

~~Leon's Story~~

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When I was a small child, my mom was my hero. I can remember the feeling of love as she would spin fantastic stories to me and my brother, Daniel, about great feats and accomplishments distant relatives of ours had done. As she would tell us these stories, the passion in her eyes left no room for doubt. She would become animated, the character of her stories would play out right in front of our dirt-stained faces. Whatever the story she was telling was as real as the hunger pains that washed over our malnourished bodies.

My mom was one amazingly strong and proud woman. Of course as an adult, I realize that my long lost second cousin once removed wasn't a famous bear fighter in the cold Russian tundra, or that our family isn't actually related to the English crown. However, as a small child I would fist fight, yell at, or bite anyone who dared to tell me that she was lying.

In retrospect things are usually much clearer. As an adult now, I'm able to put our situation in proper context. If I were to see the three of us walking down some dusty street in Bakersfield, California back in the late 70's from the vantage of an adult, I would see an extremely different picture. I'd be able to see my dear mom for what she really was: a child. A sad, lost teenager with two children in tow. I would see a little girl in dirty, patched jeans that were products of her tortured little fingers that washed and repaired all of our rags that we called clothing at night after tucking me and my brother away on some random floor she found for us to call home for the night.

I can now easily see what my mom was doing for me and Dan with her stories. She was creating new realities for us. She used these stories to protect us. She was hiding us inside these dreamscapes, shielding us from our actuality and the fact that we were without. Without a home. Without a car. Without the next meal. We were destitute. When I was a small boy my mom was our hero and, as I sit here writing this, I realize that, even as she rests in peace, she still remains my hero today.

My biological father, Geoffrey Leon Lessenden Sr., was not around for most of my life. He was lost in drug addiction and the monster called CDC or the California Department of Corrections. Up until just a few years ago, I would be telling you how much I hated the guy, and I would go over all the ways that he was this really bad person. I would be retelling all the nasty stories that were forced on me as a child. As I write this it makes me angry. How or why adults think it's okay is beyond me. Telling babies how awful their Dad is (regardless whether its true or not) is just wrong.

I was brainwashed into believing that the man who helped bring me into this world was just the worst kind of human. That the man whose name I carry was just some sort of hardcore piece of shit.

Well that's what some people would have me believe, but I'm not going to be doing any of that. I'm going to keep it real, what I know about Geoff is that he had his own issues that kept him removed from my life. He has a story that I hope to one day know in its entirety.

There are however a few things I know for sure about my biological Dad. Like for example I know for sure that he grew up in the 'hood. Bakersfield, California is well known for hating the cops, high crime rate, murder, drugs, prostitution, gang violence, but mostly its known for extreme poverty.

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It took Geoff a long time to get out of the trap that most of us poor people fall into, namely drug addiction and prison. But he did it; he's out! And I'm proud of him for that. Sadly he is an old man slowly dying from too many years of i.v. drug use and smoking.

Fast forward some to when mom met a really great man by the name of Larry Rubin Carpenter. From what I was told by mom, Dan and I were walking on the side of the road on Highway 99 in Vancouver, Washington. How the hell we made it there is still slightly confusing although I'm pretty sure that some guy mom was hanging out with dumped us there.

The story goes that Larry was driving up the highway when he spotted a cute chick with a couple of rug rats struggling to carry the bags of food we had just scored at the food bank so he pulled over and picked us up. For better or for worse they remained together until Larry died an awful death while under hospice care at the house where I grew up.

In between this first encounter and Larry's (Dad's) death there were many crazy adventures. If I were to even write half of them I'm sure you would dismiss me as a liar like so many dismissed mom when she would tell her stories.

The man I called Dad suffered from schizophrenia. If you don't know about that mental health issue, let's just accept that shit was wild. Dad...well Dad was genuinely crazy at times. There are parts that I'm able to laugh about now...but that's only because I'm still alive!

Dad and mom had two more children, both girls. The older of the two is my beautiful sister, Donna. The younger is the other beautiful sister, Tracy. I love both of my sisters dearly. For Dan and me, however, the arrival of our new siblings was not so good.

Before the girls were born, life was wild because of Dad's mental issues, but Dad treated us as well as he could. But the new addition of Dad's "real" kids caused life to get rather hard for us boys. Dad began to treat us bad and at times things got violent and even dangerous. Together, Dan and I found safety in one another and in the streets.

