

I'll Be There

On June 25, 2009, Michael Joseph Jackson, known famously as “The King of Pop,” died in his Beverly Hills home at the premature age of fifty. But his was no kingly death. He was not slain in battle, like King Ahab, or stabbed in the back, like Edward the Martyr. No, Jackson was killed by acute propofol and benzodiazepine intoxication or, in layman's terms, an overdose of anesthesia and a handful of benzos, administered by his physician, Dr. Conrad Murray, to treat his severe insomnia. But how did a celebrity with a half-a-billion-dollar net worth get to such a low point? And what the hell does his death have to do with me?

Michael Jackson and I have more than a few things in common. We both come from large families, though his nine siblings trump my seven. We both practiced karate at one point in time. We also both suffer(ed) from anxiety, insomnia, and depression. Most importantly though, what truly tethers me to him, is the sad reality that both of us were abused as children. When Michael would make mistakes while performing with The Jackson 5, his father would consequently beat him with a belt. When I misbehaved by not following orders, like taking a nap in the living room with my brother instead of in my own room where I had been told to stay, my father would consequently beat me with a belt. It's strange to think that this is our connection, that this is what I have to share with a dead singer. But he is more than just a dead singer to me.

Abuse is a cycle. Everyone knows this, even those who continue that cycle. Michael Jackson and I are victims of this misery-go-round, strapped in as youths and forced to break free with only the strength of our own free will. I thought he'd be powerful enough, he had money, fame, and adoring fans, but no. He never seemed to escape all the madness, the toxicity, and the torture. But he was my escape. On Sundays, when my father would wake my brothers and me at the crack of dawn to do chores, I was always comforted by *The Best of Jackson 5*. Music changes

people. When some sweet melody or groovy rhythm played, my father became a different man: kinder, softer. He'd flip through his black CD case and crank the volume on our old stereo, and I'd hear the pretty, young voice of Michael Jackson percolating throughout our one-story home on Hettering Road. Once I heard that sweet sound I was changed, too. Fear no longer flowed through my veins while Michael was singing. It was as if he was singing directly to me, as if he knew this little girl dusting countertops and scrubbing a dirty kitchen floor in Delaware of all places, telling me, *"You and I must make a pact. We must bring salvation back. Where there is love, I'll be there. I'll reach out my hand to you. I'll have faith in all you do. Just call my name and I'll be there."*

Sure, Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, and Marlon brought me some semblance of comfort as well, but it was Michael who I adored. It was Michael whose bright smile was front and center on the cover of the Greatest Hits CD that I gazed at and wiped the dust from with extra care. It was Michael who I associated with my father's equanimity. Hence, when I was seven years old, sitting on the maroon leather couch roosted in my grandmother's living room and desperately trying to follow along with the complex words that spewed from a news reporter's lips, ones that held all the grown-ups' attention so fervently, I began to cry. I assumed none of them knew the real reason why this announcement about a pop star's death was making me hysterical. In hindsight, though, I can see that maybe all of them actually knew what had been going on as my aunt consoled me, rubbing my back as tears welled in my eyes which were glued to the television.

I felt betrayed. I thought we had made a pact but here I was now, alone with my own thoughts and this harrowing new information. He wasn't reaching his hand out to me any longer; his hands were in the morgue along with the rest of him. Did he still have faith in me? Can

anyone have faith when they're dead? "Michael," I called out. But he never answered. He wasn't there. At least I still had his album.