

## **Remembering Joshua**

I was a witness to one of life's most horrendous tragedies today; I watched a man die of AIDS. Even more tragic than the cause of his death is that he died alone, tucked away and forgotten, in a cold concrete room with bars on the window and silence his only companion.

There weren't any loved ones to hold his hand as he faced this horrifying nightmare. There were no friends to calm his sobbing cries of loneliness. It was just him and whatever thoughts he may have had while lying there in a cloud of quiet desperation.

It may have been fate that put me in that moment, or perhaps it was part of my life's journey that was necessary for me to become the man I am today. Some may even say it was an accident that I needed surgery at that time, and then happened to pass by Joshua's room. Whatever else it was, or might have been, it was a small part on my life that left an imprint which forever is a part of me.

I was recovering in the Medical Ward from a hernia operation. I was only 28 years old, and full of restless energy. I didn't want to be restricted to a bed, so I hijacked a wheelchair from the hallway. No one seemed to care that I was rolling around outside my room like a madman. The more I rolled around, the bolder I became. It wasn't long before I was navigating the halls of the Medical Unit.

At the end of the hallway I had to turn around. I managed to hit all three walls before I was able to point myself in the right direction. While I was doing so, Joshua was laying there in his bed laughing at me. At least he was attempting to while coughing a lot. I looked through the door and saw him there; I waved and said "Hey, what's up?" His hand came up; just a skeleton of a hand, and his skin was chalky white. He was in a ward with seven beds, yet he was there alone.

"Can I come in?" I asked.

"Sure." He replied.



As I moved closer I saw how drawn and pale his face was. His coughing spasm had diminished and he threw the paper towels into a trash can at the side of his bed. There was a red bag in the can marked "hazardous waste."

Seeing the six empty beds I suddenly realized there might be a reason he was alone. "You okay? You aren't contagious or anything, are you?" I hesitantly asked.

"No, I have AIDS. I'm dying." He said it as if to say, "I have a cold, or a touch of the flu."

"It's okay if you want to leave. I understand." No animosity or disgust in his voice, just a statement. I stayed, we talked, and I learned that he could have been released from prison, but because he had full blown AIDS his family didn't want him living with them. He didn't have anyone to help find a halfway house or hospice that would accept him. A couple of places he was able to contact wouldn't accept him because of a criminal record. After a short time I could tell he was tired, so I said goodbye and that I'd see him later.

The following day I returned to Joshua's room after breakfast. I rolled into his room, still in my wheelchair, and asked him how he was. He said he was just tired of being confined to the medical ward, and wanted to get out into population, but he was concerned about being taken advantage of, having his property stolen, and the usual things that go on in prison. I could hear the disappointment and heartbreak in his voice as he told me these things.

His voice seemed weaker than it had been the day before, and I wondered if my being there was depressing for him. Joshua didn't have much, but he had a small 5" black and white television. Didn't turn it on, it just sat there beside his bed. After awhile, he laid back in the bed with his eyes closed and whispered his words between ragged breaths.

That afternoon the officer assigned to the medical ward decided to open the outside recreation area. Joshua and I decided to go outside. I helped him walk through the doorway and out into the grass. I noticed how slowly he walked, stooped over like my 70 year old grandfather had done after two strokes a stroke



and bypass surgery. It didn't seem natural; Joshua was about my age, maybe a couple of years younger.

There wasn't much of a recreation yard to speak of; just a few benches and a horseshoe pit without any horseshoes to throw. We sat on the grass and Joshua said that the sun felt great. Actually, the sun just accentuated the pallor of his skin, almost as if it was transparent.

When the officer announced that he was closing the recreation area Joshua said he wanted to take a nap. I walked him back to his room and went to use the phone in the dayroom. I just wanted to call my mom and hear her voice. She had called the Director of the medical unit on the day of my surgery, and he was kind enough to check on me and call my mom to tell her I was doing fine. I had to fight back the tears when I talked to her, I don't think I had ever felt so lonely in the ten years I had been incarcerated, but I was sure feeling it then.

Later that afternoon I went to see if Joshua was awake, but the nurse closed his door and told me not to disturb him after dinner. I looked through the narrow glass window and watched him from the hallway. I didn't seem to have as much restless energy as I had the day before.

I returned to my own room and stared out the window at the fields beyond the wire fences. I thought of my own mortality, and that I too would probably die alone in prison. I had seen many others pass away, a few were even murdered. None of them affected me the way Joshua did. I remembered all the people I had hurt, and I questioned my own purpose in life. I even wondered what Joshua's thoughts might be and what he must be dealing with.

Just two days later I stopped wondering. I heard the officers and nurses in the hallway. They locked us in our rooms. I saw the metal shackles and handcuffs dangling from their hands as they walked toward the ward where Joshua was. Then the nurse came with the body bag and went into Joshua's room.

It's sad enough to watch as this deadly virus consumes its victim, but it's an indescribable heartache to see the last few sparks of life fade off into the darkness and no one seems to care.