

WHEN DANCING WITH A PIT BULL,
IT'S ALWAYS BEST TO LET HIM LEAD...

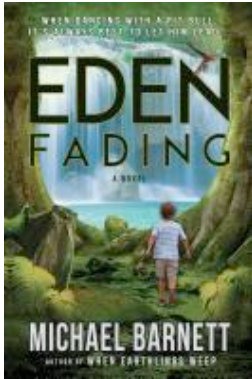
EDEN FADING



A NOVEL

MICHAEL BARNETT

AUTHOR OF WHEN EARTHLINGS WEEP



This story opens in 1961 and, right away, the reader discovers that peace and violence, beauty and evil, can co-exist in the same place, casting a contradiction into every story. Mike appears to be a sweet and innocent three-year-old boy but, at his core, is an unfathomable wickedness, with his younger brother, Jerry, squarely in his sights. Follow the family through years of tribulation as they are beset with one catastrophe after another.

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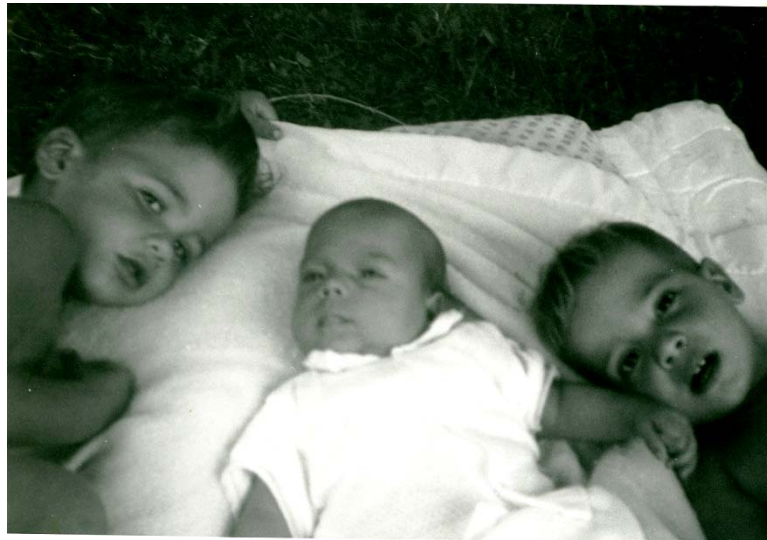
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Second Edition

K Street

The approaching disaster pulls us; draws us, like ants to a flame.



Mike, Jimmy, and Jerry, 1961

We arrive to a typical hazy summer day in Southern California, with the temperature hovering around the mid-seventies. The air is redolent with the smells of eucalyptus trees and orange blossoms. Mixed with these obvious good smells is background smells, which are not so good. These smells are clearly part of this haze that surrounds us and envelops everything. It is August of 1961. We, the watchers, are in the back yard of a small, light-green, and white trim, two bedroom, and one bath home. There is a purple flowered bougainvillea covered lattice, which takes up much of the back wall. A six-foot cedar fence surrounds the back yard, with alternating baby blue and crimson flowered hydrangeas planted every five feet along the back yard fence. At the back right of the yard is a large white playhouse, complete with front porch and railing, a working door, and

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two faux windows, sans glass. At the back left of the back yard is a one-car garage, painted the same light green as the house.

It is a normal lazy Monday morning, mostly quiet with husbands off at work, and their wives busily working on their chores. The occasional car or truck interrupts the silence, as it passes by out front. The muffled sound seems to come from the other end of a long tunnel...or other universe. A large walnut tree with massive branches that reach out to cover almost the entire back yard, and easily stands 100 feet tall is the centerpiece to this serene scene. It stands to the front right of the back yard, and blocks so much light, no matter how hard they try, grass will never grow under it. Underneath the full-sun-blocking branches of the walnut is a large handmade wooden picnic table, where two small boys sit; one is three years old and the other just under two. Both boys are wearing swimming trunks and white T-shirts, and both are barefoot. They each have short blond hair and hazel eyes like their father. They have the charm shared by young boys everywhere; they project purity and innocence, and have probably gathered here to talk about toys, or swimming pools, or maybe forts they can build where they can fight off imaginary Indians. The older boy suddenly hops up and walks quickly to a large homemade brick barbecue grill ten feet away, to retrieve something we cannot quite see. We move closer to get a better look at this shiny object in his hand and see that it is a beer bottle. He holds the bottle out to his younger brother, as he whispers something we can now just make out.

He says, "Drink this Jerry; it won't hurt you. Daddy was drinking it yesterday, and he's OK."

Jerry shakes his head stubbornly, with as much resolution as the older one trying to get him to take a drink. The older brother is relentless and now switches his tactics.

He says, "Look! I will take a drink! Look! Watch Me! Watch, Jerry!"

His younger brother is now watching his hands he has folded on the table before him. The older brother tilts the bottle up and takes a big swallow. He once again holds the bottle out to Jerry, who is still adamantly shaking his head.

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The older brother says, "Look! I'll drink some more. It doesn't hurt me!"

He takes another sip. The younger boy speaks in a voice remarkably quiet and timid.

Jerry says, "No, Mike. Daddy told us not to touch those bottles, that they are bad for us."

Mike tries again, "This isn't bad, it's good, Mmmmmmm..." he says with the best winning smile he can muster, and then takes another sip.

