

Blind Leading the Blind

A prison experience I will never forget happened one evening last July. I was making a call to my girlfriend Taemi that would no doubt end like all the others; with me hating myself and wondering why I called in the first place. That seemed to be our routine. Knowing how I would feel afterwards I would still line up each night and spend half of my forty-five minute rec time to receive a fifteen minute dose of verbal bashing. That seemed to be the routine of quite a few offenders as well. Gluttons for punishment, we couldn't bring ourselves to stop calling; most of us were too hooked on our abusive relationships and had been for years.

There was nothing special or out of the ordinary about this night. There was no full moon and it wasn't Friday the 13th, but as usual it was hot. That much I do remember. In the St. Cloud correctional facility there is no air conditioning so the summer heat and humidity made it feel like living in a sauna. Each day blurred into the next as we sat in open faced cells stripped down to our state-issued tightie-whities trying to think cool thoughts. Thankfully I had a single cell on the bottom floor and was not on the 3rd or 4th tier. They were miserable up there.

B-House-my housing unit-was considered an *education* unit where a large portion of the offenders mandated to the DOC's GED program were housed. This included men with learning disabilities and young men, still boys really, with behavioral problems who never graduated. It created quite an interesting social dynamic. Sometimes the atmosphere was closer to an asylum than a prison.

It takes an incredible amount of focus and concentration to maintain a telephone conversation in B-House. Often the man on the phone next to you is begging someone to put money on his books for ramen noodles and coffee and there is usually someone crying, promising he will change; pleading for one more chance in between sobs. Then there is always at least one abusive bastard berating some poor insecure woman calling her every name in the book. Surprisingly, she continues to answer when he hangs up and calls her right back. The worst distractions come from those waiting in the long line to use the phone. They show no regard for people who are on the phone. They yell at one another, make crude jokes, and argue over the most trivial things like, which rapper has the most money in the bank. (In prison, guys know absolutely everything about absolutely nothing and will stop at nothing to convince everyone else of it.) Yes, using the phone in B-house is a skill.

That night Taemi and I had just started talking when someone walked by with a piece of paper clipped to his chest. I only caught a quick glance out of the corner of my eye so I had no idea what it was. I paid it no mind because in that unit you never knew what you were going to see and a piece of paper on someone's shirt was nothing in the grand scheme of things. I did notice people pointing and getting a little animated, but Taemi was already in rare form telling me what a horrible person I was for the hundredth time, so my attention was focused on her flattering commentary. A few minutes later he passed by again. This time his back was to me and he was facing the men standing in line so I still couldn't see what he had on his chest.

I would describe this guy as a young thug and that is not me stereotyping him. I wasn't judging him because of his dreads, tattoos, or the fact that in a prison full of men, both of his butt cheeks were proudly on display with his pants sagged so low that he waddled rather than walked. No, I say he was a thug because of the things he would say and the way he carried himself. He bragged about being a gang member and celebrated criminal behavior, the convict code, and the street mentality. Every other word out of his mouth was an explicative of some sort or a derogatory comment towards someone else. He was always talking about beating this or robbing that or some new and improved way to sell dope. I hate

to wish it on anyone, but there are just some people you can tell will be back in prison over and over again and that's the impression he gave.

He made another pass by the phone line and this time he threw his hands up like Mohammad Ali when he knocked down Frasier and went skipping down the line like a gangster cheerleader leading the wave. This time he drew an even more spirited reaction. Some laughed and snickered; others jumped up and down making crazy "No-he-didn't" faces. A couple guys looked disgusted, but only a couple. A few near the end of the line were furious. They hurled insults and threats at him and threw up what I assume were gang signs, with their fingers. The spectacle made me more curious to see what he had going on that was causing such a commotion.

The next time he came around I turned in time to see what was on the paper. Clipped to the front of his shirt was a full page color photo of a young man shot in the face, lying dead in the street. This wasn't a theatrical Hollywood recreation either; it was gory, like someone had paused the DVR during an episode of *The First 48*. The man had been shot in his face and chest and was propped up at a slight angle in the gutter behind a parked car. There was blood pooling around his head next to the curb and his leg was folded underneath him in a hurdler's stretch. His eyes were open and he appeared to be staring at something just outside the shot. He looked like a high school kid and couldn't have been more than 19 years old. It turns out this was a photo the prosecution had used as evidence during this guy's murder trial. The young man in the picture was his victim.

No doubt this was an entirely different image from the pious young man who had stood before the judge a few weeks earlier asking for mercy. The newspaper article mentioned his emotional plea for leniency at his sentencing calling it tearful and full of remorse and regret. Now here he was bragging about his charge, strutting around with this photograph pinned to his chest like a badge of honor acting as if he was proud of what he had done.

The scene by the phone line was surreal. Some offenders actually cheered him on. There were even old men encouraging his behavior. Younger guys, totally hooked on the street-life, looked at him with awe. You could see that they almost instantly idolized him. It was sickening, like watching the blind leading the blind.

I have seen a fair amount of disturbing things while incarcerated like assaults, abuse, extortion, drug use etc., but something about this just hit me. Some things you see and your brain just rejects it; you can't believe you just saw what you just saw. That's how it was. I'm not sure why. Maybe it was the depravity of it. Maybe it was the hopelessness of it. Maybe it was just the straw that broke the camel's back. Whatever it was, a part of me was dumfounded. Another part was horrified.

My heart went out not only for the victim, but also for this lost young man so wrapped up in darkness he may never break free. I felt the pain of the mother whose son lost his life the night police took that photograph and the mother who has lost her son in the system for the next 27 years. I couldn't help but think of all the hopes and dreams each mother had for their sons that now will never be realized. My heart broke for the young men looking up to this guy and the future families that will be impacted by his influence on them.

I was speechless standing there with the phone slowly falling from my ear when Taemi's voice recaptured my attention. I cut her off midsentence and blurted out a description of what I was seeing. It stunned her to silence and we both sat there for a moment lost in our own thoughts saying nothing. I think the reality of where I was finally set in for both of us. I apologized for interrupting her and asked what she had been saying. "Nothing" she replied in a soft voice. "I love you babe."