

# Living in Dark Houses

by Joe Ponepinto

Michael Gale was fifteen when he went down to the basement, took a rifle from the rack and brought it upstairs. He loaded a .30-06 caliber shell and took careful aim at his father, who rose from the easy chair in which he was sitting, pointed a drunken finger and ordered him to drop the gun. It was the middle of a humid Long Island summer. Michael Gale betrayed no rage. He said nothing, offered no explanation as he shot his father in the heart. When he saw his father was dead, he went out to the front steps, sat on the cool concrete and waited for someone to notice. Two hours later, when the police came, he was still sitting there with the gun beside him and a spot of blood on his finger where he had touched the wound. When the cops asked him if he'd done it, he said yes, and when they asked him why, he said because it had to be done.

The meticulousness of the act, the cold-bloodedness, despite the fact it appeared unplanned, perplexed the doctors, but as they studied him they learned the abuse to which Michael Gale and his mother had been subjected, the years of beatings and deprivations under the constant threat of worse punishments should they try to leave or seek help.

I knew Michael before the shooting – that is, I knew of him – and I knew him after, when he was returned to school after two years away. The rumors – the source of almost all information in high school is rumor – said that he'd been in a federal prison, occupying a cell with a Mafia hit man who was so impressed by Michael's detachment that he shared his professional secrets and gave him a contact for his capo for when he got out. What, then, was he doing back among us, shuffling through Ronkonkoma High's hallways like a specter on his way to social studies?

The other kids avoided him, even the jocks, their bravado about being able to take him notwithstanding, but I was drawn to him, to that aura of recalcitrance, his lack of regret. At lunch break he did not eat, but stood outside on the kickball asphalt looking at the sky as though pondering the clouds, or considering other worlds. There was always a teacher watching him. I'd seen him in the hallways when I was a freshman, but we never spoke. I put my sandwich down and walked past the rows of long tables. Everyone noticed when Michael Gale went by; no one looked up when I did. But I

would speak with him.

The bar on the cafeteria door was cold and resistant, and made a penitentiary sound when I pushed and it recoiled. Outside I saw Michael leaning against the bricks of the gym, with the heel of one foot propped on the wall, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking very Brando, annoyed but too cool to say so. His hair was short and chopped, almost like he had cut it himself, which made him more menacing. It was fall and unseasonably cold, and the air was the kind of dry that made one's skin hurt. I could feel my lips chapping in the wind, but I didn't lick them because it would look girlish. Best not to get too close. I stopped about ten feet away, so I was sure he would know I was talking to him.

"Want this?" I turned my back to Mr. Abernathy and held out a joint I'd rolled in the boys' bathroom between periods.

Michael brought his gaze down from the sky and stared, reticent, maybe unsure of what he was seeing and hearing. "Can't do that here," he said at last.

"For later."

He put his hand out. Moving towards him felt like walking on ice, and I began to be nervous about what I looked like and who else besides the teacher might be watching. I dropped the weed into his palm. Michael slipped it into his shirt pocket and said nothing. I watched Abernathy watching us, but as long as we didn't get careless and light up there was nothing he could have seen. But once the exchange had been made I was flummoxed. What was I supposed to say now; ask him about the weather? I stared at him and he stared at something in the distance. It wasn't that he wouldn't make eye contact, he just didn't. I wasn't any more important to him than I was to the hordes in the cafeteria. I backed away, and after a minute turned and went inside, but I doubt if he noticed.

After school I waited by the gates. Michael lived on my street and could have taken the bus, but he preferred to walk, and today, so would I. I was already halfway down to a roach when he came by. He had no books on him, no supplies, and he wasn't going for the gift I'd laid on him earlier. The other walkers gave him a wide berth like fish around a shark. He was going slowly, and I caught up and then matched his pace.

"Hit?" I said.

He ignored me for a while. At a corner he stopped. "Don't walk with me," he said.

It would have been stupid to ask why, so I didn't, but I shadowed him, giving him another chance to rebuke me, which he did not take.