We can see what is happening. Both boys know this old dance well. Mike is the leader, by virtue of being the elder brother, and Jerry the follower, because he is the youngest. Jerry has made a valiant attempt at resistance, but we can see in his eyes that his strength is waning. Mike continues to hold out the bottle, but now he has begun to smile ... just a little. We move in to get a better look. Something of importance is about to happen. The boys freeze in their earlier poses, as the battle of wills goes on. It is then, that we smell something, which immediately draws our attention. The smell is coming from the beer bottle, but isn't beer. We quickly scan the barbecue grill, and see what we are so afraid to see; perched high on the grill, but not high enough, is a metal can of lighter fluid. We frantically put the pieces together in our mind, and realize that Mike has taken an empty beer bottle that was carelessly left there from a get-together the night before and filled it with lighter fluid, to use later. We immediately turn back just in time to see Jerry slowly reaching his hand out for the bottle. We can't stop it from happening, but we can't turn away either. Jerry now has the bottle and very slowly raises it to his lips. Immediately, he lowers the bottle.

Jerry says, "It smells bad."

This is more of a statement than an argument. The two brothers both know that this is a done deal.

Mike says, "Drink it," but he is no longer begging.

He says this with the confidence he shares with all older brothers, whose sole purpose in life is to torment their younger brothers. Jerry nods in resignation then takes a drink. His hands fly to his mouth as his eyes open wide. A muffled cry quickly follows as he jumps to his feet. Something extraordinary happens then: Time swings back to its

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normal pace, which makes us realize that up until now, time has slowed. Time had no meaning, as is often the case when extreme events are taking place. Now, as Jerry stands next to the table and his cry turns into a wail, time catches up all at once. He turns and sprints for the back door on a course to get Mom, who is inside doing the laundry. We turn to look at Mike and we see an intriguing thing happen. Like a shape shifter, he appears to change from a little monster back into a three-year old boy. Nothing changes physically, except for a drooping of the shoulders. The biggest change happens in his eyes. They go from willful and knowing to frightened and anxious. He just sits there on his side of the table, with his hands gently folded on his lap, waiting for his Mom to come out and punish him. He is well accustomed it seems, with the “break a rule, get punished” cycle. He has obviously traveled this road before.

For quite a while, his Mom doesn't come. He is both grateful and a little confused by this. Finally, after what seems like an eternity, he hears the sound of a siren far off. The siren grows louder and more insistent until it dies altogether out on the front street. Mike knows that sound from TV shows and it exhilarates him. Within a few short minutes, the back door opens and slams shut. A very petite blond-haired, blue-eyed woman who seems much too young to be the mother of these children rounds the corner of the house at a fast walk. She is wearing a pair of white pedal-pusher slacks, sandals, and a loose multicolored blouse. Mike is particularly glad he thought to drop the now empty beer bottle, under the table. He is also aware that during his handling of the bottle, quite a bit of the fluid spilled on the picnic table in front of him and on his clothes. Not much he can do about that. He sits up straight and watches his Mom as she draws up to the table, then kneels down next to him.

She says, “Mike, an ambulance is here to get Jerry and take him to the hospital. Your brother said he drank something from a beer bottle, but it wasn't beer. I smelled his breath, and it smelled like lighter fluid, the poison your Dad told you to stay away from.”

Mom's nose picks up that same overpowering smell of lighter fluid. She turns to look at the lighter fluid can on the top of the

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barbecue grill and wonders how Jerry was able to reach it in the first place. Mom now leans forward to smell his breath.

She says, "Mike, did you drink any of the lighter fluid?"

Amazed that she doesn't smell the lighter fluid on his breath, he answers, "No Mommy, I didn't drink anything."

His Mom stares into his eyes for a moment longer, searching for the lie, and decides he is telling the truth. He realizes the strong smell of lighter fluid on his clothes and table, saves him. His Mom now nods her head.

She says, "I called Mrs. Reyes to come and take you and Jimmy to her house while I go to the hospital in the ambulance with Jerry, OK?"

Mike is starting to feel better about how things have turned out. He nods his head, stands up, and walks with his Mom back towards the house.

We follow them up the back steps, through the house, and into the front living room where two paramedics are loading Jerry on to a gurney. Mrs. Reyes is standing there holding a baby who is screaming like a banshee while he holds out his arms for Mom. Meet Jimmy, the third child.

"Maria, thank you again for coming so quickly," Mom says.

Maria reaches out with her free arm and hugs Mom, then whispers intently as she faces her,

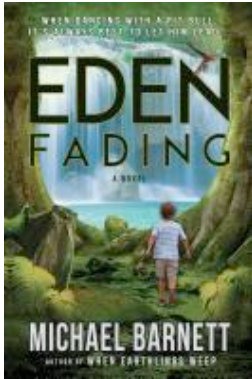
"Glenda, we are friends! This is what friends do. You take care of Jerry. I will watch Mike and little Jimmy. You go. We'll be fine."

Mom says, "Let me get a bag for Jimmy together real quick; diapers, clothes, bottles."

The two paramedic's give each other a look of impatience, which both women see clearly,

Maria says, "No, I'll get everything I need. You don't worry about that. Now go and be with your son."

The paramedics quickly wheel Jerry out to the waiting ambulance (a long bright-white 1960 Miller Meteor Cadillac, with the characteristic "hump on top"), where Mom climbs in, then off they go. Mike stands together with Mrs. Reyes, as his Mom and brother speed away, the siren wailing its crazy-mournful cry. The ambulance mesmerizes Mike, by how beautiful and breathtaking it is.



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