

1. INTRO/SHORT STORY

1. Michael

This story must start off on the right foot, so we will pull focus to the left foot of Michael Way. Long ago, people associated the left hand with the devil. If the foot and the hand correlate, then placing such an emphasis on one's left foot, half of the foundation of one's being, begins the portrait of Michael Way with a sinister stroke, indeed. This intention of this sinister stroke shouldn't evoke thoughts of Michael's character being anything as ominous as Goya's Black Paintings. Rather, its intention hints at a trouble in Michael's base: a history of war. .

The first sign of this history of war appears with a look at the shoe encasing Michael's left foot. Polish fails to hide the scuffs engrained deep within the leather of this matte black oxford. Purchased at J.C. Penney with a fifty dollar bill, it survives as a shoe made for walking, with a thick, cushioned soul. Michael uses it solely for this purpose as a salesman who wears his souls thin working business to business.

A current look at this shoe will find it paused before a glass office door. His company's name cuts across the reflection of Michael's blue suit coat and white dress shirt at chest level, in Copperplate Gothic Bold—R.T. Marketing. Michael checks that his hair sits just the way he likes it – a conservative dollop of whipped cream on top of a slice of apple pie. He straightens his red tie, inhales a breath, lets it out with a quick sigh, and applies a smile to his lips. His hand reaches for the door handle, and he lets himself in.

“Hey!” erupts from the mouths of a dozen suit-clad men and women. “Who's this?”

“The hottest rep in the room!” responds Michael. Immediately upon entering, Michael makes a round of the merlot-colored lobby of R.T. Marketing giving high fives, handshakes, fist-

bumps and one or two odd hand interactions recalling the greetings of secret grammar school boys' clubs. He nods and says "hello" and "good morning" in as many different ways, to the men and women who are standing in the lobby conversing in smaller groups. It is hard for Michael not to feel a surge of excitement at this ritual. Walking from group to group and smelling the battlefield of aftershaves and perfumes which compete like warring sentient nebulae, Michael also feels a sense of comfort – there's nothing like the smell of napalm in the morning. A stereo along the wall emits a throbbing dance beat. Club music for a different kind of club.

"Way to kill 'em yesterday. I heard you honking that horn, again, last night," greets Scott Simpson standing with Dave Sanders and Ron Smith. Michael thinks of Larry, Moe and Curly. The trio stands in a circle wearing nearly identical gray suits. Their only discernible qualities are the different shades of their solid colored, blue ties, the shoes on their feet, and the shapes of their bodies—Scott stretched like a pine tree, Ron stunted like a parking meter, and Dave as solid as a boulder.

"Well, you know, I was just Taming the Tiger all day long," Michael says with a sly side smile. Michael knew a lot more went into a successful day than using this simple move, but he liked the glib response that made sales appear so simple. He walks up and joins their circle. The four of them, close to each other in age, have a total combined life experience of just over one century.

"So, since you're probably going to be making the Leader's Speech this morning, is that what you'll be talking about?" Ron asks.

Michael's smile creeps across to the other side of his face as he answers, "The hummingbird asked the ancient samurai if he wanted to know how he was to die. To which the

samurai replied, ‘death is but the falling of the blossom from the tree.’” *Ha! Let them figure that one out.*

“Aw, not even a hint at what you’re going to say?” asks Scott like he just had candy stolen from him.

“Boys,” Michael says in the voice of a smug school teacher, “you’ll just have to wait and see.” Michael didn’t want to let on that he had stayed up an extra hour before bed writing this speech—feeling confident that his speech would be chosen from the handful turned in to Richard but knowing there were no guarantees.

“We are taking bets on what Richard’s going to talk about this morning,” continues Scott, “I say, if he isn’t balling us out for not making sales, he’ll be sermonizing about the five client personality types. Ron’s of the opinion that he’ll be dissecting the close.”

“I’d be willing to bet that you’re both wrong, although balling us out seems likely.” Richard had a way of making his squad feel guilty if they were underachieving, although Michael thought of himself as a salesman Richard could put money down on to succeed. “However, I’m not a betting man,” replies Michael.

Bells tinkle as the front door opens and a young, suit-clad woman enters the office.

“Hey, who’s this?” yells the crowd.

“The hottest rep in the room!” yells the woman in response.

“Since you’re not willing to put your money where your mouth is, maybe you could help us settle another dispute then,” Scott says, switching topics like a man flipping through television stations. “I say Ron’s new shoes are too cheap and won’t last a week.”

