L. MICHAEL BURT

THE MEMORY OF YOU

You Did Not Lose Your Way

PROLOGUE

The Name I Chose

Reader Preview Edition

An excerpt from the forthcoming book

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PROLOGUE

The Name I Chose

I don't remember the first time I hated my name.

I wish I could tell you how it began. That there was a particular day, a particular person, some terrible thing said on a playground that made me decide I'd had enough. It would give the story a beginning I could point to, something I could return to and say, There. That's when it happened.

But I don't remember it that way.

What I remember is how much I hated hearing it.

My birth certificate says Latrice. My mother gave me that name when I was born in Flint, Michigan, in 1977. She had named me after a man, a police officer she associated with strength. There was meaning in that choice for her, although I don't know everything she understood or hoped for when she made it.

I know what it meant to me.

I was a little boy carrying a name that people associated with girls. They pronounced it Latrice, and I hated having to hear it, explain it, defend it. I eventually began writing it LaTrice, pronounced LahTrus, but that didn't solve much. The written name still belonged to me whether I wanted it or not, and other people continued to decide how to say it.

My family called me Trice.

I hated that, too.

My parents didn't live together, and I spent portions of my childhood moving between their worlds. Different homes, different people, but there was that name waiting for me. To the people calling me Trice, it may have been an ordinary expression of familiarity. To me, it was something I wanted no part of.

I didn't understand why my mother had given me a name I would have to defend.

And I defended it.

There were fights. More than I can remember individually. I know children made fun of the name, and I know what happened inside me when they did. I was angry, embarrassed, quick to respond. I could go from being an easygoing little boy to wanting to fight somebody almost instantly.

I've thought about that contradiction as I've gotten older.

There was a meekness about me, a part of my nature that wasn't looking for confrontation. I could be content going along with whatever was happening around me. Yet I also learned to be ready when somebody challenged me, particularly when the challenge touched something I already felt ashamed of.

Sometimes I wonder what that boy might have been like if he hadn't felt such a need to defend himself.

I don't ask because I believe fighting was the whole story of my childhood. It wasn't. There was laughter, curiosity, running, travel, all the things that made my youth extraordinary in ways I would only begin to appreciate much later.

But I recognize how easily something that begins as a response to the world can become part of the person you believe yourself to be.

I wasn't born fighting over a name.

I learned to.

And somewhere during those early years, I decided I wanted to be called Michael.

I don't remember the day I made that decision. I can't tell you whether it happened in first grade or a little later. In my memory, I was very young, young enough that the exact sequence of events has become difficult to recover.

I remember knowing I wanted the name.

Michael.

There was something about Michael the Archangel that spoke to me. I was drawn to the name and to what that figure represented, although I couldn't have explained the connection the way I might attempt to explain it today. I've wondered whether there was something spiritual about that recognition, something I sensed before I understood it.

I don't know.

And I don't need to pretend I do.

My older cousin Gert suggested another possibility. I remember being at her house on Cass Street when she told me I could use Allen, my middle name. Or L.A.

Allen didn't interest me.

Neither did L.A., although looking back now, I have to admit that L.A. would have been a pretty good name.

But I wasn't shopping around for something that sounded better.

I wanted Michael.

There was no grand ceremony. No dramatic declaration that would divide my life into a before and an after. I began telling people what I wanted to be called, and eventually that became the name they knew me by.

My father's family calls me Mike to this day.

I didn't have to convince them that the name meant something. They accepted it.

That may seem like a small thing until you consider how much of our lives we spend being known through definitions we never consciously chose.

I didn't have that understanding as a child. I wasn't examining the nature of identity or asking philosophical questions about the human experience.

I was asking people to call me by my name.

And I remember one occasion particularly well.

It was ninth grade, in my English class.

I can't remember the teacher's name. She was a white woman, and something about that classroom has stayed with me all these years. I don't remember what we were studying or what made the class feel different from the others, but the memory of being there remains.

That was also the year my friend Danny McFarland died in a car accident.

I think about Danny when I think about that period of my life. Losing someone so young is the kind of experience that remains with you even as other memories begin to fade. I can't tell you that his death had anything to do with the conversation I'm about to describe. I only know they belong to the same year, a time I can still return to in my mind.

One day, I pulled my English teacher aside.

I had done this sort of thing before. There had been other teachers, other attendance sheets, other occasions when I needed to explain that the name written beside my name on a class roster wasn't the name I wanted to hear.

Most of those conversations are gone from memory.

This one isn't.

I told her that the attendance sheet said Latrice, but I wanted her to call me Michael.

Or Mike.

I remember asking her, politely, to respect that.

She said okay.

That was the conversation.

I don't remember an argument. I don't remember her questioning my reasons or insisting that she was required to use the name on the sheet. She accepted what I said.

And I went on with my life.

For years, I didn't think of that moment as anything extraordinary. I had made a request, and a teacher had honored it. There were plenty of other things happening in my life that seemed more significant at the time.

What I find interesting now is how ordinary the moment was.

I wasn't attempting to make a point about personal freedom. I didn't want to deliver a speech to my classmates or challenge the school administration.

