

The Pagan Fellowship.

I had better tell this in the first person. My name is Jess, and I want to tell you about Michael, someone I used to know. More than one person warned me that he was not my friend. Why did he make such an impression on me? Have I grown, or learned anything since then? I still do not know if I changed, for the better, or for the worse.

A writer needs to have the courage to tell the truth. I need to tell the truth. I want to discover what he meant to me by writing down the story of those two years; the two years during which he became important to me. Let's see if I can tell the disturbing truths about me, as well as those about him.

I came of age in the time of add-a beads and Ronald Reagan. It was 1980, and I was away from home for the first time, starting college at a place in North Carolina called Chapel Hill. Its landmarks include the Bell Tower, which chimes Queens' "Another One Bites the Dust" on the day of football games.

The day I moved into the dormitory, a four-story, red brick building from the previous century with a cornice over the door with a pineapple, a symbol of welcome, in the center as a decoration, I met my roommate. Her name was Sara. She was starting her senior year, and four a couple of years she had been coping with multiple sclerosis. She had gone into and out of remission that summer. She wanted her privacy, so she had not wanted a roommate, nor had she expected one. I had originally chosen another dormitory, one of the ten-story, cross shaped buildings which were past the football stadium. Here is the first hard truth. My mother had switched me to this older dormitory. She did it before I knew it, and I was afraid of a fight I could not win.

I have a condition called Turner Syndrome. It is congenital, present at birth. Most women have two X chromosomes. Women and girls with Turner Syndrome have one X chromosome, or a trace of the second X. Turner Syndrome is the second hard truth. The change in dormitory and my having Turner Syndrome are connected. I was eighteen going on eight. I was small. Turner Syndrome usually comes with short stature. I was vulnerable and had faced bullying through most of the time I was in school. Mom wanted to protect me, so she moved me to a smaller dormitory closer to the classrooms. She thought the number of people in the cross-shaped buildings, and the distance would be too much stress. I did not have it in me to argue with her. We had already had screaming fights the year before. That is another hard truth.

So Sara had me on her hands on top of everything else she had to cope with. She was irritated enough that she had to share a room, when she had been promised one to herself. She was even more annoyed that the person sharing her room with her was me. I was immature, as well as short. That's another hard truth. I talked too much and tried too hard.

Multiple Sclerosis is a degenerative disease. Sara used crutches when she was not getting around on a chair called an Amigo. It was not a wheelchair. Picture a scooter, such as a Vespa, with a swivel chair. Her friend. The MS affected her vision, so she needed people to read her textbooks to her. She had been a swimmer, and it probably hurt her pride to depend on anyone else. It's motor made a whirring sound, so I could hear her coming down the hall, so I had time to brace myself and get ready to surrender my solitude.

Michael would always say that we met when we went to a meeting of Chapel Hill's outdated debate society. I was not sure then why he went there. I had gone to a few meetings because Thomas Wolfe had been a member. Back then, Thomas Wolfe was my favorite writer. When I read Look Homeward Angel in high school, I felt as if I had met the author and the main character in person. It

made the biggest impression on me of any book I had read since The Hobbit. It is still one of my favorite books. The romanticism in me must have responded to the beauty and lushness of his prose.

The truth is that I met Michael in the laundry room. He lived in a dormitory next to the one where I lived, which was identical to mine. Neither building had a laundry room, so residents washed their clothes in the basement of the dormitory across the street from ours. It seems right that the setting was more down to earth than the debating society's antiquated meeting room would have been.

I came down the concrete stairs with my plastic laundry basket and my bottle of Wisk and I walked through the door. His whimsy must have stood out to me, because he was vivid to me from that first time I saw him. He was sitting at the other end of the room on a heavy, school room style chair. He had thick dark hair. He wore glasses, but the alertness in his eyes was plain to see. He had a big, bemused grin, and he looked straight at me. He had on a dark, navy blue vinyl windbreaker with a yellow Marine Corps insignia on the left side. He told me later that his father had been in the Marines in the Second World War and had been at Iwo Jima.

Years later I saw the movie *Heathers* and the scene where Wynona Ryder meets Christian Slater reminded me of the time I met Michael. Michael's sly smile seemed to say, without words, greetings and salutations. Something inside of me, either a desire to learn about the world and grow up, or compassion for the pain which I could already sense coming from him, was sure I wanted to talk to him, and made me brave enough to walk up to him.

