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Short Little Pencils

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Narrative

Short Little Pencils

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A non-fiction account of a juvenile delinquent's harrowing journey through the walls of the child welfare system. This article discusses the transformative power of writing and the act of creativity as a tool for healing trauma.

I used to see the world in black and white. You are a monster or a man, a puppet or puppeteer. There was no color in the walls of institutions, foster homes, and prisons I grew up in. At least that's what I thought when I walked into my prison cell when I was sixteen years old.

Up to that point, there was no color in my world. There was no color in watching my mother get beaten by my father. There was no color in watching her get gang raped by bikers after she escaped my father's grasp.

The first color I do remember is red. It was blood red, dark and oozing from my mother's face. Then that color became the only one I knew.

By the time I got to prison I had been locked up since I was six. I was the poster child for the child warfare system. When I was six they came and took me away from my mother. I remember watching the house fade in the rear window as we drove away. I remember the freeway signs zooming past at warp speed and the skyscrapers looming over my head like ancient Lego monsters as we drove into Portland.

I just wanted to protect my mother.

I spent the next six years in treatment centers, foster homes, and mental institutions doing everything in my power to get back home. Always trying to get home and never having a chance. She couldn't handle a child with problems.

I just wanted to be loved, that's it. Not just loved, but loved by her. She was the thing that I held onto when they stuck me in restraints when I was nine. I thought of her torture when they pierced my skin with the needle, rushing Thorazine in my arm to calm the rage that was a little boy with no home.

No milk and cookies, no basketball games.

For me there was only lunch time, school time, and pill time. I got to enjoy hours of therapy sessions with stuffed animals as play mates. There was always pity on the faces of those attempting to help me. There was nowhere for me to go. My mother became the enemy, the Mecca of deceit. All the counselors told me that I was the victim, that she was a bad person. Even though I didn't have a home, I kept running away.

Then I was Lil Josh, homeless street kid at age 12. I was escaping from case workers and foster homes by exploring the public transit system. I ran away from the system that never found me the right home. I got tired of taking their pills and getting beat up by my foster parents. I had an authority problem.

I was an easy child to beat. I was little and vicious like a baby wolverine. I was cute as a button until I got angry, then that little boy was replaced by a monster. A little, twitchy scratching and clawing monster that wouldn't stop, even if you hit me, spanked me or whooped me.

Downtown Portland in 1992 was a candy land for street kids. Little minions wandered aimlessly from park block to park block in search of other like-minded rejects. It was Lord of the Flies on food stamps. I finally found a family. A family of rejects just like me, all of us desperately trying to find something, anything to hold on to.

My world continued to be black and white tinged in the red smear of blood. It was You and us. The discarded against those that have that American dream that we could see but not touch. Very few of the streets kids I grew up with ever had the concept of a happy ending. That hope was not a luxury for a boy with nothing.

I got six years in prison for assault. I was charged as an adult and sent to prison, I can't tell you that I didn't see it coming because I did.

I knew I was destined to be a number, a criminal, a lost cause.

Abandonment followed by a high dose of drugs, sex, and violence. Eventually I knew that the life of nothing eventually ends up dead or in prison. At sixteen I was ready to make my early start.

Walking through that prison door to the sound of a thousand animals masquerading as men - shouting obscenities, threatening death, pounding on the bars of the cell, screaming at friends and foes; I had no more pretenses about getting saved.

I just had to survive.

It was in this dark place, this black bleakness of spirit, that the creative force that is possible in all places decided to rear its colorful head. In my cell, late at night, when the sounds of the cellblock dulled to a murmur I found I had but a few things I could do.

I could read or I could write.

My mind was busy. I was never a stupid boy, in fact, too smart for my own good. I knew what was right and what was wrong. It was flying around in my head like a band of banshee's in the night. High pitched shame, guilt ridden burdens the size of watermelons crashed into my skull.

I had to get them out.

In my cell, I had yellow lined legal notepads and short little pencils.

I started writing poems. I put the thoughts in my lonely head on to the page. I couldn't survive the silence of the cell or the roar of the cellblock without a way to get it out of my head. I had too much time to think about the past and try to find a future in the worst place in the world to find hope.

