

*More than Words: A Young Boy's Experience with  
Art and Writing Therapy in Prison*

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May 6, 2009

## Prologue: AJ's Story

So, I don't really know how to start, so I'll just start at the beginning I guess. People kept tellin' me I should tell my story, so here goes.

I guess it all started when I was twelve, end of sixth grade. I was always a pretty good student, but I just started losin' interest in the whole idea of school. I couldn't sit still in class, my teachers were callin' in my parents every other week for something else I had done wrong, and I was generally wreakin' havoc. Worst thing about it is, I didn't even know why. You know, some people when they're actin' out, they have a reason, they're tryin' to make some statement or just tryin' to be generally obnoxious. Not me, I couldn't help myself, I just couldn't keep interest long enough to not start doin' bad stuff. The only thing I looked forward to was art class, and not cuz I was any good at art, but because I liked using my hands to make stuff. I liked the hands-on stuff because it kept me occupied and distracted me in a good way. This is when I decided I wanted to be a carpenter or a mechanic when I grew up, you know, something that would let me use my hands every day, doin' something I really liked.

Well, let me tell you, my parents were just so ecstatic when they heard this. Their prize child, wanting to do something so degrading as be a mechanic. See, I have a brother, but he didn't exactly get the best grades or finish high school. He was never any good at it. And once I came along and was gettin' good grades in school, my parents just kinda gave up on him and focused on me. And you know, my brother never resented me for that. Not once. I think he was glad to have the spotlight off him for once, and almost felt sorry for me since they were always makin' sure I did my homework, or studied for my tests, or what not. Anyways, I'm gettin' off track.

So yeah, my parents were none too pleased when they heard about this. Even stopped lettin' me go to art class, which was required, by the way. But they had some deal worked out with the principal so I was exempt from that and instead got private advanced math tutoring shit. Yeah, that was a blast. As you might expect, this didn't go over too well with me. My last two years of grade school, I was a terror. And this time, I was doin' bad stuff cuz I was pissed off at my parents. I knew exactly what I was doin', but I didn't care. My parents were being assholes, and they deserved to have to deal with my shit if they weren't gonna take me seriously about what I wanted to do.

Well, I hit high school, and I just didn't even try anymore. I wanted to take art classes and shop classes and anything that was hands-on, but my parents made sure nothing like that was on my schedule. Made sure I was taking only the most advanced science and math courses. They just didn't get it yet. I decided to teach them a lesson. Stopped going to school altogether. I started hangin' out with my brother more, and he was mixed up in some bad shit. It started out with some harmless pranks, graffiti and stealin' some worthless junk from a 7 eleven or something like that. My parents would ground me when they found out, sent me to my room for weeks, but I'd just climb out the window to meet up with my brother and his friends. Then one day we decided to rob a gas station. God knows whose bright idea this was. And they thought it would be a great idea for this to be my first hardcore crime, so they sent me. Well of course I screwed the whole thing up and got caught. I didn't rat out my brother though, didn't even say one word about the other people to the cops. This got me an extra two months in juvie, but I didn't care. I felt like I was one of them.

Well, by this point, my parents had had enough. They up and left, the fuckin' cowards, leavin' me and my brother to our own devices. What a great idea that was. As soon as I got

outta juvie, I just went back to the same stuff. My brother tried to look after me, but he knew about as much as I did. I mean, he did the best he could, and I would've probably been gettin' abused somewhere in foster care if it wasn't for him. Probably wouldn't be in prison right now, either, but I really can't decide which would've been worse.

Anyways, one day it was all over. My brother was killed in a drive-by, and I was devastated. I didn't know what to do with myself, so I just let myself go. I kept tryin' to do worse and worse stuff, almost like I wanted to get caught. One day I just up and robbed a couple with a gun right in front of a cop. I got scared when the pig came runnin' at me, and pulled the trigger. He pulled his at the same time. He missed, I didn't. My victim didn't die, but she was paralyzed from the waist down. I was so pissed off, cuz I didn't even want to use the gun in the first place. The fuckin' cop shouldn't have spooked me like that. Well, that stint got me ten to fifteen in lock-up, which is where I am now. I'm at one of the toughest prisons in Baltimore, run by a warden who we call "the Bull." This place sucks, but there's a few bright spots. And you're gonna hear about one right now.

My name is Andrew Joseph Landon. AJ for short. This is my story.

## Chapter 1: Rules, Rules, More Rules

“Hi, AJ, I’m Michael, Michael Harney. You can call me Mike, or Michael, or Mr. Harney. Pretty much anything you’re comfortable with. I’m going to be working with you for the next few weeks. How are you today?”

