

Needs Typing

THE SHAPING OF A CONVICT

Introduction (non-fiction)

"Boy...what'cha doin' back there?"

"Nuttin' mama," I yelled in response to her calling out to me from the living room that also served as her bedroom. This was an arrangement made in 1961, when I was four years old. In a jealous rage, my father shot her several times one night at a club, leaving her paralyzed with two options: she could either lie in her bed or sit in her wheelchair. Unfortunately, for my siblings and me, her disability would eventually open the door for pimps, prostitutes, addicts, and hustlers to waltz right into our lives uninvited.

In the club that night in Stockton, California, the moment my father pulled the trigger of his gun, the possibilities for who I could be shifted in a new direction. He was born in 1912 or 14 in the deep South at a time when black males were still being brutally murdered for looking at white women, therefore, I can imagine there being an anger rooted in his heart long before he met my mother. He didn't realize it then, but the decision he made that night began the process of me being shaped into a convict. It wasn't long before I became a criminal, and in 1979, when I was twenty-one years old, I found myself in Soledad State Prison, serving a five-to-life sentence. Considering all the wrong I had done any number of things could have sent me away, but in the end it was my addiction to drugs

and alcohol that would begin my journey of decades of incarceration, and in 1998 lock me in a cell forever under California's "Three Strikes" law. When my father injured my mother his action created situations, circumstances, and a life style for me and my siblings that injured us both physically and mentally, and the only rehabilitation the system gave us was incarceration.

While my mother lay in a rehabilitation center, in Lodi, California, recovering from her injuries, my siblings and I were sent to live with other family members right there in Stockton, who wanted nothing to do with us because we were black. My mother was Miwok Indian, born on the reservation near Angels Camp, California in 1921. I remember she told me that she had very little schooling, and I wonder if that played a role in her decision to place my siblings and me in the care of her first son from an earlier marriage, along with his wife, who were both Indian. They became our first foster parents, and the things we as children experienced while we lived with them has haunted me my entire life, and some things are still too painful to speak about. I remember when one of us would "wet the bed" while sleeping, in the morning we would be marched out on the back porch, naked. No matter the condition, cold, fog or rain, we would stand there holding hands, cuddled together. I vaguely remember the way the events unfolded because I could not have been more than six years old. I believe that the only reason some events remain woven in my thoughts today, unforgotten and so strong, is because the experience was never treated professionally. The system failed because it never asked us, "how do you feel?"

Writing about it now is my rehabilitation. I remember standing on the old wooden porch with no shoes or socks on, feet cold, shaking, looking through the railing down at the growling pit-bulls that seemed to be patrolling the back yard.

The Indian woman who should have been caring for my siblings and I while our brother was at work beat and abused us daily. When Child Protection Services (CPS) finally came to our rescue, we were so malnourised, with sores covering our heads, that we had to be hospitalised. Then things began to change and we were placed in our first and only real foster home, there in Stockton, owned by an older black couple name Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. It was there that my siblings and I fully recovered, and started looking like human beings again. Then after a few years passed, our mother arrived and moved us a couple cities away from Stockton to Sacramento, and as a youngster I learned things that under normal conditions I would not have knew anything about until I entered my teens.

When I think back to my youth I see that I had many adult responsibilities, before even graduating from grammar school. I recall coming home from Del Paso Heights Elementary one day, and having my mother appoint me to be the one to cook our Thanksgiving turkey. So, I tied my wagon to the back of my stingray bicycle, both of which I built from accumulated and discarded used parts, and off to the store I went. Once there, all alone I shopped. I bought one fat twenty pound turkey, cornmeal, lard

and a few other items before heading home.

In the living room my mother sat up in her bed, looking into the kitchen where I stood at the table, and through the noise of my siblings she shouted to me how to prepare our turkey. Following her instructions I separated the long neck, heart and liver that were neatly wrapped and tucked safely inside its hollow body. I boiled them and added some diced parsley, celery, oregano, and a pinch of salt and pepper in one big pot to make the dressing. I carefully chopped up the neck, heart and liver and mixed everything together with the fresh baked cornbread. Then I heated the lard until it melted, added a small amount of salt and pepper before it could harden, and bathed the turkey with it. From that year forward I was the one who cooked every turkey that came into our home, and it felt good to receive all the accolades for my cooking, especially at such a young age. Each of us children prepared something, one of my brother's boiled potatoes while another baked the ham, but my youngest sister who still lived at home was the best cook. My mother had turned her into a master chef.

During that time in the 60s, my siblings and I grew up fast in Sacramento, and many who read this will agree that we grew up too fast. I was no more than seven years old when I discovered what "going all the way" meant. Our home had become a hang out for all the criminals that infested our neighborhood streets after the night clubs closed. Unable to sleep I would watch one sex-scene after another in the bed across from mine.

