

Michael Quinlan

Three Days of Fall

October 31, 2003

Inferno

I couldn't help but laugh as Benjamin did his best T-Rex, growling and clawing at my leg. It was almost dark, and the kid was ready to trick-or-treat for the first time, his stuffed tail swinging behind him with each dramatic step. Shan had finished making the costume earlier that day, and he hadn't taken it off for anything since. Made of green fabric dotted with black, it was ill-fitting and baggy in most areas but too tight around the ankles. The hood was the only thing that fit about right, with the edges surrounding the boy's face lined with gray, felt triangles for teeth. Shan had never been much of a seamstress, but Benji didn't mind. Neither did I. A few locks of his thick, brown hair curled out under the teeth, and his big green eyes (his mother's eyes) flashed with excitement.

I scooped him up and hugged him for a brief moment, and he squirmed and growled, still a dinosaur.

"You ready to go?" I laughed, trying to hold on.

He wriggled and roared, or rather, tried to roar.

I began to tickle him and his growls quickly turn to laughter. I loved to hear him laugh.

"Are you ready?" I repeated, still tickling.

"YES!" he gasped through a giggle.

"Ok!" I put him down and went over to the closet to grab my coat. Shan rounded the corner from the kitchen carrying Alice. Shan had dressed the infant in a black cat outfit, complete with ears attached to a headband.

"All set?" She beamed at Benji, now scratching at the door with a clawed hand and handed Alice to me.

"Looks like it." I pulled on a jacket and took the baby from Shan. She sat down on the stairs leading to the second floor and pulled Benji into a hug. He didn't squirm this time.

"Do you have a joke?" she asked, arms holding him tightly, and kissed him on the cheek.

He nodded.

"Well? What is it?" She let him go and turned him around to face her. He cleared his throat and stood up straight.

"What do you call a witch who lives by the sea?" he asked, far too smoothly for a five-year-old. We'd practiced earlier that afternoon. Shan smiled and shook her head.

“I don’t know! What do you call a witch who lives by the sea?”

“A sand-witch!” he blurted triumphantly. Shan groaned, then laughed.

“Of course. A *sand-witch*!” She shook her head. “And where did you learn that one?”

“Daddy taught me!” He was pleased with his mother’s response. She rolled her eyes in my direction.

“I’m sure he did,” she sighed and stood, taking Alice. “Daddy always needed help with jokes when he was a kid.”

“Hey,” I cut in, “I suggested that he make a crack about how the Terminator is now an elected public official.” I pretended to pump a shotgun and whipped out my best Austrian accent, “Can you say ‘Hasta la vista, taxes?’”

Shan shook her head and bent to kiss Benji again.

“Alright, baby, have fun!” She grabbed a plastic jack-o-lantern bucket off the dining room table and handed it to him.

“Ok!” he chirped, taking the bucket while turning back into a dinosaur.

I kissed Shan goodbye and told her we’d be back in an hour.

It was brisk and windy outside and I thought about going back to get a coat for Benji, but he was already halfway down the driveway.

“Slow down, kid,” I called out. He stopped at the end of the drive and pretended to chomp down on an imaginary triceratops. A few kids dressed as mutants from *X-Men*, complete with a more-than-adequate Wolverine costume, walked by in the street, and a teen couple from Hogwarts smiled and waved at Benji as they passed. He growled back. Across the street were three very convincing wraiths from *The Lord of the Rings* movies, eerily gliding across the lawn.

We set off down the sidewalk, passing our next-door-neighbors’ house. Earl and Marilyn Stevenson were already in Florida, more than eager to leave the coming Midwest winter behind. Once their grandchildren stopped coming by for candy, they didn’t see much reason to stick around and deal with the lame jokes. In years past, when Shan and I had first moved in, their wraparound porch would be practically overrun with glowing, home-carved pumpkins and fake cobwebs while the two would sit out in old-fashioned rocking chairs, dressed as if straight out of the early 1900s, and pass out candy from a giant antique barrel. As their children and families moved away, however, visits became less and less frequent until they stopped visiting all together, and grandma and grandpa Stevenson discovered how much nicer a tropical climate is once the fall set in.