“I’m making it.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s kind of a stupid question, huh? Well, how bout we get right down to it, then? Let me set a couple of ground rules first. First rule, I’m not going to bullshit you, so you don’t bullshit me. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Alright, next rule is you gotta show up. We’ll be meeting at 2:00, every Thursday for an hour for five sessions, and I can tell you right now that neither of us is going to get anything from this if you’re not here. See, the way I see it, everyone has something to teach and everyone can learn from anyone. So it’s not just going to be me rattling off directions to you every meeting. Okay?”

“Wait, you think I got something to teach? Sorry, but you’re crazy man.”

“Maybe I am, but I think you might surprise yourself.”

“Yeah, okay man, whatever. Any more *rules*?”

“Just a few more. No gang stuff, no drugs, no sexual images, and most of all try to stay away from specific details of the crime you’re in here for. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Good. Next thing I’m gonna look for from you every class is respect. Don’t show me respect, and you’ll be kicked out of here without a second thought. You do show me respect, and I’ll give you respect, too, which is something I’m sure is hard to come by nowadays.”

“You got that right. Okay, R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Doesn’t seem too hard. Is that it?”

“Just one more. You have to be as honest in your artwork as possible. If you feel like cussing, I want you to cuss. If you’re angry, I want to see that in whatever you do that day. I know how it is in here, how you feel like you can’t say anything or show emotion or whatever. That’s cool, I get that. But when you’re in this room, it’s a whole different ballgame. The difference between good artwork and great artwork is whether or not you’re honest with yourself. No fronts, no lies, nothing like that. Honesty. That’s the last rule. Think you can handle that? Cuz if not, then you’re in the wrong room, and you might as well just turn around and leave now.”

“Yeah, yeah, I can handle it.”

“Alright, let’s get started then. For this first session, I just want you to write about whatever. If you need some direction, I can give you a general topic to write about, but I don’t want to keep you in a box.”

“No, it’s okay, I think I can come up with something...”

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## Twenty to Life

Twenty to life. Those are just words. You hear them on television, on those cop shows. You cheer for the detectives on Law and Order when they catch the guy. You smile smugly when they’re convicted. When that judge pounds the gavel and the ADA says that they’re gonna

pump a triple cocktail into this scum's body. Yes, he's gettin' what he deserves. Fucking piece of shit deserves to be locked up for the rest of his life, deserves to die if that's the case. And when the show ends, and you're sittin' on your nice comfortable couch, snug under a blanket, you feel like there's been justice, that it exists somewhere out there. Knowing that dirt like that's gonna rot in hell for the rest of his life. Never thinking, what if that was me? Cuz of course you know it will never be you.

Well I was falling asleep to the bum-bum of the Law and Order credits just a few months ago, thinking the same exact shit. Now I'm falling asleep to the sound of my own tears and the constant noise of prison. Now I'm praying they'll see me for a human and realize no one should be caged up for their whole lives, no matter what they do. Now I'm watching my back with every turn, because the scum that Law and Order lock up don't even compare to the people in here. Let me tell you, twenty to life ain't just words anymore.

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Untitled

You left me,  
You left me.  
10 years old  
And you left me.

A troubled kid  
A lonely kid  
I was just a kid!!  
And you left me.

Did you even care  
When I took my first breath?  
Did you know then  
That you'd leave me?

Was I just a body?  
Something more to feed  
Draining your money  
Til the day you left me?

And when you finally  
Just gave up on me  
Did you even turn around?  
That day you left me?

## Chapter 2: When I Grow Up, I Wanna Be a Human

“Nice seeing you again, AJ. I’m glad to see you liked the first class enough that you decided to come back. Let’s get right down to business. Now, since that first session, I kinda have a taste of what you can do, so I’ll know if you’re holding back now. Of course, these first couple of sessions are more for us to get a feel for how the other operates more than anything, but just keep in mind that if you think those rules we went over a week ago don’t apply anymore, well you can think again. Understood?”

AJ responded with disgruntled affirmation.

“I can go over them again if you want, refresh you on what they were, since I know how much you love rules.”

“No, really dude, I got it. Let’s just get this over with, okay?”

“Alright, now I wanna do this session a little differently, a little more directed. I’m going to give you something specific to focus on, and then you can put your own creative spin on it. After today, you get to decide what you like best, and that’s how we’ll do it for the last 3 sessions, okay?”

“Sure thing.”

