

Mike, Mike, Mike, Mike, Mike

It didn't dawn on him as he watched the newscast that the talking head with the plastic hair and bouncy-but-serious delivery was talking about his brother until well after the second commercial (fifteen minutes could save you 15 percent or more, with a talking camel yelling "Mike, Mike, Mike, Mike, Mike—guess what day it is. It's hump day!")

Mike. The man just shown on the newscast was Mike.

Even after it dawned on him, it still didn't make enough sense that he could put the two together: "Mike" and "brutal, ritualistic slaying."

The body the station just shown being carted out of Mike's house covered in a white cloth; that was Mike. Weren't they supposed to use a body bag or something? Weren't the people doing the work supposed to have shirts on that said "MEDICAL EXAMINER" on the back instead of ambulance badges on the sleeves? How could that really be Mike when they had all those details wrong?

Weren't the police supposed to notify Mike's next of kin before they blasted his name all over the TV?

It can't be Mike. They got the wrong name. Or I heard it wrong or something. Or it's some other Mike Samuelson. Surely there are two or three of them around, right?

Steve Samuelson picked up his iPhone from the table beside his easy chair and slid his thumb across the screen to unlock it. Without thought, he tapped the Phone icon, then scrolled down to *Mikey Wikey* on the list. Mike always hated that nickname, but as they grew to be adults, he started taking it as the good-natured jab Steve intended it to be.

Steve tapped Mike's nickname and the phone switched to a message that said, "Mikey Wikey," and underneath said, in smaller type, "calling Mobile..."

Dude, you're dead, he would say when Mike answered the phone. After Mike processed that statement and uttered his usual, "What the hell are you talking about?" Steve would relay the story about the horrific crime the plastic-haired bobblehead on TV was talking about, and Mike would go, "Whoa. Crazy," and they would move on to other subjects, like they always did.

Ring

It would become one node on the rotating wheel of Family Anecdotes the two brothers alone shared. Both parents were dead. Neither one had a wife or children. They were the Samuelson family, and when they had beers together with Mike's friends, this story would hop right onto that story carousel along with the time Mikey got knocked out cold as the two tried to skate on a frozen pond in their parents' back yard and Mikey's melon met the gnarly little tree in the center of the pond unexpectedly. Or the time when they started walking along the railroad tracks behind their pasture, and before they knew it, they were twelve miles from home without a clue how to get back, eight and six years old, panicked beyond belief, both so close to tears they could feel them about to spill out, when Dad came along in his 1976 Pontiac LeMans—the one whose wheels kept inexplicably falling off at the most inopportune times—and intermittently beat both of them all the way home, still managing to scream at the car in front of him, "Asshole! If that light gets any greener, it'll *puke!*"

Ring

Their childhood full of neglect—a welcome change from the active attention of their father—helped draw them closer together, as they both cowered together in the face of their father's overbearing tirades, his red-faced screaming fits, his punches, kicks and stomps when they found themselves playing too loudly during an episode of M*A*S*H. Their dad made pretty good money, they later found out, but the family always lived beyond its means, meaning the boys wore last year's styles—or the year before's. When they were

little, it didn't matter, but as they grew, it isolated them from the other kids. It didn't help that the family was forced to move every three years or so after their father's temper would sour another job for him and he would have to job-hunt again. When they were wearing flare-leg jeans while everyone else received some secret memo about straight legs being the new rage, and when they were still wearing pearl-button cowboy shirts and Converse sneakers while everyone else switched to Ocean Pacific T-shirts and Nike tennis shoes, friends started being hard to come by.

Ring

"Thirty *dollars*?" their mother shrieked when they both tearfully requested a pair of Nikes to stop the constant ribbing they received at school. "There's no way in *hell* I'm paying thirty dollars for shoes! You can wear these eight-dollar Fas-Baks, just as good!" So Steve tried to roll his flare legs into straight legs, but they kept falling out, the only consolation being the flares covering up his eight-dollar Fas-Baks, hiding them from the cruel laughter of all the other kids in the eighth grade. Style seemed to come so easily for everyone else; their hair was always styled, while Steve and Mikey always just got the simplest haircut, their long, painfully straight locks laying down in whatever fashion the wind allowed. Their mother was raised by Depression-era parents, so baths were limited to every other day at the most frequent, and even then, the water better be four inches or less. The sparse baths contributed to their already-greasy hair, and that helped cement their isolation from the other kids. One of Steve's great pleasures as an adult became his daily shower.

