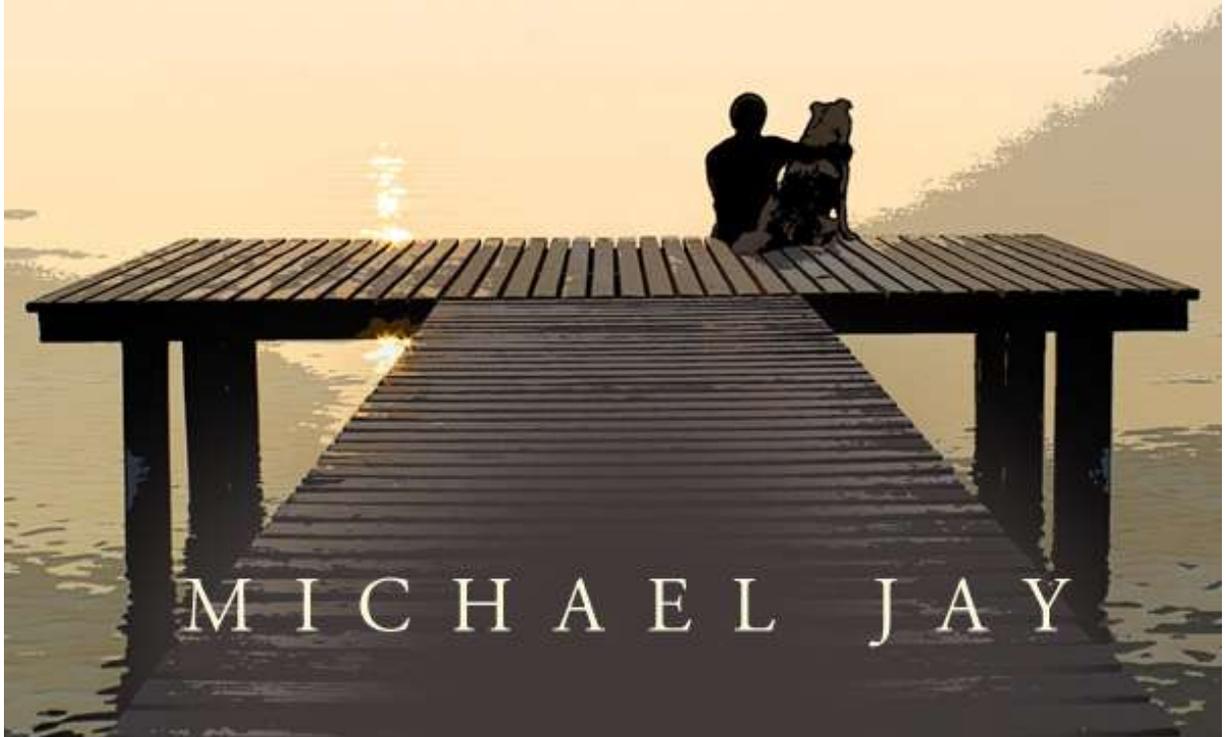

DOG WATER FREE

A Memoir

A coming-of-age story about hope and faith and a young mother's love
that fosters an improbable journey to find emotional truth



M I C H A E L J A Y

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To Tommy

And to his daughter and to his son, Amy and Tom, Jr.

And to everyone who loved him.

DISCLAIMER

DOG WATER FREE is a memoir about a journey to find emotional truth. These are the author's recollections. To protect the privacy of others, some names have been changed. In two minor incidences, events have been condensed. Otherwise, these events are as the author remembers them to have happened. Any resemblance to fictional events or to fictitious persons is entirely coincidental.

*“Automobile in America,
Chromium steel in America,
Wire-spoke wheel in America,
Very big deal in America!”*

- Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

ONE

DUMBFUNDED

Legends are born to every generation. In cities and towns the world over, stories of glory are passed from fathers and mothers to sons and daughters.

I am collecting mine now.

At Augusta, Jack Nicklaus will defend his first Masters when the azaleas bloom in April.

Out in Los Angeles, Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale are still basking in the glory of the Dodger's sweep of the Yankees last fall. They held the two-time defending champs to four runs in four games.

Down in Miami, an up-and-comer by the name of Cassius Clay will be a 7-1 underdog to Sonny Liston at the end of the month, according to my little brother, who somehow knows about such things. The challenger pays no mind. Preening before a bouquet of microphones, he can't resist taunting one of the meanest fighters in the history of the sport. "He's too *ugly* to be champion of the world. The champ should be *pretty*...like me." He is also composing a poem for the occasion. I can't wait for the weigh-in.