Instead he walked on as though I wasn't there. Michael moved without destination or purpose, like a zombie forced to roam the earth, or at least as much of it as he could before he finally had to go home for the day. I wondered what was waiting there for him. The rumors – more rumors – were that his mother never got out of bed anymore, and that a grandmother or aunt had come to run the house. Whoever was living with him was never seen outside, so any of it could have been true. He was out of place among the other kids, without an overweight book bag slung over his shoulders, without that hunched posture my classmates joked about of Egyptian slaves pulling another stone for the pyramid of learning. On top of chores and the trouble at home, I had my own studies pressing down on me, inflicting more punishment on my already painful back: a physics book, one for trig, two for English and another for history, all with reading and assignments due within a day or two, which would keep me and everyone else occupied at night, and off these streets, which I guessed was how the parents and administration wanted it.

All that and my father's anger, too, making it so much harder to focus on my studies. Mom begged me to stay with it—keep to the books as my way out. She said if I kept my grades where they were, I could at least get into the community college, where most of the kids I knew would wind up. Stay there and I had a future, she said. I had no choice anyway—if I left, my mother and sister would inherit my share of Dad's wrath.

More years of books and then a job. It didn't seem worth it. Was that the purpose of all this knowledge? I never saw this pyramid we were supposed to be building, only the unimaginative sprawl of our one-story school, surrounded by parking lots and fences, next to a dirt-scarred field that was trod year-round by the football, soccer and lacrosse teams, never left long enough to recover. All that learning supposedly going on, but no monument of knowledge I could see rising from this foundation. The Ronk hadn't changed in the three years I attended. It hadn't changed in thirty years of existence, and I knew it wasn't going to change. They'd brought Michael back to prove it.

We went on like that, the two of us walking but not really together, in silence, until we reached our street. I was ready to turn and go home, make sure my mother and sister were okay, get started on a paper, and if Dad allowed it, maybe catch a sitcom later. I stopped, but Michael kept on walking, past our turnoff, into a section of the neighborhood I hadn't ventured into since I was elementary age. I watched him for a hundred yards or so. He seemed not to diminish as he got farther away, becoming larger somehow, to

compensate for distance. I had to follow.

I tried to see it through his eyes, how he'd raised the rifle against his disbelieving father and lined up the bead on the middle of his chest. His father would be shitfaced probably – some dads always were at that time of day – but would still have the presence to know what was happening and summon the rage we were used to hearing six doors down. It was an anger that took everything personally, from a ball landing on his lawn, to a customer at work changing his mind, to a son's mistakes, and because that was how he saw it, any punishment he decided on was fitting. I remember that summer was particularly loud, and we hadn't seen Michael's mother for a long time. I heard the neighborhood moms whispering she deserved what she got, and had it coming to her for a long time. What she might have done was beyond me, but I knew from experience it didn't have to be much. You get on the wrong side of some people and every act becomes an affront, a challenge to what they see as their authority. It could be we were so used to the noise from the Gale's house that on the day of the shooting we didn't think there was anything unusual.

Did his hands shake? Did he hesitate? The newspaper story made it sound like he aimed the gun with the same indifference as if he were shooting at a tin can. The act of a severely disturbed young man, the police psychologist was quoted as saying. Detached from reality and the consequences of his actions. But just being near Michael, I knew that was all bull. I could feel the heat that flooded his brain as he debated the decision to squeeze the trigger, the heat that was still trapped inside him, no matter how cold he looked to others. He'd have been anything but detached, I was sure of that, and I sensed he was still trying to decide if he deserved the purgatory he'd cast himself into, or if, like the experts finally announced, he was not to blame but was only reacting on a subconscious, survival level, one that demanded he rescue himself and his mother from the monster that was his father.

