

# Mumbles

by [Chris Dungey](#) (March 2025)



Graveyard at Lexington (Frederick Childe Hassam, 1891)

**He was Mike or Mikey** Moscowicz until an athletic incident left him with a big gap in his gums, upper and lower. He didn't mind (we didn't think) the nickname, Mumbles. His gaping red smile was just one more prop for our acknowledged class clown. Opening those jaws with a maniacal laugh and protruding tongue, Mikey could empty a cafeteria table of girls in about ten seconds.

He came from a large Catholic family, but his father had

fallen in 1980, when the boy was not yet 5 years old. There wasn't much glory in it. A helicopter had smashed into the C-130 that was preparing to extract Sgt. Moscowicz from the aborted Iran Hostage rescue. The nation did not much celebrate that debacle. But the family exaggerated to fill in so many of the blanks that young Mikey just shrugged his unusually broad shoulders and assumed: *Wild and crazy hero*. Not puzzling that he would adopt Sgt. Moscowicz as his template. No one tried to dissuade him until much too late.

Five uncles propped the household up with good male role models but none of them had much money. They were foundry and machine shop workers; fry cooks and school bus drivers with multiplying broods of their own to support. Of his three aunts, Mikey could boast two nurses and one Immaculate Heart of Mary nun. Medical and spiritual advice to him and his mother was always free upon request. The widow Moscowicz baked pies at home for two local diners and a steak house over in Capac. She couldn't afford the Athletic Department's insurance when it was offered. Neither could the uncles.

I *never* called him by that merciless nickname, Mumbles, which painful circumstance had bestowed on him. I did, though, like everyone, teachers and coaches alike, often ask him to repeat things he hadn't quite spoken intelligibly. Besides the class clown role adopted early on, the boy seemed impervious to physical danger or challenge. The genetic behest of the Sarge?

He wasn't ready for water-towers, yet, or for hitching rides on his skate-board behind the mail carrier's little truck. But, he spoke his mind without filter to any teacher or catechism priest. He ignored the cautionary advice of all authority figures whether official, (Constable Dooley on Memorial Day: "You! Moscowicz! If you aren't a Scout, get off that float!"), or neighborhood parent, (Mildred Miller, four houses down the block: "Mikey Moscowicz! Climb down off my bird feeder before I drag you home by your ear!")

I was running for distance events at track practice so I didn't see Mikey have his life permanently altered. We were freshmen and would be sophomores after the approaching summer. He was having a growth spurt (6'2", 230 already) while I futilely prayed for mine. Coach Tom Goode was already eyeing him as a varsity lineman so had cajoled him into putting the shot. This would keep him in the weight room year 'round. By all accounts, Mikey was goofing as usual, playing shot-put catch with another of Goode's projects, Ted Brown. Brownie sent the 12 lb. iron sphere flying back to Mikey who had turned his head to trade lewd double-entendres with a discus girl. He went down fast and flat.

"Hey, I yelled!" Brownie shouted, running to assess the carnage. "Somebody get a towel."

Mikey rose to a crouch in the grass, coughing blood and spitting broken teeth. Blood, snot and saliva spilled in long ribbons onto the inert shot nearby.

"No, no, Brown!" Goode came screeching from a conference with one of the relay teams. "Don't touch him! You've gotta use latex gloves!"

No one could immediately locate the student manager with the trainer's bag. Brown knelt by Mikey on the cleat-chewed turf, lifting the towel gingerly up to his face. When Goode and a chastened manager arrived with the emergency kit, we were all treated to our first sample of *Mumbles* Moscowicz: "Whahtha fuh, Coach. You thayin' I gah the aidth?"

Goode had nothing to say about the kid's language but quickly unpeeled several cold-compacts. Mikey had sustained a dislocated jaw and broken teeth, upper and lower. None of his teachers complained about the month Mikey suffered a wired jaw.

The family managed to put the boy in touch with a veteran's organization that cared for Gold Star kids. But, Mikey was not

very responsible in the care and maintenance of his free dentures—war in the trenches on the field; beer until puking *after* the game. By the summer of senior pictures, he had to smile with a closed mouth.

