

Michael and Me

Michael T and I grew up together in New Mexico. His full name: Michael Aloysius Kelly. I started calling him Michael T in grade school. I don't know where the "T" came from, I just liked the sound of it. Michael didn't mind because it distracted people from the Aloysius. He preferred to keep that under wraps.

'Michael T' stuck in high school. I used it so much everyone started to think it must have been on his birth certificate. I was the only one who called him that anymore. Now he was the "Scrum Doctor", or just "Doc". His presence fixed and healed the scrum, and by extension the whole team. It was a term of respect. He'd earned it.

Back in New Mexico, our sport was wrestling, and football, but mostly wrestling. Michael had wanted to try out for wrestling in middle school. I'd never thought about it before, so I just followed along with him. Even at thirteen, Michael T was already becoming physically taut. His father owned a lumber yard and put him to work in it. No free ride for him. He would be at the yard after school and on weekends, fetching orders for customers, carrying material around, cleaning up, whatever was needed.

I was bigger than Michael, but a bit pudgy, still carrying that baby-fat, and a little more intellectually inclined. I spent my spare time reading, mostly Jack London, Stevenson, Conrad, adventure. School was easy for me. I didn't put in much effort, but did well anyway, especially in math.

So things worked out well between us. I helped Michael with the schoolwork and he helped me on the mat. That is, if you can call consistently abusing me "help". Even though I was bigger, he was quicker and stronger. He had his way with me whenever he wanted. I don't think that I was ever able to beat him at anything on the mat unless he let me. Sure, in practice, he'd let me take him down, when we were doing the endless repetitions of double-leg, single-leg, etc. But, when it came to full-on competition, he didn't know how to lose. Good thing we were in different weight classes.

We spent countless hours running before school; practicing those take-downs, escapes, different rides on the mat; jumping rope, climbing rope; it

went on and on. By the time I got to high school, the pudge was gone.

Michael always stayed better, though. He was seventy-two and one in his high school career. The only loss came at a tournament in Tucson.

It had been a big deal for us. The longest trip we'd ever taken. The bus ride took all day Thursday. The tournament would be Friday and Saturday. Then, back home on Sunday.

At the Thursday team dinner we were brimming with confidence. We were going to tear this tournament up and bring home the hardware.

Come Friday morning, the confidence disappeared quickly. There were teams from all over Arizona and a bunch from California. We were the only one from New Mexico. We didn't know we'd moved up to a new level in the sport. Most of our guys lost in the first round. I managed to win my first match, then lost in the second round. The guy who beat me lost in the next round so I didn't even make it to the consolations. I was out.

By Saturday, Michael T was the only one of us left in the tournament. He had been seeded fifth. The seeders weren't impressed by his undefeated record. They looked at the level of his competition and said fifth. He did all right on Friday, but he wasn't breezing though the matches like we were used to seeing. Normal, for him, was to pin an opponent in the first period, hardly ever did someone get past the second. He had only one fall on Friday.

In the quarter-finals on Saturday morning he faced a wrestler from Phoenix. This was the third seed. He was supposed to beat Michael. Wrong. Michael took the decision, twelve-three, but I could see it wasn't easy for him.

Then in the semi-finals, he had to work like crazy. He managed a six-five win. It took a lot out of him. And, he had hyper-extended his elbow. Even so, he wasn't giving up. Coach taped his elbow and he moved on.

The final was against a guy from California – blond, tan, surfer-looking dude, but solid as a rock. He saw the tape on Michael's elbow and went right to work on that arm. Michael T fought through the pain. In the second period, he was already down twelve-three when the Californian, putting pressure right on that elbow, rolled him off of a switch move. He had Michael on his back, and in just a few seconds, pinned him.

I was used to seeing Michael T coming off the mat with the light shining from his eyes, the glint in his smile and that little “heh-heh-heh” laugh of his as we congratulated him on another win. This was something different, seeing the

blank shock on his face mixed with pain. Something had changed. Somehow, the universe's foundations weren't as solid as I had thought.

The next Saturday, back in Albuquerque, we were going out – party time, drink our troubles away, so to speak. Forget the past.

The first order of business was to get beer, the forbidden fruit. We had this figured out by now. There was a package store with a drive-thru that would sell to us. Michael always drove to the window. Even though he was only seventeen, he had serious stubble and looked older. I always told him it was because he was living too fast. He was going to burn out before he was thirty.

The guy at the liquor store knew us by now and handed over the two six-packs without question. The next stop was for ice. We were in my car and had to switch back to me driving. Michael pulled into a convenience store parking lot and parked over by the ice machine, out of sight-line from the store windows. We got out. Short of cash, it was my job to go in and distract the clerk. Michael T stayed outside to purloin a few bags of ice.

The clerk was suspicious of where we had parked. When I came back out without buying anything, he started to follow me. I sprinted to the car and hopped in. Michael was already inside. He had left it running. Adrenaline kicking in, I slammed on the gas and spun out of the parking lot. I put the little station wagon through its admittedly meager paces for ten blocks or so before I would let myself slow down.

Michael T was laughing so hard he couldn't breathe.

"That guy's fast, but I think you lost him," he gasped.

"He didn't follow us, did he?" I asked, meaning in a car.

"I think he blew out an Adidas in the second block," Michael replied, and started heaving with laughter again.

My heart rate was starting to come back down now.

"C'mon, man. My dad would kill me if I got caught doing something like that!"

"Yeah, and then he'd probably eat you, too!" Michael couldn't stop cracking himself up.

I started to see some of the humor in it as the adrenaline flushed from my system.

"I guess it wasn't the Great Train Robbery, was it?"

Michael pulled two cans from the cooler while I came to that realization. He

gave me one. We took long, first draughts.

“Let’s head up to the Canyon.”

I aimed the little car for the mountains.

The Canyon was up in the foothills of the Sandias. It was a place we could get away from the city, the cops, our parents, their world. It was our place. All the kids from our school would go up there weekend nights. It was a place where we could hang out and do what we wanted, mainly drink and bullshit. But, most importantly, it was our own. And, relatively safe. We didn’t worry about anything while we were up there. It was a good destination, and we could leave the past behind us – the worries, the doubts, the cracks in our reality.