Ring

"You have reached Mike Samuelson," the professional-sounding voice on the other end of the phone said. "Or rather, you *haven't* reached Mike. Leave a message and I'll try to reach you back."

Then a robotic-sounding woman came on the line.

"To leave a message, stay on the line. When you are finished, hang up, or press one for more options."

Beep

"Mike," Steve said, and before he even knew it was happening, his voice caught in his throat in a big gulping sound, and he was bawling. It was true. Mike was murdered, and the police had no suspects. How could it be true? Mike was the one who was going to do great things. He was going to change the world. How could he be dead? How could Steve be the one who outlived his brother? Steve, who wasted the last 15 years of his life spewing hate in the name of Jesus, only realizing how horrible a person that made him in the last year or two?

He couldn't be dead. How could Mikey be dead when Steve felt absolutely nothing he assumed normal people should feel when the person closest to them dies? Shouldn't his legs give out? Why wasn't he collapsing into a jumble of tears and sobbing? All he felt was...numb. He wanted to cry more, but even the tears were drying up. What kind of horrible brother was he? In an instant, Steve hated everything about himself for focusing on his own reactions instead of on Mike's death—and for knowing what kind of person that must make him yet being completely unable to do otherwise.

Mike always was the good one; the one who helped others without strings attached, without first requiring their allegiance to a pedantic god who required their love on threat of eternal torture. When Steve helped people, his thinly veiled ulterior motive was always to "win" them for his religion. When Mike helped people, the only motive was to help them. He made a pretty good living at his law practice, but he took so many pro bono cases that he couldn't afford some of the extravagances of other lawyers. Mike wasn't poor by any means, but he drove a Ford F-150, not a Beamer or some other phallic substitute. He wasn't top of his class or anything, but Mike was a damn good lawyer, and a lot of

innocent poor people were walking the streets only because he was good.

Steve had tried to live up to the standard his little brother set, but the bar was too high—even in this situation it was clear Mike would react correctly if the situations were reversed—and he would spend no time wondering why his reaction wasn't normal. The world needed more people like Mikey, but somehow he was now gone and the world was left with Steve, the brother who feared every thought, every emotion, every response was somehow less genuine than it should be. He knew people often relied on him to keep a level head when the world was falling down around them, but right now he could think of nothing he wanted *less* than a level head. And his self-hatred ignited all over again when he caught himself again *thinking* about his reaction instead of the fact that Mikey was *dead*.

The pools of blood shown on the newscast were testaments to the fact that Mike, like everyone else, was mortal. That red liquid, which had faithfully carried oxygen and nutrients from Mike's heart to the rest of his body, was now nothing more than stains on a floor. His brain, which was hard-wired for helping other people at all costs, was now only a hunk of meat, starved to death of oxygen. Mike was gone.

"If you're satisfied with your message, hang up now. If you'd like to change it, press one."

Steve took the phone away from his ear and looked at it. For a minute, nothing made sense. Mikey was gone. He sat the phone down, the robotic lady probably still waiting for him to hang up or press one.

Mike was gone.

Steve exhaled. It felt like the life was leaving his body with each breath. His body sank into the easy chair, feeling shriveled and wasted.

Mike was gone.

Would Steve faint? This was where people in movies fainted, he was sure. Ritualistic. Brutal. The bouncy talking

head used those words to describe Mike's death. It didn't compute. He simply could not make the words "brutal," "ritualistic" and "death" fit together with Mike, who never caused a problem in his life.

"Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward."

The annoying habit his brain had—matching Bible verses to every situation—was still working, he noticed with frustration.

"I'm a fount of useless information," he used to joke when he was dominating a game of Trivial Pursuit or answering every question on *Jeopardy* or *Cash Cab*. His brain seemed to be able to call up random facts at any time, and that included Bible verses. "I can't always tell you the address on the box," he would tell people when they asked about it, "but I can tell you what's in the mail." It was his way of saying he couldn't cite chapter and verse numbers, but his recollection of the text itself was damn near photographic. *A useless talent*, he thought many times since then. Mike could pull the same trick, but with the law and court protocols—his talent was both helpful and marketable. Steve could kick his ass at trivia games, but Mike could keep people off death row. It was no contest who got the better end of *that* stick.

