

# The Accident

A Short Story

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# Table of Contents

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*The Accident* Page 1

Critical Introduction Page 36

Acknowledgments Page 46

Life was easier for Michael than he would've liked to admit. He'd had a good **L**seventeen years of practice in the art of staying alive. It was easy, really: just keep eating, keep breathing, and keep doing what you're told. There's not a lot to it, to be honest.

Even so, Michael liked to believe he'd led a hard life. After all, the veil of night descends even upon the suburbs. For Michael, not having a car at a high school where most kids got BMWs as birthday presents was the very definition of suffering. Not having a girlfriend to pass the time with was the symptom of a cruel reality. All this 'not having' kept Michael from seeing what he already had: family, friends and good health. Plus a shot at entering one of the top colleges in the country. These days he spent his time hanging out with what he considered 'transitional friends' who would most likely vanish from his life once high school was over. The sad truth was that he felt this impending separation every night he went over to Dan's house. But he never brought it up. He just stared at the TV and laughed when his friends laughed and tried to forget about tomorrow. And for a time, it worked.

He wasn't living an especially fulfilling life, but at least he was safe. The course of his future was laid before him. In the next ten years he would go to college, maybe med school, and get a job impressive enough to woo the woman he would ultimately marry. *Two kids ought to be plenty*, he thought. Or if his wife wanted three, they'd have three. He really didn't care. All he wanted was a normal life; a good life; an easy life. A life with ups but no downs. He looked at the path that lay before him and thought, "Eh, it's not bad." He was lucky. He was living in a what some would call paradise.

November fourteenth. There was nothing special about that night. Well, Jim broke one of Dan's video game controllers when he lost a round to Carl, and Navdeep spilled orange soda all over the rug, but other than that, nothing out of the ordinary occurred. By the time he got in the driver's seat, Michael was ready to call it a night.

He coasted down the empty streets, thinking of a girl who loved him. He couldn't wait to meet her. His right hand groped the dial in search of a good song, and having little success, settled for a soft rock station. His eyes neither strayed from the road to scan the half-illuminated store facades he knew by heart, nor did they focus on the road itself. His brain was set on autopilot; he'd put his trust in its survival instincts. And why shouldn't he? Those instincts knew the way home. The stores came to an end, and now houses dotted the left side of the road as a grassy field emerged on the right. But Michael looked up at the sky. A cloud drifted over the moon, a shroud being pulled across a pale orb. Michael's brain was always a good autopilot. But just like its owner, it had never anticipated a change. Suddenly something was in the road.

*Holy shit! What's that??*

Thump! The screech of tires fills his ears and burning rubber fills his nostrils.

*What the fuck was that?*

His heart pounds. He looks in the rearview mirror.

*Oh my god. Oh shit.*

A shapeless mound lies fifty feet behind him. His heart skips two beats.

*What should I do? Oh shit did I kill it?*

The mound doesn't move. He sticks his head out the open window, squinting back into the darkness to confirm the mound's existence.

*Get up, goddam it, get up!*

Thoughts shoot through his mind like bullets: Parents. Cops. Future.

*That's it, I'm out of here. I don't even know what that thing was! Could've been a deer, or... or a big dog! Only a stray dog would be out at night! No one's gonna miss it! No one needs to know!*

He hesitates, looks up and down the dimly-lit street, then brings his foot down even harder than before. With another screech he's off, flying down the road towards freedom.

*I'll just go to bed, wake up tomorrow, go to school on Monday and pretend like this never happened. No one will ever know! ... but...*

The brakes screech once more. He looks back. He can't see anything from here. Whatever it was probably got up and walked away.

*No. I can't just leave. It wouldn't be right. It... it just wouldn't be right.*

He sits there, in the car, in the middle of the street. For how long, he doesn't know. It could be an eternity, and yet he knows that ten seconds haven't gone by. He backs up the car, slowly, wishing with every muscle in his body that there won't be anything in the road. As he nears the black skid marks, which look like giant snakes under the glow of the car's rear lights, he still can't make out a form. For a fraction of a second he's optimistic.

*It's gone! It's okay! It must've gotten up and run off! I can go on living my life again! Everything's back to normal, thank God...*

But then, in the white brake lights, the faint trace of a mound appears.

*Oh shit. Okay, what do I do, what do I do...*

He throws the car in Park, unbuckles, opens the door and steps out. He walks slowly towards the body, his heart swollen with dread.

*Mom's gonna kill me. Dad'll never speak to me again.*

Every step brings him closer to the mound.

*I'll never go to college. Never get a job. My life is ruined.*

He finds himself standing over the body. It has a face. Why does it have to have a face? For a moment even his thoughts stand still. The horror of reality sinks in.

*Jesus Christ. It's just a kid. A little kid.*

A swollen heart sinks into his stomach.

*I... I did this. I hit a kid. I'm a...I'm a...*

A thought!

*Wait maybe he's not dead. I could take him to the hospital, save his life. Heyyy, I'd even be a hero! I could just say I found him here, that it was a hit-and-run!*

He reaches down and gently touches the boy's shoulder. No movement. He wraps his fingers around tiny shoulders.

*Live, damn you!*

He begins shaking the boy, violently, as if his frenzy will arouse the child from his dark slumber. Then he pauses to think rationally. He puts his fingers to the boy's neck, checks for a pulse. Nothing. He frantically searches for a heartbeat, anywhere. Neck, wrists, heart, as if a pulse could be found, somewhere, hidden from view in a secret place; a secret pulse. He turns the boy over and sees the back of his neck.

*Oh my god. Fuck me...*

Blood. Everywhere. Dark, sticky stuff in the boy's hair, on his neck, all down his back. Making his shirt stick to his skin. Blood. *Real* blood. Not bright red like in the movies. Dark, black as the night, and warm. Eerily warm. As if the boy were still alive.

*Okay, let's think. Let's be smart about this. You've got prints all over the kid, but you can wipe them away...*

With the backs of his hands he begins brushing the boy's arms and neck.

*...and your shirt, you've his blood on your shirt, you dumb bastard! It's okay, calm down, you can throw the shirt away. Put it in a garbage bag and pitch it into a dumpster. Oh this sock has blood on it too. My shoes! Ugh, there's blood on the bottoms! It's okay, I can always get new ones.*

He stands up, twists around, trying to look down his back. He frantically tries to recall every police drama he's ever seen on TV.

*Looks good, looks good, gotta think, uh... oh Jesus, the neighbors!*

His eyes dart to the houses partially hidden by trees. Darkened windows peer out from behind leaves and branches like the curious eyes of jungle animals.

*Witnesses... it's too late at night; chances are there's no one watching, but the noise of the car... stupid kid, what did you, I mean, what the hell were you doing in the middle of the road in the first place? And dressed in black no less? Catching fireflies? Star-gazing? Playing Hide-and-go-Seek? Who were you playing—*

He swings around, scanning the open field on the other side of the road with narrow eyes. Tall weeds fade back into the dark tree line. They ripple like ocean waves under a gentle midnight zephyr. No sign of other children. Michael's shoulders relax.

*For Chrissake I'm getting paranoid... as long as there's no evidence, I'll be—Oh my God, THE CAR!*

He bolts around to the front of his car—his mom's car, to be exact—and his face contracts hideously. Ribbed dents fork out like lightning from the front left side of the hood. They look jagged and monstrous in the pale glow of the headlights.

*Now I'm fucked. Killed the car, killed a kid, killed my whole fricking life. Goodbye Brown, goodbye Harvard, hello Maryland State Penitentiary.*

His knees quake, his muscles suddenly strain under the weight of his own body, which now seems to weigh a thousand pounds. He looks up at the heavens.

