



Fred E. McMichael

# A Quiet Little Town

A lighthearted science fiction  
story that could happen to you

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This version was published on 2018-12-15



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# Chapter One – Background

Farthington is a small town in upstate New York nestled in the ski country just north of the Pocono mountains and the Pennsylvania border. For many of the town's fifty thousand or so residents the summers are too short, and the winters much too long. Although it is not uncommon for passionate skiers to travel hours to enjoy their favorite winter sport, few of the natives ever venture out to challenge the well-known slopes surrounding the little village. Most Farthingtonians think bears have the right idea in winter. A trip to the Chestnut Hill Mall to examine the latest additions to McFealy's pet store and maybe a stop at the Farthington bookstore is about as much excitement as most local residents can take on a cold winter's evening. So when spring arrives it's never too soon in Farthington.

Summers in the little village bring few warm days, but it was one of those hot and sticky ones in August when Patrick McMichaels sat on the edge of his bed at 116 Cherry Street talking on the phone to Mike North, his life-long best friend from down the street. Despite their bond, recent years had seen the boys' lives move in separate directions. They were sixteen years old and it was the year 2023.

"Hey Pat, are you going to Golden Lake on Saturday?"

"Can't Mike."

"Ruth-Ann's going to be there."

"Schoolwork. My grades are the pits," explained Pat.

Mike North was an accomplished downhill skier. His bedroom walls were filled with Farthington Gazette sports writeups. Through the years, broken legs, lost teeth, bruised ribs, and numerous trips to the Farthington General emergency room had failed to derail

the boy's goal of one day reaching the Olympics. Mike had worked diligently with one of the most highly touted ski instructors from the northeast who just happened to be his father. His skill had rapidly matured far beyond what most of the experts had ever imagined. An aggressive skier, Mike had shown personal discipline and dedication carrying his Olympic dream to the brink of reality. If he had a weakness, it was his lack of finesse and style– key ingredients in the critical eye of an Olympic judge. Nevertheless, what Mike lacked in textbook technique was certainly overshadowed by his unrelenting drive and unshakeable belief in himself.

As for the experts, there was still plenty of disagreement. Was little Mike North from Cherry Street really Olympic material? Up to now the thick-skinned youngster had proven the experts all wrong. And nothing, or at least nothing anyone could foresee at that moment in time, was going to stop him.

At sixteen Mike was facing his toughest challenge. Plans were set for the North family to move West where the ski season was longer and the competition stiffer. His coach agreed. Mike needed to get out of the local limelight. The two boys had not spoken of the move, but since the “For Sale” sign appeared in front of the North residence they had been spending more time together. Neither boy doubted it was the right thing to do, but still an unspoken sadness seemed to pervade the old neighborhood these days.

“Mike, meet you out back for a quick game of hoops.”

Pat hung up the phone as his father entered the room.

“Pat, how was school today?”

“Ummm... Ok, I guess.”

“Just Ok? How's your chemistry project coming?”

Pat glanced toward the ceiling and then back at his father.

“Look dad, by the time I finish college nobody will care about the stuff they're teaching us today.”

Mr. McMichaels looked sternly at his son.

“Yes dad, I know what you’re thinking. But Mr. Osgood told us everything we’re learning today in school will be old and outdated before we get to use it. He says the world is changing too fast for traditional education to keep pace.”

Through their early years it was Mike North who had struggled to find direction in his life. But at sixteen it was his best friend Patrick McMichaels who was losing his focus. In the early years it had been Pat the dare-devil and Pat the creative thinker. It was Pat who in the summer of their ninth year decided the two boys needed a secret project. That was the summer of the now infamous McMichaels-to-North tunnel. After watching one of Mr. McMichaels’ favorite old-time Steve McQueen movies about a prison escape, Pat had come up with the idea. A tunnel. Yes indeed. They would build a tunnel between their homes. And they would build it alone. Afterall, it made perfect sense. It would simplify things on rainy days.