Alright, for this session I want you to compare yourself to an animal. It can be any animal, so use your imagination. You can draw it, sculpt it, write about it, or mix and match. Pretty much anything. Whichever medium you choose, I just want you to answer the following question—if you were an animal, which one would you be?”

For most, this might seem like a simple question with endless possibilities. AJ, however, looked perturbed as he pondered the question. He took a few minutes before he carefully started drawing.

AJ’s finished project was a drawing of a creature that had the body of a lion with wings coming out of its back like an eagle. But the wings weren’t the only thing out of place on the lion. Inside the mane of hair was the face of a young child with blond hair and blue eyes, with a single tear rolling down its cheek.

“Alright, AJ, why don’t you tell me about your drawing.”

“Sure thing, boss. Well see, I chose a lion cuz when I was younger I used to say that I wanted to be a lion when I grew up. Everyone thought that was so cute and hysterical, cuz obviously that would never happen, at least that’s what they thought. Well, it wouldn’t have seemed so funny back then if I’d known I actually would grow up to be an animal. That’s why the face is mine, cuz that’s how I feel a lot of the time. I feel strong, like a lion, but also, I feel like people are seeing my face, but they see the me behind the face as an animal. That’s how we’re treated in here. They take us for walks, they feed us, they keep us locked up in boxes smaller than a cage at the zoo. It’s the same old shit every day. God, it’s like sometimes I feel like the fucking dogs at the animal shelter. Except no one feels sorry for us in here.”

“What about the rest of the drawing? What are the wings for?”

“Well, I think that’s pretty obvious. I wish I could just get the hell out of here. I mean, hell, I saw a little bird fly into the rec yard yesterday, and I just kept thinking, first of all, why the fuck would any living thing actually want to come into this godforsaken place, and secondly, can you take me with you when you leave? Also, I thought maybe if I had wings, I could fly up to see my brother. I mean, I don’t really believe in heaven or anything, but that just seems like the only place he’d be, so I kinda force myself to believe in it for his sake.”

“Is that something you wrote next to the drawing?”

“Yeah, I just scribbled a poem, but it’s not very good, I don’t know if I want to read it.”

“Well, that’s your choice, but just know that any time you put your heart into your writing, it doesn’t matter if it “sounds” good. If there’s truth in it, it’ll be good.”

“Alright. It doesn’t have a title, but here goes...”

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Untitled

Ask a little kid,  
What kind of animal,  
Would you like to be?

A lion, a tiger, a bear?  
Oh my, the possibilities,  
Are never-ending.

How great to imagine  
As a young child,  
Taking on another form,  
Being the impossible.

Now ask an inmate,  
What kind of animal,  
Would you like to be?

That ain’t even a fair question.  
Cuz we *are* animals,  
Fed and caged,  
Shitting in our own kennels.  
No better than a gorilla,  
And hell, most of the time,  
Even worse off.

### Chapter 3: I Might Be Gettin' the Hang of This

By the third session, AJ seemed to actually want to be in the class. He walked into the room without the stubborn adolescent act, and almost had a smile on his face when he sat down.

"Let's get started, boss."

"Well, someone is quite eager, today. I'm glad to see that. Remember what we did last time, me givin' you some direction? Do you want to do something like that today, or do you want to just free-write or draw or what not?"

"Actually, Mike, I think I like it better when I can pick. I don't like feelin' boxed in, especially when I'm doing something like this. And I think I'm gonna stick with the writing now, since I don't think I'm too good at the whole artistic thing."

"Well, that's up to you, but you don't have to be "good" at it to get something out of it, though I understand how something like that can be frustrating. But don't forget, writing can be a form of art, too, and a really powerful form at that. It can be just as abstract or straightforward as any sculpture or painting."

"I guess I never thought of it that way. Well, anyways, I've been thinkin' of some stuff over the past week, and I got some stuff I wanna say, so..."

"Whenever you're ready, go for it..."

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#### Untitled

When I was younger, my brother used to remind me of this song whenever I got down. It was a song by my man Frankie (yeah, I like Sinatra, but don't go spreadin' that around) about an ant moving a rubber tree plant, which seems impossible, but this ant's got, "High hopes, he's got high hopes, he's got high-apple-pie-in-the-sky hopes." Anyways, any time I was feeling low, "stead of lettin' go" I was supposed to remember this song.

I know it seems kinda silly now, but that song got me through some tough times back in the day, made me think I could do anything if I wanted. Not anymore though. Sitting in this cell, there's times I can't even remember the words to the song. There isn't any hope in this godforsaken place. There can't be. Hope means you're in denial, you're weak. In here you just gotta man the fuck up and move on. Cuz I can push and push on these concrete walls and metal bars, but something tells me they ain't going anywhere.

