



Dennis and Michael

## The Stand-In

By Pat Janda

When you think of a stand-in, you picture someone taking the place of an actor/actress in a play or movie—a substitute. It's not quite that way with Dennis. However, I don't know what else to call him. He's someone I've never met in my life, but I know his voice immediately on the phone when he says, "Hi, how are ya?" His calls come every few weeks or so from Tacoma, Washington to my home in Fort Myers, Florida and has for the past five years—since just after April 4, 2004. That's the day my son died—my Michael. Only forty-seven years old, he died of a seizure in Tacoma, Washington. It was Palm Sunday, but he died anyway.

It was unbelievable. Only a week earlier, when we were having our usual Saturday conversation, he interrupted himself and said, "You know, Mom, I've always been so proud you're my mother. You've always been on my side." Those words are engraved on my heart.

In order to tell you about Dennis, I have to tell you about Michael first. Their lives were entwined in a way no one could ever tear apart.

Michael was a renegade—he marched to a different drummer. Ever since he was a young boy, he did everything his own way.

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No, he wasn't spoiled, but he was persistent: a real trial in school. And yet, his teachers loved him, even if they wanted to strangle him at times! It was the same with my husband, Don, and me. No matter what, nothing worked.

As the years drifted by he was often in trouble. I recall the time, after a night out with his teenage friends, the police banged on our door.

"We didn't mean to blow up the police car, Mom," he said. "It was in a junk yard and no good anyway."

As I said, he marched to a different drummer. One thing after another: skipping school numerous days, bar fights after too much drinking. And then—one day he was gone. I discovered a duffle bag in his room the night before he left and had the feeling he might leave. I hid the bag under the large flowered hassock in the den—so he wouldn't go. But, he did anyway. No car, no clothes, he just left. He was 18 at the time and left a note, "The road calls."

Weeks passed before he phoned. We were, needless to say, frantic. "I got a job helping load a truck," he told us, "and then I had enough money to call you up."

"In the future, call collect." That was the beginning of hundreds of collect calls from all over the country—Colorado, Montana, Arizona, California – the list goes on and on. And when he called, he'd say, "I just need to hear the voice of home."

He got into trouble in Tucson, Arizona and called from the police station. Don was on a company business trip in Colorado. Frantic, I reached Don and told him what was happening. He contacted the Vice President of the company and was told to take all the time he needed to help our son.

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The company also wired one thousand dollars to cover any costs he might encounter. Don drove straight to Tucson. It took some doing and several days, but he was able to get Michael temporarily released until a court date the following week. He then bought Michael a tan leisure suit, which was popular at the time, and had his shoulder length hair cut a few inches. When they arrived in court, to their surprise, the case was dismissed!

The two returned home to Kankakee, Illinois. Michael found a job at a furniture company a short time later and all seemed to be going well. Then, a month or so later, he surprised me with the news that he felt he must go back on the road.

I could hardly believe it! Michael gathered up his few belongings and started for the door. I didn't feel he no longer loved us. I just knew this was the way he was and probably would always be. Rather than have him hitchhike to the main road out of town, I said, "Get in the car and I'll take you to the highway." I guess that was the hardest thing I ever did. We drove to the interstate and he kissed me good-bye. I can still see him, all these years later, standing by the side of that four-lane highway with his thumb out. Eventually a car stopped and, as he opened the door, he waved to me. Once again—the road called.

Michael settled in California first and then finally the State of Washington, where he lived for many years. He was born in the Navy Hospital in San Diego, so he felt like he was returning home in a way. He eventually married and had a son, Travis, and daughter, Alyssa.

The marriage didn't last, but his love for his children remained solid as concrete.

He also continued to care about Denise, his former wife, who also lived in the same town: Tacoma.

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The roofing business turned out to be the type of work he loved and did well in. He acquired a 1964 Harley Davidson Pan Head motorcycle and became friends with a group of bikers who, though rough and tumble kind of men, were the salt of the earth.

His ups and downs continued. He told me once, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Truer words were never spoken.

And then there was this Good Samaritan trait Michael always had. Most people want to help others and be kind, but Michael was more than that. If he met a fellow who was down on his luck and had no place to go, he’d say, “Well, I guess you’ll just have to come home with me.” And they did. In many cases, he had only met the person one time. Though he had very little, he was always willing to share with others. I remember calling him one day and an unfamiliar voice answered.

“Is Michael there?”

