

Michigan Fixer

by

Phil Warner

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Author's Note

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, I penned my first novel entitled **Undone**, while also recuperating from a major knee surgery. It was a murder mystery based in the City of Detroit where a rookie major league ballplayer was killed in a suspicious single-vehicle crash. Ending with a plot twist, my debut novel left the readers expecting that there was more to the story. **Michigan Fixer** is the follow-up novel and is actually part prequel and part sequel. Ironically, I made significant progress on finishing this second novel, when I contracted Covid-19 in April of 2022 and I spent more than a week isolated in our basement.

Michigan Fixer begins in 1990 and introduces the reader to a character named Kelly Patrick Ryan whose actions are integral to developing characters in **Undone**. Ryan works behind the scenes, but leaves his mark on many lives, both positively and negatively.

Although the two novels can be read independently, it is highly recommended that if you are to read both, read **Undone** first and then **Michigan Fixer**, as many key plot points are revealed in the latter novel's Parts Four and Seven. **Undone** is available in multiple formats (hardcover, paperback, audio, and electronic) through Amazon, Apple, Kobo, Barnes & Noble, and so on.

I hope that you enjoy this pre/sequel as my sophomore contribution to the writing community.

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Part One – The Fixer Emerges

Kelly Patrick Ryan's story begins in high school where he earns a reputation as somewhat of a vigilante. In Part One, Ryan explains how his hobby evolves into a profitable career in and around Michigan. Eventually, an opportunity presents itself where he can begin fixing dilemmas for the elite who have the means to pay him handsomely – or in some cases, owe him!

Chapter 1.1 – The High School Years

It is 1990 and I am sitting in the back of my eleventh-grade English classroom. Powered by my Sony Sports Walkman, Georgia Satellites' *Keep Your Hands to Yourself* blares into my ears through the foam-padded headphones. In walks Mr. Dennis with his pants yanked up halfway to his armpits, like Steven Urkel from that sitcom - I can never remember the name of that show. The main character is certainly more memorable than the actual show. Urkel, both on TV and here in my high school, is always good for a laugh.

Mr. Dennis stares at me and points to his own ears. I get the message, as if I needed the hint; I was just about to remove the headset anyway. As I remove the headphones, he shouts, "Kelly Patrick Ryan, how many times have I told you that those are not allowed in here?"

I think to myself, if my count is correct, he has told me exactly one time – just now. What's he going to do anyway? Ask the principal to suspend me for listening to music during class time, when he is supposed to be in the room, but he is not! You see, Mr. Dennis always shows up late, leaves early, and is often out of the room in the middle of the class. We're not sure if it's to get a coffee or if it's to meet up with Ms. Mercer. The rookie teacher shares an office with him. She's a young female who wears short skirts and heels most days. Some of the guys fantasize about her. Sometimes they even play that Van Halen song with their car windows down, when they drive by her house. She lives nearby and they hope she is outside to hear it. Oh yeah, *Hot for Teacher*, that's the song.

As I put my headphones away, Georgie Janes walks through the doorway. Georgie is a quiet guy who loves his music, too, albeit more on the deeper side compared to myself. I like whatever is new and gritty, but Georgie and his best friend Jane Freer like old stuff, like Bob Dylan, T. Rex, and the Doors. Sometimes, they just pull out the albums and read the lyrics with no music playing. They're looking for the meaning; I just like the sound! Besides, what the heck is a *hubcap diamond stud halo*?

I hear Mr. Dennis in a sarcastic tone, "So glad you decided to grace us with your presence today, Mr. Janes."

Just as Georgie lowers himself into his seat, Dennis kicks Georgie's chair out from under him. Georgie stumbles back, catches the desk behind him and blurts out, "What the hell, Urkel?"

Dennis stares at Georgie as if his eyes are lasers burning holes through the young student, "What did you say, Mr. Janes?"

"You heard me," and then Georgie repeats with increased volume, "What the hell, Urkel?!"

Dennis instinctively pushes his belt down slightly with both hands, walks to the office speaker toggle switch on the wall, and he pushes the toggle down.

“Office here,” stoically comes out of the speaker.