I don't remember what we said. I must have started going to visit him in his room and talk soon after we met. His room had a musty, male smell. He would come next door to see me, too. My room was on the first floor so that Sara could get in and out of the building.

I paid more attention to Michael than he paid to me. I would seek him out in his room and I would light up when I met him walking down the sidewalk or eating in the Pine Room, the older cafeteria. We would talk in one of the booths. I could have stayed and talked with him for hours. We

would also eat together at the Chase Cafeteria, which was close to the newer, cross-shaped dormitories. When I think about it, I am afraid that I came across as a stalker. I am afraid that, in describing how I followed him, that anyone reading this would call me a stalker. I feel shame at having been so needy. That is another hard truth. The word stalker implies and intent to harm someone. Maybe you could say that I was a gentle stalker. I just wanted companionship, a chance to experience his intelligence and to savor the feeling I got when I was with Michael that new things were about to happen.

He was the most undeniably a genius of anyone I ever met, before or since. He was my Huckleberry Finn, my brother in arms in the fight to elude and protect ourselves from hostile armies. At least, we both shared the fear that there was hostility around us. Probably, the people around us did not feel anything as strong as hostility toward us.

We both had early morning classes. Avoiding eight am classes was part of the culture at UNC. Most people broadcast their determination to sleep until ten or eleven. We were not most people, though. You've figured that out by now.

I would always have breakfast in the Pine Room. The ladies on the serving line knew that I always got scrambled eggs and grits. One morning, I came in to the big, warm room with its bacon smells and Michael was already sitting at a table near the door. It was cold for October. He was still wearing his corduroy jacket and a wool cap, even in the warmth of the big room. I was wearing my pea coat and gloves.

We talked for awhile. He was perceptive. He was good at reading people so that he could see what was coming. The more we talked, the more he could tell that I wanted to be closer than we were. I wanted my first romance. Michael was a realist, not a romantic. He still wore his alert, amused smile when he said, "I'm gay".

I pondered this disclosure respectfully, and with the feeling of being on a hike in the mountains and stopping to turn and discover a different view. It was college. It was supposed to be about learning. I had the feeling I might get learning about a previously unfamiliar principle of physics, or a new perspective on American History. My knowledge of human experience had been small. I had been very sheltered. For all the time we knew each other, I would try to be reasonable and mature; to not ask from him what he could not give. Deep inside me, though, I knew that he was dear to me. He had a lasting effect on me, and on many other people who were under the influence of his gravitational pull. It would always be unclear what my feelings for him said about me. I did know, always, that he had changed me the way a waterfall wears down and shapes the rocks at the bottom.

In my mind, I still see him, only now, he is in the distance instead of right next to me.

There was a lot of religious activity in those days. It was the early eighties; the Moral Majority was in its heyday. Ronald Reagan was President. At UNC there were many student religious groups: The Campus Christian Fellowship, The Campus Crusade for Christ, The Fellowship of Christian Athletes. These were the nondenominational ones. There were also those, such as the Baptist Student Union, which had a connection to a denomination.

There was the Preacher in the Pit. I did not know this firebrand by any other name. I don't think anyone else did either. The Pit was an open plaza between the library and the student union, with four steps leading down into it. Several times a month, the evangelist would stand in the middle of The Pit and preach in old-fashioned, fire and brimstone, early Billy Graham style. He had dark hair and dressed in khaki pants, loafers and oxford cloth shirts. He would have his black bible in one raised hand and his head tilted back, as if to make his sermon echo off the clouds. Some people loved to be satirical when they spoke of him. Other people listened attentively.

Michael had his own answer to this juggernaut of evangelical organization; he invented the Campus Pagan Fellowship, with influence from Greek Mythology, as well as a little from Nietzsche.

The movement was short-lived, but in that time Michael showed himself to be a whimsical, unafraid leader.

It was a spring night when he organized and held a worship service at an automatic teller machine. This was when ATMs were still a novelty. He lit four candles on the machine's ledge above its keypad. He had an invocation ready. "Oh great teller machine, giver of money and food", he said. He meant to be the embodiment of irony. The satire was a little obvious. By this time, a large percentage of students majored in business or economics and had no time for nuance. He was satirizing the fixation on money which would only grow as the decade progressed.

The next morning, the bank officials told Michael that they would no longer allow him to have an account there.