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#### The Ants Go Marching

Hands behind your back,  
Eyes straight ahead.  
Don't blink, don't yawn,  
Hell, don't even breathe.  
Cuz you might do it wrong,  
And god help you,  
If you do something wrong in this place.



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Untitled

Today my cell mate died  
His back to the grim reaper  
Who came from behind  
And shanked him with his scythe

Of course here inside  
The grim reaper is your  
Next door neighbor  
A scrap of metal his scythe

Just last night,  
My cellie was telling me,  
How something felt off.  
I laughed at him,  
Said he was crazy.

If I'd known he was right,  
Well it wouldn't have made  
Much of a difference.  
He'd still be dead,  
And I'd still be laughing.  
Cuz you gotta do something  
And crying,  
Well crying just ain't an option.

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"Damn AJ, it sounds like you've been through a lot this week."

"Yeah, but it's nothing I can't handle. I mean, I have to handle it, you know? And I think I'm doing better at not letting my anger get the best of me when shit happens, so I'm doing pretty okay right now. I just had a lot of frustration and stuff I needed to get off my chest, but I wanted to save it all for now so I could write about it."

"Well, that's a good idea, probably. Better to let your frustration out with words than with violence or something like that. That's actually a really good take on your frustrations, and I'm glad you've figured that out so quickly. But you know, you don't have to wait til our session to get it out; you can always write during the week."

"Yeah, I know, I guess there was just a lot happening and I didn't know where to begin so I just wanted to throw it all together now. I mean, it's been a long week, but I figure, how much worse can it get?"

## Chapter 4: Are You Afraid of the Dark?

April 16<sup>th</sup>, 3:36 am. AJ woke with a start. He shook his head and gained his bearings, cursing silently at the fact that he was having another one of his regular nightmares, the one where his victim turned the gun on him and pulled the trigger. He was lucky though, he always woke up just as the bang went off.

“Jesus, I don’t need this place. My goddamned mind is punishin’ me enough.”

AJ heard a clang behind him and jerked his body around. “What the hell was that?” Two months in this hole, and still the eerie sounds of prison night got to him. He took a deep breath and laid back down, pulling his single sheet up to his chin, eyes wide, looking out for anything weird.

Clang! There was that sound again, louder this time. AJ sat up and before he had a second to look around, everything went black.

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The next thing AJ could remember was a sharp, stabbing pain. “Fuck!” He tried to scream but it was stifled. He realized his face was being pushed into his pillow. He tried to lift himself up, but there was something or someone heavy holding down his arms. A rush of panic went through him. “Holy shit, is someone trying to kill me? Jesus Christ, what the hell is going on? Please tell me I’m dreaming.”

That’s when someone grabbed a chunk of his hair and twisted his head violently to the side.

“You ready to stop screaming, faggot?” a gravelly voice hissed in his hear.

Before AJ could protest, his attacker twisted AJ’s head back around and shoved his face into the pillow. That’s when he realized the pillow was soaked and reeked of something sour. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he thought, “they pissed on my pillow.” AJ was being shoved into a pool of someone else’s urine. It was then that he completely fell apart and just started crying, unable to hold back a steady stream of tears.

“Aw, what’s the matter, pussy? You want your mommy?” The gravelly voice was speaking again.

“Naw, man, he wants his daddy,” a high-pitched voice replied. “Twisted fuck probably took it in the ass from him everyday and liked it.” These words sounded like they were coming from above him. He quickly realized the thing on top of him was the boy in his neighboring cell, Big Al. Big Al was 6 foot 5 and weighed no less than 260 pounds of solid muscle. His high-pitched voice seemed out of place on his enormous frame. AJ still couldn’t place the voice of the other kid, the one who seemed to be running the operation.

Gravelly voice kid spoke again, “Ha, you’re probably right. Bet he misses that. Think we should give him what he wants? How bout it Andy?”

At this, AJ started twisting, trying to break free from the two boys’ grasps. The only problem was, AJ was about half the size of these boys. His attempts were useless.

The leader twisted AJ’s head violently and smacked him across the face. “Listen, you little shit. The more you struggle, the worse this is gonna be. I know you like this shit, so why don’t you just relax and enjoy?”

At this, Big Al tore AJ’s pants down to his ankles, laughing the whole time. AJ kept praying that it was all a dream, that he would wake up any second, cursing himself for having

another nightmare. That's when the leader started driving into him. There's no way this could be a dream now. That pain was real.

