

The Secret Scars of Brotherhood

This is the poem that is not a poem. This is the story I was not sure I wanted to share. I was 13, and my brother, Todd, was 15...

No, I was 8, and Todd was 10. He held a dime in the alcohol lamp with a tweezers, and explained, as it turned red, that yellow hot was next, and then blue, and that white hot was the hottest.

This fascinated me. How did he know this stuff? I watched in excitement as the glowing red disc in the blue flame began to quiver orange, and suddenly he turned, pressing the searing dime onto the bare skin of my bicep, pushing it deeper into my flesh when I cried out in pain. I still have the scar where he “branded” me, still wonder why I didn’t tell anyone, why I just kept it to myself.

Why was I always seeking his approval? Sure, he threatened me if I told, but what could have been worse. The beatings went on for years anyway. Never an all-out ass kicking, but a random punch to my arm or to my thigh when no one was looking, or a jab to my stomach that would double me up when no one was around.

He said he was teaching me “to be tough.”

I learned to not feel pain.

This went on until I was 14, until somehow, unnoticed to both of us, I had grown bigger than Todd. The beatings had been daily getting worse, until one day, after a repeated pounding, I lost it. I was sucked up by a maelstrom of fury. A torrent of repressed rage whipped me into a frenzied and violent delirium, and the next thing I knew, our Dad was pulling me off my bruised and bloodied brother. We all stood there in shock for a moment, until Todd said, “Well, I guess I finally taught you how to fight back.”

Todd had something about him, a charisma, a charm, which made people want to follow him anywhere, to do anything for him. I remember my tenth birthday party. I had only one friend show up, and off he went with Todd on some adventure leaving me alone with my melted ice cream and soggy birthday cake. This was something I was used to, although I never understood why, Todd, with all his friends, wanted to take mine. Nor why, when we were in college, and I fell hard for this one girl, he stole her away. Six months later, after they broke up, she came back to me; Todd never spoke to me again. Even after a year had gone by, and my heart, too, had been broken by the same girl; even after I had then gone to his apartment and tried to mend fences, he never spoke to me again. Why did I want his forgiveness anyway? Why did I blame myself for the pain he put me through?

This is the poem I never wanted to write. This is the story that never seems to end. I was 13, and my brother, Todd, was 15...

No, I was 12, and Todd was 13. It was the end of the summer before my first year in junior high school. I was nervous about starting a new school, hopeful that things would be better now that I could go to a bigger school with so many new kids; I was looking forward to a fresh start. Todd had been going to this Junior High School for a year now; he had learned the ropes and had established himself as one of the "popular kids." He had half a dozen friends over that day. He called me into his room with all his buddies around and asked if I wanted to be the "most famous" seventh grader in the school. I remember, at the time, thinking this sounded too good to be true. He then told me to go into the closet of my room and wait with my pants down. I had no idea why I did this. I had had no experience with anything sexual, and I guess for some reason, I trusted my big brother and, yes, craved his attention. I would have done anything to be one of the gang.

Todd sent one of his friends named Jack into the closet with me. Jack dangled his limp cock in my butt crack for about 30 seconds. He was no more into this thing than I was, so we both came out after about a minute without really doing anything, but what had really happened did not matter. The setup was complete and rumors were spread all across our 1960's small town junior high school. They persisted for years no matter how much I denied them, ruining any chance I might have had for a normal, decent social life. Jack seemed to be left alone, but I don't think he was ever very popular to start with. He became a leader in our scout troop and was always kind to me, although we never talked about what had happened. Meanwhile, I was branded and, yes, I guess I was famous. I was called "cornholer" and "faggot" by all the older boys. Todd just egged them on. Why did everyone try so hard to please him?

I was 13, and my brother, Todd, was 15. He called me into his room. He was lying there with his pants unzipped lightly stroking his pencil thin dick and said, "Suck it." I had never heard of anything like this, although I had started to masturbate and had had some wet dreams about the cheerleader that lived down the street. I tentatively put my mouth near his cock. He said, "Suck it. Suck it. Suck it!" He grabbed my head and pushed it up and down on his hard cock. Up and down. Up and down. A sudden choking wad of salty hot cum filled my mouth. I gagged, ran into the bathroom and spit and spit and tried to spit it all out. I brushed my teeth about ten times. I was confused, ashamed and self-repulsed. I did not need my brother to tell me not to tell anyone. It was forty some years later, before I began to grasp how I still carry a scar from that terrible moment of his greedy pleasure, before I began to understand how sick keeping a hurtful secret can make you.

I am not sure if I would have dealt with things differently, knowing what I now know, because there will never be closure. My wound was never given a chance to heal; instead, it was cauterized.

I was 21, and Todd was just about to turn 23, when he was abducted from the Radio Shack at which he worked. He was missing for a month before we learned from the five o'clock news that his body had been found. My Dad recounted that identifying the body was the hardest thing he ever had to do in his life. At the funeral, Todd was remembered for his natural charisma and leadership, for how he was always willing to help anyone in need, and for what a fine example of a young man he was known to be.

Thirty six years later, I found out from a phone call from a retired police detective that Todd was most likely murdered by a man who was trying to prove himself to his older brother. I had never heard anything about this before. The older brother had put the younger one up to murdering someone, because the younger one had witnessed the older brother murder a gas station attendant, and the older brother was afraid the younger one was going to rat him out. To prove himself, the younger brother had taken my brother, Todd, and the store manager out into the woods in broad daylight and shot them both in the back of the head.

I am not sure why that phone call mattered so much to me. The retired detective was trying to warn me that the two brothers who had been convicted of the gas station robbery were getting out of prison soon. This did not worry me. All I had known through the years is that no one had ever been charged for murdering Todd or the Radio Shack store manager. This story about the suspects was, perhaps to "protect" me, kept from me by my family. The irony of all this began to gnaw at me. I realized that my secret scars were somehow still living like worms deep inside my mind, feeding on the pain I had buried there. It was past time to deal with my past.

I guess his murder was where the story ended for Todd, but not for me, as I dropped into a morass of drug abuse and compulsive sexual encounters for a dozen or so years after his funeral, pushing away anyone that would try to love me. Today, as I near 60, I am just now coming to grips with this story and its ending, just now making peace with who I might have been if none of this had ever happened. There is something about the memory of my otherwise loving family that somehow falls in on itself, that binds me to a legacy of hurt, that still makes me feel like I have been left for dead, alone on the shore of a deserted island. Yet every day I survive, I find myself feeling more caring, more empathetic and more human than I have ever felt before. I realize now that many of us have survived our own stories and that we all have our own islands of hurt to endure. I believe sharing our stories may help us heal. I know from experience that keeping them secret will only make them fester. There may be something to learn in all that has happened to us which can help us each find the courage we need to reconnect with ourselves. I share this now to make myself whole and to bring together the pieces of myself that have run away from each other during my reign of pain. In the end, Todd did not make me tough, he made me tender, and although I will never feel thankful for the hurt that buried a large part of my life, I am finally learning to live with my past, and to my own amazement, I am starting to forgive.