“Man, these are genuine PayLess Brand Shoes, they practically come with a warranty,” Ron says, pulling up on the creases of his pants to reveal a pair of black wingtips. From Michael’s height they appear to be lumps of molded plastic sitting on the grey carpet. “Besides, these shoes are so sharp, you almost cut yourself just looking at them. They sure beat your shoes. What, is that a full bottle of shoe polish on there?”

“These shoes have a precision shine—just like the military,” retorts Scott.

“Well,” Ron says, “they look like they’ve been through a war with all those gouges there.”

“I like shoe polish,” Dave says.

“Yeah, well, I like the new Sound Horizons sub-woofers,” Ron says. “When they’re bumping, clothes have a way of just,” he emphasizes the last three words of this sentence with three deliberate pelvic thrusts, “falling—right—off.” Michael had thought Ron would turn this talk of technology toward sex, but he found comfort in the humor of Ron’s gesticulation.

“Really?” Scott says, raising an eyebrow, “that must be awkward when you’re listening to them with your brother. I’m sure Michael, here, is aware, as I am, that the girl’s take their clothes off the easiest to the more expensive sub-woofers from Sonic Resonator.”

“I don’t think either of you have a chance to get a girl to listen to your sub-woofers no matter how expensive they are,” Michael says, settling the dispute. He had seen little evidence of their sexual exploits, but had heard all about them—numerously.

“Music is nice,” Dave says.

The bells tinkle again as the front door opens and the young Mark Inmitty slowly enters the office. He eyes the people in the lobby with a look like a man who can't figure out the directions to assemble his Ikea furniture.

"Hey, who's this!" shouts the crowd.

At the shout, Mark appears blown into the empty receptionist desk standing to the right of the door. He replies, "The hottest rep in the room," in a voice that cracks and staring at the ground in front of him. Without raising his eyes Mark drifts to the back corner of the lobby where he stands next to a pot of green, leafy foliage—one arm at his side and the other hand gripping his elbow. His gazes, still avoiding the reps in the room, on the potted plant. To Michael Mark stands out as much as the fake plant he stands next to.

"Sonny, you look like a man who just got caught farting in Catholic School and is afraid the nun is going to hit him," Michael calls to Mark in a voice like warm honey, and a smile to match. "Why don't you come over here by us?" Mark slowly walks up to Michael's circle. Michael's smile quickly fades when he glimpses Mark's wildly colored tie. While undisciplined, this one could be reckless, thought Michael.

"Man, it's just so early," Mark says. "I don't know if I can function at this hour."

"Yeah, about the only one any good at this hour is Brady, he's used to getting up early to milk them cows," Scott says, chortling through his nose.

"Got to sow them beans before the sun comes up and it gets too hot," Ron says, in a voice like the stereotypical illiterate country boy.

From a nearby circle of people Brady lifts his head, "Boy, you guys are ruthless."

"I don't know about Ron, but I'm just getting warmed up," Scott says.

“Oh, you better look out Mark,” Michael says feigning caution. “Don’t you have class with Scott this morning?”

“That’s what Karl told me yesterday,” Mark says. Michael recalls his three days of uncertainty during the obligatory training before they threw him to the wolves. Now he navigated his territory like a deft poacher in Yellowstone National Park.

“Yeah, it’s me and the newbie this morning,” Scott says. “I’ll be putting the meat through the grinder to see if he can’t learn the moves. We just might make him a weapon for wealth.”

“Wow, I usually like being referred to as a piece of meat,” Mark says. Good, he’s starting to lighten up a little, thinks Michael, this one might actually have some fire in him.

“Tenderloin is good,” Dave says.

“Joking aside,” Michael says with a sideways look at Dave, whose literal take on everything reminded Michael that he thought of Dave as a simpleton. “Make sure you listen up.” As Michael talks, Karl, a few years older than Michael, walks up beside the group listening, and with his lips pursed. “You’ll be with me on the streets today,” continues Michael, “and I don’t want you slowing me down.”

“I’m sure both you and Scott will be a great help to Mark today,” Karl says, standing outside the circle. “I’ve got high hopes for my newest squad member.”

“Oh, good morning Karl,” Michael says, eyeing Karl with a look that could freeze a wart off. “You know Scott and I will have your boy slaying the beasts like a true poacher by the end of the day.” As he says this, Michael microwaves the honey in his voice.

“Yeah. Say Michael,” Karl says, “do you have a minute?” Michael knows that he can dispatch any thing that Karl might have to complain about.

“Sure,” Michael says, not hiding his tone of voice acknowledging the edge he gained over Karl, who needs him, “but a minute is all I’ve got. We’ve got our morning sparring session starting soon. What is it, Karl?”

“Can we step someplace more private?” asks Karl, eyeing the others in the circle.

“Sure thing,” Michael says like a smug politician, “follow me to my office.”