I wanted to be called Michael.

And when people called me Michael, I didn't feel as though I'd become someone new.

I've been asked about that. Whether I felt stronger, more confident, more myself once people began using the name.

The truth is, I didn't experience some great internal shift.

Michael was already who I knew myself to be.

Hearing the name didn't create that recognition. It simply meant that somebody was addressing me in a way that felt right.

I didn't need a badge of honor for it.

I didn't need the world to applaud.

I wanted to be recognized as the person I already understood myself to be, even if I couldn't have explained what that understanding was based on.

For a long time, that was enough.

* * *

My mother knew I hated the name she'd given me.

I told her.

I asked her why she had chosen it, and I remember something about her response that has become more difficult to understand with the passing years.

I think I saw hurt in her eyes.

Or perhaps that is what I see now, looking back with the understanding I have as an adult. I can't be certain. Memory is not a recording that waits unchanged for us to play it again. We return to events carrying everything we've experienced since, and sometimes what we recognize today wasn't visible to us then.

I was young, and I had strong feelings about my name. I wasn't especially concerned with finding a delicate way to express them.

I wanted her to know how I felt.

We didn't have the kind of relationship in which every difficult conversation led to a deeper understanding of each other. I loved my mother, and she cared for me. She was present in my life, providing what she could, believing in what I was capable of becoming.

There was also distance between us.

I find that difficult to describe because neither part cancels the other. A mother can love her son, and he can know that love is real, while still longing for a closeness they never quite discover together.

I don't know what my mother experienced when I rejected the name she'd chosen. I don't know whether she felt I was rejecting something about her, or whether she understood that I was expressing something about myself.

There are questions I would ask her today that never occurred to me when I had the opportunity.

My mother died in 2003.

There are conversations we never got to have, parts of her life I never came to understand, and things I would like to say now that I'm old enough to appreciate how much of our relationship existed beyond what I could see as her son.

I still carry the L.

Years after I began calling myself Michael, I was living in Atlanta, performing poetry and doing recording work, when someone suggested I use L. Michael.

I liked it.

Later, when I pursued television and film in Los Angeles, L. Michael became the professional name I used as an actor.

The name stayed with me.

I kept the initial because it belonged to the name my mother gave me. I don't need to be called Latrice to honor her, and I don't need to deny the name she chose in order to live as Michael.

There is room in my life for both truths.

She gave me a name.

I chose the one by which I would live.

And I loved her.

* * *

I am approaching fifty now.

There has been a great deal of life between that ninth-grade English classroom and the man writing these words.

I have traveled, performed, pursued dreams that once seemed enormous, and built things I had no way of imagining when I was a little boy in Michigan. I've known extraordinary people and encountered experiences that opened the world to me in ways I could never have anticipated.

I've also lived through things that nearly ended my life.

There have been years when the person I thought I was seemed to disappear beneath circumstances I couldn't understand or control. Times when I questioned where I was going, what I was doing, and whether the life I had imagined for myself was still possible.

I have felt lost.

I know what it means to look around at the life you're living and struggle to recognize how you arrived there.

And I know how tempting it can be to search for an answer somewhere outside yourself.

Another accomplishment. Another opportunity. Another place to live. Another relationship. Another version of the person you've decided you ought to become.

I have pursued my share of those answers.

Yet something has remained with me through all of it, sometimes clearly, sometimes so quietly that I could barely recognize it.

A sense that my existence reaches deeper than the circumstances I've lived through or the identities I've carried.

A knowing that I cannot entirely explain through what I've accomplished, what I've survived, or what other people have called me.

There have been times when I've forgotten how to listen to it.

I am learning to listen again.

And here's something I find remarkable.

At almost fifty, I am no longer interested in spending the rest of my life fighting to defend who I am.

I've done enough fighting.

I want to experience my life from the fullness of my being, while remaining open to everything I have yet to discover.

That doesn't mean I've resolved every question. There are places in my relationships, my understanding of myself, and my experience of the world that remain unfinished.

I no longer need to pretend otherwise.

What interests me now is the space that becomes available when I stop requiring my past to provide the final definition of my existence.

When I consider that space, I think about the boy who pulled his teacher aside.

He didn't ask her to tell him who he was.

He didn't ask her to give him permission to become somebody different.

He simply told her his name.

I can see him now, not as a symbol of some perfect childhood wisdom, but as a real boy whose life was already complicated, whose emotions were sometimes difficult to manage, and who knew something about himself that mattered.

There was so much he hadn't experienced yet.

So much he didn't understand.

But there was something he was willing to say.

Please call me Michael.

I wonder how often we know something about ourselves before we know how to explain it. How often we experience moments of freedom, presence, or possibility without realizing what has become available.

And I wonder what remains when the names, stories, expectations, and meanings we've collected no longer have to tell us who we are.

I cannot answer that question for you.

I am still discovering what it opens in my own life.

But I know what it has brought me back to.

A young boy, standing beside his English teacher, asking to be called by the name he knew was his.

And a woman who listened.

“Okay,” she said.

There was nothing more he needed from her.

He already knew.