As we walked on the sidewalk, Benji would sprint ahead for a few steps before stopping to wait for me, and as I would reach him, he’d sprint forward again. The first house we stopped at had Bach’s *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor* (with some additional sound effects) playing through the tinny speakers of a small CD player in the corner, and a giant spider suspended above the front door. Benji approached timidly and stopped at the foot of the stairs leading to the door. He turned around and I waved to him from the sidewalk.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Benjamin.”

He didn’t say anything.

“You scared?” I started to walk up the lawn to him.

“No!”

“Ok.” I stopped walking. “You gonna ring the bell?”

He considered this for a moment.

“Do you remember your joke?”

He nodded.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

He looked at me, then at his bucket. He gave a small roar and spun around, marching up to the door, and rang the bell.

Half the neighborhood later, Benji’s bucket was full to the brim. His joke had been a success and the neighbors had been taken by the kid’s adorability, being more than generous with their candy, and Benji was on a sugar-high without even consuming a single, fun-sized Milky Way. As he skipped up the Hill family driveway, whose son James was Benji’s age and the two would often play together, I told him that it would be our last house before heading home.

“Ok!” he called back over his shoulder.

My phone rang. It was Shan.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Just seeing how things are going.”

“Oh, they’re going well,” I laughed. “Kid’s a star.”

“How many houses so far?” she asked. I turned and looked down the street.

“Maybe twenty?” I approximated. “This is our last one, then we’ll be home.”

“Sounds good, babe.”

“How’s Alice?”

“I put her to bed when you two left. Getting ready for our movie.”

“Alright.” We were going to watch *The Others* after Benji went to bed. I shivered a bit. “We’ll be home in a few minutes.”

“Great, see you.”

“Bye.” I hung up and slid the phone back into my pocket. I checked my watch, it was just after eight. The wind picked up, whistling through the bare branches and swirling fallen leaves across the street, and I turned back to the house. Though the music was still playing, the door was closed and the porch was empty. I figured that Benji must’ve gone inside with James, so I walked up the drive and rang the doorbell. Tom Hill answered.

“Hey, Tom.” I offered my hand.

“Mike!” He shook my hand. “Nice costume. You got a joke to go with it?”

“I’m actually just picking up Benji,” I laughed. “Could you let him know it’s time to go?”

“Sure thing,” he said, opening the door a bit wider. “Come on in.”

I stepped into the house and stood in the foyer while Tom shut the door.

“They’re probably in the basement. I just got back from the office,” he said, taking off the coat I hadn’t noticed he was wearing.

“I must’ve missed you coming up the drive.”

“Oh, I’ve been back for a few minutes,” he said. “I was finishing up a call in the car.”

I nodded. “Do you get much business on Halloween?”

“Not more than usual.” He hung up his coat. “Fourth of July, though, is a different story.” Tom was a pediatrician, and Benji’s doctor.

“I can imagine.”

He nodded. "I'll go get the boys." He walked to the basement door, opened it, and called down. No one answered, so he walked down the stairs. I had only been waiting for a few seconds before I heard Tom coming up the stairs again.

"Nobody's down there," he said, closing the door.

"Who are you looking for?" Tom's wife, Kris, asked as she appeared from one of the upstairs bedrooms. "Oh, hey Mike," she said, coming down the stairs.

"He's here to get Benjamin," Tom answered, meeting his wife at the bottom of the stairs and hugging her. Kris looked at Tom strangely, then at me.

"You're here for Benji?" she asked.

"Yeah, didn't he just come inside?"

"He told his joke," she said, disengaging from the hug and walking over to me. "Then he said hi to James, but he left."

I blinked.

"I just tucked in James," she continued.

"He's gotta be outside," Tom assured, opening the front door and walking out onto the porch. I followed.