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Mikey's grades kept him narrowly eligible for sports and squeezed through with enough credits to graduate. He was a vibrant force at Celeryville High's lock-in party, where the Board of Education tried to keep us alive until the morning after Commencement. I'm sure he was the source of several varieties of contraband stimulants that our chaperones remained ignorant of. Mikey *signed* with his Hawaiian shaka hand gesture in everyone's face. He hugged all the girls *and* all the jocks, slobbering his love and congratulations. *My* hug turned into a headlock with rough noogies. I wouldn't see him again for more than fifteen years.

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I survived that night to spend another instructive summer at Celeryville's landmark pickle factory. Then I went off to Port Huron College, seventy miles away. I had enough savings for two semesters and a summer session but managed to score a Work-Study gig with Audio Visual Services. I didn't think much or *anything* about Mikey Moscowicz for the next four years. Like most high school grads, Homecoming was important for the first couple of years and then not again until our thirties—for those of us still in the area. Mikey wasn't at those games. Or, I didn't see him.

Our first Class Reunion was put together in August, 2001 and I didn't see him there either. Topics of conversations included new careers, new children, and the explosion in IT. Then someone asked, *what's become of Mikey Moscowicz? Maybe he didn't survive Y2K?* It would be a staple of gossip at our next two gatherings.

By the second reunion in 2004, we were comparing cell phones and other electronic toys; our views about the war in Iraq and classmates thought to be deployed. Tales of Mikey sightings took a dark turn as well. One fellow had seen him brawling in the parking-lot of Van Dyke Lanes and Lounge. He was getting the worst of it—bleeding, old *Sabers* sweatshirt torn at the neck (he'd already cut off the sleeves). He traded roundhouse blows with a biker even heftier than himself but finally went down. The storyteller, an insurance agent and bowler named Sean Hogan, saw the disturbance while walking toward his car. He said Mikey never stopped laughing during the beating. Hogan helped him up, brushed him off then assisted him to find parts of two partial bridges in the crushed limestone. Who had funded them, Hogan couldn't say. The Harley roared away ahead of someone's 911 call.

"I gathered that those dentures, wherever they came from, weren't going to be replaced by anyone," Hogan said. "He was pretty drunk and without the chompers, he sounded like the Mumbles we all knew and loved. I asked him if he was okay to drive. 'Nah,' he said. 'I don' drive.' Then he wandered up First Street toward town."

This might not be the whole picture, I told myself. Could be anecdotal. I thought about Mikey much later in the night, after my preemptive aspirins and Gatorade. Was he still living at the old family place on Second Street? Did he have any kind of job? Surely the roster of brothers could get him in *somewhere*. Of course, I wasn't recalling the smelly bear (Did he ever take his sweats home?) growling, snarling through the final reps of his bench presses. Or, on the practice field, holding a dummy for the scout team, I tried to avoid being trampled as he sought out a 2nd or 3rd opponent to flatten. Did he get *any* Division I college offers, only to see them squelched by the hopeless GPA?

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Time rolls, accelerates like a beer can in a stony rapids. I was not the only Celeryville grad to bring a divorce, a career change, a new residence, and the accomplishments of an offspring to the third reunion in September of 2008. I had quit the auto plant after earning a degree with the assistance of General Motor's tuition refund. Yep, that used to be a *thing* until the subprime mortgage bubble went *splat*. Bankruptcy was going to end *that* benefit.

I guess I was lucky. I took substitute teaching jobs all over the area and had learned some barista skills. A couple of tattoos and a pierced ear made me well qualified for both roles. *Brew Ha Ha* served decent, fair-trade coffees, imaginative sandwiches (*The Dirty Harry, The Megatron, etc.*), and brought in decent 3rd tier comics every other Saturday night. *Starbucks* hadn't arrived in Lapeer yet, where I had moved. It looked like *Brew Ha Ha* might survive what was already being called the Great Recession. The comedians appreciated a proving ground free of drunks and it was a cheap date for locals.

