

Brothers (working title)

The heavy security door slams behind me. It's clearly designed to keep people in, a solid slab of steel with a keypad knob. I've never felt a door that heavy and cold in all my life. The brightness of the lighting hit the same way as the slam of the door shutting. Everything about the visiting room is minimal. The walls are a simple breezeblock masonry, slathered with a cheap off-white. The floor is frosted with shiny white tiles, pristine not because of any meticulous custodian but simply a lack of pedestrian contact. The cold-white floodlights above add to the sterility. The room smells mostly of off-brand soap and that dry, dusty wood smell you might get in an elementary classroom, likely from the old wooden desks that are stenciled around. The stark whiteness is disorienting, or maybe it's just because I had to wake up at 5 to get this over with before work.

The officer who accompanied me gestured towards the glass windows.

"This is your first time in our facility, so I'm required to give a brief overview of our visitation policies verbally. "

I nod in compliance.

"When visiting with the inmate, you are to keep your hands in plain view at all times. Although there aren't any concurrent visitations, you are expected to speak in an orderly and civil manner. If either you or the inmate becomes disruptive, we will end the visitation and require you to leave. If you'd prefer, I can bring the inmate into the social area and so you can exchange physical greetings."

"Don't worry about it, the glass is fine." The social area was showered in the sanitizing light, so I'd rather face the area behind the glass which was much dimmer. He led me over to the miniature cubicles that separated the windows into the inmate area. The simple metal-disk stools made it obvious they preferred to keep visitations short. I took a seat, feeling the blood in the meat of my ass getting squished out between my pelvis and the metal.

"The inmate will be brought out shortly," the officer said, walking off to one of the doors and using his badge to unlock it. I leaned back a little and stared at the ceiling, taking a somewhat deep

breath, but not enough to take in the aroma too much. The room was quiet, probably the most silence I've heard in years. The last time I felt this kind of stillness was the last time I had spoken to my brother, when he told me he was getting put away. Now, seven years later, it feels the same way.

About 10 minutes had passed, but the only way I could tell that was from the stereotypical grade school analog clock that hung in the corner. It was an hour off, likely ignored during daylight savings. The door on the other side of the glass opened, and through it came two uniforms, one indigo and one neon orange.

He took a heavy, tired seat on the metal stool on his side, then finally brought his eyes up to mine. We stared at each other for a time. It wasn't uncomfortable, just a moment for us both to appreciate how time had transformed the other. He reached for the phone with both hands (since they were cuffed together) and clenched it between his shoulder and ear, bring his hands back down to rest. I picked up the receiver on my side, wiping the mouthpiece with the cuff of my shirt before holding it up to my ear.

"These stools really hurt your ass, don't they?" he started. I couldn't help but let out a small chuckle, and nodded.

"Why the somber look?" he continued, "Am I that pitiful of a sight?"

I shook my head, "No, I don't pity you. Frankly, I don't know what to feel towards you. That's why I haven't visited. I'd rather just feel an ambiguous void than risk hating or pitying you."

"You can hate me. You can pity me. I don't really care. I took a risk, I did a bad thing, and I got caught. I'm dealing with the consequences. It's as simple as that."

His eyes had no emotion, but not in a depressing way. His look was as pragmatic as his words.

"It's been the better half of a decade, and that's how you think? How do you carry on with that kind of attitude? You've never once tried to rationalize it?"

"What's there to rationalize?"

"I don't know, like '*I did it for my family*' or something."

"Well, that's not the reason."

"What the hell do you mean that's not the reason?"

"There wasn't a reason. It was an impulse. I saw an opportunity and I took it. It wasn't sentimental."

I looked at him with a scrunched brow, mouth slightly ajar. This is the first time we've discussed his motivations, and I was astounded.

"The thought of how that money could help your family never crossed your mind?"

"Of course it did. I loved them. I'm just saying they aren't the *reason*."

"I don't understand. Why would you take a risk like that on a whim?"

He leaned back a little and looked a little upward for a moment. A bit of his lower neck got exposed and I could see a hint of a tattoo he didn't have before peeking out from his chest hair. He used to talk about how he thought tattoos were a waste of money, though I imagine he got this one for free.

He returned his gaze to mine, "I can't give you an answer that will satisfy you."

"No, I suppose you can't. Well, your sentence is almost up, isn't it?"

"Three more years."

"What are your plans?"

"What type of man has planned three years ahead? I'll build that bridge when the time comes."

"What about Scotty?"

He switched the phone to his other shoulder and ear, "You tell me."

"Well, he's the reason I'm here."

"That so? What'd he say?"

"Well...that's the thing. Rather, it's what he *didn't* say."

"Hm?"

I closed my eyes and slowly rubbed my forehead. I could still picture his plain look clearly based on the tone of the voice in my ear, “What is it, Kevin?”

“Scott’s in the hospital.” I looked back up to see his bared teeth.

“...Christ, what happened?”

I looked back down again.

“Kevin...”

“Three days ago, he was in the bathroom for several hours. He didn’t respond, so I opened the door and found him with sliced wrists in the bathtub. We got him to the hospital in time, but he hasn’t been very responsive.”

There were streams down his cheeks now. His eyes saggy and tired, so the tears fell right out of the ducts. None of them dripped on the table, getting caught in the net of his wiry beard. His eyes looked like the way a dog’s look when you’re about to leave the house.