## Chapter 5: Prison Walls and Rules Don't Budge for Anyone

Mike sat in the classroom, shaking his leg impatiently. It was 2:10, and AJ was late for class for the first time. Being all too familiar with the ways of prison, Mike decided to give AJ a few more minutes, thinking he was probably held back by a correctional officer for some silly infraction. Five minutes came and went, and still no AJ. Mike decided to go find out what was going on. He ran into an officer outside of the classroom and asked her if she knew what had happened.

"Dude, every kid in this place looks exactly the same to me. Why the hell should I know where your kid is?"

"I just love how friendly everyone is in here," Mike said under his breath.

"What was that?" asked the officer, totally oblivious to Mike's sarcastic attitude.

"Oh, nothing. Can you just tell me where I can go find out where he might be?"

The officer grudgingly directed Mike to the front office and slinked away, rolling her eyes and mumbling something about "do-gooders who just need to mind their own damn business" as she went. Mike sighed as he made his way to the front office. A tired-looking man was sitting behind the cluttered desk.

"Um, excuse me, can you tell me where I can find Andrew Joseph Landon?"

"Who?" the man replied, sounding annoyed.

"AJ Landon."

"Hold on, I gotta look him up." The man took almost ten minutes looking through a disorganized mess in a large filing cabinet before he found AJ's file. "Ah, here it is, number 85716. Yeah, looks like he's in SHU. Been there since Tuesday for gettin' into a fight with some other kids on his cell block."

SHU stood for Security Housing Unit. It was reserved for people who warranted the utmost disciplinary restrictions. No visitors, meals in your cell, and only an hour of rec time 4 times a week. Mike just couldn't believe that this man had given him correct information.

"Wait, that has to be wrong. AJ hasn't been in a fight since we started our classes. That's just not like him. Are you sure you have the right file?"

"Look buddy, unless you're givin' me the wrong name, then I haven't made any mistake. It says here that inmate #85716 is in solitary, and not scheduled to get out for another week. That's all I can tell you. You have any complaints about that, you can take it up with the warden."

"Fine, can you just tell me where I can speak to him?"

"Yeah, sure, come on." The man slowly led Mike to the warden's office, not speaking a word the entire way. Mike could tell he was more than obliged to do him this favor. The man knocked on the warden's door when they arrived and, without saying another word to Mike, walked away. Mike waited, not knowing whether to go inside or wait to be called. Finally, a low, Southern voice came from the office.

"Please, come in."

Mike entered and was met with a very large man, at least 6 foot 8 inches tall, and built like a tank. He could see why the kids called him "the Bull." Mike took a deep breath and began speaking.

"Hello sir, my name is Mike Harney. I am the art and writing teacher that has been working with a few of the kids for the past month or so. It is a pleasure to meet you finally."

“Hello Mr. Harney. Leslie Kendall’s the name. You can call me Les. I hear there’s been a problem with one of your kids.”

Wondering how in the world old “Bull” had heard about the problem, Mike hesitated before he spoke. “Uh, yes, the man at the front office—I didn’t catch his name—said that AJ Landon is in SHU. Since we’ve been having these classes, AJ’s behavior has dramatically improved. I just wanted to know what happened exactly, cuz it just doesn’t seem like AJ to do something like that.”

“Well Mr. Harney, it seems that Mr. Landon was involved with a little scuffle with a few of his cell block buddies. One of them ended up in medical, was just released yesterday. Now, we asked the boys what happened, and they all pointed the finger at Mr. Landon. When we asked Mr. Landon his side of the story, he refused to speak. In cases like this, we have no choice but to put them in high security lock-up. It might do him some good, Mr. Harney.”

“Well, you have your own opinion on that. I guess what I want to know is, can you do me a favor?”

“You’ll have to tell me what that favor is first, then we’ll see what we can do.”

“Well, like I said Mr. Kendall—”

“—Please, call me Les.”

“Um, okay, like I said, Les, AJ’s behavior has dramatically improved since I started working with him. If you go back over his old disciplinary records compared to his current ones, I think you’ll see that this is accurate. What I am asking, uh, Les, is that, if possible, can I please meet with him today, for just an hour, just to have our regular session. I’m afraid it might seriously hurt his progress thus far to cut even one class out and especially to go two full weeks without a session. Do you think we might be able to make that happen?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Harney, but the rules of SHU are quite clear. We can’t be making exceptions for one inmate, because then we would have to make them for everyone. As long as Mr. Landon continues to stay silent, I’m afraid we cannot allow him out of solitary. You’ll just have to wait and do your session next week at the usual time. He will be out by then.”