That reunion gathering came just as the economic avalanche was gaining momentum. It was pretty subdued. No one I talked to had lost a home yet, though some had lost employment. The insurance person, Sean Hogan, was also divorced. No one was buying life policies but, fortunately for him, homes and vehicles with liens still required insurance.

Sean, too, had moved the twelve miles from Celeryville to Lapeer. "Good to see ya. I was in *Brew Ha Ha* with a date one Saturday night but you looked super busy."

"It can get slammed on comic night."

We sat at a round table with eight place settings in an all-purpose banquet facility in Celeryville. Two of the seats were empty. No one at this table was still married. A coincidence or invasive research? I was in the fact-finding stage of a

relationship so my interest wasn't seriously piqued. The sexual tension was palpable. Or perhaps it was gender tension.

"I moved over there because office rent was lower. Can I sell you some car insurance?" He laughed. He was hogging a pitcher of Bud Light draft. "Just pulling your leg, Loren."

"Doesn't matter. I keep only PL/PD on *my* old ride," I told him. "We could talk about some road service. The tires are baloney skins."

"Well, drop in sometime." The pitcher had about one glassful left.

Alcohol, by then, had apparently anaesthetized some of the distrust at our table. Four of our diners leaned into each other as the disc-jockey shifted to his closing playlist of slow, belt-buckle-polishers. Only Sean and I abstained from last-gasp negotiations. His ex was at another stag table so I admired his steely nerves.

"Hey, by the way," he began. "I think I saw our ol' friend, Mumbles Moscowicz a couple weeks ago."

"Really. Where?" We were both toying with our car keys, ready to pull the plug on the evening. Sean had gone for a black coffee. It steamed next to the last dregs of his pitcher.

"It was over on Saginaw Street, just before the railroad tracks if you're headed into town. You know where Golden Arrow is?"

"I do." I had been attending First Presbyterian Church occasionally. One of the items in a bulletin last spring mentioned a special collection for Golden Arrow. It's a drop-in center for the city's homeless and developmentally disabled. It gives them a place out of the weather to play board games and watch movies.

"Well, I saw him walk out of there," Sean said. "I slowed and

put the window down to whistle at him. 'Hey, Mikey,' I yelled. By then I was holding up traffic and had to move."

"Did he see you?"

Sean laughed. "I think so, but I could have been anybody to him. In the rearview, though, guess what? He's signing that old *party on* signal of his. Big ol' toothless grin."

"That's always been his gang," I said. We both laughed.

"I wonder where he was going. I'm in an apartment down the road, across from the Lapeer East. First time I'd seen him."

The evening had unwound as far as it was capable of doing. Sean lifted a sport coat off the back of his chair. I hadn't worn one, the weather at the end of August inflicting one last heat wave. In fact, the scattered remnants of Celeryville Class of 1997 Reunion, still conversing in pairs and trios, all looked up as a rumble of thunder unscrolled outside.

"Sounds like a break in the damn humidity coming." Hogan stood up, the jacket folded over his arm. "I'll see you around," he said.

"Seems likely." I got up as well. None of the three or four females still clinging to the evening bothered to look our way. "I'm going to keep an eye out for Mikey now I know he's around."

I made it out to my second-hand Pontiac G6 just as the torrent unleashed. Sean hustled to his car with the jacket over his head

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I spent plenty of mornings over in Celeryville. Every other Monday I returned my son to his mother. About once a week, I took subbing jobs at Celeryville High School. *That* was a trip with several of my former teachers still on faculty. Loren Jr.



was adamant that I *never* take a job at his middle school and I honored that.

I still hadn't seen Mikey Moscovicz on the streets of Lapeer. I took the occasional assignment at Lapeer East so had to drive past the Golden Arrow Drop-In Center. No Mikey walking nearby or going in or out. The drive into my old home town and Celeryville High always took me past the old Moscovicz place. My curiosity was building. Not long into the school year, I parked at the curb on my way out of town.

Did the parents of Mikey still live here? The place was as ramshackle as ever, two-and-a-half stories, a porch wrapped around two sides. Paint had been peeling for twenty years. Two steps up to the porch had recently been replaced with treated lumber. The floor *had* been painted a shiny battleship grey. There were toys—a semi-deflated basketball, a tricycle. Grandchildren?

