

Death unexpected

1 hunter. 1 deer. 3 shots. 1 perfect hit.

By Joanne Cleaver

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Pink was a suspect favorite color for 4-year-old boys in 1968, tie-dyed hippies and psychedelic Peter Max notwithstanding. Actually, anybody groovy had no standing at all in our household of a Baptist preacher, his choir-director wife, and four well-groomed if not always cooperative children. We ate wholesome food, wore brown and blue clothes designed to hide dirt, read character-building biographies (I admired Louisa May Alcott, for cashing in on her family) and got cheap seats to God's handiwork by vacationing in national park campgrounds.

Tupperware was a luxury for my mother, I realize now. I arrived home one spring day from fourth grade to find her rinsing out four new, tall plastic tumblers. The blue cup was already claimed by my next youngest brother and the orange cup by my little

sister, to be used by them and only them all summer for sluicing water, this being a household that spent money on soda pop never and on Kool-Aid once a week.

"I'll take the pink one," I said. I was, after all, the alpha girl.

"Actually, Michael wants the pink one," my mother said.

I looked at her. Four-year-old Michael cared about trucks and his tricycle and keeping up with the big boys on the block. We should have installed a pet door for him, he was in and out of the house so often. I had never seen a bathtub ring until I saw what happened when he hit clear water and soap. I'd thought he was just quick to tan.

"I told him he could have it," my mother said. "He thought it was pretty."

The other cup was institutional green. "I knew you'd understand," my mother said.

I understood both that a green cup was not worth fussing over and that my mother saw that Michael was sunnily unaware of any implications of his sudden affection for pink, or of any other waves he made as he cannonballed through summer.

As the neighborhood kids motored around our dead-end street in the softly fading New England after-dinner light, my mother and I dried the last of the dishes and stepped out into the back porch. "Look at Michael," my mother said softly to me. He was running down the middle of the street after no one at all, his elbows and heels churning. "I love to watch him run," she said. "I love the way he kicks up his heels." She squinted into the puddling sun to see Michael reach his invisible finish line and jump up and down in front of a phantom crowd.

For the first time, I saw myself as mother not to a plastic doll but to a real, live, child. In 20 years, I would be holding the door open for my own kindergartner. Would I be the kind of mother who let my 4-year-old son take the pink cup? Could I be a good mother to a child who ran after things I couldn't see?

Michael kept on running, through childhood and then into a seemingly endless adolescence.

He joined a nature conservancy long enough to plant thousands of tiny pine trees in Georgia and earned enough to hike the Appalachian Trail, at least until it got boring. He would go silent for a few weeks, sending thinly scrawled postcards to my parents like bubbles trailing behind an underwater swimmer. He was in Hawaii. Oh, now he was in Arizona.

He chased the blue up the Maine coast, raking low-bush blueberries.

He apprenticed to a cabinetmaker and told us at Thanksgiving how to work with the grain of cherry and maple, and why dovetailed joints were superior.

Then he decided he didn't like making drawers.

He learned how to craft guns in Massachusetts.

Then he decided the gun factory had too many rules, so he went to cut wreaths for L.L. Bean to sell through its catalogs. That led to several autumns of working the L.L. Bean warehouse during the rush season. Those Christmases we all got returned but perfectly good tote bags with monograms that were off by one initial.

He grew his hair long. Women loved it. He grew a beard. Women wanted to tame him. He started to lose his hair so he shaved his head. The more he looked like a mountain man, the more determined a few women were to domesticate him. He made no promises.

My parents worried about their running boy turned running man. So much talent, so much misfired ambition. They stored his tools, his guns, his childhood papers, the juggling batons and the African drums given him by an immigrant musician he had befriended in Portland, Maine.

Michael hunted, for the sport and for land management and

because he loved venison chili.

On a warm November day in 2005, he left his backpack and sleeping bag at the friends' house where he was staying, in central New Hampshire, while working a temporary construction job, and headed for the work site.

He never arrived. When their shift ended, his work buddies found his pickup truck by the side of the road, unlocked, with a wool shirt on the passenger's seat.

That night the weather in the White Mountains turned, as it does at least once every fall. It rained ice, and it hailed water. A damp freeze slid from the clouds and slivered between every blade of grass. The low was 11 degrees.

The next day, Michael's friends returned to the truck. It was still cold and empty. They called my father. Together, they drove and walked up and down the slippery highway and into the thickets at the edge of the forest, calling for him.

By evening, my father called my sister. Then, my mother. The next morning, my mother called my other brother, then me. The New Hampshire search and rescue team arrived and suddenly there was a mobile home offering warmth and coffee to my sister and my father, who brought Michael's hats for the search dogs to know him by. In six hours flat I left the Lake Michigan coast and opened the door to my sister's house in Concord with the key from under the flowerpot, and sat on her couch. Half an hour later, my mother and sister walked in.

"Does she know?" my sister asked my mother.

"Tell her," my mother said.

It had taken helicopters to find him, three miles into the woods from his truck, three miles of granite cliffs and thick pines and slippery bogs. He was sprawled among some rocks, wearing a frozen cotton shirt over a cotton T-shirt and jeans. In New England, in hunting season, friends don't let friends wear cotton. Only wool keeps you warm when it's wet.

There would be time later for me to weep (and I did). But at the time, so that my parents could make and take phone calls, my sister and I ordered the flowers and bought black-bordered frames for a photo display at the funeral. We cleaned my father's house and made gallons of minestrone soup for the mourners who would soon be arriving from all the corners of New England.

The day before the service, we gathered at the funeral home before the body would be cremated. My father was the only one brave enough for a last goodbye to his boy, coming back to us bent over with sobs. My mother could not look, as she sat on a wooden chair, crumpling inside her pastel pink sweater.

In rare harmony, we agreed that there was no mystery about what had happened. Michael's long-barrel pistol had three empty chambers. Two bullets, my father and brother thought, had gone at a deer that Michael must have glimpsed through the windshield as he headed to work — such a sure shot that he had pulled over, grabbed his gun and run into the woods.

"He must thought he'd gotten a shot into that deer," said my father. "He would never let the animal suffer. Never. He would have gone after it to put it out of its misery."

Outdoorsman that he was, Michael knew what would happen once the icy rain started pelting, said my mother. Hypothermia — he had told her once how it made you convulse with cold until your body in a last desperate rush to warm itself, would release the blood hoarded in your core and brain and then in a painful flush, you would strip off your clothes as your last breaths turned to crystal in your lungs. He always said he would rather take his own life than face that death.

He knew we would hear the last thing he thought: This wasn't how he thought things would turn out, but here it was. When he saw death coming for him, he ran to meet it.

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