*Why? What did I do? What did I ever do? Why am I being punished? Help me out of this, God, and I'll believe in you again.*

With a renewed sense of haste, he flings open the back left door, turns around, seizes the body and carries it back to the rear seat onto which he throws it.

*Get in there, you little shit!*

Soon he's flying down the highway towards St. Mary's General Hospital. His foot mashes the gas pedal mercilessly.

*Doesn't really matter now, does it?! I mean, the speed limit is pretty much moot at this point, huh? Ha ha ha, come and get me, coppers!*

He scans the empty road with wild eyes.

*Any other kids out there wanna play? Wanna play midnight hopscotch? Play a quick game of Tag on the highway? Well I'm "It" baby, so you'd better run!*

A pair of headlights marks the first sign of life he's seen in what seems like an eternity.

*Over here, officer! How'd you know it was me, you sly devil? Watching me all along, weren't you? Wanted to see me sweat, huh?*

It zooms by. SUV. Not a cruiser.

*Ha ha, nice fake-out. Well played. You're really enjoying this, aren't you? Ho-boy, I'm delirious. But that's okay! Maybe I've gone crazy! In fact, if I'm crazy, I won't have to go to jail! They'll just send me to some minimum security asylum! I'll watch TV and play checkers with the loonies all day! Lime-green jello? Yes, please!*

Exit 12. He sobers up and puts on his blinker.

*Why'd I put on the turn signal? It's not as if I'd care about getting a ticket at this point. Maybe I just want to follow the rules. Do things right. Yeah, like a goddam blinker will atone for murder. Which, by the way, is exactly what the cop would ticket me for if I got pulled over. "Sir, I guess I can let your failure to use a turn signal slide this time... but that dead body in the backseat's gonna cost ya at least \$30 in court fees."*

The hospital looms out of the dark like a huge parental figure. Traffic light.

*This is it, my last chance to bolt. New life in Mexico. Or Canada! I hear the weather's not so bad in Vancouver...*

Green.

*Shit. Might as well face the music. Come on, car. Take me to my fate.*

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He walks up to the Emergency Service Entrance with the boy cradled in his arms; a pathetic little *Pietà*. The automatic doors slide open, giving him a most cordial

welcome. *This ER doesn't look anything like the ones on TV*, he thinks before reminding himself that reality is rarely like TV. A woman in white hurries over to him.

“Gurney! Over here!” she yells over her shoulder. “What happened?” she asks Michael as she begins examining the body in his arms.

“I hit him with my car,” he says flatly.

“How long ago?” she asks, not finding a pulse.

“Bout twenty minutes ago. Maybe thirty.”

With the help of two other doctors she lays the boy on the gurney. “Alright, step aside!” They run the body down the corridor and out of sight. A nurse approaches Michael with clipboard in hand.

“Please fill this out,” she says flatly.

He sighs and nods. “Yeah, okay.”

Some waiting room. What he's waiting for, he doesn't know. The nurses had already told him the bad news some thirty minutes ago. After they'd clicked their pens shut, the police had said he could go. But still he sits in the waiting room. *At least it's more peaceful in here than in the entrance hall. No doctors or bloody victims rushing to and fro.* He stares off into space.

*Y'know, this isn't so bad*, he thinks. *It's no longer my problem. It's out of my hands. Whatever happens to me, it's up to them now.* Images of judges slamming gavels, wardens pointing to empty jail cells, and guards cracking whips on a chain gang.

*I wouldn't mind the beatings. Whip me, slap me, torture me to your heart's content. I deserve it. Just don't let me feel guilty anymore.*

A clock ticks on steadily. Green plants sit motionlessly next to sofa seats. Seats meant to comfortably accommodate people for uncomfortably long periods of time.

Tock, tock, tock, tock.

Time blurs as people come and go. The lobby remains unchanged. It is its own little world, seemingly peaceful and untroubled, yet filled with troubled thoughts. Michael sits. His mind sits. He has become just another piece of furniture, a natural part of the landscape.

Tock, tock, tock, tock.

Two pairs of shoes come clacking from down the hall. Heavy breaths, furrowed brows. Their thoughts belong in the waiting room.

“Michael? Oh my God, Michael!” The woman seizes Michael in her arms with a life-crushing grip. Relief washes over him. Until the moment he saw her, he hadn’t known what to expect. He’d thought her cold eyes would disown him for sure. Over her shoulder, his father stares at him. Stares, and doesn’t know what to say.

Michael does.

“I wanna go home.”

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Light seeps in from behind the orange curtain. He yawns, catlike, basking in the warmth of the sun. The bed is soft as a cloud. He has no memory. He has slept the

dreamless sleep of the angels. Suddenly, as thought and memory return to him, he feels a sharp tug from behind and he's falling; plunging down from great heights, yanked from paradise. He looks up, sees his life fly away from him, fly out of his reach. He falls far and fast, down through creation and into cold, unforgiving darkness.

He sits bolt upright. His heart has stopped. There's a lump of ice in his stomach.  
*Michael, Michael, what have you done?*

Whose voice was that? Must have been his own. There's no one else in the room. His gaze wanders from bookshelf to desk to mirror. As more memories of the previous night seep into the present, he comes to a painful realization. He can never go back. Never return to paradise.

The bed is no longer comfortable. It grows damp with his sweat. It is a swamp that is quickly on its way to becoming a lake. He hates his bed. He hates his room, and everything in it. It is a prison, a Bastille he has suddenly become aware of. He must get out.

Michael stops when he reaches the door.

*Once I step outside this room, I'm Michael. Michael the Murderer. In here, I'm just me. Just me. This is my world, my place. I can stay here forever, they can't make me go out.*

How will you live, Michael?

*They can feed me through the door. I'll make one of those cat-doors and they can pass me food in buckets. I'll throw my garbage out the window. No one ever needs to see my face again.*

What will you do?

*Nothing. I'll sit in here and be safe. People will forget I ever existed. Or they'll say, "See that house? That's where Michael the Murderer lives. And once a month, when there's a full moon, he comes out to kill again..."* He tries to free himself of these thoughts but they relentlessly parade through his mind.

What about your friends?

*What about my friends?*

They care for you, Michael. More than you know.

*They won't now! They'd be idiots to come anywhere near me!*

You need them, Michael. They can help you.

*What the hell do you know? You're just a voice inside my head!*

Yelling at me won't make the pain go away, Michael.

*Stop saying my name! I know who I am!*

Do you? Then why am I here?

*I don't know... maybe just so I have someone to yell at.*

Then you're only yelling at yourself.

It's a long walk down to the breakfast table. Forty-seven steps, to be exact. And it's not really a 'breakfast' table anymore. It's more of a late-lunch table.

*Damn hunger. If it weren't for my stomach, I could still be in my room.*

He's gotten the "Do you need anything?" a couple of times, to which he's replied "No," and he's given the classic "Go 'way" to his mom's "Sweetie, do you wanna talk?" *Doors are a great invention*, he thought to himself. If only he could keep a door between himself and others forever.

Now that his hunger has drawn him out of his room, he feels more vulnerable than ever. Couldn't he just grab a snack and run back upstairs? No, it's never that simple.

Every meal comes with a complementary awkward confrontation.

*How do I face my mother? The woman who birthed me, who gave me life! Gave life! And I only know how to take it away...*

Lucky for him, she's on the phone. "Yes, that's the driver's license number. His insurance policy number is..."

He opens the fridge and peruses the inventory. A plate of carefully wrapped leftovers catches his eye and he grabs it. The microwave door opens with a pop and his mother looks over her shoulder. He sets the timer on 'Reheat' and turns the other way to avoid eye contact.

"What? Oh no, no, he wasn't drinking! Read the police report!"

*Hurry up, hurry up...*

"Okay, thanks... yeah, send it to me right away. Let me know if you need anything else..."