My first exposure to the juvenile justice system is something to write about. Christmas '91 or '92 (the year's not really important), Daniel had done something to work our mom into a fit. What ever it was, though, Mom had beat his ass down bad. More than likely it was something small. By this time in our lives, Dad was no longer physically abusive. I think maybe his age had something to do with calming him down. Mom however still beat the shit out of us when she got angry. It was as if she just picked up where Dad had left off. I'm sure I could pose all sort of possibilities as to why, but who really cares. It sucked regardless of why. With mom it was bad at times because, as we got bigger, she started using shit to beat us with. I'm getting of the point though. The point was only that Dan had got beat down really bad this time. We decided that our best course of action would be to escape into the freezing winter night while the rest of the family slept quietly in the one room shack we called home.

Without disturbing anyone, we silently crept out the front door carrying all the belongings we could manage into the ice covered streets. The burning sensation in my lungs from that night's cold air is seared into my memory as if it were last night that Daniel and I had planned this final get away. This escape from our endless worry about the next mindless

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punishment or mental health break down.

The feeling was one of the most powerful feelings my young body had ever experienced. I was free. No more bullshit! No more. From now on, it would just be me and my brother. The world was at our fingertips. Sadly this feeling disappeared quickly as did the feeling in my out stretched little fingers that were reaching out to this brave new world. The cold reality of our decision set in fast. We knew we had to find some place to hide from the cruelties of this new found freedom.

I could easily replay each step we took move for move, but why, right? The end result was that me and my brother had eventually found refuge in an unlocked truck nearby. As our small, cold bodies unthawed, we were we were able to move our limbs some. I'm not sure which one of us started digging around the cab of the truck first, but both of us were searching for spare change or other such treasures. What I am sure of, however, is that it was I who had found that skinny key ring with that single ignition key attached. Just like I can recall the feeling of my lungs burning, I can also recall the excitement I felt when I realized that this key meant warmth. It meant that I wouldn't have to feel like a traitor anymore for my secret desire for the warmth of our shack where the rest of our family slept comfortably.

We stole the truck! The roads were thickly covered in ice and the truck was a stick shift. Of course, two people who have never drove before this night were quickly spotted by the police. A pursuit happened but it ended as quickly as it started. Daniel smashed through some big ass fence and wrecked the shit out of the truck. I jumped out the passenger side and he jumped out the drivers side and we were out! The Centralia Police had to bring in a K9 unit to track us down. After a manhunt that only lasted several hours, our great escape came to an end.

We were escorted to the Lewis County Juvenile Detention where we were stripped of our clothes by some sicko who stared entirely too long at my nude body. They gave us a set of orange boxers, pants and a top.

Once I was fully dressed, I was directed to the first place I had ever slept alone. This bunk was sooooo much more comfortable than the hard spot on the front room floor where I had been sleeping. I was warm! Under two blankets AND I even had sheets! Wow, what a trip. Up until that point in my life, the only time I had ever seen sheets used was when my parents had nailed them to the walls to cover the windows in our house.

That night I fell asleep like a baby. I was safe. I was warm. I had clean clothes and—the topper—my very own bed. Talk about wonderful.

Its probably not difficult to ascertain from this initial exposure to juvie that I would see those same orange boxer shorts and that nice warm bed many more times in my short, damaged youth.

Once in awhile, instead of letting me go "home", the state would place me in some random foster home. OMG! These were much worse than having my ass kicked at home. At least at home the person beating the shit out of me actually loved me in a strange sort of way. In most of these foster homes I would be bullied and beaten by the older kids or worse, some hill billy foster parent who drank to much.

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I suppose I should make it clear that it wasn't always like that, I didn't always get my ass kicked...sometimes they would starve us or just abuse us in other less obvious ways. You get the idea? These places were fucked and, as a little kid, I remember thinking that it would be better to get beat at home where I would at least find comfort in a sibling or, if I was lucky, my mom.

I ran away from every single foster home, that's without question. I couldn't stay at these places. Whether it was at night while everyone was sleeping, or while in town with "the family", I was running as fast as I could to rid myself of these people. What's crazy to me is all the freaking journeys I went on trying to get home! I have stories Mark Twain would be proud to spin into a book. Some of the things I got myself into while making my way home are worthy of their own story.

The worst place I ever found myself at was a boys home called Kiwanis Boys' Home, or K.V.H. I was such a management issue at school, that the school board decided to banish me.

They voted me off the island.

