

The Burden of Loss

I was five years old when I found out exactly where babies came from. My lesson was provided through the birth of my brother, Jamaar. I wasn't the best brother, but I tried to be. Mostly, I did the things for him that no one did for me. I loved him unconditionally, and he idolized me for it. As we got older, we developed a real friendship. I loved my brother, and I loved my friend, who just happened to be my brother.

December 16, 2014 was a balmy winter day. The west coast of Michigan usually provides cold winters, with plenty of snow. I had been at the E.C.Brooks facility for 14 months, 10 of them in level 4. When I made it to level 2 in August 2014, Jamaar was probably happier than I was. It had been a rocky 6 years to get to this point.

So, on the morning of December 16, I had just left the weight pit. My brother was on my mind, and I decided to write him a letter. A former Marine who had served in Operation Freedom, he suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He had been wounded in action, and had received a medical discharge. He had episodes of actions he did not remember, and the medications he were on didn't really help much. When I talked to him, I usually hung up feeling powerless to do the one thing he'd always counted on me to do: have his back.

I read the Reader's Digest, and there was an article about PTSD in that months issue. I tore it out and included it in my letter. When count cleared at noon, I put the letter in the box, and tried to call him. He was on my mind so heavily that it felt as if he were sitting in the cell with me at counttime. I tried a couple of times, got no answer, and decided to call later.

I went about the daily routines of prison life, and never really considered calling back throughout the day, even though he was still with me. Around 10 p.m., I tried calling him again. Again, I got no answer. Now I was sort of worried. Our childhood

The Burden of Loss

wasn't ideal, and we had some pretty rough times. One rule that developed out of that, at least between my siblings and I, was that you answered when one of us called. No matter what.

I resolved to call my Mother, the next morning, if I called him first and received no answer. Then I called a friend of mine, and thought no more about it. When I went to sleep that night, although Jamaar wasn't in my conscious mind, I dreamed about him that night. When the unit opened at 8 a.m., December 17, I called my brother. Twice. Getting no answer, I called my Mother. I was 32, and I was about to tell on my 27 year old brother!

My Mother answered the phone. "Hi, Boony Man. How are you feeling?" I didn't hear the hurt, or pain, or even angst in her voice. My reply was instantaneous. "I'm aggravated as hell. Have you talked to Mooch? I've been calling him, but he's not answering." My Mother said, quietly, "Your brother died yesterday." In my stupor, I asked "My brother who?". There were some friends I called brother, but who really weren't. She had to be talking about one of them.

I remember sinking down to my knees, the phone falling from my hand. I heard a C/O telling me that I had to stand up while on the phone. I ignored her voice, because even if I'd wanted to, I'd have been unable to. My heart felt like it was ripping. I have lost 3 siblings to death. None hurt as much as this.

I needed to punch something, to tear something apart, atom by atom. Instead all I could do was try to cry quietly. Not call attention to myself. My brother died on a Tuesday morning, very shortly before noon. I was a 210 minute drive from home, and to top it off, Tuesday isn't an approved visiting day, Wednesday either. In addition, I was at a multilevel facility, so I would have to wait until Friday to even see my family.

I learned that in order to go to the viewing, because there was no way I'd be able to be at the actual funeral, I'd need

The Burden of Loss

to find two officers who were willing to travel to Detroit, pay their wages, and be cuffed the whole hour they were allowing me to be there. Only immediate family members, who were also on my approved visitors list, would be allowed to be at the viewing with me. So that meant I wouldn't even be able to console my nephew, who had just lost his father.

To make matters worse, because my brother was being eulogized at our family church, my family would have been forced to lease a funeral home viewing area for the one hour I'd be allowed to be there. At roughly \$1300 dollars, for the whole trip, not including the cost of the funeral home viewing area, I decided to have my family record my brother's funeral, and watch the DVD.

I lost a major piece of myself on Tuesday December 16, 2014. Being incarcerated during this whole ordeal left me completely vulnerable, and emotionally dispondant. There was no help for me here, within these walls. The attitude I encountered was essentially, "So What?" I was forced to deal with an immense tragedy silently, or risk giving more stress to a family that was already overwhelmed in grief.

When did being a prisoner make you less than human, undeserving of compassion? When did being a prisoner start to mean that you were any less of the man that you were BEFORE your incarceration? Today, March 29, 2016, I miss my brother the same. I wish that I could at least visit his grave, cry out my grief. Scream away my pain. Unfortunately, I can't, and this, more than anything else about prison, will haunt me all the days of my life.