“But, Mr. Kendall, uh, I mean, Les, it’s really very important that—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Harney,” the “Bull” had a hint of impatience in his voice now, “but there is nothing I can do. I will have an officer show you to the front gate.”

As getting into heated arguments with people twice his size was not something Mike enjoyed doing, he gave in and saw himself out. Driving away from the imposing building he loudly cursed the warden, and AJ, and all of the work he had done thus far, as it all seemed to be going quickly down the drain.

## Chapter 6: My Body Is Not My Own

Mike started yelling as soon as AJ walked into the classroom the following week, forgetting a promise he had made to never raise his voice.

“What the fuck were you thinking? So much progress, so much time and energy, completely ruined!”

“Dude, what the hell, I didn’t even do anything!” In one split second, all of AJ’s defenses crumbled to the ground and tears started pouring out. No longer was there a stone-cold statue of a wanna-be-man sitting in front of Mike. There was a boy, a child, looking for comfort from a parent’s hug, from a brother’s arm around his shoulders. All at once, Mike forgot his boundaries and enveloped the boy in a hug.

“Oh god, AJ, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Tears fell out of AJ’s eyes until there was nothing left. His crying became heavy, dry heaving as he desperately tried to find his mask and fit it back into place.

“Alright, how bout we start over, huh? We have 45 minutes left, how bout you just write—about what happened, about what you’re feeling now, about anything you’d like.”

“Yeah, whatever.” The mask was back on, as AJ grabbed a pencil and got to work...

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### My Body Is Not My Own

I used to think  
I had something  
That no one could take from me

A possession  
That was my own  
Through riches or poverty

Even in here  
Where everything’s  
Designed to steal autonomy

But I’ve come to find  
That even this  
Just doesn’t belong to me

My body is not my own.

At first I thought  
It was a dream  
Until I felt that awful pain

They were laughing  
While I cried  
Like it was all some silly game

And when they finished  
 They spit on me  
 As if to really rub in the shame

Now every night  
 I am reminded  
 As I lay me head on that red stain

That my body is not my own

And now the inmates  
 Look at me  
 Like I'm a juicy piece of meat

They shove their dicks  
 Into my mouth  
 Give me tips on my technique

They call me bitch  
 Endearingly  
 And for my "love" compete

So I guess now  
 The prison's job  
 Of taking my life is complete

Because my body is not my own.

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After AJ finished reading, Mike was furious, but this time, not at AJ.

"What the hell happened, AJ? You shouldn't have been in solitary, you were the frickin' victim for cryin' out loud! This is completely unfair! You need to tell someone about this."

"Tell who? It won't fuckin' matter. Don't you get it yet? We're animals, no more than dogs humping each other. Something like this is normal, almost supposed to happen. And I ain't openin' my mouth anyway. It'd just get me more shit than I'm gettin' already. No, I'm not fuckin' talking. It wouldn't do a damn bit of a good, and it just ain't gonna happen."

Mike tried to protest, but a guard came in just at that minute to take AJ back to his cell. The look AJ gave him as he walked out told Mike that this is where the conversation would end.

## Chapter 7: Dead People Ain't Gonna Write You Back

AJ had a far-off look on his angry face as he entered the classroom for the last time.

"Well, AJ, looks like it's our last meeting. Bet you're about ready to be done with this by now, huh?"

"Yep, guess so," AJ responded in a flat tone.

"What's going on?" Mike asked, noticing the unresponsiveness, something he hadn't seen since the first couple of sessions.

"Nothing." Same emotionless tone.

"Yeah, sure, that face just screams nothing."

"Well that's what's goin' on, so just lay off."

"Hey man, what happened to that first rule, no bull shittin' me? I mean, I know it's our last class, but you haven't forgotten that rule yet, have you? We've been doing great, don't start gettin' all stubborn on me again."

"Well, what the hell am I supposed to do now, Mike?"

"What do you mean? Just keep doing what you've been doing. Just because we don't have any more sessions left, doesn't mean you have to stop writing. Any time you feel like you have something to say, jot it down. Hell, you can even write me if you want. But how bout we not focus on that right now? We still have this class. It isn't over yet."

"Well, I don't know what to write today."

"Come on, you haven't had trouble coming up with something since we started; I don't believe that for a second."

"Well believe it, man. I ain't got any ideas." AJ insisted on being difficult. It was the last class after all, and it just seemed like the customary way to send Mike off.