I am alone

I am running

I am out of breath

I need a cigarette

Prison is a place of confinement. It is a place where your entire identity is defined by a number on a card and a cell. Your world revolves around being nothing. Letters are rare, visits even scarcer. For me they were non-existent.

I wanted my life to have purpose. I was drawn to the pen and the pad. It was something that couldn't be taken away from me. It was something I could do on my own. It was up to me. I realized that it was always going to be that way. No matter where I was or why I was there, I had to figure it out solo.

I didn't want to be a statistic; I didn't want to be a number. I just wanted to be a kid. As I started to delve into my childhood I understood that I was still a child and many of the things that happened to me were not my fault.

In the trenches of my juvenile poetry obsession I found clarity within my spirit.

It was simple. I had a story to tell. As I told my story, darkness started to become light. Poems about prison cells and noticing the birds came with poems about ripping my face from my body and flushing it down the toilet.

For a forgotten boy, having a story to tell is important. It gave me an identity. I could be a poet or a convict. I could be a writer or an enforcer. Was I going to allow the violence that had infected my life to define me forever? The denim blues last long after you walk out the doors of your prison cell, but there was a light shining in my pencil. In my prison cell, alone at night, I remembered that I was still a child. A child is allowed to make mistakes. A child is allowed to grow.

I started writing daily. When I couldn't sleep, when I tossed and turned from hip to hip thinking about time or friends or foes, I would jump out of bed and pour it into the pad. Better than any counselor I ever had, better than any drug I have ever done, it got it out. It let me go to bed. It calmed the dragon for a moment, long enough to take a breath and live another day.

I got a job and with the money I earned I bought a cheap Yamaha guitar from the canteen. Within a week I had written a song and started practicing every day. A friend of mine showed me a few blues chords and scales, taught me the intervallic structure, and off I went down the corridor of songwriting bliss. Nothing was going to stop me. I decided to be a rock star and an author.

So what if I was in prison, so what if I hadn't done anything my entire life. The things I was putting on paper were good. They made me feel good, even when I was talking about the most tragic experiences of my life. Other convicts asked me to write love letters, others asked me to write songs. I had a purpose and nothing or no one was going to take that away from me.

I began to find color in my life. I turned dark shadows of boyhood prostitution to flower petals reminding me of the rain. I turned hateful words of my mother, into fuel for a locomotive train that could carry through the walls of my cell and out into the land of the free.

I had never been a free man before. As a child I made no decisions for myself. I didn't have much choice in where I went or what I did, even when I thought I was in complete control. I found bucket lists of ideas for the future. While inmates were killing each other with baseball bats on the yard, I was writing new songs about searching for hope. When the guards were harassing me with strip searches I was composing poems about addressing congress.

Instead of surviving darkness, I was finding color.

It propelled me through my prison sentence and into the free world.

I realized that I could share this feeling, I could share this process of self discovery with the rest of the family I left on the street corner, lurking in the shadows, been nothing so long they got no other choice. Creative action changed my stars, changed the color of my memories, and gave me a place to start. My purpose was to share this phenomenon one song, one poem at a time.

I got accepted to college before I got out of prison and moved into my dorm room when I was released. I graduated with honors four years later. I put my book on hold and went in search of life experiences. I continued to play music and develop songs, but spent my time living in the moment.

On the Road, Kerouac's coming of age novel of travel and poetry was a big influence on my college years. I had been taught to hate, hurt, and mangle whatever came across my path and it was important to me that I find new things to learn. I wanted new things to create about. I knew that

the moments that had defined my life thus far couldn't lead me down the road I wanted to travel. I had to step outside the box and go searching for a new family and a new set of circumstances.

When I got out of prison I was 22 years old and addicted to creativity. It was my God, my Omega, my Chi. I did poetry slams in dark bars, open mics in coffee shops, and street corner performances with a hat and a smile. Always dreaming about making it big, telling my story, and creating a forum of hope for the hopeless.