But now, it seemed, that brilliant mind was...gone. Steve wasn't even sure he believed in an afterlife anymore, though he still hoped such an idea could be true, however improbable. Was Mike even now walking through the gates of heaven, hearing the voice of God saying, "well done, thou good and faithful servant?" The idea wasn't as comforting as he would have liked. He often expressed this idea to dozens of grieving families, but now that he was the one needing some sort of reassurance, the concept rang decidedly hollow and un-comforting.

He found that the question of what happened to Mike after his death wasn't nearly as important as the question of Mike dying in the first place. Surely this whole thing was a mistake. Should he go to Mike's house? Would he just be in the way there? Should he go to the hospital? The morgue?

How did one even find out where the morgue *was*? Should he go to the police station? How did other people—*normal* people—always seem to know what to do in situations like this?

His fingers working without full authorization from his consciousness, Steve dialed 911.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" The self-assured but faceless female voice on the other end answered.

"Um," he didn't even remember dialing. What was his emergency? He had an innate sense that he needed help, but what kind of help? What did he need that 911 could help him with?

I'm in shock. That has to be what this is. Is this what that feels like? Like you can't think? You can't breathe? What's my emergency? What's my emergency?

He was drawing a blank. He could imagine NSA-style police computers linking up via satellite, pinpointing his location to send out a cop car to arrest the man who had so frivolously dialed 911 when he had no emergency.

"I just heard on the news that my brother was murdered," his voice spoke into the perilous silence, unbidden, unauthorized. "Don't you guys have to tell me that first before the news does?"

He noticed with what was rapidly approaching a third-person perspective that Self-Assured Dispatcher hesitated. She probably didn't get that kind of question very often.

"Did you say you heard on the news that your brother was murdered?"

"Yes ma'am." He knew one thing for sure, no matter how distraught you are, *always* be polite and respectful to cops. Mike told him that.

"Where did this murder occur?"

"The TV made it look like it was at his house."

"Sir, you should call the police non-emergency number next time. I'll transfer you."

Click.

Next time? How often did she expect his brother to be murdered? He felt like chances were equal that he might either burst into babbling tears or maniacal laughter. The fact that he did neither was disappointingly not comforting. *What the hell am I doing on the phone?*

Steve hung up the phone without waiting. Dropping the phone mindlessly into the front pocket of his jeans, he ran to the garage, got into his car and made the drive over to Mike's house without consciously deciding to do it.

As he approached the usually serene neighborhood, populated with professional types and retirees, the chaos seemed to have infected the neighborhood like a virulent strain of the flu. Police cars seemed to be everywhere, along with—for some strange reason—a fire truck. For a moment, Steve couldn't wrap his head around that. Maybe, he later thought, it was his brain trying to avoid the truth of the situation, but he actually stopped the car, pulled over and tried to figure out under what circumstances a murder scene could possibly call for a fire truck, and what help firefighters could hope to provide in such a situation.

"Sir, you're going to need to move along," a voice shouted outside his window, shaking Steve from the loop of wonder about the presence of the fire truck that was trapping his brain. He shook his head and blinked his eyes, then turned to face the voice.

It was a kid in a blue uniform. When did cops become so *young*? This one had a cloth badge sewn on the shirt of his uniform. When did cops stop using metal badges? Weren't they supposed to use metal to deflect bullets or something?

He shook his head and blinked again. No good. This cop had "Citizen Patrol" sewn into the uniform directly below the badge, directly above a name: "J. PARKS," all embroidered in gold thread that stood out importantly against the deep blue of the uniform.

"Sir," J. Parks said again, tapping on the driver's side window with the butt of a flashlight, which seemed absurdly

out of place in the middle of the day. “I need you to move your car. You’re impeding an official police investigation.”

Steve felt like if he opened his mouth to answer, he might burst out in hysterical laughter—with an equal chance that he might simply fall apart and bawl on J. Parks’ nice, severely pressed blue shirt.

“Sir.”

Steve shook his head and blinked again.

“That’s my brother’s house,” he said finally, rolling down the window just as it looked like J. Parks might be forced to say ‘sir’ again. “You must have the wrong house or something.”

J. Parks made an expression that looked a little like indigestion, then he turned away from the window, clicking the receiver on the CB radio attached to his shoulder.

“Unit C120. I have a subject claiming to be the victim’s brother. Advise.”

There was a pause of silence, then the hiss of a CB mike clicking on.

“Unit C120, wait for 540. He’s en route to your location.”