

The following is an excerpt from "A Prisoner's Fight: The Pandemic as Seen From Inside the Illinois Department of Corrections," by Nicholas Chittick.

Ms. Sumpter got my phone issue worked out and had my mom's cell phone number processed as an emergency. Her number was finally approved. I was grateful, I was finally going to be able to call and talk to her. It'd been over two months.

She was still in the hospital, but she'd successfully undergone all necessary preparations for transplant and was now just waiting on a set of donor lungs. I told her about the newspaper interview I'd done with the Jacksonville Courier for the Level Up program. She said that there was a donor organ shortage going on. It seemed that the quarantine (ironically, since it was a policy put in place with the intention of keeping high risk people like my mom safe) was responsible for the shortage. No one was going anywhere or doing anything, so there were fewer traffic accidents or other events that led to donor organs becoming available.

My mom had a hard time talking, couldn't catch her breath, so it was a short conversation. Still, it was good to finally hear her voice. I was very worried about her. Thoughts came unbidden to my mind.

If I killed myself, could they send her my lungs? We were the same blood type, O positive. But no, she wouldn't want that.

But wait, what about a child molester? There was certainly no shortage of them running around the prison.

"Hey," I could say to them. "You wouldn't happen to know your blood type, would you? Why do I want to know? Oh, no reason. Just making conversation. Hmm, O positive, you say. Interesting. You look

like you're in pretty good shape. Do you run a lot? Oh, you do? You love cardio, set some track records in high school? Awesome, man, awesome. Say, let me talk to you for a second over here in this darkened corner."

But no, she wouldn't want that, either. The truth was that I felt powerless to help her, and those stupid little daydreams helped me to get through. Walt was the only one I told what was going on. I asked him to pray, and I prayed fervently that night. It was an odd thing to pray for if you thought about it. For my family to have a miracle, another family would need to experience a tragedy.

It was around seven o'clock in the evening the next day when something told me I should call my mom. I usually only used the phone once a week, and she'd had a hard time talking the day before, but still. Something told me to call, so I did. I went with my first mind. It was September 11, 2020.

My sister, Jenny, answered my mom's cell. We hadn't spoken to each other in twenty years or more.

"Hello, Nick? It's Jenny. Let me step out of the room so we can talk."

Uh-oh. This didn't bode well.

Jenny told me it wasn't looking good; one of our mom's lungs had perforated. Mom couldn't talk because she was intubated and was breathing with the help of machines. Jenny mentioned that after I'd called the day before they'd looked up my newspaper interview on the phone and mom had been very proud. I didn't care about that, though. Jenny said they were still holding out hope for a last minute donor to come through, but it was now a matter of hours. There was a long silence. I couldn't speak.

"Nick?" Jenny said. "Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Are you okay?"

"No."

"I know," she said. "Listen, Mom is awake. She can't talk, but she can hear you. Do you want to say something?"

"Yes."

I wanted to say a lot. I wanted to tell her how lucky I was that she was my mom. I wanted to tell her what a great example of strength and compassion she was for us growing up. I wanted to tell her that she was the most amazing woman on the planet and thank her for giving me my life. I wanted to tell her that my failures and mistakes were on me, and that no one could have done a better job being a mother to a son than she'd been to me.

"Nick?" said my sister. "Talk now." She held the phone to my mom's ear.

"Mom," I said, struggling with all my might not to let my voice break. "I love you very, very much."

They were my final words to her. I hope they were enough.