Freedom was important to me. I wanted true creative freedom. I didn't want to be another cog in the system of debt, poverty, and monotony. I believed I was a light sent from the darkness to inspire hope. Lofty goals for an orphaned street punk, but that is the power of creative intervention. I believed I could do these things and went searching for opportunities to create change.

Every summer while I was in college I took an adventure. My freshman year I took off to New Orleans with sixty bucks, a back pack, and a guitar. Portland hurt me. Memories on every street corner coaxing depression out of every pour in my body. I went looking for inspiration out there. Beyond the confines of my home town, I went searching for truth.

In New Orleans I met voodoo dance queens moonlighting as strippers. I played Jackson Square, belting out songs I wrote in prison for the homeless. They gathered in flocks and listened to their story unfold in my music. I worked as a bartender on Bourbon St, chasing tail late into the heavy hot August nights. I took taxi cabs to late night coffee shops and spent hours talking to strangers about the power of the creative spirit to move mountains of shame. I was homeless most of the time and broke the rest, but I was free. I wasn't hurting anyone to survive. I was holding up my end of the bargain. I was living with less and experiencing more. There was sorrow and pain, but through my eyes it was a kaleidoscope of impossible. It was a mission in forgiveness. I was taking a walk of self belief. I was creation personified, living off the spoils of my creative energy, and challenging the world to pay attention to me.

My sophomore year, I went to San Francisco. I played my Ibanez hollow body electric outside of Giant's Stadium, got my picture in the paper, and fell in love with a hippie on Haight and Ashbury. I survived by busking for tourists on the Fisherman's Wharf. Playing freestyle blues for the nightclub crowd in North Beach. I slept in my car and smiled at the universe for giving me peace even though I had nothing to show for it.

When depression hit on the days when no one gave me money for my songs, when my batteries died and my voice cracked from singing for no one. I didn't break. I didn't rely on the callousness of apathy; I didn't let my beast out of the bag. I went for a walk along the pier. I smelled the ocean and let the salt remind me of prison walls and programs that I didn't have to abide by anymore. I watched the fog roll in off the Golden Gate Bridge and felt blessed, letting the depression of being nothing ooze out into the bay, feeling freedom and breathing in life.

I worked cherry orchards for two summers after that with my friend from college. Letting the brief memories of my childhood become flush with the flavor of fresh cherries in my hair, acres of land to walk, and late night campfire jams for country folk looking for a happy ending. I took chances, made mistakes, and continued to believe that the act of creation is the true purpose of life.

After college I found myself searching for my purpose again. I was burned out from banging my head against the walls of the social justice system. I wanted to impact the lives of unwanted kids, but found the system unwilling to receive my effort. Unable to affect the change I wanted in the system, I again turned to the creative spirit for guidance.

For a graduation present I was given a trip to Europe.

I decided to go to Germany. It was 2006 and Germany was hosting the World Cup. I have never been into soccer. Football was my favorite sport to watch, but I knew there would be thousands and thousands of people in the street. I booked a flight, packed a backpack, and hopped on a flight to Frankfurt. I had never been outside the country before. I didn't know German, but I knew how to play my guitar and sing the universal language of the soul.

I had my guitar and the belief that no matter what happens I would thrive.

I had two hundred dollars when I arrived in Frankfurt. I de-boarded the plane with my guitar strapped across my chest, belting out songs about travelers and language barriers much to the joy of customs officials smirking as they checked my passport. I couldn't read the signs. I didn't know where I was going. I had no reservations. I was living on pure faith. I believed my guitar, my voice, my creative spirit would take me exactly where I needed to be and it did.

When I got back from my trip I was exploding with confidence, inspiration, and faith. I moved to Big Sur California where the gigantic Redwoods meet the scraggly cliffs of the Pacific Ocean. I found the land of purple sand beaches and beautiful hippie fairies with mandolins and folk songs. Kerouac himself perched on these very cliffs with notebook in hand, gazing at the poems in the waves, and telling their stories. I got a job as a bartender and started writing my memoir again.

I hadn't touched it since I got out of prison. It was hard to write about the past with so much new information clouding my perception, but the forest helped ease the pain. The forest helped heal the wounds I wrote about at night, by firelight, outside the tent cabin I stayed in along the Big Sur River. I continued to follow the spirit and it had brought me back to this story: my tale of childhood oppression and self discovery. When I asked the creator what I should do the answer was clear.