Up in Toronto, the Leafs are on the brink of a third consecutive Cup, but they'll have to get by my Wings to do it, so I pray to God they don't.

Back stateside in Midtown over at New York City Center, rehearsals are underway for a second revival of *West Side Story* when John, Paul, George and Ringo step down onto the tarmac at JFK. Frenzy is fueling hysteria as an onslaught of flashbulbs warms an otherwise lackluster February sky. In living rooms across America, the music of Leonard Bernstein is about to earn a breather. Turntables will rest when families gather to watch a band called The Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*, about which I am clueless.

Except for knowing that the girls in our neighborhood are all abuzz , I just learned that our dad is going to join us on the couch on Sunday for some TV viewing that doesn't involve a prizefight or a bowling tournament or *The Untouchables*. So it must be big.

South of Manhattan at Arlington National, on the outskirts of our nation's capital, the eternal flame is marking a snow-covered grave. It's been almost three months since sixth-graders like me felt eerily responsible for our numbing sadness as we watched a little boy hero salute his father's flag-draped coffin. Hard as I try, it is impossible to imagine how he must have been feeling. God love him.

Meanwhile, in a working class neighborhood in the heart of Detroit's Westside, a young mom is receiving news from her doctor. She has a year to prepare her family for her death. She will be leaving the man she loves and the four children she cherishes behind to fend for themselves. Nearby, neighbors don't know what to say. Heartfelt prayers fill voids of silence. "*God help them,*" they are heard to mutter.

Still on her mission fifteen months later, her focus heightens when her husband drops dead.

Some wonder aloud what many are thinking. "What in the world could this family have done to deserve a fate such as this?"

Everyone wants to know.

* * * *

Outside, the rain pounds.

Inside, candles flicker while mourners pack into pews. Late arrivals hug the walls as a mist of incense shrouds friends and faithful. Schoolchildren join in quiet prayer. "Kyrie, eleison...Christe, eleison."

Lord, have mercy...Christ, have mercy.

Dumbfounded, I'm standing in the vestibule. My name is Mikee and I am one befuddled, sorry mess of an eighth-grader. I'm pretty sure I'm suffering from something called *impostor-syndrome* for spending way too much time in church without actually praying.

It sounded so harmless that I should be appointed "President of the Altar Boys." *Thank you, Sisters.* They did it to honor my mom. And I must admit that it pleased her to no end when they put *me* in charge of a contingent of Mass-servers in our parish.

I am just now realizing I was blindsided.

My duties are endless. Much of it involves handing down edicts from the nuns. Latin must be enunciated. Mumbles don't cut it. Servers have to show up fifteen minutes in advance. Shoes must be wiped of mud before entering the sacristy. And they had better be dress shoes. No sneakers. Priests will verify. And altar boys must at least *look* prayerful, so bed-head is verboten. *Check. Check. Check.* They've also put me in charge of scheduling, which is a mixed blessing since it allows me to slot myself for weddings to earn a little cash on Saturdays, as if weekday and Sunday Mass-serving duties aren't enough. I've also begun serving as many funerals as possible for the chance to enjoy some fine second-hand cigar smoke while riding in the back of cushy Cadillacs with the Monsignor and missing huge chunks of school. Burials at cemeteries like Mt. Olive over on the Eastside can keep me absent from the nuns until well past noon on those days. So that's how bad it's become. I now look forward to funerals, for God's sake, which I have come to view as *mini-vacations*. Lord help me.

Most mornings, I'm in the sacristy at this hour, waiting for an elbow from the priest to let me know that it's time to look respectful as I march toward the altar. There will be no such nudge on this day, however. Today, there will be only the sound of a dirge. An organ blast from the balcony above will signal our time to roll.

Paced by pallbearers, we shuffle arm-in-arm up the center aisle, my two brothers, my sister, my mom and me. The sight of our dad's casket before us is giving rise to speculation. Murmurs are blanketing the congregation.

A secret is passing among them.

God help us.

TWO

PEACE AND OUT

I blamed it on one too many furtive glances when time stood still again eight months later. The clock on the wall of our eighth-grade homeroom froze like a rope on a forgotten toboggan after a cold night facedown on a hill. Then, with one last desperate tock, life imitated a cartoon when its hands spun like a pinwheel before falling limp on the six. Fretful classmates notwithstanding, the drone from whirring sprockets had me grinning. I figured it somewhat sublime on this final day of our elementary school careers that our black-rimmed *Seth Thomas* should join the ranks of those with nothing left to give. *Hasta la vista, good Sisters of the Order of St. Dominic.*

Peace and out, Seth.