After some sort of hearing, it was decided that I needed to attend an alternative school at some other campus.

Well, about that—there was no such other campus. What Centralia School District (shame on you) decided to do with me was hire a taxi to transport me over to KVH where I would be taught with the inmates. My life has not been the same since. #metoo

Not long after these events at KVH happened, my life took a dangerous turn. I was so mentally and emotionally ruined by the things I went through that I set out on a path of self destruction. Drugs, sex, crime, and more drugs was how I coped with these events. Of course the only place that lifestyle ever leads to is prison. Here's the kicker: My first trip to prison was before I even turned 18... In fact my family thought that I had just ran away again. They assumed that the reason I hadn't been home in so long was that I was just out running the streets. They had no clue. When I called my mom for the first time from prison, she went nuts! It's funny, too. She told me that I was really going to have my ass beat for this one, as if all the other physical beatings weren't so bad.

When I made it to the Washington Corrections Center receiving unit in Shelton, Washington they immediately placed me in "the hole" due to my age (16). I guess they have rules for kids being there. Go figure.

Isolation is the worst. So calling my mom from there and not hearing what I needed to hear ("Baby its going to be alright") sucked. I was lonely, scared, and looking to be reassured that all would be well. That never happened.

Now I was lucky enough to turn 17 relatively soon after starting my journey into DOC. Isolation is no place for a fragile mind like the one I had. I guess 17 was old enough for me to be released into the general population (aka mainline). Finally out of the hole, I was able to experience prison for the first time in all of its glory.

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Gang violence, racial segregation, and real-life, old school convicts. Oh, and I had nearly forgot, roll your own TOP tobacco cigarettes. Wow! Those things blow my mind. At 16 years old, I had been sentenced to 27 months in adult prison which, by the way, is above the standard range because I was standing next to a childhood buddy when he assaulted another kid.

It was a time I'll never forget, in that short period of my life I was "put on to the game".

Drug dealing and prison politics consumed my every move. The prison I was transferred to after receiving in Shelton was Clallum Bay but, back in those days, it was more commonly referred to as Gladiator school. The 90's were nuts in DOC. A truly wonderful place for the underdeveloped, uneducated, and unappreciated young boy like myself. Where were our progressive politicians then?

I was released from prison on February 12, 1998. By January 28th (my birthday), I had already committed two (non-violent) robberies and a first degree burglary, gone to trial and lost, and was sentenced to 777 years in prison.
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I always thought that was an odd number to use. I mean really WTF, As if I would live past the first 100 years right? just to be on the safe side let's just add 677 more. Personally, I think if they want to dish out prison terms like that, they ought to just keep it real instead of using 777, they should use 666. Clearly this sort of prison sentence has to be at least partly inspired by the devil... well, if you're unfamiliar with Washington State's Three Strike Law, 777 years is what they give you when they strike you out. 777 years for a teenage boy who was already lost to the system. An interesting side note is that I was actually the youngest person ever in the nation to be sentenced to this.

What an honor.

There I was, a teenager, and NEVER getting out of prison. What a trip. I can not adequately express how heavy that was on my heart. Inside I knew just how much of a hurt little kid I was. None of this made any sense but, so far, that's just the way life was to me.

Obviously I didn't know what to do. Soooo I went with the flow of things for a few months. All the time contemplating ending the shit early. I was thinking that I sure as fuck didn't want to be here forever.

I can point to the moment that I decided NOT to kill myself. It was my first visit with my daughter who by luck or chance had an amazing mother who refused to let my prison sentence be the reason Sophie didn't know her dad.

Sadly for Denise and Sophia I made all the wrong choices. Once I came to terms with the fact that I was going to spend the rest of my life in prison, I decided that I was going to do it at the top of the food chain rather than at the bottom with the rest of the mindless sheep.

I spent the next 8 years lost in prison gang life. Drugs. Money. Position. Power. You get the idea right? I'm guessing if you're reading this, you've probably watched Nat Geo programs dealing with all that. Imagine all that and then place me somewhere in the middle. I was that stereotype. Shaved head, Gang tattoos, and a fuck-the-world attitude. In an odd, twisted,

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fairytale sort of way, I was blessed, just like Cinderella fit the glass slipper, I fit the state issued boot. My cousin Troy was the "shot caller" for Washington's most most notorious and violent gang. This gave me the room to be the man in far more situations than I should have been. I was lost. Prison had fully consumed me and my world. I was no longer "Leon, Troys younger cousin". I had become "Leon, the big homie shot caller doing life w/o."