It was colder outside and the wind was really whipping. I called out Benji's name and walked to the sidewalk. I looked down both directions of the street and called again. Kris joined Tom on the porch and both also called out. The street was quiet. My stomach tightened.

I took off jogging down the street in the direction we had been heading, calling out.

Nothing.

He must've gone home and I just missed him. I turned around and headed back towards our house.

"Anything?" Tom called to me as I passed by their house.

"No!" I called back. "I'm thinking he might've just gone home." I kept running.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone and called Shan. After four rings, the answering machine picked up. I hung up and called out for Benji again. Still nothing.

I hit redial but the machine picked up again.

"Hey, Shannon," I started to leave a message, scanning both sides of the street as I ran. "You need to pick up. I can't..."

"Michael?" she picked up.

"Yeah, hey." I was nearly out of breath.

"What's going on? I was showering. Are you running?"

"Is Benji there?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did Benjamin come home?"

"You're not with him?"

"Did he come home?" I was yelling now.

"No. What happened?"

I was nearly home. "I'm almost home. Get some shoes on."

I hung up and picked up the pace. I called out again, looking around, bordering on frantic. I was passing the Stevenson's house when I stopped suddenly.

There was a light in the empty house's window.

I sprinted up the lawn and pounded on the door. No one answered. The door was locked, so I decided to check the back. The light in the window had been extinguished, and I ran around the house. As I was rounding the corner to the backyard, a door slammed, and I heard feet running down the stairs of the deck. The darkness was overwhelming, but I could make out a form sprinting around the other side of the house towards the street. I skidded to a halt and sprinted back the way I came, yelling for the figure to stop.

Before I reached the front of the house, I heard the screaming of breaks, a car door slam, and tires squealing, and when I got the street, all I could see was the retreating taillights of what looked like a station-wagon. I started to pursue the car, the adrenaline an inferno raging through my veins.

“Michael!” Shan yelled from our door.

I stopped, and the taillights disappeared. My head was pounding and my lungs were aching. I felt like I’d gotten hit by a train. I turned around. She ran out to meet me.

“What happened?”

I stared at her. I didn’t know what to say.

“Where’s Benjamin?” she took my arm and squeezed. Her voice wavered. “Michael! Where’s Benji?” There were tears in her eyes.

The adrenaline dissolved and I remembered how cold it was. I began to shiver. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t think. I pulled my arm free and staggered up to our door. There was a sharp pain in my stomach and I doubled over.

“Michael!” she pleaded from a few steps behind me. “Where is our son?”

I coughed and shook my head.

“I don’t know.”

November 1, 2004

Ecclesiastes 3:4

I flipped through the channels and stopped on Monday Night Football. Well into the third quarter, the Jets were pummeling the Dolphins so I switched off the TV altogether. I finished my beer, stood, and stretched. I'd been sitting for a few hours, only getting up for more beer. Time to get moving.

I pissed, then went to clean up my mess in the kitchen. I took out the trash, filled the sink with soap and water, and collected all the dishes and set them in the sink. I looked around the kitchen for anything else to do, but decided to leave anything else for tomorrow. Shan had taken Alice and gone to her parents for the night. I needed the night alone, and I wasn't going to spend it cleaning. Shan, Alice, and I had spent last night in a hotel, and by the end of the night, she could tell something was wrong. Without me asking, she had told me that she understood if I needed to be alone. I told her I did.

Before crashing in front of the TV, I had tried grading papers, but I couldn't focus and I'd had too much to drink. I'd even called my brother, but hung up when he answered. I felt sick.

We'd been searching for the better part of the year. There wasn't a ransom note. The police said they weren't giving up, but they didn't have any leads. The station wagon I saw was never found. I even told them about the three wraiths and probably sounded crazy. Shannon said she didn't blame me. I didn't believe her. Hell, I blamed me.

I grabbed a few more beers out of the fridge and went back to the couch. I still remembered the way she looked at me at the moment it all hit me. I dropped the beer on the coffee table, not bothering to open it. Whatever strength I'd ever felt, whatever confidence I'd ever had was wrenched out of me in that look. I had lost her son.