“It’s Mr. Dennis here. One Georgie Janes is coming to the office right now to explain to the vice-principal why he came into class, stumbled around, yelled at me, swore at me, and called me a name. I trust that I won’t see this young man in this class again, for the rest of *this* year.”

I am thinking, who the heck does this guy think he is? That’s not his call. Georgie came in late and that’s it. This fool provoked Georgie to get him to lose his cool. Regardless, it is Friday; I am hopeful cooler heads will prevail and Georgie will be back on Monday. I am somewhat of an expert in this stuff. Considering he was provoked, Georgie really should only have a few detentions, at most! In fact, it would be better if Mr. Dennis issued the detentions himself, rather than deferring his supposed authority to the office staff. He just doesn’t get that he undermines his own authority by asking the office to solve his classroom management issues. It’s like Mom saying, *Wait until your father gets home*, or vice versa. Anyway, back to the story.

On his way to the door, Georgie walks in front of me, we lock eyes, he places a five-dollar bill on my desk, and he raises just his right eyebrow. I’m amazed at people who can do that little facial trick as I cannot even come close to getting it to work, nor can I do the Billy Idol sneer or curl my tongue.

I don’t even bother trying to raise my eyebrow; I just nod in acknowledgment.

You see, I have a bit of a reputation with the student body. I do favors, well I guess not really favors, because I accept payment. On occasion, when someone can’t pay me for whatever reason, then they owe me one. In those instances, it’s still not a favor though, as we call that a *marker*. So, with a quick eyebrow raise and five bucks, Georgie has engaged my services to mess with Mr. Dennis. I will have to get the creative juices flowing and in a hurry. After all, it is Friday and justice is always better when it is executed in a timely fashion.

“Okay class, I have to get a movie reel from the English Office. I will be right back and we will watch that Macbeth video I told you about.”

Perfect, I pull out a pack of Wrigley Juicy Fruit gum. I remove one foiled piece of gum from the pack, unwrap it, and put the gum into my mouth. I place the wrapper on my desk and smooth it out. After a few folds, I have a piece of shiny foil that is about two inches long by one quarter inch wide.

The movie projector is on an AV cart right next to me at the back of the classroom. I eye the projector, which is plugged into one of the electrical receptacles on the cart and subsequently, the cart is plugged into the wall. The cart can’t be live for what I am about to do, so I pull the plug out of the wall receptacle and I unplug the projector from the cart. I place my piece of foil across the two prongs on the projector plug and using my right pinky finger, I push the foil down to make a U-shape out of the foil. I fold over the excess foil onto the outsides of the two prongs.

Prior to reinserting the plug into one of the cart's outlets, I double-check that the cart is not powered up. Good, I plug the projector into the cart and the cart cord remains sitting on the floor.

Several minutes later, Mr. Dennis comes back with a movie reel under his arm and his pants pulled up a little higher, once again. I swallow my wad of gum and doodle in my notebook nonchalantly while our teacher loads the film into the projector. After a couple minutes, he has it set to go and flips on the red power switch, but nothing happens.

Under his breath, he whispers, "What the hell?"

From across the room, everyone can hear a male voice say, "Hey now, you might get sent to the principal's office."

Dennis snaps his head in the direction of the comment and squints his eyes, but no one owns up to the remark.

Back to the task at hand, Dennis steps away from the projector to figure out the problem. First, he wiggles the projector plug that is inserted into the cart receptacle and puffs his cheeks as he thinks. I swear I can see smoke smoldering from his ears. I think to myself - he really does look like a cartoon character as he goes through this routine. Then, he smiles proudly when he notices that the cart is not plugged into the wall receptacle. Genius electrician here! He whistles some unrecognizable, upbeat tune as he picks up the plug and with an overly technologically-proud look on his face, he inserts the plug into the wall receptacle.

Anyone with a basic knowledge of electricity will know what happens next. The AC current runs through the cart cord into the receptacle, where it finds a short circuit made of thin foil. Immediately the foil explodes from the current with a flash and a puff of smoke that diminishes to a smolder within a few seconds. Mr. Dennis jumps back as every student in the class turns to the noise in awe. A few students scream, but most are silent. After a count of three, the entire class erupts into applause and giggles.