Finish the Book.

So I did.

I played in the ocean by day, frolicking with my girlfriend and dreaming of changing the world. At night, I wrote. My face heavy laden focused on the ancient laptop computer my uncle gave me, writing about prison rape, childhood torture, and this writing cure. Pausing to stare through the redwoods into a cell from what seemed like a long time ago. Then back to the page and my rage, my hurt and my torture.

I had avoided writing the book. I had sat down with a couple of publishing firms when I was released but never followed through as I got lost in my college days and my pursuit of life itself. Now I was doing a complete re-write. A new format, a different focus. The story was the purpose, the solution the creator gave me in my cell when I was seventeen and had no one but God to help me.

Big Sur was amazing, but three months into my writing bliss out in the forest I lost my job and had to move in with my uncle in Riverside. Riverside is not a majestic forest, it is a place of dirt lawns and urban sprawl. It did not make me smile. Depressed and broken again feeling utterly worthless I spent a couple of months on my uncle's couch nursing a broken heart.

Again I found myself with no job and looking for renewed purpose. I still wanted to change the world and I still believed finishing my memoir was the catapult I needed to get me over the wall. I started researching jobs in the desert, resort jobs where I could work in exchange for housing.

I found a job in Northern Arizona working as a waiter at a fly fishing resort. Since my release, I have found nature to be my best mother. I find great comfort wrapped up in her arms. Untouched by cynicism, she moves me.

The closest town was 45 miles away, the North Rim of the Grand Canyon was only 70 miles west of my front door, and the ancient Vermillion Cliffs were right outside the back door of my trailer. The work was fast paced and fun. My customers were white water rafters, river guides, and fisherman.

I loved being their waiter, inspiring them with stories of my life and travels and being inspired by their stories, struggles, and triumphs. During the day I worked and learned how to fly fish on the Colorado River.

I would get up early in the morning and rent a boat from the shop and drive the 15 miles to the boat launch at Lee's Ferry. The land of Edward Abbey and the Monkey Wrench gang, cliffs so barren and beautiful you knew man never had a chance at taming them. The river was so cold and so pure. On clear days you could see to the bottom, fish visible to your sight.

Fly fishing is not easy; it takes practice, talent, and patience. You spend more of your time untangling your line than actually fishing. I couldn't get enough of that river; it was the only place on earth I felt comfortable alone. I would stand in the Colorado River, with the Grand Canyon towering over me like ancient Mayan statues, the roar of the river pressing against my shins, always

threatening to pull me under. There was never anyone in sight. It was just me and the mighty Colorado. She told me it was okay; that everything was working out.

In the desert, far away from the institutions and street corners that defined my life, I finished my memoir. It took me 5 months, but I finished it.

It was a stormy desert day where the sky dust earth met the gloomy thunder clouds. I couldn't see my hand in front of my eyes and the sand bit into my face, got into my teeth. If you stood outside too long you could become just another cliff being molded by the wind. I sat in my trailer with a cup of coffee, Ben Harper playing on the radio, and wrote the last chapter of my book.

I wrote about the day I was released. I wrote about the confusion of being a free man but still facing the world alone. It had been seven years since I was released from prison. When I closed the computer I had tears in my eyes as I looked out my window at the red earth swirling around me.

They were tears of joy and relief. Finally after twelve years of battling the page I was finished with my book. I watched my pain wash away with the wind. I watched it smash against a rock and get scuttled away by a dust devil. I watched it spill into Lake Mead and sputter into nothing as it reached the ocean. I felt it lift off my chest, out of my heart, and back into creation.

I had completed the circle of my life from orphan to writer, prisoner to advocate. In those pages I found the courage to carry on, to move past the post traumatic memories and events that had shaped my childhood.

There are roads that lead us back from the abyss of knowing, the chance of surrender. There are real burdens in this world that are worth carrying, for the purpose of art, the purpose of creativity. These things I hold certain and I have let the earth teach me what my fellow man could not: breathe, churn, love, and return to the dust.