He hastily pops the microwave door open and snatches the half-heated food. With a quick turn, he heads straight down the hall. His keen ears hear the click of the phone being hung up. He dashes up the stairs, making as much noise as possible, trying to drown out any words that might pursue him.

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Well, that went well. I mean, you got your food, you got a drink, and you've managed to shut out someone who really cares about you. Well done, sir!

*Oh, shut up. What, are you sarcastic now?*

You are. Which is why I can be.

*Just shut up and let me eat.*

Fine.

(A squirrel skips about the yard, burying its nose in the grass. A leaf falls from somewhere out of sight. A second squirrel begins chasing the other one around.)

Y'know, I wonder if this window gets HBO...

*I said shut up!*

Well, technically speaking, I'm not talking. These are called "thoughts."

*Just leave me alone.*

You are alone. I'm the voice inside your head. If you don't want to hear me, then go speak to some real people, like your parents!

*What am I gonna say to them? "Are you proud of me, Dad? Are you proud of your son, the murderer?" What's he gonna say to that?*

You'll never know until you ask.

*Why are you forcing this?*

No. The question is, why are you talking to yourself, Michael?

*Because I don't want to talk to anyone else!*

Exactly. And why might that be?

*Because they'll judge me!*

No harsher than you're judging yourself.

Lights flicker like candles in the distant blackness. An icy breeze wraps around his shoulders, sending chills down his spine. The air *smells* quiet. The world is blanketed in night.

*This looks familiar*, he thinks as store facades fly by on the left. Facades, faces. Faces of people he's grown up with. They stand on the side of the road, waving as he passes. Saluting his big send-off.

*Road, road... where am I going?* He looks forward and the faces recede into the darkness. Lights whiz by as if he were being sucked into a black hole. A field approaches on the right. Houses dot the left side. A giant yellow moon winks to grab his attention.

*No... no! It can't be!* A figure in the road. A little man with a sign. No, a little boy with a sign. And a curly red tail.

He tugs hard on the wheel but it doesn't budge. The boy smiles wickedly.

*Turn, goddam it, turn! No! Not again!*

He yanks harder and harder. His efforts prove futile. The child in the road grows ever closer. Michael stops his tugging to inspect the wheel, and sees that it's welded to the dashboard. The boy breaks into a laugh.

*Why are you doing this? Let me go!* The boy is nearer now, looming taller and taller. His raucous laughter fills the night. One hand holds the sign while the other beckons Michael ever closer with a finger.

*I won't do this again!* he cries, shaking sweat from his face. He reaches for his seatbelt buckle, only to discover a cushioned harness around his body. He looks over the

side of the car, sees a pair of tracks, and realizes he's not in a car, but on a roller coaster. The boy's sign comes into view: 'Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here.'

*Goddam you!* Michael screams as the train slams into the little red creature, who laughs triumphantly and explodes into smoke. The fields and houses are ripped from view, replaced by darkness as he begins to descend. The twin lines of the track drop before him towards a red horizon that opens like a hungry maw.

*No! Oh God, no!*

"God? Ha ha ha! God?! Not where you're going, pal!" says the little red boy, who is now sitting right next to him.

Michael screams his pain and anger, his guilt and frustration, his last shred of salvation as he plunges into the fiery deep. He feels his heart, his soul, being torn out from behind.

He gasps desperately for air. The fire is gone, the tracks are gone, the boy too, and all that's left is Michael, sitting upright in his bed, shivering in cold sweat. The dark shapes of his room enter his eyes, but the nightmare is far from over.

I used to like being in my room. It was my own little private place where I could do anything I wanted, or lay in bed and daydream. Now it's a prison. What's left of my imagination has turned on me. Instead of helping me through this... this whole episode, or even distracting me from thinking about it, my mind keeps reminding me just how pathetic and miserable I am. I'm Michael, by the way.

First of all, I'm not a crazy person. I'd like to get that straight. I'm just a little lonely, and I don't feel like talking to anyone. In the past couple days I've tried reading,

drawing, listening to music; anything to get my mind off of what happened. But it's no use. My drawings turned into cars. The lead singers call me a killer. Hell, even Tom Sawyer got hit by a train. I don't know what to do. I certainly can't go outside. The whole neighborhood must know by now. My friends are probably saying something like, "Yeah I knew him, I was his best friend," just to get attention.

I, on the other hand, do not want attention. What I want is a new life. If only I could throw on a disguise, slip out the window, sell my possessions and buy a ticket to Mexico, life would be gravy. I'd get a fresh start, no one would know who I was, and no one would care where I was from. I'd work at a frozen drink stand by the beach and nobody would know my name. Children would play soccer on the beach. I'd make strawberry smoothies for them and they'd call me "the American."

But fate, it seems, is cruel. I can't live the life I wanted. I had it all figured out: college, career, marriage. It was such an easy plan—a boring plan, but a tried-and-true one. A simple life. That's all I ever wanted. But now I'm *fucked*.

All I've been thinking about lately is what I'm going to say to that kid's parents. How can I possibly face them? I've taken away the most precious thing in the world to them and I don't even know their names. Kids deserve to live. That kid was probably full of curiosity—I mean, he was out chasing fireflies or something, right? Me, on the other hand... I've lost that spark. I'm so bored and jaded that all I do is waste time while I wait for life to kick in. I hardly care about myself, let alone others. I can watch a dozen deaths on TV without batting an eye, but now that I've seen it in *real life*, it's... it's different. My point is, that kid was innocent. That kid was pure. It's not right that I get to live while he doesn't.

“What day is it?”

“It’s Tuesday,” she says. “You’ve missed two days of school.”

“Oh.” His mind wanders. The eyes, the ever watchful eyes of his peers haunt his thoughts. He imagines them following him as he makes his way to his locker. His classmates whisper all around him like swamp creatures. Judging him, mocking him, spreading rumors and lies. Their eyes pierce his soul. “I can’t go back.”

“You *have* to go back. Eventually.”

“But not yet. There’s something I have to do first.” A pair of strangers sit in the corner of his mind, wringing their hands. Leaning against each other. They wait for him. He looks up at his mother, and as a mother, she understands.

“Want me to go with you?”

“No. I have to do this alone.”

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*So this is the house*, he thinks as he looks up from the crumpled piece of paper in his hand. *7021 North Rockway*. The houses along the street look different in the daytime. Their shutters are bright red and their aluminum siding gleams like new. Curious jungle animals no longer. In the driveway of this particular house, a greenish-blue minivan sits, and an oversized Tonka truck lies on its side in the tall grass, forgotten.

Michael summons courage into his fist as he approaches the door.

*Knock, knock.*

A distant thump. Silence. Then the advancing thumps of footsteps through the hall. Hard metal snaps away from the lock. The door swings back and Michael draws in a deep breath.

“Hi.” A boy stands in the door. He can’t be more than seven years old.

*Have I come to the wrong house?* Michael wonders. But the boy’s face tells him otherwise.

“Yeah, um... are your parents home?” The boy nods and retreats back down the hall, letting the screen door swing shut with a snap.

*It can’t be him... it can’t! His face, his neck, his body... everything looks fine. Like nothing happened! Was I dreaming? Am I going crazy?* Heavy steps approach, chasing away his bewilderment. Bushy eyebrows arch up curiously over a pair of tired eyes. The man stands tall, a suburban giant in the doorway. But even through the screen door, Michael feels the man’s weakness. Sleepless nights have fallen on this household like a curse.

“Hello,” the man says solemnly. His vacant facial expression suggests he doesn’t know who Michael is, but his unwavering gaze reveals otherwise. Curiously, his tone is far from hostile.

“Hi,” Michael says. An awkward moment passes as he looks into the man’s eyes. “May I come in?”