This is his son we’re talking about, so I don’t know why that surprised me. Well, actually I do, I just don’t want admit I was surprised that he was still human on the inside. Back before the trial, every time I saw him he was artificial, no remorse or anything. The whole process just seemed like an inconvenience to him—which it definitely was—it just didn’t seem like he appreciated the gravity of it all: his wife was leaving him, and his son, he was facing class C felony charges, he lost his dream job; his entire life toppled like a Jenga tower. And he was still cracking jokes at our meetings with the lawyer! This is the first time I’ve seen him be genuine since I bailed him out of jail.

“Jeff...I’m sorry. You don’t know how God damned sorry I am.”

Honest-to-God whimpers came through the receiver. I pitied him, but it wasn’t as patronizing as I thought it would be. I didn’t know what to expect by doing this, but I think I’m glad I did.

He snorted and cleared his throat, and muttered to the glass more than the phone, “Don’t you still work with this kind of stuff for a living? Couldn’t you see the signs?”

That's what stung most of all. It's a bitter criticism I had been chewing on constantly for the last few days. When you work at a hotline, you gradually lose sight of the sincerity of your responses. You're talking to people who are confronting perhaps the most philosophical question there is, whether to say goodbye to it all or not. It's a damn sorry thing to deal with, people who want to die. It's not even that they want to die, it's just that it's preferable to living. No one really wants to die. Statistically, it's inevitable that some people will get the short end of the stick more often. There's some guys who were dads, but crashed their family on a roadtrip and now they're a paraplegic. What do you even say to that? When you deal with that kind of shit all the time, I guess it's natural for you to just shut off after a while. It's not rewarding to get invested in these people's lives. Sometimes, I even felt that just letting them do it would honestly be better for them, but I couldn't say that. How fucked would be to bring yourself to call for help to just be told, "*Hm, yeah, you've got it pretty rough. I'd off myself too.*"

"Yeah. Believe me, *believe me*. I've been thinking the same thing, I'm a God damn fuck-up. I became so desensitized I didn't even notice he was exhibiting the textbook signs of depression. Seventeen is a hard age, he's dealing with college applications and state tests and God knows what else. I just wrote it off as normal troubles, but when I saw his pale body bathing in his own blood, that really wrangled in how wayward my ambitions have gotten."

"Kevin...I'm sorry you have to go through something like this again."

"Sorry? Why the hell *you* sorry?"

"Well...ever since what happened to Becca, you were different. I'm just...sorry you had to experience something like this ag—"

"Shut up." I wanted to say a lot of things at once. I wanted to say nothing *happened* to Becca, the only thing that *happened* to her was herself. I wanted to say that ultimately I've learned nothing, and I just ended up becoming even blinder to the feelings of others. I wanted to say that I deal with this kind of stuff all the time so it shouldn't phase me. So ultimately nothing came out.

“...Sorry.”

“God damn it, why are you sorry?!”

“I’ve been sorry. Since the moment I called you from jail I’ve been sorry. I’ve been sorry so goddam long now I don’t know what it feels like to be anything else. I know you feel responsible about Scott, but you know this all happened because of me. I have every fucking right to be sorry.”

I looked at him. I looked at his sad face with my own sad face. His tired eyes, his dry skin, his unkempt hair. His pupils were tiny and tense, probably because of the white that drenched the room behind me. I wonder if it looked like Heaven to him. I can only imagine what he’s gone through in here during all this time.

“I am too.” We both sat quietly for a spell.

“Why don’t you come live with me when you get out?” I offered. I knew he was surprised, but he did a good job of hiding it.

“Well, we’ll see. Three years is a long time. Plus, parole and all that. I doubt you’d want to have to deal with any of that.”

I don’t know if the offer was genuine or not. Like he said, it’s a long time.

He continued, “What did the doctors say?”

“He’ll be alright. But he’s required to attend therapy. Since he’s still a minor, Child Protection Services is looking into our case too. I don’t abuse him or anything, so I don’t think it’ll be a big deal.”

“What about Mom?”

“She’s still doing well. I helped move her to a new nursing home a year or two ago. She still wishes you’d write.”

“Well if she moved I don’t know her address.”

“Right. I’ll write it down and have the cop give it to you.”

He was still sniffing a bit.

“Well...so that’s everything? Any other news? I assume you’ve got work today cuz of your outfit—I don’t want to keep you.”

My spine shivered. I was annoyed being obligated to come confront him., but I knew it was the right thing to do, but now I regret feeling that way. He’s been suffering alone in here for years. I never once thought to visit because I was so disgusted with how he acted. But how *else* could he have acted? I’ve heard stories of lots of people’s lives falling apart from them. Everyone deals with it in weird ways. I mean, I don’t think there’s a *not-weird* way to handle your life imploding. It’s just curious to find out what they did in response.

I didn’t know that kind of stuff at the time. I didn’t realize anything until now. It’s the same attitude I have with work and that I had with Scotty. God damn. Is this how I deal with everything? I hated him for being that way but I’m the one who was ignoring everything.

“...Uh, yeah, I guess that’s everything.” I honestly did have to leave to get to work on time, but I still felt guilty.

“I’ll try to keep in touch with you and Mom and Scott more frequently—that is, if he even wants to talk to me.”

“I don’t think he’d mind.”

“Good...well, I’ll see you later then.” He pushed himself up and shook his legs a bit to get the blood back into his thighs, and walked through the door back into the bowels of the System. During our time talking, the officer who escorted me had returned to the social area and was monitoring our call.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Not quite. Would you mind letting him come out here?”