Placing my faith in the bell, I retreat to another world. Need be, I'll just say "*I'm heading out for a loaf of bread,*" if anyone asks, before I hop on the bus over to Michigan and Trumbull when Mantle and Maris and the Yankees come to town. I'll get up early on that July fifth morning to beat the crowds to watch our homegrown Tommy Tresh play a little pepper with his teammate Mick. Then I'll watch them both shag flies and sling their own brands of frozen ropes to the bag at second from deep in the Tiger outfield. Any big leaguer can chase down a high fly, of course. It's the throw that follows that makes my tail wag. It's all about anticipation, and keeping your head in the game and thoughtful footwork to position for momentum *before* the ball is in your glove. So I'm learning. Ah, summer. Balloons will bob from our backyard clothesline on my upcoming fourteenth birthday. There will be no cake and no ice cream on that mid-July afternoon, I've just decided. With help from my mom, we'll serve up a screwball. My little par-tay will mark a departure. It'll forever be remembered for *Red n' Yellow* side-by-side, just cherry pie and corn on the cob sharing the same paper plate. That should get a rise out of the girls in the neighborhood. God, I can hardly wait. Summer at last. On evenings when I don't

have a game, I'll walk the ball fields across from our house with my little Duchess, stride for stride. We'll check out every backstop to scout the competition and visit with faithful fans. At the age of six months, my Old English sheepdog has become a total babe magnet, by the way. Who knew? When I'm not rolling around on the lawn with my best buddy or firing up our mower, I'll be across the street shagging flies myself—or at the plate taking my swats. Maybe this year I'll learn how to lay off high inside fastballs. I dream. Cue the ringer. Clock dismissed. Summer vacation at last.

Two weeks pass in a blink.

* * * *

Birds were flying low beneath a darkening midday sky when I learned the sorry truth about what it means for a boy to man a shovel. And I thought math was hard.

Even my blisters wept that day.

Had it not been for my mom standing nearby, I would never have managed. Resting her wrists on my shoulders, she looked me in the eye. *“Come on, Mikee. You dig. I'll pray. I'm not going anywhere.”*

She made me do it with those exact words. And in time, her insistence would prove to be a godsend; for had she been any less resolute that day, I would have no doubt remained forever unmindful of a much bigger truth that no one in the world could know. My puppy isn't all I buried on that tear-filled eighth-grade afternoon in June when I said good-bye to my beautiful Duchess.

“Not bad for a first-timer with a shovel,” my mom offered, with a smile just right and a hug for good measure. *“Hold onto your dear mother here, mister.”* Two simple graveside prayers later, she leaned into my shoulder to give my arm a loving squeeze. *“It's ok to be sad, buddy,”* she whispered, just as my tears came flooding.

Intended or not, with that lesson in closure behind me, I could feel my confidence grow. And by the time my blisters callused, I had become all but certain I could handle just about anything life threw at me.

Until tonight.

THREE

FAYED

Desperate, I cling to a memory from back in the day, hoping against hope it might bring me solace, since it never failed to work its magic in the face of bleak circumstance in the past. I'm remembering my little brother as a precocious first-grader. Whenever storm clouds gathered or our mom got riled, Patrick knew just how to break the tension with a whisper of his own. *"I guess this means we're uck-fayed, don't it, Mikee?"* I laugh. Thank God. I'm all better. Sort of.

So why am I thrashing so?

And how did these past months flash by in such a flurry? And what's up with this evil chill that's now slicing my fifteen-year-old body in half? I'm shaking like some lame little imp is dancing a jig atop a grave that's somewhere in my own future. We're talking dire and frantic foreboding here, as I stand on this funeral home landing. *Lord, help me.* My dad is dead. My puppy has been put down and buried. And tonight my mom lies lifeless on a heavy steel gurney in a dark lonesome recess of the basement below. With all that I'm feeling, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if I woke up dead tomorrow too. Might as well join the party. Whatever. I'm ready. I think.

I can't stop obsessing.

You do wake up after you die, don't ya?

Jesus, Mikee.

Settle, already.

