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THE CROWN ROYAL AFFAIR

June 2014

A spring night. A man in his 30s walks into the parking lot of a convenience store a few blocks from his rented apartment. He picks up a stone and smashes the glass to unlock it. Estimated replacement cost, \$500. Inside, he selects a bottle of Crown Royal, retailing for \$24.95. The police respond to the alarm and arrest him.

No stranger to the judiciary system, the man has a rap sheet, which includes numerous misdemeanors, starting at age 18 for walking on a highway. Various driving violations and possession of marijuana follow. Because he is in jail for one of these minor offenses, he can't show up for another of his hearings and is arrested for Failure to Appear and later, Failure to Comply. He is placed on probation again.

A fall night—a few months later. According to the video on a surveillance camera at the same convenience store, the same man picks up a stone and breaks the glass door. He selects a bottle of Crown Royal and a pack of cigarettes. He exits, sits on the curb nearby, lights a cigarette, and drinks the alcohol.

The police, responding to the alarm, take the man into custody. As he is escorted to a squad car, he yells, “Hell yes, I broke into the store. I admit it.”

Police records note the defendant, while on probation for the first break in, burglarized the same store a second time. The man pleads guilty, is assigned a public defender, and waives his right to a presentence investigation and report. Had the two been completed, they might have pointed out the peculiarities of his case or his diagnosis of schizophrenia 11 years before.

He agrees to a plea bargain and accepts four years of prison for the two felonies—burglary and criminal damage for breaking the glass. Two other warrants, one for misdemeanor drug possession and the other for public intoxication, are quashed.

Jason enters the state prison system in December of 2014, with the days already spent in jail counting toward his release.

With good behavior, he will be released with supervision July 21, 2016.

June, 1990

I read Jason's crimes as a cry for help, but maybe you see it differently. Maybe you have to know him.

We met in Peoria, Illinois, in 1990; he was 9 years old and I was 36. We were part of the Heart of Illinois Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) Program of America. My (now) ex-husband, Harry, and I chose to be a Big Couple, selecting Jason from a number of profiles, age 8 through 12. At the time, Harry wondered if our racial differences — Jason, Black; we, white — would be a problem. I argued no, though I remember when the three of us stopped for lunch at a café in a rural, white town, not far from Peoria. I felt uncomfortable for Jason. From then on, we chose the places we visited more carefully.

Edna, Jason's single parent, looked to BBBS for the male influence her son was missing. As Jason grew up, she worked in a daycare, attending to newborns and managing adolescents after school. She was good at what she did and seemed to thrive on it. She surrounded Jason with her large family and their children and took him to church every Sunday. Their rented single-family home in a low-income neighborhood was kept neat and clean; the shades were always drawn.

As a Big Couple with Jason, we hiked, visited friends, went to county fairs, made meals, and just hung out together. The program encouraged "the Bigs" not to be cash cows or Disneyland friends. We weren't. We spent a lot of normal life together, whether we were with Jason alone or with Edna, watching her son play sports. I also tutored him in math, without much success, and thought he might have a learning disability. Bottom line: he was a good kid. He used his manners, followed directions and didn't push boundaries. He was a pleasure to be with as he tried new things and responded excitedly about the results.

Harry and I moved from Peoria when Jason turned 15. By the time we returned two years later, he was no longer interested in the BBBS relationship—typical of most kids his age. He dropped out of high school at 18.

Edna called during a Christmas holiday. Jason was in jail—for possession of marijuana. She thought the jail time might do him some good, but I could hear her concern and arranged the bail for his release. She also told me that, during an arrest in 2003, Human Services diagnosed him with schizophrenia and prescribed medication.

Jason and I reconnected after my divorce from Harry. Jason and I never talked about jail nor much about the divorce. Jason played me, occasionally, for money—once asking me to pay for an inexpensive computer for which he would reimburse me—but never did. He introduced

me as his sister to his new girlfriend, a serious relationship. “Jason’s a great guy!” she said. “Funny, friendly, caring.” I agreed.

I moved to Wisconsin with my new partner, Mike, and Jason and I kept up on the phone. We never wrote letters. That would change.