A voice similar to the one that made the previous snide comment is heard, "I guess Macbeth is *not to be* today."

Mr. Dennis throws up his arms and yells, "That's Hamlet, you jackass. How can I teach these hooligans?"

Mr. Dennis storms out of the classroom and we all just look at each other, wondering what to do next. When everyone is sure that he is out of earshot, the entire class releases their tension and breaks out into a loud laughter.

Chapter 1.2 – Georgie’s Return

Monday morning, I walk into English class and Georgie is the only one in the classroom. I ask myself why I am here so early. Well, at least it’ll give me a chance to talk with Georgie, although I have to admit, I am a little more than surprised that he’s here. I knew he should only have detentions, but Mr. Dennis was pretty heated on Friday. And, he did give that public declaration that he expected to never see Georgie again in his class. How can Mr. Dennis save face with Georgie here in class? Again, therein lies another problem with deferring your authority.

As I slide into the seat next to Georgie, I say, “Mornin’.”

I get, “Hey,” in response, as Georgie stares at his desk.

“Frankly, kinda surprised to see you here. Even if you weren’t kicked right out of this class, I figured at a minimum, Dennis would have tried to give you a slew of detentions and you would have just said *screw it* and just skipped anyway.”

Georgie mumbles, “Nah, no detentions.”

I open my eyes wide, he looks up, and our eyes connect instantly.

Georgie continues, “I don’t wanna talk about it, but thanks for what you did. I heard about it. Everyone heard about it. That was well worth my five bucks, for sure!”

“Nothing, man,” I say as I pull the five-dollar bill from my left front pocket and place it on his desk, “but you can have this back; it was my pleasure.”

I look up and see several other students arriving so I know our conversation will have to end soon.

Georgie slides the bill towards me and says, “Na, you earned it. Keep it, seriously. I won’t take it back from ya. Besides, I don’t wanna have to owe you a *marker*,” to which we both grin.

“Okay, thanks man. So Georgie, no detentions, nothing?”

“I said I don’t wanna talk about it. Drop it, okay.”

Just then, five girls sway into class, carrying their binders in front of their chests and giggling to each other.

As if on cue, Mr. Dennis follows them in, yelling to the class, “Alright everyone, take a seat and let’s get down to work. We wasted too much time on Friday and we have too much material to cover before exams. No more distractions, folks!”

I climb into my rightful seat and see Georgie’s head tilt downwards towards his desk again. He stares at the concave groove that we use to keep our pencils from rolling off the laminate tabletop.

I hear the chalk sliding on the green chalkboard, so I turn to see Mr. Dennis writing the word *Review* in cursive. I ask myself if our kids will still have to learn that archaic skill. I'm knocked out of my daydreaming to see Mr. Dennis looking directly at me, then he looks over at Georgie, and again back to me. I then see the slightest upward movement of Dennis' right cheek to form a half of a smile – a smirk, I guess.

Instantly, chills rush over me. This guy gives me the creeps.

Chapter 1.3 – All-Nighter

After my freshman year away at college, I am back home in Lexington, Michigan. For those who don't know where that is, hold up your left hand in front of you, so that your palm faces away from you. The lower peninsula of Michigan is shaped like a left-hand mitten. Now, look at the thumb and you'll see two joints, or knuckles, I guess. Between your wrist and the lower thumb knuckle, you'll find Detroit. Halfway between the upper knuckle and your thumbnail is where you'll find Lexington. It's on Lake Huron and its beaches are a highlight for folks around here.

I am sitting on the beach with some old high school friends, late one June evening, when another group walks by our camp. In amongst the group, I recognize Georgie, so I give him a shout, "Hey Georgie, it's Kelly. Man, it's been a long time!"

In the glow of our bonfire, I see a small smile come across Georgie's face and he heads toward me. I meet him halfway. We slap our right hands together and squeeze them tight, before we pull in for a brief hug, well I guess more like a chest bump.

Georgie says, "Kelly Patrick Ryan, I thought you moved away."

I reply, "Well, just for school and it sucks, but I'm home for the summer, working at Lakeview golf course: odd jobs here and there painting and stuff, some maintenance, too, I have a knack for fixing things, I guess."