He was a little bit of Haight Asbury at a campus in the south in the time of add – a – beads. He had created a little bit of street theater in a time of pink and green conformity.

I saw him after he had made his statement. I was taking a walk by myself when I saw him standing on a large, open grassy space. Bill, a boy with long, blond curls, glasses, and a kind, laughing smile, was there too. There was also Mimi, a sweet, ethereal girl with long light brown curls and a soft voice.

It was April, and there had just been a light rain. The grass was damp and soft. We sat on the grass and talked, and walked on the grass and talked. Mimi described the ceremony. I loved satire at the time. "Impersonal banker", I said. "Impersonal banker", Michael said, volleying my attempt at a quip.

That night was when his fame began to spread.

When I was eighteen and going to school for the first time, I walked in a pink haze of romanticism. I wanted to be normal, and in my mind, that meant having a romantic relationship. To me, being without a romantic partner meant one more way of being on the outside. The marketers of

normal had baited their hooks and I, being hungry, and not wise enough to recognize a trap, took the bait. Just like today, every magazine, and every message was a carpet bombing. The bombing was meant to secure as much territory as possible in order to generate revenue. The territory was profitable. The invasions goal was to secure the region where our deepest longings were.

On the other hand, I valued nonconformity. Being different was the reason I hurt, and it was what I was proud of. If I had to be different, I would cultivate those qualities which were my own. Some of what made me different set me apart in a good way. For instance, I had writing. I wrote poetry. It was an era that had no time for romanticism and poetry. Then again, had the world ever been any different? I wrote poems and wanted to develop any ability I had. But as that year went on, I wrote less and less. I never did learn to treasure any positive uniqueness in me.

When I met Michael, he seemed to be an iconoclast in a positive way. He had an independent and was his own self – ruling wind. No one else could change his direction. He set himself apart by choice and he had qualities which made him uncommon. For instance, he was a card carrying genius. I mean that figuratively. However, if there were a test for genius and if those who scored high received a card, Michael would have had one.

I had to balance two conflicting, incompatible emotions when it came to Michael. I knew that there would be no romantic love. I was glad to be around him. On the other hand, he touched my romantic imagination. Years later, long after we and left school and not long after he stopped talking to me, I gave him the nickname Heathcliff. In a way, he had the same pull of mystery that the fictional character had. I knew even when we first met how that story turned out. Unlike Cathy, I would never want to break my heart to break his. I did not want to break his heart. I did not want to break anyone's heart. For me, there would also be many times when I would fight hard to repair my own. Eventually, I would give up trying to be what I was not. When I let go of what I was not, I started looking for whatever elusive qualities were inside me.

I was not interested in makeup. Though many short women would have wanted to, I was not going to wear high heels. Why pretend I'm not short, I thought, when everyone can see that I am. I was never going to wear a suit with shoulder pads, which were the fashion at the time. There was no sense in dressing for a job I would never have. The corporate world would not want me, and even if it did, I would be miserable there.

When I was in Michael's company, it felt easier than being around other people my age, because I did not feel that I had to worry about my appearance. Comparing my intelligence to his was another matter. He had played chess over the phone and won chess competition when he was a child of about ten. Among his friends there was a running joke about how he had revealed that he had gotten 1510 on the SATs. It was unusual for anyone to advertise their SAT score, to say the least, but it was still a rare accomplishment.

Video games were taking over the stage from pinball machines, and Michael was good at them just like he was good at chess and math.

Pac Man and Ms. Pac Man held the attention of many students. The orchestra of electronic games filled the bottom floor of the student union, a three – story building of concrete and glass in the ugliest style nineteen sixties. Across the main street from the university, with its time-mellowed buildings, there was a little sandwich shop. There were several video game machines in the back. One evening, I was there with Michael and Mimi, sitting in a booth while they played Donkey Kong. The truth was that Mimi stood by the machine while he played. I opted out because I had not eye-hand coordination. Chances were that it would be Michael's turn to play for the rest of the evening.

There was also a jukebox and one song in particular that played that night stays in my mind. The lyrics were crass, but the guitars and the rhythm were infectious; it was a guilty pleasure of a song called "867-5309" by a group by the name of Tommy Two Tone. Hearing that song still makes the atmosphere feel like it did back then. The band never did have another song on the radio, but I

have the feeling that many people my age know it from the first two or three bars. When I hear it, I can see Michael leaning over the video machine running up a score. He was comfortable with anything electronic, whereas I was not. As for as everything wireless and digital, I could never have imagined what wash coming.