The box springs squeaked loud and fast, keeping pace with the foot stomping James Brown tune that blared from our one speaker record player. The street light found its way through the torn sheet that hung as a curtain in front of the window, exposing the unknown prostitute with her legs pinned back against the wall, moaning out loud while a desperate man pounded in and out of her. Neither one of them was concerned that I, a little boy, lay only a few feet away. But it was those events that would arouse my curiosity about sex. What a way for any child to learn about the "birds and the bees." It tarnished my concept of sex with a woman when I became active because what I saw when I was a child did not teach me to respect one, therefore, I didn't value a woman's love.

Some nights I would get out of bed and maneuver my way through the uninvited guests who would be partying at our house, and through the smoked filled rooms until I reached my mother's bed. There I would sit on the floor beside it while she patted my head. I would sit there and watch the strangers dance while the masquerade of faces slipped in and out of my bedroom. I knew no one. I often sat there until the sun light reached over the horizon, embracing me with its warm rays.

Many mornings our family's refrigerator and kitchen cabinets would be empty because of a wild party the night before. With no food to relieve the hunger from my stomach, I would walk through the rooms and collect the beer, wine, and whiskey bottles, and empty their contents into a tall mayonnaise jar and drink

it. Then after kissing and saying good-bye to my mother, I would go to school and play marbles in the dirt with the other kids, drunk. What I didn't know then was that I had laid the foundation for my first addiction. This is one of many things that until now no one knew, but at the sametime it's tacitly shared by my siblings because of the untold secrets in their own hearts.

It was nice being back with my family in Sacramento, but life was hard. There were times I wished I had been back in the huge soft bed I slept in all alone when I lived at the Jackson's foster home. Waking up knowing that I would eat breakfast every morning. The smell of the fresh homemade biscuits that flowed from the oven down the hall, under the bedroom door and into my nostrils, made me hungry. I would lay in bed and envision my foster mother, "mama Jackson," spreading butter on the hot biscuits as it melted and ran down the sides. I felt safe laying in my bed at the Jackson's foster home. The sound of birds chirping outside of my window comforted my young heart, and made it hard for me to pull the covers back and crawl out of bed, but the smell of the biscuits were irresistible. I didn't know then my life was about to head down hill again, but it did. Living in Sacramento with my mother, I stayed in trouble, so did some of my brothers, and it wasn't long before our bad behavior made us "wards of the court." We didn't realize it, but we were already being shaped into "convicts," and the juvenile court system knew it, it just had other names it used to describe us. And just think, all this happened before I turned ten years old.

The neighborhood my family settled in when we moved to Sacramento, was Del Paso Heights, and it quickly pulled us into a life of crime and incarceration. I was around ten when school began to no longer hold any significance to me, though I cannot say with certainty that it ever did. I do believe that because of the way my brothers and I were behaving, the juvenile court was preparing to place us back into foster care. Then a small time hustler from Chicago, who my siblings and I came to know as "Uncle Bob," rose up out of the group of people who would invade our home with their all night parties, to help our mother raise us. When my brothers and I would get in trouble, and find ourselves sitting in front of a judge, Uncle Bob would be the one there to support us because our mother's condition left her unable to attend.

"Okay!" the judge shouted, his voice roaring like the wizard in the movie "The Wizard of Oz."

"I've been told that you want to assist in the care of these children, is that correct, Mr....let me see here-Mayhorn... yes, Mr. Mayhorn?"

"Yes, your honor, that's correct."

"All right then. I'm releasing them into your custody. Maybe you can make a difference in their lives, good luck."

"Thank you, your honor."

I don't know how many times Uncle Bob came to our rescue, but he kept coming, and the years kept passing. Then I turned fourteen years old, and the juvenile court started sending my brothers away. One at a time I watched three of them be sent to the "Carson Creek Boy's Ranch" to serve time. Uncle Bob continued to lend his support, but by then we had strayed too far from his reach. Our way of thinking and surviving in the world had already formed. We had become criminals in every sense of the word, and it wasn't long before I ended up at the "Boy's Ranch" too. I was out of control and did whatever I wanted, and I no longer listened to my mother or Uncle Bob. By then I had already spent the majority of my life in the custody of the juvenile system, and in the back of my mind I was visualizing myself in the penitentiary. After all, I was the big fourteen. My experiences up to that point in my life told me that I was already a man. I had convinced myself even more by spending that summer with my girl friend in the back seat of her parents car, practicing everything I saw in my bedroom in earlier years. Then after another "all nighter," early one morning she hit me with the news.

" 'Em pregnant," she whispered.

With the car windows fogged from heavy breathing we laid there sweating repulsively while our hands and arms slipped from each other's body. Lying there in love or lust it made no difference to me, and after the rush from the sex high began to subside, I remember saying, "pregnant! girl...yoe mama gunna

kill you." Then already addicted to heroin and drowning in alcohol, I was finally sentenced to serve time at the "Boy's Ranch." My whole life had grown to be centered around hustling, getting high, and sex, and no, I had never been faithful to my girl friend, and she knew it. Days after being released I became a father, and I was only fifteen desperately needing one myself. My heroin use had only gotten worse while incarcerated, so after arriving at my mother's house I unpacked and made "mad love" to my girl friend, and then out the door I went. A young "sista" who had worked the streets for me before my incarceration was waiting on me. I simply ventured deeper into the criminal activity I had been apart of before. I hustled hard and manipulated every young woman who listened to me, and before too long my criminal behavior was at full speed again.