I pressed the buzzer and that's exactly what it was—anyone inside was treated to the quarter-ending klaxon of an NBA basketball game. I waited, not wishing to subject the occupants to that noise again. My patience was rewarded after another few minutes. I saw the bottom of a bathrobe or housecoat slowly descending the stairway that faced the entrance. The steps were studied and tentative—I had bestirred someone's pain and infirmity.

An elderly woman made it down the treacherous stairs and inched toward the door. She opened but kept the chain lock in place. A gap of a few inches remained to allow for wary conversation.

"You from cable?" She spoke in a half-whisper, a scuffed smoker's voice. I had no spark of recognition though I remembered Mrs. Moscovicz yelling at every football game. She and Mikey's siblings did *not* hold their applause as requested but whooped and hollered as he crossed the stage at

graduation. Up close, I could see that she was wearing a wig.

"No, I'm sorry. But can you tell me if this is still the Moscowicz residence?"

"Who are you?" Her darkly shadowed eyes, too, were searching for a clue to my identity. She tilted her head, for a better angle, I thought. But then it remained at 45 degrees. "We are still Moscowicz."

"You probably don't remember me. I'm Loren Borden. I graduated with Mikey. We played football."

The door widened the slack out of that chain. "You're old friend? New friends, I call cops. I tell Mikey this."

Well, *that* said a lot. What sort of friends did she have a beef with and how did she know who was who? "No, no. Just an *old* friend from school. Can you tell me where he lives, or how can I get in touch?"

"He live by Lapeer, I don't know where. Sometime he live in a tent. He takes the drugs."

Mrs. Moscowicz was wheezing painfully now. Shouldn't she have oxygen with her? I had probably taxed her enough. I had an impulse to ask my way in and then help her to a chair. The chain remained in place and I didn't want to get myself onto some kind of public registry.

Yet, she didn't seem ready to slam the door. We stood there in silence for half-a-minute and I guess she recovered her breath. Since she wasn't going to fall over *or* close the door, I opted for one more inquiry: "Does Mikey ever stop in to see you, Mrs. Moscowicz?"

Again she looked me over. "You're not County cop? They harass my boy."

Didn't she just tell me that she'd call the police if Mikey's

bad influencers came around.

"No ma'am. I'm not an officer of any kind. I'm not a drug user."

She was teetering. She laid her tilted forehead against the wainscoting of the door frame. "He stop to see me sometime. When he have a job here. You miss him from lunchtime."

*Well, hell ... why didn't you lead with that?* But I was getting warmer. "So he has a job over here?"

Mrs. Moscowicz sighed as heavily as her lungs would permit. She reopened her sunken eyes. I must be a total scumbag to continue plaguing this woman but I was so close. I would have a major headline to present at the singles table whenever the Class of '97 convened again.

"Father Suarez call his cell phone to come work at cemetery. If Mikey answer, the priest pick him up. Mikey dig the grave, sometimes mow, clean up old decorations."

I wanted to squeeze her spindle forearm or touch her hand—some sign of appreciation. But Mrs. Moscowicz was done. She began to close and spoke through the last bit of aperture. "You named what?"

"Loren Borden, ma'am." The door closed softly. "Thank you for your time," I called, hoping she would still hear. *Your precious time.*

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Mt. Calvary was the Catholic burial place for parishioners of Sacred Heart in Imlay City. It was on the other side of a chain link fence from a parking lot for Blazick Foods. That's the iconic pickle factory where I'd labored for four summers. The lot was now reserved for office and salaried workers because the plant had expanded exponentially to both sides of Black's River Rd. I had never attended a graveside service at

Mt. Calvary though I'd been in Sacred Heart for a funeral mass. The penetrating odor of brine must be quite unpleasant on some days for the gathered mourners. That smell didn't come out of work clothes, I knew, nor did the green and yellow stains. I entered the first of two gates.

