

I was in California, so the call came before sunrise. “I have bad news,” Charles Green, the editor of this magazine, told me evenly. “Michael Kelly was killed in Iraq.” I sat back down on the bed, gut-punched.

There isn’t much to say to news like that, but I had questions. Were he and the soldiers he was riding with under fire? Where and when, exactly, did this happen? In the tender ending of *A River Runs Through It*, John Maclean asks his son Norman these kinds of questions when Norman’s younger brother Paul is killed. Norman doesn’t know much. Neither did Charlie. Nor could he know the answer to what I was really asking: Why are wonderful people like this taken from us before we are ready for them to go? But there are no satisfactory answers, not in a book or in life. Or, if there are, only God has them.

I had fancied myself close to Michael, had known him 10 years, had competed against him. I wrote side by side with him, drank with him, swapped yarns about family and politics with him, had been edited by him at three magazines. But in the first hours of life without Mike Kelly in this world, it became apparent that there are a thousand of us—not all journalists—who’d been touched, and changed, by his preternatural presence.

“Oh, no!” exclaimed a friend from Boston who left the news business to work at Harvard. “He was the best of our generation.”

Another friend of mine, Democratic political consultant Ray Strother, said that Kelly’s death left him disheartened, disoriented. “This brought the war home for me,” he said. “I want to throttle someone, but I don’t know who.”

Michael would have known. In a recent conversation with assistant to the publisher Jill Bartscht, a woman Kelly treated like a kid sister, Jill asked Mike what he was bringing her when he came home from Iraq. “One of Saddam’s ears,” he quipped.

Michael believed in this war and in covering it because he felt he was seeing the story through. Twelve years ago, he’d gone to Iraq, written a book about what he saw, and begun his meteoric rise through the ranks of journalism. All this has been dutifully chronicled in the press in the past week, as have Michael’s high-decibel crusades against what he saw as the shenanigans of Bill Clinton and the wasted promise of Al Gore.

The people who didn’t know him personally wrote about his writing, which is a worthy enough subject. His friends wrote mostly about the man.

It’s an interesting distinction. Invariably, Mike’s magazine colleagues would be asked loaded questions about Kelly from their liberal friends, who would express surprise when told he was the nicest, funniest, fairest, most self-deprecating person on Earth. This wasn’t quite the dichotomy it seems. Kelly was not a Republican, and was not really a political conservative. One of the reasons he was so tough on Clinton and Gore is that he believed he actually *was* what they said they were—a centrist Democrat, with a more hawkish foreign policy than has been fashionable in that party.

But enough about politics. Mike’s writing spoke for itself. It’s the person—this barrel-chested fellow with the pudgy cheeks and the impish smile and, yes, the brass balls and astonishing brain—whom we will miss much more than the column.

He’d come into our office on, say, a Monday morning with specks of paint on his hands, hair, face, and glasses. “Michael, what were you *doing* this weekend?” White House Correspondent Alexis Simendinger would ask. “Painting the Cape May house,” he’d reply cheerily. His daily attire might consist of a plaid shirt, corduroy pants, and a tweed coat. Looking quizzically at this ensemble, Mike would hold up two ties, one of them a god-awful orange color and the other all rumpled (and turquoise) and call out:

“Jill, which tie should I wear?”

“Neither!” she would shriek.

The 20-somethings in our offices here at *National Journal*, where Mike worked for two years, first as a columnist and then as the editor, have been in a fog this week. They are young, and some haven’t suffered loss before. They have now.

“I cried off and on all weekend,” one of them told me. “I still can’t believe it.”

Their grief is all the harder, because it’s not just the loss of someone they believed in; it’s the loss of someone who made them believe in themselves. Siobhan Gorman, a young *NJ* reporter whom Kelly immediately cherished for her Irish name, sent Mike’s wife a letter this week. “Mike was magnetic, and he made a special effort to reach out to me and help me realize that I could be not just a reporter, but a writer,” Siobhan wrote. “He had an amazing gift for making my writing more mine than I could....”

