

Bruised Apples

By Jack Coulehan

A manila folder labeled “Michael” lies in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet, along with “Bathroom Renovations” and “1980 Honda,” remnants of a time when files were objects that occupied space and gradually turned yellow. The hump in the folder consists of a handful of letters; the last one, written on peculiar blue stationery, is dated September 2, 1981. In it my friend Michael O’Leary apologizes for his behavior. He tells me that his mother has had a stroke, and he has come home from California to take care of her. “Right middle cerebral,” he writes. “Massive.” Paralyzed and dumb. His father is paralyzed, too, with grief and dread. “My life is shit,” the nurse—my friend Michael is a registered nurse—complains. He writes with characteristic looping penmanship and wide margins filled with zigzags, stars, and exclamation points. He is overwhelmed by his parents’ needs, his brother’s indifference. “My goddamn headaches are back again. Sunlight drives me crazy. I mope around all day. I can’t get rid of them. Help!” In the last paragraph he comes to the point: “What I need is some Dilaudid. Could you write me a script for Dilaudid?”

This letter is addressed to my office at the University of Pittsburgh, where the moment I read it I exploded. It’s difficult to remember how emotion *feels*, but easy to recall its name and my behavior. Righteous indignation. Swearing. Dashing off an abruptly dismissive note. Tearing it up. Stomping out.

There was another bombshell on the Evening News that same night. Michael O’Leary had drowned in the Youghogheny River. His body was found in the rocky shallows about a half-mile beyond the rapids at Ohiopyle. Police speculated that he must have been swimming in the river when he had a seizure. A terrible accident.

As far as I knew Mike had never learned to swim.

The last time I had seen Mike was early on a muggy summer morning three years earlier. I had driven him to the Greyhound Bus Station in Pittsburgh, after insisting the night before that he leave my house. We didn’t say much. When he climbed onto the San Francisco bus, I stood there blankly, barricaded against compassion, determined he had violated my trust. Good riddance, I told the steering wheel on the way home.

Mike was a high school friend, one of fifteen boys in our tiny class. He was angular, acne-scarred, and—when manic—the funniest person I’ve ever known. He and Bill Barnes and I invented the Supreme Council, which secretly ran the universe, and made ourselves its officers. Had this been the ‘90s instead of the ‘60s, we would have been considered nerds, but at that time there wasn’t any label for us, other than unpopular. After graduation Mike joined

the Marines where he trained to be a medic. They sent him to Vietnam, where he experienced the heart of darkness for two years. Later, he became a nurse.

I'd see Mike occasionally during medical school, but later when my wife and I lived on the Navajo reservation in the early '70s, we were within striking distance of his home base at Merced in California's central valley. He worked in a migrant workers' clinic run by a clutch of hippie doctors who lived in a commune. When we visited Mike, we talked politics, injustice, the Vietnam War, and especially the plight of migrant farm workers. Mike damned the federal government, while ignoring the fact that I was employed by the same warmongers, possibly because he considered caring for Native Americans a worthwhile endeavor, even under questionable auspices. In any case, at Mike's house we were able to let our hair down—listen to music, smoke pot, and argue all night. He called himself our “social director,” clueing us in to folk singers and rock bands he relished. Each time we visited him we came home with stacks of old LPs, like Joy of Cooking and Phil Ochs and the Beatles' White Album. Mike had a huge American flag that he used as a throw on his living room sofa. It gave him a lot of satisfaction to sit on the flag, despite the fact that the Marines had paid for his education. I still have a photograph of our diaper-less 8 month-old son sitting happily on the stars-and-stripes after having peed prodigiously. It made for a hilarious story.

Mike was wild. Girlfriends came and went. He moved to the coast for a while. The next thing we heard he had driven to Nicaragua and was working at a rural clinic there, twelve hours a day, seven days a week. So much work. So little time. And then back to the San Joaquin Valley. After a while we heard about his breakdown, his diagnosis, his stint as an inpatient at the San Diego VA Hospital. I think it was his latest girlfriend who kept us informed. Michael was doing well, she wrote. Better. Always better. She was a lovely woman.