Much of the acreage lay in shadow. I followed the narrow asphalt lane. So many trees must make Mikey's job tough. Well, but, grave digging—what part could be easy? He must know how to operate a back-hoe. It would be a very long day otherwise. Still, I could not place the image of him that I'd conjured over the years at the controls of heavy machinery. But, as I turned right at the end of the access road, I spied a green, mini back-hoe. It was parked in sunlight where the backstretch swung toward the exit. Headstones were farther between back there as were the trees. Maybe the sun kept molds and leaf stain from disfiguring monuments

No one seemed to be attending the machine. I pulled halfway off the lane—just inches from the nearest headstones. A southeast breeze rustled the trees behind me and brought the chink and scrape of a shovel. My course on foot skirted the machine and the heap of sod and clods it had made. Two empty water bottles lay nearby. The shovel blade flashed above the pit, tossing more fine bits of clay or shale onto the pile. I saw the back of a bald, sunburned head. Then Mikey turned, saw me, and opened that gaping smile.

"Ya thnuck up on me." He reached to the back lip of the grave and took up a soiled baseball cap. Vintage *Detroit Pistons*. "Need my hah." He slapped it against his hip a few times then pulled it on backwards. "The Bad Boyth." His face disappeared and the shovel blade flung out more light colored dirt.

"How's it been going, man?" I moved closer to the hole.

Mikey paused to look me over. He continued to lift and drop the shovel. "Jutht thquarin' it up. Don't wan' the box to cath

on anything. Roots crawl alla way over here. They're a bitsh."

"Do you remember *me*, Mikey?"

Now he squinted, a shaft of sunlight finding his reddened dome through clouds gathering in the west. "Ya faith ith thorta famil'ar. We ever geh high?"

"I don't think so, Mikey. It's me, Loren Borden. We graduated together. We played football."

Mikey continued to hack away at something in the hole. He ducked out of sight again and came up with a sizeable stone and a length of root.

"I gah mah bell rung, thumtimes." He smiled and shook his head. "Yer Loren, huh?"

"I am," I told him. "Some of the class always wonder what you're up to. We never see you at reunions or Homecoming."

He held up a finger for quiet. "Ya hear thah? Football practith, jutht over the Blatzick rail thpur. Ah the new high thcool."

The *Pistons* hat disappeared again. Followed by two last flights of loose clay crumbles and then the shovel. "Gah tha' done." Mikey lifted himself out of the grave with some effort. It took him three tries. He was no longer yoked and was now anchored by a beer gut.

"Wha wuth your name again?" He limped around behind the pile to retrieve a grubby denim jacket. A saw him try to straighten, to work out a tightness in his back. He fished a pack of generic smokes from a jacket pocket followed by a long-barreled butane lighter.

"Loren Borden, Mikey. Listen. If you're done here I can give you a ride back to Lapeer." That inspiration had leapt to mind unexamined. "Your mom said you're living over there."

He lit up then put everything back. "Nah quite done yeh...Loren. Gah puh the back-hoe 'way. Geh paid. Father Suarez pick me up in anothuh owah, drive me back aftuh Taco Bell."

"Well, okay Mikey," I said, with some relief. "I just wanted to stop and say *hello*." The breeze had stilled. The Blazick pickle fumes no longer drifted downwind from us.

"Ya theen how Ma'th real thick." Mickey's smoke lingered now. "Thicker even than me." His gums in the gaping, embarrassed smile weren't close to being pink. "U'm nah thpoth ta go aroun' by her. They can't thtop me alla time."

Someone must have called him *sick* or told him he had a sickness. Counseling at some point? Siblings hollering at him? "I was sorry to see her in bad shape. Listen. If I see you around Lapeer I'll buy you dinner." I extended my hand.

Mikey didn't shake but only raised his *party* fingers. "We can geh high!"

I flashed him back *hook 'em horns* and turned back to my car. The Bobcat fired up behind me.

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What is another decent simile for time's passage? The rust on a tool left out in the elements? The slow motion loop of your car if you've hit black ice? Maybe. The 1997 Class of Celeryville High reconvened for the third time in 2013. Once again, I found my place setting card at a table with three other singles. Second attempts at matrimony had thinned out our small but resolute herd. Sean Hogan sat with a new lady though I couldn't see any rings. His ex was not in attendance. He came over with a mixed drink to catch up on events when chairs at my table were vacated for dancing.

