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I Remember

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Frank Morse

Reflection

This is the product of working several months with about a dozen people as we prepared to hold a TEDx event at Everglades Correctional Institution. Each of the nine speakers were asked to share their personal journey, and this is mine. The event never happened because of COVID-19 shutting everything down, but the experience of working with a group of men to write, rehearse, and perform this piece is one I will never forget.

I Remember

Lights illuminate the darkness. Trees appear clothed in strobes of red and blue. Wind rushes around me through the open windows. I am a passenger on a hopeless journey. Opioids had taken me down many roads, none of them good. When the spike strips appear, followed by her desperate cry, “I can’t steer!”, I know this road will be the same.

The streets are littered with the broken dreams of people like me: people caught in the rip currents of addiction. The waters of our world are rewarding and unforgiving. The opportunities in the land of the free are beyond compare, but second chances are hard to come by.

Unimaginable pain floods my senses. I can’t move, it’s dark, I feel encased, trapped. Time seems to stop. Am I awake? There are no sounds. Why do I feel so cold? “Stop moving, stop moving!” I hear banging, glass shattering, “Can you hear me? Who’s with you? Who’s with you!” I’m awake now, crying out in pain. “Jessie! Jessie’s with me! Help!”

My second chance began in a burning car, in a ditch, upside down, smashed, broken, and dying. From a hospital bed in 2003 until today, I have faced many obstacles. The things in my life that fueled my actions didn’t disappear like magic. I was still an addict who feared rejection. An addict; a broken person. It would be some time before I could grasp it, but eventually, I had a realization. This realization would become the spark that ignited a passion that transformed my life.

I remember experiencing a little pill that has changed our world and completely altered my life forever. At the age of 19, I had two rules: no heroin, no needles. Living in a small Florida retirement community, I would never see these things. That stuff was in the big cities where the grimy TV addicts lurked in alleyways with their dirty needles. My knowledge of pills consisted of, if it’s a pain killer, take it, so I took it. Soon my life became consumed by an unquenchable thirst for these little pills. In time I would discover what they truly were. These little OxyContin pills were nothing less than heroin sold in pharmacies instead of alleyways.

For an hour, I was going in and out of consciousness. I begged them to give me something for the pain, but they said I had to wait until we got to the hospital. Strapped to a board, the distinctive sound of whirling helicopter blades, the cold air made me want to shiver. Where’s Jessie? Where are they taking Jessie?

When I grabbed a needle and shot up OxyContin, it wasn't because I wanted to have fun. Growing up, I knew I would never shoot up drugs because I was just a regular kid having a good time. I went to youth group, attended Boy Scouts; I even won a Most Outstanding award at the Sheriff Department's Explorer summer camp. Never considering it could go from just having fun to just having to use. Never imagining that I could think a life without heroin wasn't worth living.

My story is a success story, thanks to a second chance. That may be hard to understand from the outside looking in or from the perspective of someone who isn't an addict. After all, I'm living inside a prison today with a natural life sentence. That doesn't sound very successful! At least not until you consider the life of an addict is a perilous one. A second chance is never a sure thing. The other side of the coin is death; Jessie and I were both heroin addicts. On the morning of July 31, 2003, we decided to get help. I would turn myself in, and Jessie would go to the methadone clinic; I would go to jail and get my life in order, and one day it would be happily ever after. Before that though, we decided to get high one last time for old time's sake.

Waking up in the hospital after my first surgery, my mom and dad were at my bedside. In my heart, I knew the answer before I asked the question. I looked at my mom and asked where they had taken Jessie. She didn't answer me. I looked at my dad then and asked him. I think you already know, was all he said. One last time for old time's sake. Three weeks after her 21st birthday, no more chances, Jessie was gone.

After the accident, I struggled with the question of "Why me?" Why not let Jessie live instead of me! Why not let the man in the truck she hit live instead of me! Why, why, why. Lots of questions, no good answers. Who deserves a second chance anyways? Some people say everyone does. After the accident though, I didn't feel like I should be the one miraculously surviving to tell the story.

Unfortunately, Jessie's story is not an uncommon story. Hundreds of people die every day in America from opioids, heroin. The rip currents of addiction stealing their last breath. A second chance is a gift of mercy, and it was hard for me to grasp. I realized Jessie's story could help someone, and I was alive to tell it.

A second chance isn't promised. I received one to tell Jessie's story. My journey started in a ditch, but it isn't ending there. What second chance have you received? Who paid the price for it? Many have paid the price for mine, and I'm living each day honoring the sacrifices made for my opportunity. Will you join me? Will you step into the realm of the unknown and make beauty from ashes? It won't be easy, but telling this story wasn't easy either.

Author Bio

Frank Morse is a self-taught portrait artist, writer and public speaker who has been incarcerated since he was 23 years old. He is the president of the Draft Pick's Gavel Club, an affiliate of Toastmasters International, staff writer for The Endeavor newsletter, a prison publication at Everglades Correctional Institution, a peer facilitator in the Horizon Faith and Character Program dorm, and facilitator of the Art Expressions Program. He is incarcerated in Florida.