The door swings open and Michael enters. He carefully drags his shoes on the doormat, twice each. The man turns and walks down the hall and into the kitchen, and Michael surveys the inside of the house. Clusters of keys dangle from a series of hooks on the adjacent wall. The door to the hall closet stands slightly ajar, revealing colorful

winter jackets. The window curtains in the living room on the left are a frilly blue and white, and Michael imagines how they would sway in a gentle spring breeze. At present, however, no wind blows through this house.

He follows the man into the kitchen. A row of cabinets comes into view on his right, a round wooden table on his left. A woman sits at the table, motionless. Eyes ringed in red look up through tangles of thick brown hair. *Worn down like ruins in the desert*, Michael notes solemnly.

There's a shiver of anguish about the whole place, from the small cars on the floor to the plastic cups in the sink that gives Michael the sudden urge to bolt for the door. The man's voice interrupts his thoughts.

"Want something to drink?"

He clears his throat, as if suddenly remembering that he has a voice, and that people don't communicate via facial expressions alone. A feeble reply escapes his lips. "No, thanks." *I can't ask for anything from them; haven't I taken enough already?* He senses the woman's eyes on him as he stares intently at the cabinets.

Standing in the middle of the kitchen, he feels lost at sea. He has no shelter, no bearings, no ground to stand on. He is completely at the mercy of the ocean. And then the man speaks again.

"Please, have a seat." He motions to a chair at the round table. From behind one of the other chairs the little boy gazes at him with curious eyes. Perhaps he's too young to understand who Michael is and what he's done to his brother, but somewhere in his slumbering subconscious, he knows. He *must* know.

Michael selects a chair and eases into it, careful not to disturb the sanctity of the kitchen with loud, careless noises. The man takes a seat next to his wife. *Time to do it*, Michael says. *Like a Band-Aid; right off!*

“Mr. Fairbanks, Mrs. Fairbanks. I am so sorry about what happened.” The words pour out, a speech practiced a thousand times before, but never spoken. Michael takes momentary comfort in letting his mouth take over. “I can’t tell you how awful I feel about it. I haven’t had a moment’s rest since that night—and yet I have no right to complain to you two; I can’t even *imagine* what you’ve been going through.” The sudden realization of his own words shocks him. He really *couldn’t* imagine. He thought he could, he thought he *had*, a million times in his mind, but the truth was that he’d never had children. He’d never smiled joyously down upon unused eyes or raised his child in the air in proud triumph. No, he’d only seen others do it. His speech begins to waver. “I don’t... I don’t know what I can do or say to make things better. I don’t think I can make things right.”

His eyes are on the floor. Bodies shift in chairs, producing ruffling sounds. But Michael is far away. He sits on a throne in an alien kingdom, waving a wand and righting toppled statues. If only he could do that here.

Before the parents have the chance to speak, Michael continues, “And that’s all I want...” *Don’t lose it!* His voice begins to crack, “...I just want to make things right!” Water floods in from the depths of his soul, spilling out of his eyes, a river bursting through a dam. He chokes back sobs and buries his face in his hands, unable to remove them, ashamed to look at his audience. A mound, a mound of shame. *I am buried alive in the grave that I dug.*

He feels the blackness of the void around him and wonders why they don't interrupt him, don't try to save him from himself. And then the man speaks.

"It's hard. We can't undo the things we've done." A long, high-pitched noise seeps out from behind the thick tangle of hair next to him. "We can't get back what was lost." The noise draws into a mournful moan, then splinters into a desperate sob. Michael crushes his eyes together, as if doing so could crush himself.

"Life isn't just about the choices we make. There are other things too: obstacles, accidents, thrown in our way." The man's eyes narrow with newfound intensity. "It's how we deal with these things that truly matters."

Michael feels pain from the pit of his stomach. Their kindness, their generosity, it hurts more than hate. He wishes they would hit him, kick him, pin him to the ground and scream at him. But instead they are cruel. They offer him kindness, forgiveness, which he refuses to accept. He must answer for his crimes.

After a good five minutes of gut-wrenching crying, Michael wipes his face with his sleeve. His cheeks are so wet that the action is almost futile. *My face is a soggy mess.*

He breathes deep, finds his focus. He feels a little better now that he's cried. "It's just... it's just not fair." Michael's cracked lips move as his tear ducts search for more tears. "It should've been me." He sighs painfully. "It should've been me!"

The woman is cold in her silence. Perhaps she agrees.

"Don't say that," the man says. "Nobody should have to suffer the way *we've* suffered." He sighs and, for a moment, looks very old. Fragile, even, like an old oak who's seen too many summers. One strong wind might be enough to uproot him. His

wife's hands begin to tremble. Michael turns to look at her, and from across the table, can somehow sense the anger simmering within her. He is suddenly afraid. Without noticing his wife's quaking, the man continues, "The truth is, it's nobody's fault."

"Oh yes it is!" she suddenly shouts. The man is jolted by the unexpected outburst. Michael stares in astonishment as she lashes out like a Fury, tangled locks whipping through the air like scorpion tails. "*Someone* was driving that car! *Someone* should've been watching the *road!*"

"Now, honey..." the husband butts in cautiously as Michael absorbs her verbal assault. "It could've been anyone."

"But it wasn't, was it? No, it was some teenager who'd just gotten his license, out for a joyride at three o'clock in the morning!" The assault of her verbal slings and arrows shocks Michael, but what shocks him more is how he finds himself reacting to it. Her insults aren't nearly as therapeutic as he'd imagined. In fact, they make him feel like a cornered beast.

"But it's not like he was drunk or any—"

"Oh come on, Herb! Whose side are you on, anyway?" She glares at him menacingly and points a finger across the table. "He was clearly being irresponsible!"

"Don't." Surprising even himself, Michael speaks up. The echoes of shouting fade from the room. Silence.

"Excuse me?" the woman says incredulously.

"Don't tell *me* who was being irresponsible." Michael's eyes, now fierce with rage, stare at the table. The woman opens her mouth to speak but Michael quickly continues, "A ten-year old boy. Out of his bed. In the middle of the street. At three

o'clock in the morning?" He lifts his menacing gaze and their eyes meet. "And you're saying *I* was the irresponsible one?"

Caught off guard, the woman is almost too shocked to reply. But she finds her voice and declares, "*He* didn't have a car! *He* didn't have a responsibility to watch the road!"

"What!? Are you telling me you never taught him to stay out of the road?"

"No, I—"

"And do you know the *color* of the clothes he was wearing? They were black! So *assuming* you were okay with him *sneaking out* in the middle of the night and playing in the street... you should've at least had the common sense to dress him up in *neon colors* or something!"

"Now wait just a minute," the father says firmly. "We didn't know anything about him sneaking out..."

"And even if we *had* known," the mother continues fiercely, getting to her feet, "Who the hell are *you* to go out driving at that time of night? You're in *high school!* You should've been in bed!"

"Excuse me, but that's irrelevant," Michael argues, also rising to his feet. "It was a Friday night, and I don't have a curfew. Besides, if it weren't *me*, it could've been anyone else! I wasn't the only one out that late, y'know."

"Oh yeah? Then tell me, who else is out driving at three a.m. on a Friday night?"

He shakes his head in frustration. Hot sweat dots his brow and the hairs on his arms stand on end. "I don't know... *people!* People coming home from parties, or

people with night jobs, like cops or truck drivers or doctors at the E.R.! Fed-Ex delivery-men or Seven-Eleven employees!”

“*Those* people would watch the road! You said you were daydreaming!” There’s fire in her words, and Michael can almost swear he sees smoke fuming from her nostrils. He looks at her and sees a scaly monster.

“For like a *second!* But even if I’d been paying full attention, I still wouldn’t have been able to stop in time! In the clothes he was wearing... I mean, I could hardly see him until he was right in front of me!”