Lou Jacobson, another young *NJ* reporter, remembered writing about the controversial efforts by the federal government to get ineffectual Head Start contractors to per-



COURTESY OF THE KELLY FAMILY



SHEPARD SHERBELL/CORBIS SYGMA

read: "Thank you so much for coming in on short notice and with all your usual top-flight professionalism ... and writing such a perfect piece."

You might conclude that there was nobody like him, but that would be wrong. There are two people named Tom Kelly who are very much like him. Mike credited his dad with instilling most of his best qualities, and his oldest son Tom seemed to us to be Mike's clone. When the boy was 3, he'd run around this office quite bravely—as long as his father was in sight. "Mike! Mike!" Tom would yell, for that is what he called his daddy. And if the boy got tired of playing with trucks, he'd tell us solemnly, "I'm

going to write my column now."

form. Lou examined a program in Texas that was ill-serving the local Hispanic community, then turned his piece in to Kelly. "I had perceived and written the piece as an outside-the-Beltway story," Lou recalled. "He didn't: For all the Clinton-bashing of his columns, he saw it as a little-noticed example of what the Clinton administration was doing right. In fact, he rewrote the entire first page to frame it this way."

What Lou didn't know is that Mike was doing that all the time for senior writers, too. "He could mortally juice copy, man," recalls Kirk Victor, our veteran congressional correspondent. "Once, he really goosed one of my stories, 'The Case Against Impeachment,' which obviously he didn't agree with. But he made it stronger."

I had a similar experience. At the end of the impeachment saga, I delved into the origins of "the politics of personal destruction." Kelly, in a column for *The Washington Post*, had recently written: "The vast wreckage about us is one man's work." He meant Bill Clinton. In my *NJ* cover story, I cited this column as an example of, well, historical myopia. "Back-reading" the story as the senior editor, Kelly asked Charlie Green whether I was agreeing or disagreeing with him. Oh, he was assured, definitely disagreeing. "I see," he said. "Then let's make the point more strongly."

Mike freely admitted his fallibility in print, too. After the Good Friday agreement was forged in Northern Ireland, Kelly reminded his readers that he'd previously scoffed at both Clinton's decision to grant a visa to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams and the appointment of George J. Mitchell as a peace broker. "Well," Kelly wrote, "at least I was consistent: wrong in every regard."

Yet Mike would hand out the most extravagant compliments to those who worked for him. A Kelly memo might

This week, Mike's parents and his sisters have been brave. But it is the saddest thing to think about Tom, who is about to turn 7, and Jack, who is 3. Jack has been telling his mother, Madelyn, whom we know as Max, that they must give Mike some "spray-spray," his word for anti-septic spray you would put on a cut, to make daddy all better. But the father who posted your picture in his hotel rooms is not coming home, dear Jack. You must now look to your big brother, who will need you so.

His friends must also learn to live without Mike, who made friends everywhere he went. He was still making them at the end, in Iraq, where he befriended ABC newsman Ted Koppel. "In this environment, you can bond very quickly, and we did," Koppel said. "We, his colleagues, and the scores of men and officers of the 3rd Infantry, with whom he also bonded, came to love him."

I imagine Kelly had also made a friend of Wilbert Davis, the 40-year-old Army staff sergeant from Tampa who loved baseball and who died with Michael—and who also leaves behind two young sons. Since Charlie called me last Friday, we have learned that Kelly and Davis were in a Humvee that had come under fire, that their vehicle went off the road into a canal, and that two other soldiers, thankfully, escaped. The deeper questions will never be answered.

I do know that Paul Maclean, the doomed hero of *A River Runs Through It*, was also a reporter and, like Mike, a rebel. At the end of that story, Norman Maclean's father asks if there is anything else his surviving son can tell him. He is unsatisfied with the reply.

"You know more than that," his father answers sternly. "He was beautiful."

So were you, Michael. Goodbye, sweet man. ■