

## What's Left

I think when we are very young we do not fully grasp who certain people are in our lives. Most of us have our mothers and fathers, siblings, and they become pretty easy to comprehend. They're usually the closest to us, we'll usually see them everyday. Aunts, uncles and cousins, are a bit trickier but they're fun and it's always exciting visiting their homes. So we catch on. Friends are friends, and possibly the easiest of all to understand. We know we like them and want to be around them and when you're so young, that's all that matters. But there are others I think that we don't understand who they are to us until later. Until our young minds begin to comprehend more of what's around us. We will not understand what they mean to us until later.

Michael was not related to me. But I wasn't sure if I knew that or not. I just knew who he was and that he had nowhere else to go. He lived with us, slept on the bed in the garage, had ashy grey hair and skin and called me "pork chop". He would be there when I got home from school and let me and brother watch scary movies with him late at night sometimes. I didn't think Michael was a bad person, not at all. But I knew he did things that were supposedly bad. I only knew when my mom or dad would yell at him in the other room. Usually for smoking or drinking while he was supposed to be watching us. I barely understood what smoking and drinking was at age four so I didn't think he'd done anything wrong. But my brother and I still giggled in the background as my parents reprimanded him. In ways like this Michael felt like a sibling. A cool, kind of strange older sibling who did fun things with us and helped us with stuff. I remember numerous hikes through the woods around our house, where we pretended we were much farther from home than we actually were. I remember fishing for tadpoles in the canal that

ran through our backyard, feeling on top of the world with the fishing poles he'd craft for us out of sticks and fishing line. I remember things getting broken, bikes, pipes and doors, and Michael always knowing just how to fix them. Every single time. It didn't matter what it was. In ways like this he felt like superman.

I never thought my brother looked anything like Michael, but as I grew I discovered he was his father. I guess I could see it sometimes, but only if I thought about it. Something in how they spoke that made them seem, allied. Like they had been through something I never got to see.

Although I now knew who Michael was to me, not family but seemed like family, my mom aided my understanding with stories. It was through these stories that I put the pieces together of what his relationship to our family really meant. And what their relationship was. They married young, my mother being only sixteen. I remember thinking that was weird and too young, even when I was little and thought the fifth graders in my school were already grown up. But she spoke of their times together with a smile and a shaking head; times that I understand much better now that I'm older. Times that seemed wild, dangerous and fun, but also times that I've come to realize made her leave him. On numerous occasions Michael was drunk, getting injured, getting in a fight or getting arrested. Once at Pearl Jam concert a guy in the crowd spilled his beer on my mom. Michael met him with a full, swift punch to the jaw. Another time he walked a good five miles to the liquor store, and in the process he jumped a barbed-wire fence and filled his combat boot to the brim with blood. But there were also times I could see that made her laugh in remembrance. Like times in the backwoods of Pennsylvania, where he dug up old glass bottles for her. She loved collecting bottles. A large collection that still sits in a

break-front in my parents current home. They often got lost in the woods, along with my uncle who only seemed to fuel Michael's need for rowdy behaviour. Thinking about times like this, I can clearly see a spot where my brother would fit in perfectly. Michael often tormented his younger sister too. Once in particular by releasing hundreds of fireflies in her room. I always thought that was creative. He played with knives, fire and harsh words. He was impulsive, adopted and an alcoholic. But I knew from the way my mom talked about him, that he added something to her life. Something that may have turned sour as time went on. But also turned to something memorable and warm. Something familiar that I knew she held close.

My brother does not remind me of his father in the traditional sense. I never thought of my brother as anything like Michael. They didn't look similar, except for similar coloured hair which I gathered from old photos, before his grey fully set in. Michael's voice was coarse and scratchy, worn from years of yelling and cigarettes. I hoped my brother's voice would never become so rough. Although Michael's voice was familiar, not scary or strange, it still always felt sickly. Like his throat should be tired even from short bits of conversation. It was always like that.

Unfortunately one of the clearest memories I have that involves Michael, was the day he died. We were living in Barbados, over 3,000 miles away from him in Florida and hadn't seen him in years. I heard a loud, gut-wrenching screech come from my parents room. I'd never heard anything like it from my mom before. I thought she was hurt and ran to help, but my parents shut their door and didn't open it for hours, and I knew it must have been something else. I sat in the hallway outside their room with my younger sister until they finally opened the door later that night. Hours had passed but my mom could still barely compose herself. She spoke through tears

and breaking words. “Michael died,” she broke as we came to her bedside. And all of sudden I had tears too, something about seeing your mother cry does that. “I know,” I said. “I know, you know,” she said, sobbing even harder and grabbing us in her arms.

I didn't know how I expected my brother to react to the news. We hadn't seen Michael in so long, I had almost forgotten what he looked like. I didn't know if this should make the situation harder or not. If it was sadder or better, that it had been so long. My mom woke him up in the middle of the day, the time he usually slept until. I stood in the doorway as she entered. She sat down on the edge of the bed, still crying, just more quietly. She said a few words, but all I saw from him was what seemed like a nod, and then his head hit the pillow once again. Being about ten years old I figured maybe it just didn't mean that much to him, that he could fall back to sleep. It wasn't until he didn't get out of bed for days that I realized what had really happened for him.

Even now, I never immediately think of Michael as my brother's dad. It's what I say when I explain who I'm talking about, or how I know him. But I think even now I think of Michael as something different, even when I know the truth. The thought of him leads me back to thoughts I had of him when I was very young. This grey man who lived in our house and walked me to school, fixed my bike and eventually, drank himself to death. At least, that's what I assumed. To tell the truth, my mother never told us. I think I asked her I once, but she didn't answer. I wanted to know what happened, but I never wanted to know the about the things that made him do that. That made him like that. They must have been monsters.

For the most part my brother and his father seemed to have gotten along quite well. Fishing, walking through the woods, or playing video games bonded them for as long as I could

remember. And I do want something to remember of him. It almost seems like a short, weird dream when he was with us. That's how I think of it. That's how it feels. Like a dream that wasn't necessarily good or bad, and one you have trouble remembering it unless you try quite hard. So although my brother does not remind of him, I force myself to make the connection. I do not, by any means, want my brother to end up like his father. But I do force myself to see the bits of Michael that are there in him. I force myself to remember them together, how we all were together, just so there's something left.