"Fixing things *and* breaking things. Thanks again for the exploding film projector trick!"

"Ah yeah, I almost forgot about that. I fix golf carts and anything that seems to get broken there. No explosives."

"How could you forget about Urkel blowing a gasket? That was *the* highlight of high school for me, even though I didn't even get to see it for myself!"

"Yeah, that was up there. Hey man, do you want a beer?"

"Sure, wouldn't mind if I do. Thanks Kelly."

Georgie and I sit down on a long log, away from the fire and the crowd and we begin to talk. I fill Georgie in on how I am at an upstate community college studying computer science, but I'm bored out of my mind. They teach me basic stuff on how to use a computer, but I want to know more about how they really operate. I let him know that I am just in the wrong program and I might drop out or maybe find another program to take.

Meanwhile, I learn that Georgie had dropped out of high school before graduation. I feel bad that I never knew that he had left school. You see, we were friendly, but not close friends. He and I only had the one English class together and we obviously lost touch. He tells me that he is working at a corner variety store and lives at his mother's house. His parents split up, but there is a new guy living with his mom.

I don't know why I am curious, but I ask, "What happened with your parents?"

"It was my fault, I guess."

"What? Oh, come on Georgie, it wasn't your fault that your parents split up."

"Well yeah, Kelly, it kinda was."

"How can that be?"

"Trust me, it was."

"Georgie, I know kids sometimes feel like it's their fault, but when a couple splits up, it's because they have issues between them. Sure, parenthood adds to the stress, but I'm sure it wasn't your fault."

Georgie gets quiet and stares at the sand, as he stared at his desk years earlier. His silence brings back memories of him saying, "I don't wanna talk about it."

I say, "You okay? Sorry to push."

Without raising his head, Georgie responds, "Kelly, we were never friends in high school, but what you did for me will always stick with me. You had my back. No one ever seemed to." After a slight pause, he says, "Thanks."

"My pleasure, man. Really, it was! I enjoyed seeing that jerk squirm."

"The fact you tried to give me the five bucks made it even more special."

"Wish you would've taken it back, Georgie."

Georgie continues to look at the sand and I look at my watch. It's just after 2am, but I have a feeling we're in for an all-nighter.

We continue with small talk for quite some time, but when there is another lull with Georgie staring at the sand once again, I cycle back to the earlier conversation, "So Georgie, why do you think it was your fault that your parents split up?"

"You know Rod Stewart, right?"

"The singer? Not personally, but yeah, sure. Have a few of his albums."

"You know that one song where he talks about Georgie being gay?"

I respond, "I guess."

Georgie chuckles and continues, "Well, quite the coincidence, isn't it?" He pauses before he says, "I'm gay, no more, no less."

"Oh geez, Georgie, that's no surprise or a secret. I've known you're gay for... well, like...*ever* I guess. You're not going to scare me away or anything."

"You knew?"

I shrug, "Yeah, so what?"

“Well, thanks Kelly. I was nervous to tell you, especially since we’re sitting here off by ourselves. People will talk?”

“Whatever, don’t worry about it,” and I give him a push in the shoulder. “So, this is why you blame yourself for your parents splitting?”

“Yep, they fought like crazy when I came out. Mom kept trying to protect me and my dad kept blaming her for being too soft on me growing up.”

“First, don’t blame yourself. Second, if their marriage wasn’t strong enough to survive that news flash, well, then it wasn’t going to survive something else later on, something that would’ve had nothing to do with you.”

“You may be right.”

“Goddam, you know I’m right.”

“Thanks Kelly. That’s a relief to let that out. It’s a small circle that know and it feels good talking about it.”

“No worries. By the way, it’s now 3am. Do we have enough beer to make it to sunrise?”

“We might need to pace ourselves.”

The sun is peeking over the calm waters of Lake Huron and it is majestic. An intense pink, with hints of orange, floods the horizon. It’s the dawn of a new day and I hear a swoosh as Georgie cracks open another Coor’s Light.