“That’s a lie and you—”

“How dare you call me a—”

“ENOUGH!” the father shouts, and everyone is silent. With chests heaving, tempers boiling, and anger coloring the skin, Michael and Mrs. Fairbanks slowly sit down to recollect themselves. The man regains his calm and speaks. “Now everyone just calm down. Take a deep breath and relax. There, isn’t that better?”

Michael mutters, “Easy for you to—”

“Bup-Bup! *Quiet*, I said. Listen, I know everyone is angry, but we can’t lose control of ourselves. We need to address each other *respectfully*, and with *some* sense of decency.” He pauses a minute to think, then says, “Okay Michael, you’ve said before that you’re sorry. You’ve apologized for hitting Ethan. And now you’re saying it’s not your fault. Why?”

“I... I’m not saying... I mean it *was* my fault,” Michael says. Why was such a simple thought so hard to put into words? “But not entirely. That is to say, it’s not *entirely* my fault. He shouldn’t have been out there in the first place.”

“Okay Michael, I hear what you’re saying,” Mr. Fairbanks proceeds calmly, “But you need to understand something. And this is something you can’t learn in school; it’s something that only a parent can truly appreciate.” He scratches his cheek, gathers his thoughts, then proceeds. “It’s *hard* to raise children. It’s a twenty-four-seven job that demands time, effort, and constant attention. If you go to the mall, you take your child with you. If you go grocery shopping, you take your child with you. When you walk through a store, you’d better be holding his hand or else he’ll wander off. Your child will try, at every turn, to play in the dirt, or knock something over, or throw things around.” His wife tries to speak up but he quickly adds, “Wait a minute, honey, I’m trying to make a point here. The fact of the matter is, raising children requires constant supervision. There are only a few times in a week when you have a moment to yourself, and these times are, to a parent, more precious than gold.”

Michael assumes the man’s pause marks the end of his speech. “Okay, but—”

“Bup-Bup! Let me finish. One of these times is at night. With only a few hours between the end of one day and the start of another, we need all the sleep we can get. You think *you* wake up early for school? I’m up an hour before your bus driver leaves *his* home; that is, unless I want to get stuck in rush-hour traffic.”

“Get to the point, Herb,” his wife butts in.

“My point is this: we can’t possibly monitor our kids *all* the time. If one sneaks out in the middle of the night, how the hell would *we* know?”

“Watch your language,” she says, nodding towards the younger son, who hasn’t moved from his spot behind the kitchen chair.

“I’m sorry. But do you hear what I’m saying, Michael?”

He sighs and nods. “Yeah.”

“I mean, you’re a young guy. You of all people should know that if you were to sneak out at night, there’s a good chance your parents wouldn’t know about it.”

“But the thing is, I *don’t*. I’ve never tried to—never *had* to! I’ve earned my parents’ trust by obeying curfew when they set it, by not drinking or doing drugs, and by using their cars responsibly.”

“Well, it’s different for you; you’re older than Ethan. He was ten and had an active imagination. Apparently, so do you. I mean, both of you were day-dreaming when it happened. Or so it would seem.”

*That’s true*, Michael admits to himself.

“Right? I mean, you’re both dreamers, in a way.”

Michael sighs again. “Yeah.”

The mother adds, “You should’ve both been sleeping, that’s all.”

Michael raises his eyebrows and nods in agreement. The woman begins crying again, softly, and her husband gently comforts her. Michael stares at the floor and feels terrible all over again. What was he doing? Ashamed one minute, yelling the next. God, it’s all so fucked up. The train of sanity has derailed and he’s been doing nothing to rescue the victims. He shivers in his cold sweat.

Her sobs eventually cease. Michael looks up. The couple sits there, sharing their misery. A pair of lovers struck by tragedy. Had they ever anticipated this moment? When he’d first laid eyes on her in that grimy jazz café, had he known she would one day bear his children? When she’d dropped the bowl of pancake batter upon spying the ring clasped in his outstretched fingers, had she realized that she’d be making pancakes for

their two children in years to come? When the doctor laid their newborn baby in her sweaty arms, and they stared at their creation with twinkling eyes, had they ever fathomed that it would be a teenager behind the wheel who would take that child away? Michael stares at the floor and hates himself again.

*There has to be a way out of this hell. Every labyrinth has an exit.* He needs to say something to pull them out of this darkness. Dare he ask the question he's had on his mind for so long? He summons his courage and swallows hard. "What was he like?" The parents look up slowly, their miserable expressions thawing in surprise. Michael's eyes beg them. "Really. I'd like to know."

Slowly, the man stands up and retreats from the room. The woman seizes a roll of paper towels from the countertop and daubs her eyes. Michael is reminded of a Buddhist saying: 'Humans are doomed to a life of pain and suffering.'

The man returns with a loosely-bound book. He hands it to Michael, who quickly accepts. As he opens it, an entire life unfolds before his eyes. Crayon doodles of horses, tigers and rainbows litter every page right up to the edge. With each turn of the page, a tidal wave of information washes out. Dreams, friends, wishes, pets, places he's been to and places he'll never see. An entire life, spilling out onto Michael's lap, where he cradles it like a lamb.

The man clears his throat. "His teacher said he loved to draw. Even in class. *Especially* during math."

Michael chokes on a laugh as he lays the book upon the table. How close he feels to this boy, how well he knows him. They were cut from the same cloth. "Did he want to be a fireman? I imagined he did..."

The woman manages to laugh as she reaches for the book. “No, he was much too afraid of fire. Ethan was more the astronaut type.” Michael sees the boy standing in the middle of the road, staring at the heavens. The woman smiles faintly and her husband squeezes her left hand. Her right hand carefully turns a page, and Michael sees a mother dragon tenderly caressing her eggs. The tangled brown locks are peaceful and still. “He invented worlds, you know.”

“Really?” Michael says with sudden curiosity.

“Oh, absolutely,” the man declares proudly. “Whole planets full of people and creatures and machines. Heh! We used to tease him about it. Tell him, Sharon.”

“We’d catch him staring out the window while the rest of us were watching TV. *What planet are you on this time, Ethan?* we’d say. He’d look at us as if we were crazy, and say, *Earth. But I’m looking for Trelnak.* Ha! Can you believe it? What an imagination!”

“And he drew designs for rocket ships,” the man continues. “One had a doggy door so the astronaut’s dog could go out and pee at any time!” He and Michael laugh. They laugh and laugh until their faces turn red. The woman wipes away more tears, and smiles. The man continues, “Ah, boy. His drawings were good, too. Schematics of the ships from every angle, and a detailed look at the inside of the cabin too, like blueprints.”

“A born architect,” Michael says with a faint smile.

The man looks at the floor with regret. The woman sniffs. The gloom of silence reenters the room. Michael sees how his tactless words have affected his hosts. Perhaps he finally sees things from their perspective. Perhaps not. He says cautiously, “What made you decide to have two kids?”

“Well, after Ethan was born, we wanted to make sure he’d have someone to play with,” the man says.

“...But we didn’t want a big family, where the kids wouldn’t get enough attention,” the woman adds.

“Huh,” Michael mumbles, lost in thought. “I’m an only child, but I don’t feel like I get enough attention.” He quickly adds, “Oh, and I’m not trying to elicit sympathy or anything... I just... that’s just the way it is with me. I wish my parents knew me better. It’s hard being a kid.” In the corner of his mind he sees a skinny leg dangling over a windowsill. Black shoes and black pants.

Michael’s gaze falls to the floor. He slowly looks up, tracing the floor tile until his eyes come across a dirty pair of sneakers hiding behind a kitchen chair. Unseen, unheard, but there all along. The boy is probably lonely, confused. Someone ought to speak to him, ought to explain that everything’s okay despite all the shouting and crying. Michael hesitates, wondering if his words are pure enough for the boy’s ears. Then he begins slowly, “What’s your name?”

