

The Man I'm Going to Be

In the evening of October 20, 2019, my seventeen-year-old son huddled with my wife and me in a closet of our home as tornado sirens blared and the television issued constant warnings. Ominous clouds spun up a twisting wall of wind that passed close to Richland campus and proceeded toward the three of us cloistered in a closet.

That was the last time there would be three.

But it wasn't a tornado that changed that number. It was a different kind of loss—something infinitely deeper than broken timbers and collapsed buildings. It was the loss of what might have been—what should have been. It was the loss of Michael.

The threat of severe weather passed by us, and we encouraged Michael to prepare for his big day on Monday, October 21st. He was returning to his high school classes after being homebound for six weeks due to pervasive panic attacks and haunting depression. His counselors said he was ready. We believed the storm had passed.

At three in the morning, a thunderclap shook the house. I went upstairs to check on Michael. Surprisingly, I found him fully dressed—decked out in his favorite hoodie and shoes. I asked him why he was dressed in the middle of the night, and his answer made perfect sense. “I just want to see how I'll look tomorrow,” he said.

“Well, at least let's take off your shoes,” I answered and proceeded to help him. That was the last time I touched my son alive. Early in the morning, before the sun had banished the darkness from his room, I opened his door. Seeing only a vague shadow reclining where he usually slept, I gently shook his leg. “Time to get up, Son,” I said. Nothing. No movement. Instantly, I knew something was wrong—horribly, irreversibly wrong. I leapt up and turned on his light.

There, dressed in those favorite clothes, wearing the same shoes I had removed only hours earlier, was our son. Except it wasn't our son anymore. His eyes were open, but he could not see. A bullet had ended everything he was to be. I screamed for my wife and we called 911.

Neither of us had heard the shot. Suicide was impossible. He was getting better. Everyone said so. That thought hung in the air as the police escorted us downstairs. “It's a crime scene now,” they said.

Our beautiful, gifted son was gone. The angelic face, the bright eyes were open still, but the life in them was gone. The sly, mischievous smile was gone. His thoughtful, kind, and giving spirit had slipped away, and in its place was a crime scene.

The week that followed was a blur. The coroner explained that Michael had left a note taped to his chest. According to the report, it said, “Do not resuscitate.” My wife and I knew our son, and we knew that couldn't be right. Michael was gifted in many ways, but spelling was not one of them. When they finally returned the note, in his familiar scrawled printing, it said, “Do not revive.” Even though he had kept his darkest secret from us, his personality showed through. In the corner of the note was a small, hand drawn figure that was familiar to us. He had drawn it many times before. When we first asked him about it, he said, “That's the man I'm going to be.”

He couldn't say goodbye. It would have been too difficult, but that drawing left us a message. We saw the man he wanted to be. The man he struggled to be, and the spirit he would be in a place where panic attacks don't exist. Where depression is recognized as an illness, not a character flaw. A world where, one day, we will join him, and the two of us will once again be three.