* * * *

Comfort finds me by way of another distant memory. I can feel the mellow timbre of his inflection in my bones. Such a soothing Belfast-born lilt it is when my grandfather spins tales that are true. Most often, he speaks of the lineage of bred offspring of famous racehorses and where they fit in the history of the *Sport of Kings*. He talks about thoroughbreds with names like Gallant Fox and Citation, or Seabiscuit, sired by Hard Tack, son of Man o' War, the most famous chestnut of all. And when he is spot-on his game, we hear about *his* own offspring, like his courageous and gutsy Margaret Mary, a chestnut in her own right, otherwise known as my mom Marge.

And so it is. In the spirit of the words of my mom's father who knows a thing or two about lineage, *'tis enough to make me remember how't all began...eight short years before...when bewilderment was my friend.*

FOUR

FATE

An unflappable muse, motherhood becomes her. As mood maven and mentor to her budding brood of four, everyone who knows Marge loves her for her sparkle. A spirited gamer with a secret, she styles through matters mundane with the passion of a virtuoso readying for Carnegie Hall. But for the size of her heart, the Irish in her bones, and the grace of God, she might never have evolved with such consummate charm. Too bad for me. It complements her all-too-disconcerting intuition, which allows her to predict what her favorite second-grader is going to do before I can even think about doing it. More perplexing still is something I learned during a recent moment of confidence. My very own most faithful, happily married mom has a mysterious schoolgirl crush on Mr. Spooky himself.

I don't get it.

Our Magnavox *pings* before casting its warm glow. That's when the creepiest man on television hits his mark. Deadpan cool, Rod Serling becomes one with the camera. Prone to the willies, I shudder to think he might be standing in our living room when he speaks about a dimension...not only of sight and sound...but of mind...beyond that which is known to man...as vast as space and as timeless as infinity...in a middle ground...between light and shadow...science and superstition...somewhere between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge...beyond the boundaries of imagination...in a place called...*wait for it*...

Nannah-Nannah—Nannah-Nannah...

THE TWILIGHT ZONE!

Please give it up already, mister! God, that music creeps me out. As for Marge, she can't get enough of his confident swagger when he weaves issues of human nature into his freakazoid fables, none of which I am old enough to fathom nor quite young enough to ignore. "Come on, Mikee. Sit with me here. Let's watch this." She pats the couch. A master of all manner of maternal prerogative, she loves nothing more than testing my mettle.

"Aw, come on Mom. Must we?" I mean it.

Bone-chilled after a sweaty walk home following Friday night hockey on the pond, I oblige by burrowing my head into a sofa cushion. A throw finds my shoulders.

"Look at you. You're shivering. Here you go, buddy." She swaddles me.

I thank her though it doesn't help.

Except for Jack Paar, which I'm never awake to see, Mister Creepy Spooky there and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* are the only TV shows Marge enjoys. I don't know which is worse. Best I can tell; they both fuel her delight in crafting beguiling challenges, which tickles her fancy big-time. It makes for a baptism of absolute befuddlement for me, her devoted but clueless third-born middle son. *Nannah-Nannah—Nannah-Nannah*. That wacked-out music won't stop playing in my head.

Welcome to the *MikeeZone*.

* * * *

In a neighborhood of a town brimming as much with peril as promise, all I know is how to ride a two-wheeler and when to genuflect during Mass. Oh yeah, I've also

reached the *Age of Reason*. At last. I'm off the bench. At the venerable age of seven, they've put me in the game. Absent is that cloud with no hint of silver lining that had been hovering over my head. Now endowed with *Free Will*, gone is certain destiny that would have me spend eternity in a *NeverLand* called Purgatory, which the nuns promise is not as horrible as the torment of hell, but dreadful nonetheless, "*since it's not quite Heaven, children.*" No wonder we all counted the days until First Holy Communion.

Heading home with a spotless soul after making my First Confession, I can't resist closing my eyes and swinging for the fences.

"*LORDTAKEMENOW,*" I blurt untainted, as I duck into a shrub for mortal cover.

Dumbstruck, I still don't know whether to feel lucky or sad that the hand of God stayed put that day.

So I guess I got that going for me.

Meanwhile, Marge indulges her ever-loving instinct by entangling me in a perfectly exigent web. Believing a well-timed challenge can make a good boy a better man, she concocts a summertime doozy of a notion in honor of my upcoming eighth year.

She calls it *disappearing*.

I call it unbelievable.

Within reason, she tells me, I will never again have to ask her permission to go anywhere or do anything.

Huh?

As long as I promise to obey the law, to steer clear of a nearby public housing project, and to return home by an appointed late afternoon hour, I can *disappear* whenever I darn well please. Imagine. With that, rather than feeling like somebody wants me out of her hair, my buttons are popping for having earned her trust, which I swear never to squander.

