

The Year Michael Got His Own Page in the Yearbook

by Nick Seagers

Some kids use a belt or a length of rope. Some kids use a dog leash. My brother, Michael Foley, chose to use a guitar strap looped over the metal track of the garage door. It was raining the day I opened that door and found him. One of his hands was caught between the strap and his neck, like he tried to change his mind too late. This was back when I was a sophomore and still thought life was something that was more ahead of me than behind me.

What Michael did is sometimes mistaken for suicide. What we all learned is that it's really called Thrill Asphyxiation but you could call it Space Monkey or The Choking Game or Black-Out if it makes you more comfortable. Hundreds of kids die each year from it, but not many parents knew about it. After some investigations were done, the statistics showed some fourteen other teenagers died the same way in Vernon.

You can use your shoelaces or an Ace bandage. Loop a belt around your neck and toss the loose end over a shower curtain or closet pole. Pull. Try to lift yourself off the ground. Wait until your vision gets starry and starts to shut down. Your face will get red and hot and you should be able to feel your pulse in your eyes.

Now, let go.

When the pressure is released, the blood flowing back into the brain creates a rush. The mixture of dopamine and a flush of oxygen combined are supposed to feel like meth. All of these facts were written out step-by-step in the pamphlets they passed out in school. There were even easy-to-follow illustrations.

They called an assembly at school, bringing in an ex-junkie to talk to us about suicide. He sat up on the stage in the auditorium, one foot up on the stool they gave him, telling the students how precious life was and how it should be treasured. I could feel the eyes on me

when he said that being a teenager was the best part of life. If he really believed that, he must have lived the shittiest life imaginable.

The teachers at school kept asking me if I was okay. How was I holding up? Did I need anything? When I got home it was, "Can you please remember to wipe your feet next time?"

The cops said Michael's death was due to autoerotic asphyxiation, or AEA. The coroner's report stated the guitar strap was used as a sexual enhancement device. My folks were accused of tucking his stuff back into his pants before the authorities showed.

Vernon High latched on to my dead brother's body and dragged him through each classroom. In the bathrooms were posters warning against the dangers of Flatliner or Airplaning. Counselors were at the ready with leaflets and an open-door policy. We learned phrases like "carotid sinus hypersensitivity" and "self-induced hypocapnia." School officials were trained to keep a lookout for red eyes and raspy voices. Parents were told to worry about their children.

Taff stole all my belts and shoelaces and took the lock off my bedroom door. Every rope and cord in the house was hidden down in the Vault. Even at the grocery store she started getting paper bags instead of plastic.

Some kids in Vernon choked each other. They would have Cloud Nine parties where everyone strangles everyone until everyone is having fun. Doug Davis said it was like seeing God. Claudia White said when she had her first sexual experience she was disappointed that it wasn't as good as Tingling.

After a four-part series in the newspaper, Taff made me go see a therapist.

The first year after Michael died I was under supervision full-time. I was encouraged to sleep on the couch or even the lawn. The feeling that I was paying for what happened to my brother surrounded me like the bubble I was put inside.

A campaign was started by the principal to pass out plastic bracelets to promote awareness. There were so many hands that

clamped on my shoulders, I had bruises. There was a lot of, "I can't begin to imagine what this is like for you."

While the community of Vernon stayed alert for disoriented kids with frequent headaches, I hung out in Michael's room a lot, trying to find any answer. I listened to all of his CDs and read what his friends wrote in old yearbooks. I imagined them all sitting cross-legged in the cafeteria, humped over the glossy pages. Inside one was a flyer for a yearbook signing party, something I was sure my brother wouldn't have gone to. But would he? Who the hell was this man named Michael Foley? The more I looked the less I saw. Did this trail of porn magazines and poetry come from the same person who tied me to a tree when I was seven and sprayed me with the hose for an hour? He was just as full of shit as the rest of us.

Michael was seventeen and stoned more often than not. He was in the top ten of his class. He was an avid basketball player. He was a music enthusiast who loved old school rap and people think he died playing a game called Purple Dragon.

But he didn't.

What I never told anyone is that he left a note. That day I rolled up the garage door and the recoil from the springs made him sway, a piece of notebook paper was pinned to his shirt. I thought it was a gag. Michael was always pulling crap like that. He'd jump out in front of cars and pretend to get hit, slapping the hood. Taking the rope swing down at the old railroad bridge he would swing out and wouldn't let go until he was on his way back so no one would see him land underneath.

I grabbed the note, stuffing it in my pocket, my brain fizzing. Who? Someone must have done this to him. He wouldn't—why would he—is he? Fuck, fuck! I think he is. Oh fuck, shitty-shitty fuck-fuck. What's going on? The rest of that day, my brain only recorded the fact that I forgot to show anyone the note until the next day. But the final diagnosis was in.

The note: Fuck you. Albert's cool. I'm out. —MF-

There is a saying that if you have lost your parents, you have lost your past; if you lost your children, you have lost your future; if you

have lost your spouse, you have lost your present; and if you have lost your sibling, then you have lost your past, present and future.

There were lots of comments about how I didn't seem sad enough. At the funeral I should have cried. Only, instead of grieving, I smiled for a press photo for the Michael Foley Legend Scholarship that was set up. The award was given yearly to whichever graduating student was eighth in their class. There was no application and no set amount. Whoever was in eighth place won whatever amount had been donated that year. I graduated with just seven people ahead of me. The day they told me the award would go to Bethany Hatfield due to a conflict of interests, I figured I would end up shaking fries out of a wire mesh basket until the day I died.