During the day I would take the young sista "shop-lifting" at the malls in Sacramento, and at night I would take her to one old timer's house after another, so she could trade sex for money in order to keep our addiction under control. Many times during the day she would team up with one of my brother's girls, and when they returned they would have thousands of dollars worth of merchandise to sell. None of us ever used our earnings to rise above the poverty we lived in because we were ignorant toward the life style we lived, and everyone in our circle was using heroin and cocaine, and drinking alcohol all day.

My life continued down the same road of addiction and criminal activity unerupted for the next four years, and then my

older brother from my mother's first marriage was murdered. He had been rising as a drug dealer after he separated from the Indian woman who abused us, and moved to Sacramento. A few of his own childhood friends were later convicted for taking his life. The police had been called to a remote area on the out-skirts of Sacramento, where a car was found smoldering by morning workers on their way to the "hop-fields." After a long and grueling investigation it was determined that the motive was robbery. When my brother was finally buried I could see my mother's own life coming to its end every time I looked into her eyes, but I didn't want to acknowledge the inevitable. My brother's murder broke her heart, and she lay there wounded by her loss, unconcerned with the world around her. My attempts to cheer her up were ineffective, and she appeared to be disconnected from the reality of everyday life. It was as if she had already "crossed over" to wherever our souls go when we die, and closed the door behind her.

One morning after arriving home around 2:AM from a party, I sat by my mother's bed, on the floor, the same way I did when I was a little boy, and we spoke about our lives, past and present, as well as our good and bad times. Before retiring for the night I gave her her medication, along with a tumbler of ice tea, which she loved. Then I kissed her good night and walked into my bedroom to the crib where my son lay sleeping. I stood there looking down at him, and I heard his mother call my name, almost at a whisper. As I turned around, the dim light cast from the lamp that sat on a night stand next to our bed allowed me to

see her beautiful black body lying there on top of the blankets, waiting for me. Every night was the same. She never went to sleep without us making love, never. We were each others first lover, and when it came down to us having sex, enough was never enough.

"JuJu...wake up. Sump'in wrong wit yoe mama," my girl friend shouted. I opened my eyes to find the morning well upon me, but I wasn't rested. The night before, my girl had proved to be more than I expected. Still, like I had grown to see in my mother and other women alike, she rose with the dawn every morning with a certain resilience and determination to do all the amazing things that women do.

Jumping out of bed I ran to my mother's side, and found her unresponsive to my efforts to wake her. Did she purposely fall to sleep without taking her medication? She knew the consequences.

Once at the hospital, I looked down upon my mother with eyes filled with tears. The doctor standing in the room calmly informed everyone present that she was comatose, and most likely would not recover. A few months later she died without ever regaining consciousness. She passed away a few weeks after my twenty-first birthday. I spiraled out of control even more. I believe my mother gave up her will to live. Losing her first born child, witnessing the negative life the rest of us were living, and considering her own condition, she must have decided

not to take her medication. The unusual conversation we had the night I returned home late from a party was her way of saying good-bye. After wards, she just closed her eyes and rode out the storm that she had too long lived in.

It was 1978, and another winter was approaching as I sat alone in my mother's house. My entire family, including the young women who had been apart of my brothers and my life, that used to roam the hall way were all gone. Every move I made echoed off the walls of the empty rooms, the silence being my only company. Even my girl friend had packed up and left, disappearing with our son while I was away one night. It was just my addictions and me, sitting in the house that morning. Neglected bills after my mother's death caused the cold from outside to wrap around me like a blanket. The only insolation I had to protect me was the heroin and alcohol that flowed in my veins. Then just when I began to feel like I had nothing to live for, God blessed me. Another beautiful black young woman, who would also be the mother of my youngest son came into my life. I didn't recognize it as a blessing at the time, drug addicts rarely do. Still, she helped me pack up my personal belongings, and moved me in with her and her young son. She became the love of my life. After my addictions destroyed our relationship my feelings for her never faded, and to this day she remains rooted in my heart.

I stayed semi-drunk, therefore, never sober enough to realize I was an alcoholic, but I was. It wasn't long before I found myself back behind bars. But after everything I had been through,

prison was right where I wanted to be, I was who I wanted to be; I was a convict. Everything that had happened in my life up to that point, beginning with the night my father shot my mother, shaped me more and more each day into a convict. As a young man I had looked forward to going to prison while others my age looked forward to graduating from high school and joining the army.

So there I was in Soledad State Prison, laying on the bunk in the single cell that was assigned to me. With my feet crossed and hands folded behind my head, I took a deep breath. In reality I was incarcerated, but being away from the everyday drug and alcohol use that came along with the life style I had lived before coming to prison, my incarceration made me feel more free than I had felt in years.