The times with Michael were the most vivid of my life. If the rest of my life was to be uneventful, it was partly because he was not there. When we were young, Michael created events. I was seeing so many things for the first time then. He was the butterfly that fluttered its wings and created a chain reaction, with a hurricane as the final result. His determination would be the same whether he was playing a video game or directing the course of his relationships.

We stayed in the sandwich shop for a while. It was a weeknight, so we left before too long. I never did play Donkey Kong at all.

Michael was exceptionally perceptive. He knew that he was in my heart. I did not talk about it, because I did not want to weigh him down with burdens and expectations. He knew that I romanticized him. He might even have found my adoration of him touching. He may have found me charming. I wanted companionship so much that it hurt. In spite of my loneliness, I respected him too much to try to force him into a role he did not want.

We tried to accommodate each other. He would spend time with me. We would spend time walking, going to movies, or studying. Once I initiated a pillow fight in my room. One afternoon, he wanted to order a Tequila Sunrise at a little Mexican restaurant. It turned out that the waitress for our table was in his ballroom dance class.

Or we would do something more adventurous. Michael liked climbing and hiking. We would go walking in Duke Forest,

On a day when the fall weather was at its best, he would lead me up to the old meeting room on the fourth floor, where a large portrait of Thomas Wolfe was hanging. Behind the small stage at

the front of the room, behind some pretentious velvet curtains, was a room from which you could climb onto the roof. The roof was flat, and not as daunting as a pitched roof would be. I would climb up by myself and sit on the roof and I was not afraid. Being up so high gave me the feeling that the day was pristine and it was possible to initiate something wonderful.

At other times, he would go further, and he did not take me with him on these excursions. He was one of the inventors, along with several of his math and computer science friends, of a pastime called “buildering”, which involved going at night to a convenient construction site and climbing the building’s steel frame; going as high as they could. A large new library was under construction and this was their favorite buildering destination. They eluded any authority figures each time.

Once we went into Woolen Gymnasium, the older gym, and he introduced me to lifting weights. We put on the gray shorts and t shirts students using the gym could pick up at a window when they came in and went to the weight room. I lay down on the bench and grabbed the bar. He stopped me and carefully took off some of the weights. This gesture communicated his concern and solicitousness toward me.

There were often dances going on in the common areas of the dormitories. They were often on Thursday night, because it was a part of the culture for many students to start the weekend on Thursday.

One Thursday evening I went with Michael and some other friends to a party in Joyner, one of the older dormitories. It was across from the other dormitories where we lived, but it was bigger, stretching across the whole block. In its basement was the laundry room where Michael and I had met. Down a small flight of concrete stairs was another part of the basement. There was a large multipurpose room with plaster walls and black and white tile flooring. The room was full of people and music. The high ceilings made the music resonate. There was plenty of room in the middle of the floor for dancing.

It was the time of Punk and New Wave. The songs I remember from that time include Blondie's "Call Me" and "Heart of Glass". There was also music by David Bowie, such as "Let's Dance" and "Suffragette City". The music was infectious, if very stylized. One song that did not play that night was one of Michael's favorites. "I Am Antichrist" by the Sex Pistols.

Finally, they played a softer song; James Taylor's "Carolina in My Mind". I liked the song at the time even though now I find it maudlin and manipulative. The first few bars played and Michael turned to me and said, "What the hell" with a roll of his eyes and a playful grin. He put his arms around me, led me out on the floor and we danced for the rest of the song. For me, it was like swimming, pushing off into a lake in which the water was neither too warm nor too cold. There was no need to move along a spectrum and make it into anything else. I just felt comfortable.

For a long time, what I thought he had meant by "What the hell" was that he would dance with me out of pity, or for amusement. I was, as so often happens, mistaken. He had been referring to my being a girl. Maybe he felt comfortable dancing with me because I was childlike and small. My pride must have left me long before that evening. The irony of this was that he had told me before that pride was his favorite of the seven deadly sins.

When I was much older, I realized that he had been the only person with whom I would have been able to relax and trust enough to have an intimate relationship.

Sometimes I would take walks in the evening to enjoy the dark and the open space available in the large, grassy quadrangles. Sometimes, when I knew I did not want to be alone, I would visit Michael in his room and we would talk, or we would go walking along the crisscrossing brick pathways.