“Just a minute.”

“Hi, Michael. Do you have company?”

“No, Mom, that’s Tattoo Bob. He’s living here now—had no place to go.”

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll take in a serial killer some day?”

“No. I can tell.”

And that’s how Dennis came into the picture. They met at the Cloud Nine bar, a favorite hangout for bikers. Dennis lived in his truck. He had traveled from Florida to Texas to Seattle, Washington and ended up in Tacoma, Washington.

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The transmission job Dennis had in Seattle didn't work out and he now headed for New Mexico. They got to talking about Dennis' 1945 Harley Davidson Knucklehead and Michael's '64 Pan Head. The two had a lot in common. They were both wanderers.

Michael invited Dennis to stay at his house. He could sleep on the sofa. Not wanting to be a burden, Dennis declined. Michael gave him his phone number in case he changed his mind. A couple of days later, as the October winds blew colder; he called Michael and accepted the offer. He intended to stay for a week or so, but was there five years. As time went on, they occasionally argued and bit-by-bit their friendship began to fall apart. Dennis decided to leave one day. He said their friendship meant too much to him to let it go because of disagreements. They kept in touch—both living in the same town.

And then the terrible phone call from Travis—11:00 pm on Palm Sunday: 4-4-04. We live in Florida, but we were there the next day. Our other two sons, Hugh and Chip, flew in from Indiana and Kansas.

It was all a blur, but somehow we lived through it. Our sons are as different from Michael as day and night. Hugh, three years younger than his older brother, is a banker with Wells Fargo. Chip is five years younger than Hugh and a music teacher in Topeka, Kansas with more than fifty students.

Even though they didn't march to the same drummer as Michael, they were close. Don and I were always glad they didn't try to emulate him, however! One boy in trouble all the time was enough.

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The brothers were our rock during those heart-wrenching days out in Tacoma that April. I know we couldn't have lived through it without them. No matter how far away we all are, our hearts are entwined. As Hugh said one time, "They're family—they're us."

When we all assembled to discuss the funeral plans, Michael's buddies suggested a Memorial Service/pot luck supper at the Cloud Nine bar, instead of the traditional Mass we would have planned. They felt he would like that. At the Cloud Nine, as in the television show "Cheers," everybody knows your name. The fellows posted signs all over the city about the Memorial Service for "Pan Head Mike," as he was affectionally called.

About 200 Harleys parked out front that Saturday night and the crowd gathered inside. Every fellow who came through the door asked, "Where is she?" They were looking for me.

As I hugged each one, I whispered, "Thank you for being my son's friend." And in every case the answer was the same, "But you don't know what he did for me." All these men, with their long hair and black shirts and tattoos up their arms, were the tenderest, sweetest men you could ever meet. To see them walking in with a covered dish—well, it was a memory not soon forgotten.

One of the crowd, whom they referred to as The Reverend, gave a touching Eulogy and when he finished, another drove Michael's Harley slowly in while a recording of "Amazing Grace" played. No matter how tough they were, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. Michael would have been shaking his head slowly from side to side, and I know tears would have glistened in the corners of his green eyes.

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And then Dennis called Travis on his cell phone. He was not able to come to the Memorial Service because he was in Texas and couldn't drive his Harley that far in time. He asked to speak to me.

After his words of sympathy, he said, "I never thanked you for the Christmas present you sent when I was at Mike's. It was a black T-shirt, the only gift I got that year.

It meant a lot to me." I didn't even remember the shirt. I often sent a box for whoever was there at the time.

The following month, on Mother's Day, Dennis sent a card and an old picture of Michael and him. He wrote a note saying he hoped I wouldn't mind if he sent a Mother's Day card. I didn't mind at all.

And that was the beginning of the phone calls that continue to this day. When I hear his voice and especially what he has to say and how he says it, I'm once again talking to Michael.

"I'm thinking of panning for gold out in the hills. I've done it before and I just might strike it rich one of these days." Adventure is his middle name, as it was with Michael.

He's my son's stand-in, a streetwise biker, a part of the brotherhood that cares for one another—a band of brothers. Dennis told me one day, "If I can help in any way to keep Michael alive for you, I'll do it. I'll call you for the rest of my life."

And when I try to thank him, he repeats an old motorcycle creed that goes something like this: "If I have to explain, you wouldn't understand. For those who understand, no explanation is necessary."

Yes. He is our stand-in. Michael would be glad.