Everything we're taught about our parents, from our first smack by the obstetrician, is that they're good and dedicated to caring for us, and that it's a sin to disobey, or not to love them back with all our hearts, because whatever they do is done from love and sacrifice. It takes a lot, an adolescence full of disappointment, before we begin to see it otherwise, to see the egos at play, the selfishness, to feel the hurt of neglect and punishment, before we understand that parents are as capable of hurting as a stranger. Maybe more so. And that's when we're able to accept the responsibility, the stigma of hating a parent. Those thoughts must have confronted Michael as

he peered down the barrel of the rifle. He wasn't just firing a bullet into his father's heart, he was taking aim at a whole system, one that gave his father, his abuser, the power of life and death over him, and from which the only way out was to revolt, reverse the violence and seize that power. But by doing so he could never be part of the system again. He usurped and abdicated all at once.

I watched Michael as he walked, and knew he was still working it over, even though there was no way now to make anything different. He went past rows of houses, every one as lifeless as the school, as though inside the families were living through the same drama as his—the exquisite threat of an icy, angry, regretful father, who saw enemies in every encounter, and who had become a conduit for, instead of a shelter from the cruelty of the world. In a back room huddled the rest of the family, petrified they might set him off. I knew it couldn't be so. There *were* happy families. I'd seen them. They came out on weekends to play. Their houses lit up in the evenings and looked warm inside. But I hadn't known them the way I knew clans like Michael's. The houses I knew were dark, a stillness punctuated by explosions of temper that echoed through the rooms and hallways. Being in one was like being a front line soldier during a war—violence was inevitable, unscheduled, unpredictable, and its possibility permeated every minute, every thought.

At the boundary to the town's commercial district, Michael stepped into Zeke's Pizza. When I caught up and looked through the window he was already sitting at a table. A waitress was delivering a couple of slices, like they'd known he was coming and knew what he wanted before he got there. He looked up at me through the glass as he took his first bite. This time he didn't seem as unfriendly as he'd been on the street. It was more like he was sad about something. I went in and signaled to Zeke for two of my own, and pointed to Michael's table. Then I went and stood across from him.

"Go ahead," he said.

I pulled out a chair and sat. It was like a movie. I was sitting down with the don, asking for a favor, wondering what I could do to gain his trust. We'd lived a few houses apart for so long, never talking before. Neither one of us was much for playing stickball or touch football in the street with the other kids, or just getting outside in general, and add in the difference in our ages and the distance was galactic.

"You been following me all the way from school," he said.

"Why do you still go?"

"I have to," he said. "If I don't they put me back in the nuthouse."

"You mean, an asylum?"

"Yeah," he said. "Don't you know I'm a crazy fuck?"

"At least you don't take no shit from the teachers. Man, I wish I could be like that." I felt stupid as soon as I said it. My whole idea had been to be Michael's pal, his equal, almost, but I sounded like a loser kissing up.

"I don't do it to be tough," he said.

I didn't get that. His ignoring the teachers was maybe the coolest thing I'd seen in my days at the Ronk. "Then why?"

"Don't care anymore."

I stared at him. I probably looked like someone's little brother, desperate for attention, but somehow it encouraged him to go on.

"I'm already fucked, so why bother?" he said. "Whatever I do don't make any difference."

"You're not fucked."

"I'm not?" he said. "I killed my old man."

"But he would have killed you, probably."

"And my mother. So what?"

"So you're alive. And she's alive. You had to do it."

Michael ignored my logic and dove into his pizza. This wasn't going where I'd wanted it to. I'd wanted to hang with him, to be his henchman in whatever scheme or adventure was next. But I realized there was no scheme. Whatever desires and plans Michael once had, they were blown away when he pulled that trigger. Maybe if I could get him to talk about it, he'd loosen up. He might dump the guilt out of his system. I looked down at the table. "How bad was it?" I said.

He finished his slices and took a gulp of Coke. Instead of using the napkins he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Don't ask me about that," he said.

I stared at him again. It seemed to be my best approach.

"They asked me about it every day for two fucking years." He said it matter-of-factly, without raising his voice.

"Did he hit you with his hands, or did he use a belt?" I asked. "The sting from leather lasts longer, if you ask me. Probably has something to do with the leverage, the length of the swing. Generates more speed."