I think back to that day in Mr. Dennis’ class and I grunt out a little laugh, “So, I still don’t get it. Urkel was so pissed at you when you left the class, but you were back in class on Monday. How did you pull that off?”

Georgie reverts back to staring at the sand and whispers, “I was sworn to secrecy.”

“Or what Georgie? Oh come on, you’re in the sharing mood and it’s been liberating for you.” I lower my head and stare at the sand as well. “Okay, this sand is beautiful, but let’s agree to look up at this stunning sunrise.”

Georgie chuckles and we raise our heads in unison, just as a male mallard duck glides in and lands on the still water in the bay in front of us. We both smile at the sight.

“Okay, I’ll fill you in, but you are the only one I have ever told and I don’t want this to go any further. It was so disturbing. Okay?”

I nod, take a sip of beer from a tilted can and continue to stare straight ahead.

“Well, at the end of the day, I went by the English Office trying to find Mr. Dennis. I wanted to apologize.”

“Smart move.”

“No, it wasn’t. You know how you always thought that Mr. Dennis had a thing for Ms. Mercer?”

“Yeah, hot for teacher!” I make a fake toast and take a long draw on my beer.

“Well, he absolutely did; I caught them in the act!”

I laugh and snort some beer out through my nostrils as I turn to him with what I’m sure is a stunned look. When I recover, I say, “No way.”

“Yes way.”

“Okay, but tell me more!”

“Give me a chance and I will,” Georgie says through a grin. “I went to knock on the English Office door. It might have been locked, but it just flung open when I hit it. Right there in front of me, well, they were about ready, uh, well, I don’t know. It seemed like it anyway. Regardless, they were wrapped up in each other. I must have made a noise or something and Mr. Dennis’ eyes opened. Well, more like popped open - he just stared at me with those wide-open beady eyes!”

“That’s hilarious! What did you do?”

“What do you think I did? I ran!”

“And you’ve held this in for years?”

“Yep. When I got home, the phone was ringing and it was Mr. Dennis. He threatened me with my life if I told anyone.”

“Oh my! This made my day! This made my week, actually! I knew it.”

I thrust my beer can at Georgie and say, “Here’s to remembering to secure the locked door if you’re going to do the nasty!”

Georgie chuckles and clanks my can.

After the chuckling subsides, I ask in a more serious tone, “You said you dropped out of school shortly after. What happened there?”

Georgie’s eyes hit the sand, but he does continue, “Well, I told you my parents split up and within a few months, my mom hooked up with another guy, not much of a guy. A scumbag, actually.”

“Why’s that?”

“You know how some people think that gay guys are loose? I know some of us are, but I’m not. When I’m in a relationship, I’m in a relationship.”

“Monogamous,” I say to give it a name.

“Huh? Oh yeah, I’m monogamous.”

“When my mom would be out, he would drink, and he would hit on me.”

“He didn’t, um?”

“No, I had to push him away a couple times, but no.”

“I don’t know what to say, Georgie.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just listening is good; I appreciate it.”

“It’s therapeutic to get it out, I imagine.”

“I guess,” he takes a drink and continues, “well, it was messing with me. I told my mom, but she thought I was misinterpreting things. That’s when I got into drugs and then harder drugs. Then, I had no money. It’s like, how do I break away? I would have moved out, but I had next to nothing. I felt, and continue to feel, trapped.”

Georgie stares at the sand again and after about twenty seconds, he says, “I just wanted to die. I’m, well, I’m much better now. I think I have the drugs all licked, but that scumbag, if he ever tries that again, I’ll kill him.”

I reach over to Georgie and pull him in tight, “Georgie, you’re a good man. Don’t let that scumbag make you think you’re anything but a good man. And I don’t want you messing up your life if he does something bad.”

“Thanks for being a friend, Kelly.”

“Well, every few years or so anyway.”

He grins and wipes a tear from under his right eye. “What I told you goes to your grave though, right?”

“The gay thing?”

“Not funny, dude.”

“Just kidding, man. To the grave.”

Georgie clarifies, “Both the Urkel thing and the scumbag hitting on me thing.”

“Yes, both to my grave. I promise. I won’t tell anyone about either of those fools.”

We turn to stare at the sun in its full glory over the lake.

