

THE PROMISE

By Michael Marshall

It's been nearly three years since I visited the east coast. Long enough for absence to feel normal, long enough for distance to soften details and sharpen desire. I am preparing to travel through Delaware, New York, and Virginia – states where my family lives and where my past remains quietly intact. I come from a large family – the voices, the laughter, and the love are good for the soul. Separation has not erased the bonds, only stretched them thin.

Over the years, I have been the family member who connects the dots – keeping us in touch via text and telephone. But over the past two decades, our family has grown smaller and quieter. Keeping in touch has become less habit and more responsibility. My role has been to keep everyone updated and connected – because we are family.

Recently, I reached out to my sister, nieces, nephews, and cousins driven by some renewed urgency. I realized how easily relationships drift when left unattended. Birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries are important details to keep track of – however, remembering is not something I do so easily anymore. While technology has helped bridge the distance, it has yet to replace physical presence. Nothing does.

This trip revolves around my nephew. He is preparing to enter Rutgers Law School on a full scholarship, a moment in time that carries weight and pride for our family. His mother died when he was 13 years old – and his father disappeared from his life shortly thereafter. Since then, a village-like flock has looked over him, cared for him, and helped pave the way for his success in life. I promised to be a part of his life. My surviving sister, Michelle, and I will be present as anchors of family support at his commencement. My deceased sister would be proud of the effort in her honor – and of her son who's graduating magna cum laude.

For me, the logistics of travel have been complicated. My calendar is unusually busy lately. Of course I find time for feeding hungry Tucson citizens and helping the neighborhood HOA, but medical appointments have been the wild card in recent weeks. Fortunately, I managed to rearrange appointments and clear enough time to be present in my nephew's life. Realizing that I may not always have this flexibility in the months to come, I weighed my options, identified a small travel window, and made flight arrangements. I'm learning that cancer impacts life in this manner. It redraws the boundaries of choice. The knowledge sits in my chest – quiet, heavy, and impossible to ignore.

My diagnosis comes exactly twenty years from the first time I started intense study, review, and examination for prostate cancer. Poked, prodded, MRI'd, and biopsied, I always managed to have negative results. Some professionals felt as though it was just a matter of time for this day to arrive. Others viewed my case as one of those rare

anomalies. I can't say why me or why now – but I can say there is some relief in knowing what my status is, finally.

For now, the good news is that I'll be with family on the east coast as I get more data following the next series of scans, tests, and exams. I have a new 'silent awareness' of time.

Knee surgeries, spinal fusion, heart valve replacement, and brain surgery were merely a prelude to this year's event. I feel mentally and emotionally prepared to endure. And I'm not alone in the fight. Shigeo has already secured medical journals and texts in Japanese to learn what he can do to help. I trust his commitment. I'll be fine.

My nephew? He'll continue to be great. He is one of the most highly-focused young men I've ever encountered. We keep in touch on a weekly basis. He likes to FaceTime so I always see his smiling face – especially when he says, "Uncle Michael, I know you'll be direct with me," as he seeks time tested perspectives on adult questions.

Meanwhile, my mind keeps flashing back to a time when my youngest sister's love for her son first registered with me. My nephew was two years old. My youngest sister was a happy mom. Her voice was low, soft, and soothing. The moment was something precious as her eyes filled wide with hopes and dreams.

I can hardly wait for that trip to the east coast in a few years – when my nephew graduates from law school.

That is something to live for. I promised his mother.

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