Michael narrowed his eyes at me. He sat there for a good thirty seconds, looking at me the way a doctor examines a patient, debating whether to answer. "Everything," he said, finally. "A belt, a baseball bat, the hammer from his work bench. Everything he could think of."

I was a different person at home. There were expectations, and we

– my mother, sister and I – all tried to live up to them. It created a kind of teamwork among us, each taking a part to get something done, like cooking dinner and cleaning the dishes. This was completely different from being at school, where everything was competition. The smart kids competed with each other for the attention of the teachers. The jocks competed with each other for mating rights. Cliques held grudges against other groups, and within them each member fought every other for position in the hierarchy, like chimpanzees. Friendships seemed temporary and conditional. The only constant was the politics. We had none of that here.

At home there were procedures, and there were, of course, penalties for failure or deviation. My father liked things a certain way, and as long as we adhered we could approximate the happiness of the other families on the block, at least for a few nights out of the week. For example, he did not like to have his thoughts disturbed. If we were watching TV while he was reading the newspaper in his den, and there was a loud scene in the middle of the show, he might have been able to hear it. One of my jobs was to anticipate when these scenes might happen – and they do happen in almost every show – and turn down the volume so the interruption was inaudible. I usually kept my hand on the control, just to be safe, so it was easier to prepare myself for the offending segments. But it took something away from our enjoyment of the program. They say you can't miss what you never had, but I did, and still miss the feeling of family. Wanting that life never went away.

Not every disturbance was avoidable. My father had a list he kept tacked up to the side of the kitchen cabinets, on which were the names of the people who kept him from the success he expected, and believed he deserved. It was neat and official-looking, the names written deliberately, denying the impulse that was behind it. There were several dozen entries, and next to each was a note to remind him of what the person did. There were days when he added another name, and he told us how he would exact revenge, even if it took the rest of his life. Those were the days it was best not to watch TV at all. I really didn't think he needed the list. He would have remembered all those people and their crimes regardless.

I wondered sometimes why my name, and my mother's and sister's were not on his list, since we had offended him more than anyone. Maybe he had another list stashed away just for us. I would have liked to see it, to see if it included our offenses. I'd have liked to know just what, exactly, he had against us.

At home we didn't talk among ourselves about the punishments that were doled out, although I think I would have liked to. I was bigger

in high school, and was much more able to endure them than my sister and mother. But there was nothing I could do to ease their pain. Sometimes, in my room, I heard their whimpers when he became angry. I should have done something, but I didn't. I let them take it because I was still afraid of what he might do to me.

I couldn't help but think it was like this for Michael and his mother. That's the real reason I hounded him. I wanted to know how he got the courage. I wanted to know what would happen to him after school was over, and beyond.

The next day I cut the last class and was waiting for Michael at Zeke's. I paid for his food in advance as an excuse to sit with him again. When he arrived and saw me, he stopped at the door. I pointed to the pizza and pushed it closer to his side of the table, and he came over. But when he sat down he said, "Listen, I don't come here to talk. You want to sit here, I don't care. But don't ask me any more questions."

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We sat for a few minutes, eating, wiping the grease from Zeke's pies off our mouths. Michael squirmed. I had taken the seat that looks out the window, so that he had to sit facing the rear wall, with his back to the door, and it made him uncomfortable, as though he was afraid someone would jump him from behind. I suppose I had taken my seat to avoid the same feeling. But in a minute the silence made me edgy too, the way I felt in the minutes before my father was due home from work. I couldn't just sit there much longer.

"I need your help," I said.

"No, you don't."

"My mother needs your help. My sister."

He looked right at me and I knew he understood. But he said, "Shut up, man. Just shut up about it. What do you think I can do?"

"Tell me how."

He was an inch away from taking a bite, but he put the slice down on the plate, got up and walked out into the darkening afternoon.

There is a private language among the abused. It's not something that can be understood by those who haven't experienced the shame of their torture, how they live with it, allow it to happen—how they are, ultimately,

both the cause and the result. It is comprised of glances, postures, subtle gestures, and what isn't said communicates as much as what is. Because we are not always allowed to speak, we learn to say things in other ways. Michael and I were doing it then. He stopped a few yards outside Zeke's and reached for a smoke. From the way he was handling it I knew it was the joint. I knew then he would tell me what I was desperate to know.