One day while I was wasting away in segregation for a gang hit I was accused of, I received a letter telling me I had been remanded for resentencing!

WTF?

Not really understanding what it all meant, I sent it over to my buddy who was in the next cell over. He told me and I broke down. I remember crying for hours.

At court, the judge gave me about a 20 year sentence which left me with very little time remaining. I don't think I can put into words the emotions I was experiencing. To say they were overwhelming would be an understatement.

My return to the joint after resentencing was a m/f trip. I was fast tracked to a prison work camp. That is, in its own right, a trip. In a matter of months, I had gone from doing a 24-month program in segregation on my life w/o sentence, to being transferred to a work camp. I was excited! The whole camp life was bizarre. There weren't even fences holding me in. I spent about 20 months at one camp until they were tired of my bullshit gang activities and non stop rule violations before they shipped me off to another more restrictive camp where I met (Tom) and finished the remaining 20 months or so.

There I was back on the streets of my city. The only difference was my age and a new social position in my neighborhood. Just like prison, this new found freedom consumed me.

At no point before my release did I prepare for real life. Hell, I thought I was the man and everyone in the hood thought so as well.

Spending the last 15 years of my life behind bars, doing drugs, tattoos, and EVERYTHING in between was not something I was able to get out of my system. Believe me, I tried to fight off all the urges to get high or hang out with the homies but I just didn't have the resilience to bounce back from the constant set backs that life was putting in my way.

Maybe you've heard this before but....history repeats itself.

I left prison the second time August 8, 2011 and by August 12, 2012 I was back in jail facing my 3rd strike AGAIN. After months of fighting I finally caved to the State, plead guilty, and accepted another 20 years behind bars.

This is where my story gets interesting. While I was in jail, I convinced Emily (the lady I dated the entire year I was free) to marry me. I thought this would make life better for the three of us. Yep, she was pregnant, just like Denise was when I went to prison the first time. We would do this time together, as a team, as a family.

Another really huge decision of mine was to completely turn away from my past. Or, as it's commonly known in prison, I chose to "drop out" of my gang. This decision was helped by

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the fact that my cousin Troy (the OG shot caller) was nearly killed by our own gang. Needless to say my decision to drop out wasn't a difficult one. I sure as hell wasn't trying to get stabbed to death over some shit my cousin had done. nor could I see myself pledging my loyalty to a group of m/f who are capable of turning on each other like that.

Fuck that.

I want to live. I want to have a life. To be free. To love. To be loved.

Emily and our son don't visit much. Of course this hurts, but Emily has her own story I'm sure. They're gone, but my seemingly endless desire to overcome the issues in my life that have held me hostage is alive and well.

My hunger for a real life is a non stop motivating force that pushes me to challenge myself. I've been dead inside for too many years of my life. I refuse to accept this shit as my fate. I refuse to cower to my demons any longer. No longer will I allow the damaged little boy to steer this ship.

With my head held high I confront the facts as they are. I can either own them or they can own me. By reflecting on my past I've decided to control my future. Some very wonderful things have happened for me these past six years. Tom (my mentor) has held my feet to the fire continuously pushing me to challenge myself. To overcome. To achieve.

With Tom's help and hundreds of hours in a psychologists chair I've managed to build something more valuable than all the gold in the world. A healthy self-image. An image that I'm proud to see when I look in the mirror. While I continue on this journey I make it a point to acquire as much education as possible. I have multiple degrees in computer science and a good handle on training service dogs. Really, the list of accomplishments just goes on and on. :-)

One of the most important things I have learned during this coming of age story is that I am so much more than just the things I have done and have had done to me.

Some of the other things I've learned about myself are that I'm an advocate for the disadvantaged. I use my voice where ever possible when other voices are being shut down by the masses or lost in the noise. I care deeply about my fellow man. I realize that it really does take a village to raise a child, meaning I, too, play a role in their upbringing.

There are so many things I can say about the man I am, but that's not my style.

I would just like to close by saying that I love life. I wake each morning with hope in my heart and the desire to be the best man that I can be. Regardless of all the horrible stuff life's thrown at me, I make it a point to also keep in mind all of the awesome stuff life has given me as well.

When I was a small child my mom was my hero. As a man she remains that power figure.

Rest in peace mom.

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Submission
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