As the months dragged on and the search was yielding nothing, it became real. The school had given me whatever time I'd need, but after a few months of futility, I went back to work. I hadn't given up, but with Shan and Alice at home, I needed to work. The days away from home turned into nights away from home working late. Shan never said anything about it.

It started to rain outside. I was feeling even more sick. The doctor told me not to drink with the anti-depressants. The priest told me not to drink at all. The doctor was Shan's idea. The priest was my father's.

The aging Fr. Mark, lungs slowly calcifying and hands shaking from Parkinson's, had married my parents and been present throughout my childhood. He'd been a major inspiration for my brother, and was the homilist for his first Mass. He'd spoken about the Will of God and surrender and how proud both he and the Church were of Andrew for giving of himself to that Will. My mother had cried, overwhelmed with joy.

I'd gone to visit Fr. Mark just a few days ago. He had been glad to see me, and I him. He offered words of comfort between breaths through the oxygen mask, and there was some comfort in his words. He told me to stop drinking before it became a problem. Drinking, he'd rasped, would not bring back my son, and it would only lose me a wife and daughter. I didn't disagree. It didn't take too long, though, before he'd told me to call my brother. That, I did disagree with.

Fr. Andrew, my older brother, had married me and Shannon and baptized both our children. He'd been a major inspiration all throughout my life of a man trying to be the best man he could, and in the weeks following Benji's disappearance, he was the person I spoke to the most. The last time we talked, he'd spoken about the Will of

God and surrender and how we often won't understand why things happen the way they do and that it was up to me to surrender to that Will and to trust in His grace. I'd told him to go to hell.

I found myself holding a picture Shannon had taken that day. It was the picture we'd put on the flyers, Benji baring his teeth, crouching like a dinosaur. I leaned back and closed my eyes. I ran through the minutes in my head like I'd done every night since it happened. I used to be looking for something I'd missed before, something that would bring back my son, but now I did it just to remember.

It was after eleven and my house was dark except for the lamp on the end table. It was quiet. I was long past trying to find a reason. Every time I did, it just slipped away and left me even more unsettled. All the things people had said to me and Shan, all the words of comfort and prayers in faith, only lasted as long as it took to speak them, leaving only silence in the dark. I just wanted to hold onto the silence. I just wanted to hold on.

I'd stopped praying months ago, but now I opened my eyes and looked up anyway. I turned off the lamp, and in the silence of the room, I stopped remembering and just sat there in the dark. I wondered if this was what surrender was like. I was numb.

The phone rang, obliterating the silence. It was almost midnight, but I answered.

"Hello?"

"Michael?" Shannon sobbed on the other line.

"Hey."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

She was trying not to cry, so we said nothing.

"Shan, I'm sorry," I said after a few moments. I didn't know what else to say.

"I know," she whispered.

"I don't know what else to do."

"I know."

"I..." I coughed. "I'm lost."

I could hear her crying now. She was holding the receiver away from her face. When she spoke again, she didn't try to stop crying.

"Alice and I will be home tomorrow."

"Ok."

"Will you be there?" she asked, beginning to collect herself.

"Yeah," I said. "I'll be here."

"Ok," she said.

"Shannon?"

"Yes?"

"I'll always be here."

"I know." She sounded sure.

"Ok. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Night."

"Goodnight." I hung up the phone.

November 2, 2010

All Souls

I voted this morning after dropping off Alice at school. Because of the crowd, I'd ended up waiting for over an hour. Afterward, I went and got coffee and bagels for Shan who was home with Therese, dealing with the chicken pox. I didn't have class until the afternoon, so I planned to spend the morning at home and let Shan get out of the house. Then the phone rang.

The call had been too much to handle, so I hurriedly explained to Shan what was happening, grabbed my keys, and practically sprinted out of the house, promising to call very soon.