Realizing he’s being spoken to, the boy recedes further behind the wooden chair. His eyes are wide and beautiful, like a cherub’s.

“Don’t be shy,” his mother says warmly. “Tell him your name.”

The boy doesn’t move.

“Go on,” his father prods gently.

The boy eyes Michael cautiously. “Jason.”

“I’m Michael,” he says with an irrepressible smile. “Nice to meet you.” He offers his hand, but the boy doesn’t move.

“You’re too old to be a brother,” he says. Michael raises his eyebrows, shocked.  
“And definitely too young to be an uncle.”

Regaining his composure, Michael chimes in, “Plus, you’ve already got a father.”  
He gestures towards the man.

“Then what are you?” the boy asks candidly.

Michael kneels down in front of Jason and says hopefully, “A... friend?”

The boy looks at Michael quizzically for a moment, then, shaking his head, says,  
“I don’t know. Friends don’t kill each other’s brothers.”

No one breathes. The refrigerator stops humming. Even the birds outside cease their chirping. It’s so silent that Michael can almost hear his heart crack. All this time, from the moment of the accident, to the hospital waiting room, from the moment he set foot in their house, right up until the present, Michael has been overwhelmed by the sensation of falling; of spiraling downward and downward into a dark abyss. It isn’t until this moment that he’s hit rock bottom. After all his imaginary games, his sleepless nights, his sleepless days, his thirsty soul-searching, his anger and self-hatred and frustration, the full gravity of his situation hits him. Not only has he taken a son, he’s also taken a brother. An irreplaceable older brother. Energy seeps from his shoulders and he feels his body weaken.

The boy’s mother swoops in. “Don’t say that, Jason!”

“He didn’t mean for this to happen!” his father explains.

“Then why did he kill Ethan?” the boy asks innocently.

The two parents open their mouths to speak, but Michael interrupts and they fall silent.

“No no, it’s okay.” He speaks from his own mouth. His body is weak, broken. He is drained, emotionally and spiritually. And yet, from the depths of disgrace, he feels a strange sense of freedom. At last, he is alive and in control. He sits down cross-legged on the floor. This time he comes to the boy not as a stranger, or a villain, but simply as another boy who’s as lost in the world as he is. “Honestly? I don’t know why it happened. Maybe I’m being punished for my lack of ambition. Kids are starving in third-world countries and I’m sitting around here, doing nothing with my life. Or maybe God has a cruel sense of humor. Or maybe, just maybe, there’s no such thing as fate, and things just happen because they happen. I’ve given up on trying to figure out why my life is the way it is. Up until now, it hasn’t even been *my* life, really. It’s just been *a* life that I’ve been lucky enough to watch.

“Even in my *dreams*, I’m not in control. I’m watching myself kill your brother. As if none of it’s my fault.” He sighs and licks dry lips. The boy may be young, but he’s old enough to understand. “But I’m taking back control of my life. Even if that means owning up to what I’ve done.” He looks directly in Jason’s eyes. “Your brother’s death was my fault. If it hadn’t been for me, he’d still be alive. I wish I could talk to him. I wish I could tell him that I’m sorry; that I wish I’d never been born, just so he’d be here, alive, and with you today. But I can’t tell him this. Because he’s gone. He’s gone, Jason, and *we’re* left here, suffering. I really don’t know why it happened. And I don’t deserve to be your friend. But maybe someday you’ll forgive me. It’s the hope that one day you’ll forgive me... that I’m holding on to.”

The birds resume their chirping. Mr. Fairbanks sits back and exhales. Mrs. Fairbanks watches her son intently. Jason looks at Michael curiously, as if he doesn't hate him as much anymore.

\* \* \*

Farewells are rarely easy. But after all the tension of the mid-afternoon meeting, saying goodbye is the easiest thing for all of them to do. They're out on the front porch, Michael and the Fairbanks family. A gentle breeze stirs life into a nearby set of wind chimes.

"Thanks for stopping by," Mr. Fairbanks says, shaking his hand. "I know it wasn't easy."

"I appreciate it, sir," Michael replies. He considers telling Mr. Fairbanks that he hopes to be half as good a father as he is someday, but then decides that some things are better left unsaid. Then he turns to Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Y'know," she says awkwardly, "When you first got here, I was afraid of what I might do. I hated you—hated the fact that you killed my boy and weren't going to jail for it." She draws a deep breath and exhales. "I mean, I was just angry... still *am* angry. But—" A faint smile attempts to creep onto her face. As if she sees a vulnerability in Michael, she proceeds carefully, "I guess I've come to terms with the fact that it happened, and that nothing I can do or say will bring him back. But still... as I'm sure anyone in our position would say... I can't help but wish that it hadn't happened to *us*." She looks intently at Michael, gently brushes his mopy hair, and forces a pleasant grin. "And, I guess, I wish it hadn't happened to you, either."

Michael smiles. Her words are more than he expected. He can tell that she hasn't forgiven him yet; that somewhere beneath the surface, she still hates him. But he realizes too that her verbal forgiveness is the most he can ask for at the moment. "Thanks, Mrs. Fairbanks."

The two parents retreat into the house, leaving Jason and Michael alone on the porch. Michael scans the boy's mildly-freckled face and is reminded of the pulse-less boy cradled in his arms a few short days ago.

"So," Michael says, bending down in front of him. "Are we cool?"

The boy eyes him distrustfully. He narrows his eyes as if trying to gauge the level of Michael's sincerity. Michael quickly adds, "You know I didn't mean it."

Tightlipped, the boy replies, "Maybe. But you still killed him."

Michael sighs. "Well, it was an accident." The boy doesn't budge. "Tell you what. From this day on, the two of us will always be a hundred percent honest with one another. No matter what." Jason wrinkles his brow and squints, perplexed. Michael continues, "The two of us will be... 'Truth Buddies.' That means you're the only one in the world that I'll always be a hundred percent honest with."

"Why?" the boy asks.

"Because I think we have an understanding. And because we've got nothing to lose. With your parents, or your friends, sometimes you lie to them because you don't want to hurt their feelings. But with us, we've got nothing to lose. We're not friends. We're not risking a friendship. I know that you hate me. And you know that I want you to forgive me. But I'd rather have your genuine forgiveness in twenty years than your fake forgiveness now. Know what I mean?"

“I guess so,” the boy replies. Then he adds, “I hate you. I wish you’d never been born so I’d still have a brother.”

Michael is pained by these words, but accepts them. “Good. That’s what I’m talking about. And I must confess that I hate you too, a little bit, for not forgiving me. And I really wish you would.”

The boy frowns. “Well, I’ll probably hate you forever.”

Michael nods. “Maybe you will. Just don’t lie to me about it.” He turns to leave. Jason calls after him.

“Hey, Michael, what’s *hell*?”

“What?”

“Hell. My dad said it. What does it mean?” Michael hesitates. “You hafta tell me, *Truth Buddy*.”

Michael looks skyward in contemplation. Then he answers, “It’s a place where you go to get punished.”

“For what?”

“I dunno. For whatever you did wrong.”

“Oh,” the boy says. Then, with a turn, he vanishes through the doorway.

Things were significantly easier from then on. The funeral wasn’t half as painful to sit through as he’d imagined. He still got some angry looks, and he felt another big surge of guilt, but at least he was in control. The return voyage back to school was a piece of cake. Even the curious, prying eyes in the hallways didn’t faze him. There was

nothing they could do that a seven-year old boy couldn't. And it turns out his friends stood by him. That was a surprise. They weren't transitional friends after all.

I guess you won't be needing me anymore, huh?

*Nope.*

You feel good? Feel strong?

*Like I'm in control for the first time in my life.*

What are you going to do?

