

Last summer, I received a letter from Misty, my little sister—my first contact with anyone from home since coming to prison, my first letter ever from anyone in my family. For eleven lonely years, years when I felt forgotten, I had written and sent countless letters and cards to my parents, hoping to fan some imagined glowing cinder of compassion. We were never close, never. In fact, the term *family* should be used loosely when referring to us collectively.

I never expected to receive a response to any of my letters. At first, I wrote of forgiveness, change, and family as if we had a chance of making amends and starting over, but as years passed, I wrote my letters more as reminders so they wouldn't forget that I was alive. For a few days after mailing each letter, I would approach mail call with shallow hope, no more than someone, numbed by disappointment, half-heartedly checking weekly lottery numbers. A "leave us the hell alone" letter would have been better than nothing.

While I was staring out at the top of a solitary birch tree, the only living thing not within the walls of this prison that I could clearly see from my window, something was slid under my door. It was about time for mail call. The sun was soon to set and the sultry summer heat would slowly dissipate. I wanted only to drink in the cool air and relax, my only reprieve from doing hard time locked in a steel and concrete sauna. The letter was no more than four feet away from me, but I would check it later. It wouldn't be anything important.

When I saw my sister's name above the return address on the envelope, the calloused security that I had worn like armor against the horrible reality of prison was suddenly ripped from me, leaving me defenseless against genuine emotion and sentiment. I was more afraid than I have ever been during any conflict or fight, which says a lot when one has spent a large portion of life in a maximum-security prison. A multitude of questions and possibilities flooded my mind. Why write now? Did someone die? Was I going to be accepted? Was I going to be asked

to stop writing home? I felt weak and confused and agonizingly excited. I may even have bargained with God to wheedle him into blessing me for once in my undeniably miserable existence.

Despite my anticipation, I opened the envelope carefully, as if it were from the notorious Ted Kaczynski. Little did I know, but a bomb was about to go off. I counted four typed pages, single-spaced, and like a seasoned pessimist, I started reading the last two paragraphs on the last page. If the letter ended on a good note, I would read it immediately. Otherwise, I could read it later, after my hope had ebbed and my stoical shielding was back in place.

To my relief, the letter ended with Misty's hope that we could develop a relationship. She had offered to help me, her big brother. She had apologized for not being there with support all those years. Her words touched me deeply. Even when I was out there, my family had never helped me. At that moment, I felt wanted, needed, welcomed as if I were being invited into her home, as if I had pulled up to the curb of the upper middle class suburban estate she shared with my mom to find her excitedly waving to me from behind an upstairs window.

Turning to the beginning of the letter, I began my first of many emotionally charged readings. I scrutinized every word, searching for subtle clues that would reveal the author behind the crisply typed words. Elation flooded me when I read that Misty remembered me as her favorite brother, the brother who taught her to play chess and who took her for motorcycle rides. Sorrow gnawed at me because my brother Mike was homeless, living day to day on the discards of a society unmoved by his plight. I felt indifferent to my sister Tina's problems with men and money, a condition she appears destined to live with for the rest of her life. I was proud of Misty, the youngest of us, eleven years younger than I am, for earning a college degree and pursuing a career in Medical Diagnostics. I felt some emotion when I read of my mother's regrets

concerning the abuses I had suffered as a child by her hand and anything else she could wield. But that part of the letter seemed unconvincing, lacking heartfelt genuineness. I never knew the Devil, the scourge of my childhood, to have any regrets. I found it unbelievable.

If you don't talk about it, it doesn't exist—that may be the first and foremost rule of my family. My parents *never* beat me or forced me to beat my brother and sister. They *never* locked me in a small closet or starved me for days. They *never* threatened my life, told me “just die already,” or otherwise degraded me. That is what they choose to believe in order to live free of guilt for their crimes against me.

Misty was the privileged child, a spoiled brat compared to the rest of us. That's the way Mike and Tina saw it, and they resented her for the special treatment she received. In my opinion that just meant that Misty wasn't receiving a regular beating. As the eldest, I understood that the abuse I suffered wasn't Misty's fault. Our cold and calculating overseers drove wedges of hate and mistrust into our young hearts and minds with their wrathful words, their flailing fists, and when they had tired or wanted entertainment, with their grim games of torture, where we were forced to hurt and humiliate each other. They had done well to program us into versions of them, lacking sympathy and emotion.