I sat on a weight bench in the basement of Michael's house. There had been no one home when we entered, so I wasn't able to put the lie to any of the rumors about how he lived. He'd led me straight downstairs, not stopping to let me see the rooms upstairs, not even turning on the lights. At the bottom of the steps he pulled the strings to a couple of bare bulbs hanging from the joists, creating circles of light like those used for interrogations in the back room of a police station. Something hissed and I jumped, but it was only a leaky hot water heater. I watched as the trickle from the rusted barrel made its way into a crack in the cement floor. The gun rack was still on the wall, but it was empty, probably had been since the incident when the cops confiscated anything dangerous.

I thought he would tell me his version of the story at last, but instead he said, "Take off your shirt." Before I could ask why he had his unbuttoned, and he turned around to show me a scar that ran from his left shoulder halfway down and across his back, a rift in the topography of his flesh. He lifted his arm, and there was another line, pink and raised, a smaller ridge of mountains. He had the sinewy look of a wrestler, and maybe would have been on the squad if he'd avoided the injuries his father inflicted. Still, I could see why the jocks were afraid of him.

He moved closer while I dragged my sweatshirt over my head. My shoulder looked moldy in the yellow light, more like a fungus than a bruise. I turned a little to show him my back. The welts from my last beating were fading, but were still visible and painful. He sat down behind me on the bench and touched his fingers to the circular marks that accompanied them, as though he were reading intricate tattoos. "Sometimes he uses a cigarette," I said.

I thought he only wanted to see the evidence, to make sure my story and my motives were true, but while he was still behind me, Michael rested his head between my shoulder blades, and I could feel the soft stubble of his beard against a still sore area of skin. I let him keep it there. The pressure didn't hurt, and I began to think he had some power to cure me.

"Why is there no one else home?" I asked.

"There's no one else to be home."

"Your mother?"

He lifted his head from my back. "She left after I came home and the semester started. I don't even know where she went."

"She wouldn't forgive you."

"Would you?"

It didn't make sense. "He beat her as much as he did you," I said.

"More. He put her in the hospital. She was only back for a few days when he went after her again."

"And that's when you did it."

Michael remained quiet, and I didn't push for an answer. The details didn't really matter at this point. He moved away to the other side of the basement, as if waiting for me to follow him back upstairs. He shed no tears, displayed no anguish over the departure of his mother. He did not seem, even, to be trying to figure this aspect of his tragedy out, but had accepted the fact she was gone. I wanted to tell him to call the police, have them track her down for child abandonment, but I realized then he had been abandoned long before. This was where I might have insisted he come to my house. He could have dinner with my family, watch a little TV, stay in the spare bedroom overnight, or for a few days if he wanted. But of course that wasn't possible either.

"Do you want me to stay here?" I asked. "We could hang out, maybe talk. You wouldn't have to be here by yourself."

"What is there to talk about?" he said.

"Then we don't have to talk."

A clock chimed upstairs. I didn't have to count the bells to know it was five and getting dark, and that I hadn't begun clearing the yard of leaves. It had to be done before he got home. "If I see a leaf on that lawn, it's your ass," he'd said.

"Mom," I said aloud. I had to tell her to take Susan and get out of there. I had to run home and bring them to Michael's house where we could all be safe. But he would come. Or he would stop them before they could leave. I had to get back, right away. I wasn't going to make them take my punishment.

"I know you have to go, Tim," Michael said as I gathered my bag. He understood what was going down. His look said he would have done the same thing.

"Wait for me at Zeke's tomorrow," I said. I bolted up the stairs and

ran the six-house distance, flinging my gear into the garage and grabbing the rake. I attacked those leaves as though they were alive, like they were an army advancing on my mother and sister. But there was a breeze. A gentle thing that for someone else might invoke calm or beauty. I tried my best, but it did no good. Leaves littered the yard and were still coming in from the neighbor's. I worked until it became so dark I couldn't see, and laid the last bag at the side of the garage. He watched me finish and came at me as soon as I was done.