"Hey, I was sorry to see that *Brew Ha-Ha* closed," he said. "What happened?"

I pushed aside a small, sample plate of deserts. "Well, the economy," I told him. What a shocker. "And then Starbucks. And then Bigby."

"Did you land on your feet, I hope?"

"I'm at Bigby now. The hours are flexible and teachers don't wanta come to work more than ever."

He sipped his amber drink. "God, I couldn't do that. I'd commit a homicide in short order."

"The kids scary, alright. I tend to take mostly AP classes unless the budget is tight."

"Speaking of the economy. I'm out of insurance. I'm learning Financial Planning with Edward Jones." He pulled out his wallet and slid me his card.

"Thanks." I smiled. "I've got a plan," I lied.

"Hey, what did you think of our boy, Mikey Moscowicz?"

"Why? What about him?" I said. "I haven't seen him walking lately."

"He died," Sean said, softly. "Overdosed. He was living in a tent behind Wal-Mart"

"Oh my God. That was him?" I'd heard customers talking in the queue at the coffee house—current events between bursts of steam. The cops had found a body. They'd gone to the homeless camp make them put out their fires. This was in April, our Michigan spring impervious to global warming.

"That was Mikey. And, of course, his fellow campers had cleared out."

"Geez, I don't read the County Press any more so I missed the story *and* the obituary."

"Ol' Mikey was a kind of pioneer, as it turned out," Sean continued. "The autopsy said it was a drug called fentanyl. I'd never heard of it and the coroner said it was his first case."

I stared at my fifth club soda with lime twist."Jesus. Cold, then dead, then abandoned."

Sean pushed back his chair. "Speaking of which. I'd better get back to Kelly or it'll be someone else next time."

"Alright, man. I'll come find you when I hit the lottery."

Before I could bail out on the festivities and before Sean could keep Kelly happy on the dance floor, the music was cut. Some kind of portable altar was wheeled out in front of the DJ. Our Class President, Isabella Perez Leonard tested a microphone. "Well, classmates. I'm sorry we have to begin this ceremony after only sixteen years." The lights dimmed further.

There were four candles inside glass globes on the little cart. Zachary Boseman, Class Secretary, stood by with a 3x5 card. Some of our classmates have been lost since we last met. Zach will read the names.

Bella ignited a long fireplace match. She lifted the first glass. "Isaac James Wallace. Killed in action in Afghanistan, November 2011." She touched flame to wick and replaced the glass. Then came Wendy Tortarelli Brown (Ted Brown's wife?) followed by Lyle Lyndon Foster. These were news to me except for Ike.

"And ... lastly." Wow. Bella's voice had thickened to a croak. "But..." She had to pause again.

*Don't lose it now. You're nearly done.*

"Michael Luke Moscowicz. Rest in peace, every one of you."

*Well, yeah. It makes sense.* I recalled that Bella had



something to do with Lapeer County Mental Health. I had made her cappuccinos at Brew Ha-Ha *and* Bigby. She had a Master's Degree in Psychology. Though she was the warmest, most engaging person one could hope to meet, I felt like total loser each time she came in.

The lights came back up to medium dim. The temporary alter was moved out of the way. It didn't matter. The bloom was emphatically *off* the evening.

No one was dancing. I wanted to ask Bella if she had, in fact counseled Mikey at some point. But there would be confidentiality considerations Maybe she wouldn't want to talk about a client she'd lost.

Back at a table with her plus-one, she *was* daubing at her eyes. I had to pass them on my way out. I turned toward her and raised the *party-on* fingers. She saw the gesture and smiled. "Yes, Loren. Thanks for remembering."

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**Chris Dungey** is a retired auto worker in MI. He rides a mountain bike and a Honda scooter for the planet; follows Detroit City FC with religious fervor. More than 75 of his stories have appeared in litmags and online zines, most recently in *Revolver*, *Book of Matches*; forthcoming in *Post Box (UK)*, and *Discretionary Love*. Dungey's most recent collection is called *We Won't Be Kissing*, from ADP/Kindle.

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