Planting my face deep in the screen as I blast through the door, I'm out before she can change her mind. *Free at last*. Inside the garage, I imagine hearing my grandfather's hurried brogue as I push off atop my Schwinn with no fenders. *Moykee. Look at ya. Ya little shite. Ya got yourself a fookin' hall pass, don't ya?* I laugh. I am well into my crooked roll down the driveway when Marge steps onto our front porch to launch her parting salvo. It hovers in the air...like a slow belch from a cold-morning smokestack

downriver. “Hey. Have fun out there, buddy, but do me a favor. Promise me you will never tempt fate, especially on a dare. I’m serious.”

Huh?

There’s not a soul in our neighborhood old enough to ride a bike who doesn’t know about dares. That much I get. It’s the other part of her caution that puts me in a tailspin as I pedal toward the high school on our corner. I’m about to step into *the cove* for an afternoon of three-wall rubber-ball fast-pitch when it hits me. *Who the heck is this guy Fate anyhow and what is his flipping problem anyway?*

I’m serious.

Time tempers my innocence. Within a handful of years, one thing has become clear. In our little corner of America, slim is the difference between survival and disaster. That’s why you do not crawl under a car sitting up on a spindle of a jack to retrieve a thirty-nine cent rubber ball. You do not accept a dare to jump a freight train moving a hair faster than you can run. You do not swim during *polio season*. You do not crouch behind the plate if you are not wearing a cup. And needless to say, you do not ride on a wooden roller coaster called “*The Wild Beast*” after a disturbing mishap had it condemned by city officials, even when invited to do so by your fifth-grade sweetheart’s father at the annual *DPOA Family Day Outing*, hosted by the Detroit Police Officers’ Association over at Edgewater Park.

Perhaps most obvious to an altar boy like me in the 1960s, you never accept a dare to touch a communion wafer with your hands unless you *want* God to throw a lightning bolt down upon you.

“*God made ‘em flunk me,*” shouted one fallen acolyte. Although not quite a bolt of lightning, that boy heard a serious thunderclap when the nuns held him back a grade for munching on hosts while scarfing sips of *Manischewitz* from the cupboard in the sacristy.

That was around the time something happened that affected everyone who knew us. It led to that late morning shuffle up the center aisle behind my dad’s casket. It was a week into my eighth-grade year when I learned the real truth about the perils of tempting fate.

In get-it-done style, I heard my dad give an order. He was talking to someone he called *an associate*, on whom I had never before laid eyes. With unmistakable clarity, he instructed that cologne-laden wise guy to direct a stonecutter to prepare a grave marker before its time.

“Gimme a break. Are you saying he won’t do it because he needs more information? I gave him all I got for now. You just tell that little mook that I need him to get started,” I heard my dad tell him.

Done and done.

Sure enough, in a matter of weeks, that was that.

Now, the convergence of recent events would make you think I had accepted a dare to crowbar the poorbox from the vestibule of our church. God help me. It hasn’t even been a full day since we said our good-byes, my mom and me.

I miss her already.

Ignoring the consequences, I flip off fate when I tell myself my situation cannot get worse.

Aw, Mikee...Mikee....

Big mistake.

I knew it as soon as I said it.

Would I ever fookin’ learn?

How could I have forgotten the anguish on the face of that diminutive stonemason whose reluctant desire to do a favor for a small-fry goombah sent events into a spiral two years before? Flush against the funeral parlor wall, he sat with a cadre of men that I never before had seen. All dressed to the nines, they joined in quiet prayer. Short-brimmed hats in hand, they looked like brothers of Green Bay’s coach Lombardi in their long tweed topcoats. Beads dangled from their chins as they pressed small crucifixes against their lips. Murmuring in unison, their plea sounded like something I learned as a Mass server, but different.

“O come molto triste...

O come molto sbadato...

O come molto stupido...

Antonio...Antonio...Antonio.”

Other than clergy, no one in that dim lit room appeared more comfortable with their surroundings than that well-tailored group of men on the night of my dad's Rosary. Quick to pay homage before the service began, their prayerful, not-quite-Latin chant made it feel like Satan himself might be channeling their words in English, lurking among them, plotting and laughing.

"Oh how very sad....

Oh how very careless....

Oh how very stupid...Tony...Tony...Tony."

Five Hail Marys in, the strangers in overcoats vanished without notice.

All I could do was pray to God that they took the Devil with them.

* * * *

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