The gun was easy enough to obtain. The discontent at our school ran deep, and there was always someone willing to flout the law for profit, or sometimes just for fun. That made weapons and drugs common knowledge, available with the right contact and the proper amount of cash. Even the nerds would be able to get a gun, if they ever wanted to. I stashed it in my backpack, inconspicuous among the books, just another lump of learning breaking my back.

"One shot," I told Michael. "Just like you."

"And what good will it do?" he asked. "They'll hate you. You think they'll thank you for it, but they won't. You'll be like me."

Neither one of us was eating today. The four slices of pizza sat on the plates, as frigid as the weather outside.

"That was my mistake," he said. "Thinking that she cared."

"He's alone at the house," I said. "My mother and Susan are out grocery shopping. I'm going to do it." I started to get up from the booth.

"You really want to fuck up your life that much?"

"It's like you said, Michael. I'm already fucked. I guess the question is what kind of fucked do I want to be?"

"Just get away," he said. "Steal the car and drive someplace and stay there. Not this."

"I'm not doing this just for me," I said.

"Sure. That's what I thought."

So they would put me away for a while. But no one could touch me wherever it was, and Mom and Susan would be safe, even if they didn't thank me—even if they said they hated me. I could live with that more than the idea of them being hurt. And I would get used to being alone. I would be better at it than Michael. I would prefer it.

He had shown me, in his way, what I needed to know. I paid the tab over his protest, and slipped my backpack onto my shoulder, which caused

me to wince a little from my last beating. I was glad for the pain, for the encouragement it offered.

"I don't know if I'll see you again," I said, which was true but far too dramatic, and I regretted it. This wasn't the end of a movie, where the two buddies embrace each other, knowing that one of them isn't going to make it. In this scene, we didn't even shake hands.

The cold air slapped my face when I opened Zeke's door and stepped outside. This was going to be one of those unrelenting winters,



Model: Bethany Rand

where the snow and the ice started right around Thanksgiving and kept the world frozen until April. I thought about who might shovel the driveway in the coming months, and how much worse the weather would be upstate if it was going to be that bad here. I passed the houses of the neighborhood, unconcerned the families would know there was a gun in my pack, even wanting to stop and tell them about it. I wanted to say, “I’m doing this for you, too.”

My father would be my motivator, I had assumed, but all that simply drained from me as I walked. Everything became calm. There was a certain amount of pride, too—that I’d finally come to a point where I could act, that I could make things right, and that the consequences were not as important. There was no heat in my mind, like there had been in Michael’s. The debate had been put to rest, and I knew it wouldn’t haunt me in the future the way it did him.

When I got to my house I slipped around to the side door and into the garage. I started to close the door behind me, but something was blocking it. Michael pushed it open—so hard that it threw me back and I let go of the backpack. He came in and picked it up before I could, undid the zipper and pulled out the gun. “How?” I said. I hadn’t seen him following me.

He scrutinized the gun as though it were a toy, perhaps not up to the job. He flipped open the cylinder to inspect the rounds. I’d lied. I hadn’t been sure if I could do the job with one shot, like Michael, and I’d loaded all six chambers. He took out four of the bullets and threw them to the garage floor. “This is all that’s needed,” he said. Then he snapped the cylinder shut and spun it. He pointed it at me.

“Michael, you have to let me,” I said. “I have to end this.”

“It is ended,” he said.

He moved to the door that led into the house and jiggled the knob. “Open it,” he said.

I unlocked it, and he took my key. As he stepped inside he asked me where he would find my father, and I told him. Then he closed the door and locked it again. I heard him pad down the hallway to the living room, where my father was surely sitting, reading the paper and swilling a beer. Michael’s footsteps diminished and I listened harder, anticipating father’s raised voice, the rage and indignation, and dreading the eternity between the first shot and the second.