Most of the time, though, on weeknights, I studied and then went to bed by eleven. I did things much the same way I had in high school. The difference was that now I had a brother in arms. I had met someone who would talk to me and make jokes with me in a way that no one had before.

Now I had someone who was beside me, sometimes, at least, and who would create experiences with me so that my life did not have to be a long road where I passed scene after scene and only experienced moments by myself.

At the end of November, everyone was studying for final exams, which would come just before winter break. Michael and I would go to Wilson Library, the classical, original library building. We would sit at one of the long tables under the graceful dome of the main reading room. “We can’t talk to each other”, Michael said. I would agree since I was trying to do more than merely pass organic chemistry. My eyes, though, would jump up and down and back and forth across the page and I would have to force myself to concentrate. It would not surprise me when I found out later that difficulty concentrating was a symptom of depression.

In January the semester started again and people settled back in to the dormitories. I enjoyed the feeling of starting new classes and opening new books. I settled back into studying.

I was usually asleep by midnight. The bed in Sara’s and my room were bunk beds. Of course I would sleep in the top bunk since Sara needed the lower bunk. I would use the bed frame at the head of the beds like a ladder and scramble to the top and swing myself over, right leg first, onto my mattress. I could always do it quickly. It was one of the few ways in which I showed any agility. Sara would have parked her scooter next to her bottom bunk and slide into her bed. She would have already plugged it in to a wall outlet so that its battery could recharge overnight.

One night, I had been asleep for a little while when a knock on the door woke me up. The doors in the old dormitory were large and heavy, and the high ceilings would magnify any knocking on a door or slamming of a door and make it carry up and down the hall and into every room. Instead of being annoyed, I was excited that someone had sought me out.

I swung myself over the side of my bed and scrambled down. I grabbed my magenta (magenta was one of my favorite colors when I was a little girl.) terrycloth robe and padded across the floor in

my bare feet. I opened the door, and there was Michael. Opening the door only enough for me to get through, I slipped out into the hall. It surprised me that he would come to my room after midnight.

He looked subdued. I was not used to him looking anything less than completely sure of himself. He was wearing his corduroy coat and his dark navy blue knit cap. It was cold, so I pulled my robe around me more closely. We sat down on the speckled linoleum floor and settled in with our backs resting against the wall. He pulled his knees up underneath his chin. He hugged his knees and was silent for a moment. I probably asked him, in my quietest voice, what was wrong. Otherwise I know I said very little. He told his story of what had happened that evening in a few words, with his head in his hands. The tough, disdainful self he usually projected had gone into hiding.

“This is such a disaster”, he said quietly. He told me that he had gone to the old meeting room to keep an appointment with someone from his programming class. His name was Jeremy, but I was no programmer so I had not met him.

Two people who had been eager to hurt Michel all year had walked in on them. One of these, whose name was Tom, was a year older than we were. Tom was a brusque, frowning person who was in the air force R.O.T.C. He wore his blond hair cut very close to his head and had a toothbrush mustache which would have caused students of twentieth century world history to think about the Germany of the nineteen thirties and forties.

Along with Tom that evening was Harris, who looked a little like Edgar Allen Poe and often wore an opera cape. He also often had his Afghan hound with him. Harris’ hypocrisy was especially egregious because he was gay also. Years later I would think of him when I read about Roy Cohn and Joseph McCarthy.

Michael came and knocked on my door as soon as all of this went down. Even after he dropped me from his life completely I took it as a compliment that he had come to me and had shown more vulnerability than he ever did before or since.

They called him up and made him stand in front of the group. He wore a suit and tie, and an amused grin. His protective persona again had the floor. He had to give up his key to the meeting room. So did I. I did not regret leaving this group. Michael had been foolish, but they had been petty; even the people who I had thought were bigger than that.

Later that Spring Michael sent me a note in which he quoted Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra. He referred to the part where the philosopher says that in order to be someone's friend you have to be willing to go to war for him. You cannot be a friend unless you are also willing to make enemies. My first reaction was disbelief. I had been his supporter and comrade-in-arms when most people threw stones, or were content to sit on the sidelines. His note implied I had not done enough. I would have defended him again if I had the chance to do it over. It sounds melodramatic, but I would still literally take a bullet for him. And I am not using "literally" as filler.