*I don't know. But whatever it is, I'm going to be the one doing it.*

Good. Well, see you around, Michael.

*Wait.*

Yeah?

*Are you my conscience? Or God?*

Come on, Michael.

*No, really, I want to know.*

If there's a difference, I don't know what it is.

*...Oh.*

Take care, Mike.

## Critical Introduction

In *The Accident*, the protagonist embarks on a journey of mental and emotional self-discovery. In Michael's opinion, his own apathy provokes his 'fall from grace', and he redeems himself by learning to rely on action rather than imagination to steer him out of various crises. However, his interpretation is problematic because it oversimplifies events and neglects to consider the fact that his actions *cause* these crises in the first place. What Michael sees as a string of events charting his journey from selfishness to thoughtfulness is presented to the reader as several miniature episodes that mimic the greater narrative arc of the story; these episodes follow Michael through the stages of passivity, violent interruption, internal moral debate, decision to take action, and the fulfillment of that decision. As a result, the overarching story is forged in the struggle between the protagonist's desire to simplify and the narrative's proclivity to skew.

Michael begins searching for answers after the accident interrupts what he considers to be a simple life plan. Michael, a natural daydreamer, relies on his imagination to provide his life with meaning. He immediately interprets the accident as a 'fall from grace' after he sees the "Ribbed dents [that] fork out like lightning" on the hood of the car, which make it look like the vehicle was struck by lightning (Page 6). Baffled as to why he is being 'punished', Michael screams at the heavens, "*What did I ever do? Why am I being punished? Help me out of this, God, and I'll believe in you again*" (6). The protagonist looks at what appears to be a freak accident and attempts to give it meaning by searching the scope of his imagination. His reaction is narrow-minded and self-serving, since he perceives the accident to be a tragedy that has befallen *him* rather the *boy*, who, after all, is the one who is dead.

By interpreting the accident as a ‘fall from grace’, Michael creates for himself new questions to ponder: Why has he fallen out of divine favor? Is he like Adam in his lazy “paradise”, or is he like Lucifer, who was punished for pride? In the opening scene, Michael’s only noticeable flaw is his general apathetic attitude, making him seem more like the Biblical Adam, in terms of being a well-intentioned but ultimately inexperienced human being. Michael preoccupies his mind with these thoughts as he tries to forge meaningful connections, oblivious of the irony that he is utilizing the same imagination that took his attention off the road in the first place.

The narrative’s interpretation of the accident differs from Michael’s. It sees the entire scene as one contained episode, starting with Michael’s unfocused driving and ending with his arrival at the hospital. In this episode, Michael’s journey takes him through passivity, a violent interruption, an internal moral debate, a decision to take action, and the fulfillment of that decision, mimicking the greater narrative arc of the story. Michael enters this episode in a daydream, from which he is violently awakened when he hits the boy. This interruption yanks Michael out of passivity and prompts a debate between his impulse to flee and the moral obligation to stay. Ultimately, he chooses the path of honorable action, and his trip to the hospital marks the fulfillment of that choice. Instead of fleeing from the scene of the crime or seeking the assistance of friends and parents, Michael himself chooses to take the boy to the hospital. The story interprets this choice as the protagonist’s redemptive act. Symbolically, just as his attention shifts from sky to road when the boy appears, once he has hit him, his thoughts too must become ‘grounded’. The narrative considers this episode capable of functioning independently from the rest of the story, since it sees the protagonist overcome error and

conflict to do the right thing. The structure of this episode not only resembles a morality tale, but also mirrors what Michael perceives to be the course of the greater narrative body.

In Michael's mind, although he has overcome passivity by taking the boy to the hospital, once he arrives there, he recedes back into his imagination. It is as if passing the burden of Ethan's body on to someone else frees him from his proactive obligation and permits him to reassume passivity, which he demonstrates by sitting idly in the waiting room: "What he's waiting for, he doesn't know... He stares off into space" (8). He finds temporary comfort in the fact that his fate is no longer in his hands; the idea that freedom can be more frightening than imprisonment is introduced as another reason why Michael prefers a passive life rather than an active one. Even after his parents bring him home, Michael remains in his antisocial stasis.

In the days following the accident, Michael locks himself in his room. His self-imposed exile reiterates his proclivity for passivity and his fear of social condemnation. However, he soon discovers that his solitude does not bring him the peace he desires, for his conscience emerges as a judgmental voice inside his head. Even though Michael seeks a passive life, his psyche defiantly opposes him, saying, "I'm the voice inside your head. If you don't want to hear me, then go speak to some real people, like your parents!" (13) Michael's conscience becomes a nagging voice that chastises him for his cowardice. Taking a cue from the voice that pesters him by day, Michael's *subconscious* torments him by night. In his dream, Michael finds himself reliving the traumatic car accident; he is bound to a roller coaster and forced to ride. He tries to resist revisiting this traumatic experience, screaming, "*No! Not again!... I won't do this again!*" (14), but

finds himself shackled and helpless. Curiously, his subconscious presents a version of the accident in which he is the victim rather than the perpetrator, but the outrageously-hyperbolized version of the boy makes this episode mock Michael rather than absolve him.

Somewhere between his dream sequence and his monologue to the reader, a pivotal shift occurs in Michael. In fact, this undocumented moment not only marks a pivotal shift in Michael's behavior, but also serves as the fulcrum of the greater narrative project. It is in this narrative gap that the protagonist decides to pay the Fairbanks family a visit, which he subsequently mentions in his monologue. Perhaps this behavioral shift occurs immediately after he awakens from his nightmare, when he's "sitting upright in his bed, shivering in cold sweat" (15). At this moment, the physical change in his posture mirrors the mental change in his personality, as he forsakes the passive, reclined position for an upright, active one. Following this instant, the voice in his head disappears and does not resurface until the very end of the text, where it exists as a mere afterthought. Perhaps the narrative suggests that because Michael finally obeys his conscience and takes action to 'right his wrongs', he is in accord with his conscience and has therefore reunified the debating forces inside his head. Certainly, the Michael that emerges from isolation seems surefooted in his purpose, having overcome his fears of confrontation and social ostracism. The only voices he argues with in the latter half of the story belong to the parents of the deceased boy: and even after he realizes how rude he's being to Mrs. Fairbanks, Michael's turbulent inner dialogue doesn't recommence, for his personality is unified. So if the pivotal moment that theoretically takes place in the gap on Page 15 and provokes this turnaround in Michael's behavior, then why isn't it presented to the reader?

Perhaps it is so personal to Michael that the narrative refuses to show it, despite the candid view into Michael's psyche that's been permitted thus far. Or perhaps, in this moment, Michael experiences thoughts so pure that he cannot translate them into words. In a story where even personal thoughts and dreams retain a somewhat performative aspect, a moment of unfiltered, unscripted thought is especially significant, so perhaps the narrator is trusting the reader's abilities to fill in this gap.

This moment is pivotal in a myriad of ways; not only for the protagonist, but also for the story itself. In the protagonist's mind, it marks the end of a wasted, downward-spiraling lifestyle and the first step on the road to redemption. In the narrative scope, this moment marks the end of Michael's antisocial imprisonment and the beginning of his active reengagement with the outside world. In the first half of the story, Michael finds sanctuary from the outside world within his own imagination, whether in his daydreams or daily routine. It is his opinion, following the car accident, that tragedy can only befall him when he ventures outside his door, so he subsequently barricades himself inside his room. However, after several episodes of self-nagging and inner torment culminate in an infernal nightmare, Michael realizes that he cannot escape his suffering by hiding. As Satan says in *Paradise Lost*, "The mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n"<sup>1</sup>. Just as the apostate angel makes this statement from the bowels of Hell into which he has recently fallen, Michael comes to a similar realization after he awakens from a dream in which he descends into the "hungry maw" of Hell (15). Unlike Satan, however, Michael chooses to 'climb out of Hell' rather than stay there and become its king.