“The Game of Liars,” as my parents called it, was a long, grueling event. It usually began with a simple question like “Who left the light on in the bathroom?” followed by three replies of “I don't know.” Then, in turn, Mike, Tina and I would be hit, usually with a belt. The question would be repeated. Should a confession not emerge, another round of painful wallops would follow. The interrogation would last for hours, while we stood at attention with our noses pressed up against a wall. My parents claimed that they couldn't stand to look into our *lying faces*. There were no bathroom breaks or timeouts to eat. In my parents' eyes, it was better to torture the

innocent than to let a liar go unpunished. On a particularly memorable instance, after my parents had beaten and tortured us for hours in order to find out who had adjusted a setting on the sewing machine, my mother burst into laughter. "I remember," she said, "I think that *I* changed the setting." My dad joined her in laughing at us before dismissing us to our rooms.

Sometimes, when my mom or dad tired from swinging a belt, we were forced to hit each other. There comes a point when an area of a person's body has been hit so many times that even the movement of clothing over the skin feels like it is immersed in flame, and after the underlying nerves, exhausted from extreme sensation, stop sending pain signals to the brain, a person simply feels nothing. For me, no torture hurt as much as it hurt to beat my own brother and sister or to receive a beating from them. It was games like this that destroyed any chance we might have had to form any real bonds of attachment, to trust, or to love.

I learned early that there are worse tortures than being hit. Those are the ones that stay with you, that bring the nightmares.

I wrote my first reply to my first letter from Misty with the utmost attention to detail. This young woman had mustered the strength and bravery to write a letter to a convict, a person my parents could create but would not accept or support. She just had to have broken free of the cruel bondage of our parents. The letter was proof of that. But after thorough consideration of what she had written, I realized that she was also the product of the people who had raised me. I recognized the problems that plagued me when I was her age: low self-esteem, inability to trust, melancholy, traits I shared with Mike and Tina. On the other hand, Misty could not possibly know who I had become, the product of more than five years of substance abuse treatment, anger management treatment, stress management classes, and one-on-one counseling, followed by four

years of college studying psychology. I had become strong. I understood myself better. I knew to choose my words wisely or risk losing her.

After 11 p.m., when prisoners are locked in their cells for the night and the lights are dimmed to a faint glow, a calming silence settles throughout the dorm. Free from the usual yammer, I can hear myself think. My diligent work continued deep into the night, until my vision blurred and my fingertips numbed, until my will to continue writing was dashed by the realization that I was crossing out more sentences than I was keeping.

Sleep was impossible, but I was content lying in my bunk and thinking how lucky I was to have such a wonderful sister who had written such a wonderful letter. I hoped that she was real, genuine in her desire to have a relationship with me, free from the heart-hardening legacy of our parents. I took pride in my persistence that allowed me to endure eleven years of emotion-draining rejection in order to maintain contact with my family. I had earned this letter, and I believed that my family was salvageable. If we worked together, we would heal together as a family. For the first time in my life, I felt joy.

Although a few more letters followed during that summer, it is that first letter that I will always treasure as one of the rare good memories in my life. That letter healed many of the emotional wounds inflicted by my family. An ability to feel happiness, free from guilt, shame, or fear, was reawakened. Despite being locked away like an animal, in conditions not fit for an animal, I felt freer than at any other time. I had been reminded that there is more to life than merely reaching the other side of the wall that locks me in this prison.

But now, months have passed since I last heard from my sister, and once again, I find myself sending letters and cards to a black hole. At first, I thought something terrible had happened, a car accident, a robbery, Mike acting out his frustrations upon her to get back at our

parents. Then, I feared that I had written something inappropriate about her personal relationships, her issues of self-esteem, her issues of trust, her issues of conflict resolution and interpersonal relationships. Finally, I accepted the fact that my family is dysfunctional. My parents have never apologized for their crimes against me. Any words of wisdom that I could give to Misty, when filtered through her skewed perceptual lens, ran the risk of being misinterpreted as harsh criticism or personal attacks. She is a prisoner of the bitter upbringing that once fettered my heart and mind. I realized that I am free from the past, free to embrace life.

Often, when I am deep in thought, I will look out my window, through the dark rusted screen, around a thick iron bar, past a tall chain link fence to the top of the implacable concrete wall that marks my horizon, to the uppermost branches of that lone birch tree. And I am reminded of life outside prison. The thin branches move with the wind, long slender arms stretched to the sky.

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