I'm driving too fast, but I don't care, and I only slow down as I approach the police station. I park on the street, not bothering to feed the meter, and I race through the doors. I'm met by the chief of police and a few other uniformed officers who quickly lead me back to the offices. As we're walking, the chief's explaining to me what's happening, but I'm not really hearing him. Something about a drug bust and finding a child along with the drugs. Something about the child not being the drug dealer's and roughly matching a computer-generated image of what Benji would look like seven years after his disappearance. Something unbelievable.

The chief stops as he's nearing the end of the cubicles, and I can see the nameplate on his office door. I can see through the glass windows of his office, the shades pulled all the way up. I can see a young policewoman leaning against the chief's desk, talking to a boy in one of the chairs facing her. I can see thick, brown curls. I can't breathe.

The woman is smiling kindly as she's talking to the boy. He's nodding and responding, but I still can't see his face. As he's answering, he looks to his left and I see his profile. I reach out and grip the chief's arm, steadying myself. He doesn't know that we're watching, and he runs his hand through his hair.

"Mike?" the chief's looking at me now.

"Yeah?" I whisper, not taking my eyes off the boy.

"He says his name is Ben."

I sink to my knees. I'm lost. The chief waits a minute before speaking again.

"Is that him?" he asks. "Is that your son?"

The woman is talking and pointing to things and the boy gets up from the chair to look at what she's pointing to. He's looking out of the windows with curiosity, but I still only see his profile. He turns and looks out the window that I see him through, taking in the bustle of a police station. He looks out with his mother's eyes.

"Yes." I'm reeling now, but I stand with the chief's help. "That's my son."

The chief nods and pats me on the shoulder.

"Can I call my wife?" I ask after I've steadied myself.

"We already sent a car by to get her."

"Ok."

"Now, we're not sure what's happened," the chief begins. "So, we're not sure what to expect out of him. He seems to be comfortable talking, but we're just not sure what to expect."

I nod. I don't know what to expect, either.

"We think it's ok if you talk to him," he continues. "Do you want to wait for your wife?"

I nod again, and it hits me.

I'm overwhelmed suddenly with a torrent of emotion and memory and I ask to sit down. The chief leads me to a nearby desk chair and I take it. I don't know what to think. With my head spinning and my heart pounding I remember the last moments I had him. I remember frantically searching for him and telling Shan. I remember the agony of the search, of not knowing what was happening to him. I remember the crushing darkness of grief that had nearly overwhelmed me and my family. I remember tears. I remember comfortless words and prayers that gave no peace. I remember the memorial service three years after it happened. I remember the birth of our third child, our daughter Therese. I remember finally calling my brother and asking for forgiveness. I remember realizing that I couldn't bring back my son. I remember everything.

I see him now.

I realize that I have no idea who he is. He's not the boy of five that I scooped up and hugged. Does he remember his family? Does he remember his home? Will he know us?

I'm paralyzed in the chair. I hear quick-moving footsteps behind me. Shan's here.

She calls my name. I heave myself out of the chair just in time to catch her as she throws her arms around my neck, holding tightly.

"Is it him?" she whispers into my ear.

"Yeah, baby, it's him."

"Are you sure?" She won't be able to handle losing him again. Neither will I.

"I'm sure."

She lets go and looks up at me.

"Have you talked with him?" she asks.

"I was waiting for you."

"Ok." There are tears in her eyes.

"You guys ready?" the chief asks. I look up at the boy in the window, now sitting at the desk with the woman, writing something. I look back at Shan. She nods.

"Yeah, we're ready."

The chief leads us to his office door and opens it. As we walk in, the boy doesn't look up and no one says anything. The woman with him stands and begins to close the shades in the room. Shan and I stand in the doorway. The woman finishes closing the shades, nods and smiles to us, and leaves the room.

The boy is drawing at the desk, but still he doesn't look up. Shan is holding my arm, not breathing. I take a step further into the room and she follows. The boy stops drawing and puts down his pencil. I speak.

"Benji?"

The boy looks up and sees his parents.