set bong and bottle down, opened the door, and there he was.

Green eyes and pink nose, tiny, skeletal, smutty with filth. Fleas bobbed in his matted fur. I saw ribs. He mewed. I reached. He stepped forward, cautious but desperate, and rubbed his head against my open hand.

“Looks like we've both been dumped, buddy.”

He leaned into my palm and I gave him a thorough petting, making a mental note to lacquer my hands with bug-spray later. I picked him up, turned him around and checked the genitalia, obvious male and helluva set. He ducked his head against me and purred.

I brought him inside and washed him in the sink, which he took with stoic grace. Gray gunk sluiced away to reveal a ginger pelt and angry red wounds. I cleaned the injuries and rinsed them with peroxide, worrying about his chances of survival. He was *so* malnourished, his little body too hot even for a cat.

I gave him water and tuna — he started yowling surprisingly loudly, as soon as he smelled the fish — and spread some newspapers. He ate and drank with great noise and enthusiasm, then daintily did his business on the comics page, right on top of Judge Parker's head. By then I was sitting in the La-Z-Boy, an *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* in hand, the ten o'clock news on the big screen.

He walked over and sat beside the chair and stared up at me. I didn't take the bait. He forced the issue by rearing up on his hind legs and standing there, his front paws tucked under his chin, his back legs folded into a stable base. He used the extra height to peek over the chair's arm.

I said, "Where'd you learn that trick?"

He mouthed a silent meow.

"You want some lap time? Is that it?" I patted my thigh and said, "Come on up."

He sprang off his hind legs and bounded into my lap. He stretched — back arched, ears a-twitter, mouth wide — then sighed and plopped over on his side. Heat poured from him like a hotplate. I scratched his ears and stroked his corduroy ribs.

"You'd have starved in a week," I said, and, thinking of the fever, "You're not out of the woods yet."

A paw reached and touched my wrist.

*So, who do I know who's looking for a kitten?*

A pink nose bumped against my palm.

*Failing that, where's the nearest animal shelter?*

My index finger got a rough-tongued lick.

*It'll have to be a no-kill. Wouldn't make sense to save him from starvation just to pass him off to an executioner.*

A second paw joined the first, and he grabbed my hand in a kitty-hug.

*And I better move fast before he gets attached to me.*

He rubbed his head against my palm. Closed his eyes and purred.

*Aw, who am I trying to kid?*

"Welcome home, little fart," I said, massaging his ears and thinking of the litter boxes, cat food, and veterinarian visits in my future. We sat awhile, new owner and new pet, as the bond deepened.

“You’ll definitely need some scratch posts,” I said. My couch, La-Z-Boy, chairs, and bookcase all stood around with vulnerable surfaces hanging out. Especially the bookcase. Seven shelves high, thirty volumes wide, and filled with hardbacks, it was by far the biggest claw-and-climb temptation of the lot.

“And I suppose you’ll need a name.”

His tail thumped.

“And shots.”

He cocked one eye open and patted my hand.

“And an operation.”

He rubbed his head against my palm.

“But the name’s all we can do tonight.”

I thought a moment.

“How about ‘Wino,’ for the song that was playing?”

He made a long sigh.

“You’re right. Who names their cat ‘Wino?’”

Then the obvious solution occurred: not the song but the musician.

“I like it,” I said. I chucked his chin and looked into his eyes. “From this day forward, you shall be known as Zappa, Zappa.” He made another long sigh, sounding bored. “Glad you approve,” I said.

*Talking to a cat.*

*Not to worry unless he starts talking back.*

Thus, I became a cat person and kitty became Zappa.

I should’ve named him Harbinger.

# About the Author



Bob Mann has worked as a janitor, fry cook, waiter, laborer, forklift driver, printer, roughneck, mud logger, ER lab tech, water quality chemist, environmental chemist, and hazardous materials chemist specializing in reactive hazardous waste. Along the way he participated in community theater, did a little writing, and received a Master of Science in Chemistry. He writes horror, magical realism, and science fiction.

Originally from West Monroe, Louisiana (yes, of *Duck Dynasty* fame), he moved to the Houston area in 1989 and has stayed there since. He and his wife live in a geodesic dome south of town, where they are tolerated by their two cats, neither of whom is named Zappa.

He made his first batch of beer in August 2000, and caught the brewing bug on the spot. In 2014 he started making wine, and in 2016, mead. The real “Brownbagg Brewery” (Bob’s homebrewery, which consists of a kitchen and a back room in the dome) has created 17 beers, two wines, and two meads, with more to come.

And, hopefully, there will be more *Joe* books to come, as well.

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