Today Fred and Janet McMichaels look back upon the incident with a smile. But at the time they found nothing humorous fully expecting to be paying off lawsuits well into Fred’s retirement years. The tunnel actually turned out to be an amazing architectural achievement defying for days a number of longstanding civil engineering principles– not to mention Newton’s law of gravity. Eventually, however, physics won out and few from Cherry Street will ever forget the day six fire trucks pulled up in front of the poor sighted Mrs. Murphy’s home. They were looking for the old woman who had called 911 reporting an earthquake in her backyard. It’s a wonder no one was seriously hurt, except for Mrs. Resinski’s cat Rosie who had gotten loose again that morning. Rosie was almost buried alive. She survived, but hasn’t left home since.

But now, at sixteen, it was a more cautious Pat. The boy was changing and he was struggling with the direction of his life.

“Pat, sit down.”

Oh no, thought the boy. He glanced toward the door. Fred McMichaels

believed learning was best accomplished through real life situations and he was constantly on the lookout for opportunities to apply his theory. But his kids didn't see it that way. They called it "the Fred time-warp." Dad's stories-with-a-lesson simply defied the principle that time moves forward.

"Dad, could we skip the lecture tonight?"

The boy was sitting on the edge of his bed with his eyes avoiding those of his father. He had dreamed of one day working alongside his father out at the lab, or at least that's what Fred thought he was dreaming about.

Pat's father Fred was an engineer at the Jefferson Research Lab in Brintwood. Brintwood was a small town just east of Farthington. But Jefferson accepted only the top students which wasn't exactly Pat's current ranking. The boy was a bright kid, but at this point in his life schoolwork just wasn't high on his list of important things to do.

At sixteen Patrick McMichaels was more interested in a weekend at Golden Lake with Ruth Ann Barber. Fred just nodded and started walking toward the door when Pat suddenly blurted out,

"Dad, do you think I'll ever be any good at anything? Sometimes I feel like I'm living in the wrong place or time."

The words jolted Fred- "wrong place or time."

He instantly stopped in his tracks and turned back toward his son, hesitating for a moment to collect his thoughts before replying.

"I know what you're feeling. Trust me, you're living in exactly the right place and time."

Fred looked at the boy slumped over the edge of his bed.

"But dad, sometimes I feel like my life isn't real. Like it's just a dream."

The boy hesitated, looking down from the edge of his bed. Fred shook his head.



“Your life is real. It isn’t just a dream. But if you’re not careful life can pass you by like a dream.”

“But dad, you know I seem to keep screwing up everything I do these days.”

Fred looked at his son, rubbing his chin.

“I need to tell you something that will be difficult for you to understand.”

Fred hesitated.

“You don’t need to worry about screwing things up. In fact, you can make as many mistakes as you need to and it really doesn’t matter.”

“Dad, don’t you care about my life? You should be yelling at me and telling me to straighten up like other parents do.”

But Pat knew his father wasn’t like other parents and said things nothing like what other parents say to their kids, like what he said next.

“Pat, if what I told you scares you then what I am going to tell you next will scare you even more. When I tell you your life is real and isn’t just a dream that doesn’t mean that dreams aren’t part of your life and aren’t real. You can think of your life as just a practice run. A chance to try life out before you go for real. And you can practice as much as you need until you’re ready to go for real.”

Fred hesitated, then looked directly into his son’s eyes.

“And when you’re ready to go for real, you’ll know it.”

Fred hesitated again.

“There’s a master plan, and you have a critical part.”

The boy looked up at his father. He was used to his father saying strange things like what he just told him.

Then his father added,

“And remember, you have the tools.”

His father turned and headed back downstairs. Pat fell back on his bed. His eyes scanned the slow-moving ceiling fan. Then he looked around his room– football pads, basketballs, baseball bats, soccer cletes, and a single picture of an old-time baseball legend. His father’s words echoed through his head.

Tools? What tools? Pat wondered.

Mom sold the electric saw the day after I chased Rosie with it. In the distance, his mother’s voice was heard.

“Pat, Mike’s here.”