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, Merritt, ed. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Hackett Publishing; 1957; Indianapolis, Cambridge. Page 217, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, Lines 254-55.

Because of the complexity of his nightmare, Michael's 'awakening' is multifaceted: not only does he realize that he'll find no peace in seclusion, but he also discovers how utterly ridiculous it is for him to accuse the boy of causing the accident; the idea of a "little man" with a "curly red tail" is almost comical in its absurdity (14). Recognizing the fact that the boy is innocent leads Michael to the conclusion that he himself is entirely at fault. Therefore, he feels he must redeem himself with the boy's parents; and he can't achieve this act from within the confines of his room. He's given further reason to visit the Fairbanks household when he reflects upon his perceptions of the boy. Following the bizarre dream, Michael sees how misleading his own imagination can be, and realizes that the only way he'll ever learn who the real Ethan was is by asking the Fairbanks family. Michael interprets the scene at their house as his first step towards redemption, whereas the narrative sees it as a turning point in the text between an internal dialogue and an external dialogue.

The segment beginning with Michael's dream and ending with his departure from his room mirrors the path of the overarching narrative. He enters the dream in a dreamy state of mind, observing the "world...blanketed in night", seeing "store facades...fly by" through docile eyes, only to be violently interrupted by the realization that he's reliving the traumatic car accident (14). This time the moral debate is waged between himself (good) and the boy (evil); he struggles to alter the course of his destiny, only to fail and wake up in a cold sweat. In the pivotal but unwritten moment following his awakening, Michael decides to take action, and his departure from his room marks the fulfillment of that decision. Like the earlier encapsulated episode, this one is also capable of functioning as both an independent tale and a representation of the overarching story.

When Michael visits Mr. and Mrs. Fairbanks, his intention is to make amends for the vehicular manslaughter of their firstborn son, Ethan. Once he's there, however, some of the events that take shape are beyond his control; others, he had not even anticipated. Prior to his visit, Michael visualized the two parents as a "pair of strangers [who] sit...wringing their hands [and] leaning against each other" (17). For perhaps the first time in the story, Michael's assumptions are correct, since the two parents are mourning and emotionally supporting each other when Michael arrives. The protagonist interprets this accurate prediction as an indication that his ability to empathize with others is sharpening, and that he is finally moving from selfish to thoughtful. Whereas hiding in his room had been a selfish act, confronting the Fairbanks family is a thoughtful one. By assuming an active role in his life, Michael feels that he is demonstrating a level of moral maturity he hadn't possessed at the beginning of the text.

However, Michael's mere return to society doesn't absolve him for his crime. In fact, some of his behavior at the Fairbanks household is not only 'wrong', but downright disrespectful. Despite the overwhelming guilt and humility he displays in front of Ethan's parents, when passions mount and Mrs. Fairbanks erupts at him, Michael lashes back at her. He defends himself by saying that Ethan "shouldn't have been out there in the first place" (24). Although his re-assessment of blame is perhaps merely a knee-jerk reaction of his inherent defense mechanism, he has no right to shout at the grieving mother. After the intervention of Mr. Fairbanks, Michael regains his composure and resumes feeling miserable, more so now because of his outburst.

He feels even worse after Ethan's younger brother delivers him a verbal knock-out. The boy calls Michael a killer, provoking the latter to "hit rock bottom" (30) in what

he perceives to be his 'fall from grace'. Michael realizes that "not only has he taken a son, he's also taken a brother. An irreplaceable older brother" (30). In his isolation, Michael was only concerned with how the accident would affect his own life, but now he realizes just how severely his actions have impacted the lives of others. He finally assumes full responsibility, telling the boy, "Your brother's death was my fault. If it hadn't been for me, he'd still be alive" (31). Perhaps, at long last, Michael feels he can relate to the Fairbanks family. His ultimate act of selflessness lies in the pact he makes with young Jason Fairbanks: He proposes the two of them become "Truth Buddies" (33), a concept which pains him but is what he considers best for Jason, who now has a safe resource and emotional punching bag in Michael. The bond forged by this deal is based on truth rather than friendship or brotherhood, which is significant because it demonstrates that Michael now values honesty and responsibility above social acceptance; it also shows that Michael is unwilling to usurp Ethan's role as Jason's rightful brother. Instead of trying to replace the dead brother, Michael seeks to *earn* Jason's forgiveness through service. It appears as if the protagonist has finally matured enough to realize that the only way to atone for his crime is through thoughtful action rather than cowardly avoidance.

However, the narrative refutes this simple and overoptimistic reading. It knows that Michael's problems are far from over, since he's bound to receive some "angry looks" at the funeral, and will have to deal with an awkward relationship with Jason in the future (34). Michael leaves the Fairbanks household thinking that he's done more than anyone could expect of someone in his situation, but despite his best efforts, he hasn't 'healed' the Fairbanks family, and his own future is sure to remain emotionally

complicated. Furthermore, he still has social ostracism, legal issues, and perhaps impending psychological issues to deal with. Plus, his future encounters with Jason will inevitably be awkward and troubling, and may in all likelihood end with the sundering of their truce. If Michael is unaware of these possibilities, then at least the narrative is, which is perhaps why it chooses to end where it ends, before matters can get worse.

As the story draws to a close, so too does another ‘contained episode’ of Michael’s development. Like its predecessors, this segment also mimics the plot of the overarching story. This time, Michael’s initial passive state involves him sitting in silence, absorbing Mrs. Fairbanks’ verbal abuse. His sudden backlash serves as the violent interruption, which is then quelled by the intervention of Mr. Fairbanks. In the ensuing moments, Michael is morally torn between blaming himself and blaming the others, but in large part thanks to the verbal knockout that Jason delivers by saying “Friends don’t kill each other’s brothers”, Michael once again begins to blame himself (30). Aware that he is at fault, Michael attempts to remedy the situation by apologizing to Jason in what is to be his most sincere display of remorse in the story, and he proposes afterwards that they become “Truth Buddies” (33). Although this resolution does not solve everyone’s problems, it is the best solution Michael has to offer, and it aptly demonstrates his understanding of what Jason needs while at the same time showing his willingness to suffer for atonement. Once again, a contained segment functions as both an independent episode and a representation of the narrative body at large.

In the protagonist’s eyes, his choice to lead an active life brings the story full circle. He thinks he has evolved from a whiny, self-serving individual into a considerate, responsible human being. The ability to move on with his life marks his escape from the

passive stasis he takes comfort in, and heralds his return to productive society. As Michael sees it, his heightened levels of social awareness set him apart from his earlier, less-mature self. The story judges Michael differently. In the various miniaturized episodes it presents, an array of Michael's good and bad traits are illumined. Throughout the story, he is constantly making mistakes and subsequently trying to atone for them; it is not as if he undergoes one massive, spiritual revelation and seeks to 'mend his wicked ways'. Instead, he is only human; and like a human, he has both good moments and bad. Each contained episode functions as a microcosm of Michael's experience, since the narrative shows how he has grown a little but is still not without faults. Ultimately, the protagonist makes more sense of his experience than the narrative does. He sees his dismissal of the voice of his conscience, or 'God', from his thoughts as a sign that he has become self-reliant enough to function on his own. The narrative, on the other hand, knows better. It suspects that Michael will need this voice again someday, and has proved by example that the protagonist's moments of confident action are often followed by relapses into passive remorse. And yet, it has faith in Michael, for although the young man makes mistakes, he has shown throughout the course of the narrative his willingness to learn from them. Ultimately, Michael's imagination is a curse and a blessing, for although it can lead him into disaster, it can also help him make sense of his reality and therefore help him become a better person.

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