We were living in Pittsburgh when Mike showed up on our porch one day with his duffel bag and asked to stay for a while. After the breakdown, he was stronger, a new man, he explained, and back on his own two feet. I'd never seen him so high and scattered and brittle as he was then, clearly manic. He said he needed just a little help. Could I become his doctor? First, there were his headaches. Like me, Mike had been a migraineur since high school. This was in the days before effective migraine-specific treatment existed, although in his case it probably didn't matter. In fact, he had started to take opioids early and often, although in the Merced days I wasn't aware of it. Somehow he managed to get a steady supply of Dilaudid. Or at least he did until Lithium straightened him out. Now I'm fine, he said. I'm stable. My mood is good. No more dope. It's just that the headaches have come back. I need something. Dilaudid. Just a little.

We took him in. He planned to get a job. He hadn't seen his parents in years and intended to visit them. He had never met his brother's wife or seen his nephew. He would start job-hunting the first thing the next morning. Maybe he did, but by early afternoon Mike arrived at the community clinic where I worked and asked the receptionist for an appointment. You're crazy, I told him. I can't see you. Just pretend you don't know me, he said. I need your help. I can't talk now, I told him. I have to go. Come back at five. I'll give you a ride home. He pestered me for a week about this. In the process he told me his story, the ups and downs, the manic psychosis, the drug rehab. In between the bouts of nagging, Mike was his usual

hilarious self. My wife and I stayed on edge much of the time, but just when we approached the limit Mike did something sensitive or generous, like sending her a stack of red roses. I broke down and wrote him a script for Lithium when he promised me he had made a psych appointment at the Pittsburgh VA. However, when the time came, it slipped his mind, or he wasn't feeling well that morning. Finally, after he stayed in bed for two days with his face in the pillow because of a migraine, I wrote him a script for Dilaudid. Ten tablets. Of course, I wanted to make it official, so I took him to the clinic and examined him and set up a medical record. I think the clinic even tried to bill Medicaid in California. But none of these measures diminished my guilt about being manipulated. After the second Dilaudid prescription, I drew the line.

Following the Dilaudid confrontation, Mike got louder, more raucous. He also became more obsessive about the book he was supposedly writing, an exposé of incompetence in the Veterans Administration. For several days we couldn't tell whether Mike would come down from the spare room and disrupt our evening by chasing the children around until they became cranky; or stay in his room and stare into the distance in front of his typewriter. After a week of this I told him he had to go. He cried and promised and promised and cried, but then gave up and called his girlfriend and made arrangements to return to San Francisco. The next morning I drove him to the bus.

The letter's postmark is dated three days before they found his body. According to the News, Mike had been in the water at least 24 hours. Discovered by picnickers spending a pleasant Sunday afternoon along the river. He must have jumped from the highway bridge, or somehow forced himself to walk into a deep pool of the river, like Virginia Woolf. I guess suicide wasn't mentioned out of respect for his family and to allow his burial in sacred ground. I went to the wake that Monday after work, to the town at the base of Laurel Ridge where Mike and I used to spend our weekends hiking and fooling around. One summer we found a geological map in the public library of all the caves along the ridge and spent weeks spelunking the lot of them. In our Supreme Council meetings we discussed plans for improving the world. The first thing we intended to do was outlaw nuns. The second thing Mike had in mind was to arrest the rich people who lived at the end of his street and give their big white house to his parents.

What I remember about the wake is Michael's despondent father. He was a small man who had always seemed colorless because he was neither a big shot nor an intellectual, but drove a bakery truck. He hovered beside the casket, which was nestled among a dozen flower arrangements, including one with white lilies from California that had in gold letters across it: ALL MY LOVE, BABE. Many of my high school friends were there. We talked on the porch, but none of them invited me to go out later for a drink. After all, it had been more than 20 years.

Instead of driving home, I stayed at the Motel 6 that night. The apple orchard beside the motel may have still belonged to the people who lived in the big house that Mike coveted so much. Inside my room, spores from the air conditioner replaced the sweet smell of rotting apples that pervaded the parking lot. Before going to bed I went out and walked through the

orchard, up one row and down another, again and again, unintentionally mashing some of the fallen, bruised apples. There were so many of them, and it was a moonless night.

Jack Coulehan is a physician and medical educator whose stories and poetry appear frequently in medical journals and literary magazines. He is the author of six collections of poetry, including most recently *The Wound Dresser*, which Robert Pinsky selected as a finalist for the 2016 Dorset Prize (Tupelo Press). In 2012 he received the Nicholas Davies Scholar Award of the American College of Physicians for “outstanding lifetime contributions to humanism in medicine.”

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