"Sure, sure. Fine, well, how about you write a letter to your brother? You've mentioned him a couple of times, and I know you miss him. He may not be able to respond, but he sure as hell will be able to see what you've written."

"A letter to a dead person? Seems kinda silly."

"Yeah, probably, but why not give it a shot?"

"Whatever you say, boss..."

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Dear Danny,

Hey, what's up? Ha, you are, I hope. I mean, I know you know I don't really believe in heaven or hell except when it comes to you, and I know you've done some pretty bad shit, but not enough to send you to hell, right? I mean, if you're down there, where would I be going?

Jesus, look at me asking you questions like you're gonna write back. You're probably wondering why the hell I'm even writing to you in the first place. Some idiot brother you've got, trying to talk with the dead through snail mail. Well, my lame-ass art/writing teacher suggested it, so don't think I'm going crazy. He thinks maybe it will help me work some shit out, I guess. What shit, I don't know, I'm mostly just writing this to humor him.

Oh, guess what! I got my first tattoo the other day. Dude did it right in my cell usin' god only knows what for ink and a needle, but it came out pretty good. It's a snake in a figure eight



eatin' its tail, just like yours. Can you believe that? And you woulda been real proud of me, I didn't even flinch or anything. Took it like a man, just like you.

Truth is, Danny, I miss you like crazy. That might sound weak and stupid, but it's true. Sometimes I have dreams that we're hangin' out, playin' football or something, and I wake up and I'm in this godforsaken place, and it hurts so much every time. The thing that hurts most is that I never had a chance to thank you for raisin' me after our fucking cowards of "parents" up and left. I mean, you probably wouldn't be happy with me being in prison now, but what can I say? I took after my big brother.

In reality, I know you wanted better for both of us, you just didn't know how to get it. Well, I promise that I'm gonna make it happen. I might be locked up now, but as soon as I get outta this dump I'm gonna make something more. For both of us. I mean, it'll be for you in spirit since you're dead and all, but you get the picture. Point is, I don't want to make any more stupid mistakes. Life scares me, but I don't think anything can be as scary as this awful place. I just wanted you to know that I'm gonna do better, I promise.

Well, that's pretty much it. I hope you're doing okay, well, besides the whole not breathing anymore thing. Write back soon!! (Just kidding, you know I can't be serious for too long).

Love,  
AJ

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"There, I just wrote a letter to a dead person, you happy?"

"Well, that depends, how do you feel?"

"I guess I feel a little better."

"See, and you thought I was going crazy asking you to write to your brother. I mean, from the sounds of it, you're getting some really good stuff out there, setting some good goals for yourself. And you keep working at it, you'll be able to reach those goals."

"You think so?" AJ had loosened up by now, deciding to drop the stubborn act for the sake of it being the last few minutes of his last class.

"I know so. But, unfortunately it looks like our time is up, so I guess this is it."

"Yep, I guess so. But listen, Mike, promise you won't be a stranger. I mean, it gets lonely here, and I could always use a visitor."

"I'll see what I can do. Thanks for stickin' with the class, and thanks for helping me out. I've learned a lot from you, just like I told you I would."

"Sure you did." AJ smiled as he remembered that first session back when he was a stubborn newbie.

"I did!" insisted Mike as he went to shake AJ's hand.

A guard came in to take AJ back to his cell. As they were headed out the door, Mike wanted to know one more thing.

"Hey, AJ, you called me lame in this letter just to look good for your brother, right?" he asked half-jokingly.

"Uh, yeah, sure thing boss, whatever helps you sleep at night," AJ responded as he walked out, the slightest hint of a smile in his voice.

## Epilogue: AJ's Final Story

### Heavy

Growing up, I idolized my big brother. He was 3 years older than me, and boy, was he built. He could bench 225 easily, not even breakin' a sweat. I used to tag along with him to the gym, which wasn't a gym at all but an alley behind the Laundromat with some used, rusty weight equipment that a high school had thrown out years ago. I remember the day my brother found the stuff lyin' next to the dumpster. Man, it was like Christmas, Easter, and Hanukah all rolled into one. He was so excited, he came runnin' into the house with a handful of weights, dropped one on his big toe, and had to go to the hospital. That part wasn't so great, but it was pretty damn funny.

Anyway, point is, I remember one time I went with him to the alley and usually I'd just spot him, but this time he asked me if I wanted to try it out. I thought he was joking, I mean, me, little puny me, lifting weights? Well, I wanted to impress my big brother so of course I said yes. I laid down on that bench and put my hands up on the rusty bar. I can still remember the smell, which, in and of itself is not a pleasant scent, but to my brother, it smelled like the ocean or a bunch of roses or somethin' else that people think smell good. Anyways, so here I am, my bony little skeleton arms graspin' onto that bar, and my brother said, "Ready? 1, 2, 3, lift," and I tried with all my might and I got that bar up. God, I was so happy, I had the biggest smile on my face. Well, actually, I had the biggest grimace on my face cuz, man, that bar was heavy (course there was probably only about 60 pounds on it, but that's not the point). But afterwards, I looked at my brother and he just looked so proud, I couldn't help but smile. My arms musta been sore for 4 days after that, cuz, man, that bar was so fuckin' heavy. But at least I had made my big brother proud of me.

So fast forward 4 years later. It's my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Of course, by this time my so-called parents had abandoned me and my brother, so it wasn't exactly the sweetest 16 ever. I mean, my brother tried the best he could, even got me one of those little cookie cakes with the designs on it. You know, the kind that are like a big cookie with icing like a football field or a soccer ball or something. But, I'm gettin' off track. Well, later that night, my brother says he's got a surprise for me. He pulls out a gun and holds it out in front of him. Says it was his first piece and he's givin' it to me. To be honest, guns scared the hell outta me, but this is my big brother, like I said, and I was still always tryin' to impress him. I knew he did some bad stuff, drugs and shit, but like I said, I idolized him so I never asked questions or judged him for anything. He was god to me; he could walk on water, or whatever the expression is.

Well I took that piece from him, and I was back in that alley again, a puny little kid tryin' to bench 60 pounds. Only this time, I was a puny little kid tryin' to be tough and act like I knew how to handle a gun. That's something you never forget, how heavy that gun is the first time you pick it up. Like a balloon filled with quarters or somethin'. "Look, it fits," Danny said, smilin' his same proud smile as he walked away. I tried to hide my fear, didn't want my brother to see me strugglin' with the idea of carryin' a gun. I wanted to be just like him still.

Well, a couple of weeks of carryin' that thing around, and I barely even noticed it anymore. I got so used to the weight, I would throw my jeans in the wash, not realizing it was still in my back pocket til I heard the clang at the bottom of the washer. And boy did I feel tough, invincible. Nothing could touch me. I wasn't scared of anything anymore, let alone the gun. It was almost like it was a part of me now, like an extra limb or something.

Well, when you feel invincible, sometimes you act invincible, too. See, that's how my brother felt and acted. Like he could walk through fire and not even feel the heat, not even get burned. One day, he walked through a fire even he couldn't survive. Got involved in a drive-by, was shot four times and ended up wrapped around a tree in this huge blaze. Worst part about it, I saw the whole thing out my window. Remember how I told you that 60 pounds I benched felt so heavy, how that gun I held for the first time was like a fuckin' weighted ball? Well, all the fuckin' weights and guns and anything else in the entire world can't even compare to the weight I felt seeing my brother killed before my eyes. I knew all this bad shit would catch up to us one day, had this voice in the back of my mind always saying, don't do that, stop. I didn't listen; neither did he. Sometimes, the pain is so fucking heavy I can't even lift myself out of bed in the morning. My chest feels so tight, like someone stuck a vacuum down my throat and is suckin' up all my air so I can't breathe, can't think. I'd give anything to trade this fuckin' weight in and bench press 1000 pounds instead. Cuz it'd feel a whole helluva lot lighter now.

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To be honest though, things *are* startin' to feel lighter little by little. Yeah I'll always be carryin' the weight of my brother with me every second of every day, but it's gettin' easier to cope with all the time. True, the boredom of prison doesn't help much with the flashbacks and nightmares, but it'll all be done eventually. And when I get outta this place, I'm gonna pay a whole lot more attention to learning from my mistakes. As much as I'd give anything to see my brother again, I don't want to end up like him, dyin' in a "blaze of glory" so to speak. I want to live my life how I want to live it, not how people want me to. I'm not tryin' to fool myself; I know it's gonna be hard as shit out there in the free world, but I'm gettin' more ready to face it each day. A lot of that has to do with the pencil and paper I keep with me at all times now (well, except for when we're in lockdown and we're not allowed to have shit like that). Point is, I'm growin' and learnin' little by little. I'm takin' responsibility, I'm forgettin' the shit my parents put me through, I'm livin' through my brother's example, and I'm gonna make somethin' of myself. It's gonna be a long and heavy road, but I've already had some weight-training; it can only get lighter from here.