December, 2014

Edna called to tell me about Jason’s felony conviction at the convenience store. Still, I was shocked when I received the Number 10 envelope on which Jason had neatly printed his return address and prison number. His one-page letter in black, ball-point pen on lined paper with hole punches to the left began, “Dear Judy.” In his first correspondence, he offered to mentor my 23-year old son, whom he watched grow during the BBBS days. “I’ve got lots of experience now and know where no one should ever be — here,” Jason wrote. “I want him to know that loud and clear.”

He also asked if Harry would write him.

Mike, a former juvenile probation officer, helped me search through the state prisoner database on the Internet. The state of Illinois incarcerated Jason for Robbery, Class 2. A felony—but a relatively victimless crime. That last part made me feel better.

During the next two years, Edna and I made three visits to Shawnee Correctional Facility, four hours south of Peoria in Vienna, Illinois. Jason and I continued to write letters. They filled the time between visits and gave him the space to verbalize his frustrations—the inedible soy-based food, the anger of his first cellmate and the 21 of 24 hours he spent daily in his cell. He went to church and the library and the gym. “I go to anything I can go to,” he said, “just so I can get outta my cell.”

He said the prisoners did receive good medical care. Staff made sure he took his medicine for what he called anxiety and psychiatrists had labeled schizophrenia. Jason laughed. “They don’t want anything to happen if I’m not medicated.”

July, 2016

Just a few days before his parole, Mike and I received another letter from Jason. We remembered one of his first prison stories — the trip from the prison intake center near Chicago to the medium-security facility downstate. He called it the longest, scariest bus ride he’d ever experienced as

he didn't know what was in store for him. This narrative was different. He wasn't scared to start fresh. "My goal is simple no matter where I go," he said. "Job. Money. Apartment. Car."

On the day of Jason's prison release, July 21, Mike and I met Jason at Shawnee to drive him to the northern edge of Illinois and the halfway house he'd parole out to. His release, two years early, carried a few stipulations about counseling, classes in anger management and substance abuse as well as the directions to take his prescribed medication. They eliminated the option for Jason to parole out to a local homeless shelter, which many incarcerated people initially did. He also had the usual requirements—to check in with his parole officer two times a week and find employment.

The bottle of booze Jason stole from the convenience mart seemed expensive, considering the cost of incarceration. It would have made more sense to me to send Jason to the local community college to teach him a trade and let him pay back the \$1050 for the two bottles of Crown Royal and the repair of two broken glass doors. Instead, Shawnee Correctional Facility spent around \$38,000 each year on their incarcerated men—\$105 per day. The United States incarcerated 1,306,300 individuals in 2017. Jason's crime seemed one of those types that could be better sorted out with therapy and other human services.

That anticipated morning of Jason's release, he exited through the bullet-proof glass door at the promised 8:30 a.m. with a huge smile on his face and one cup of coffee in his stomach. He was too excited to eat the prison breakfast. He wore a new, prison-issued white t-shirt, gray sweat pants (despite the 90 degree/70 percent humidity outside) and black, army boots. He carried a bag, the size and shape of a 30-pound summer sausage. In it were a variety of "survival" items, including one roll of toilet paper, which I could see through the mesh as it worked its way to the base. The prison also provided him with \$10 and four days of medication for his schizophrenia.

Jason came right to the point as he hugged me, "I'm never going back there."

We drove the four hours north to Peoria listening to Drake and Kendrick Lamar. Mike and I dropped Jason to spend a few hours with his mother and two beloved aunts. Edna served him his favorite foods—fried chicken, bar-b-que ribs and potato salad. He showered the prison off and then met us for the other half of the drive north, carrying two duffle bags full of new clothes Edna had purchased for that very moment.

A thunderstorm pelted us with rain as we couldn't find the address of his new home in the night. A man approached us selling drugs in the

lightless neighborhood. We arrived, at last, to a rundown tenement building. The night manager for the eight men in residence, all released from prison over the last six months, met us at the door. He shook Jason's hand, welcomed him inside and immediately told him he couldn't leave the premises until he met with his parole officer. Jason, tired from the emotions of the day, said good night to us. When he saw my look of concern, he added, "This is still better than where I was."

Jason arrived at the halfway house with lots of hope and many challenges. A felony arrest stacks the odds for success against you. The conviction stays on your record permanently, leaving a stain many can't shake when getting a job, renting an apartment or buying a car. Many employers have removed from their job application the question, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" but many others haven't and continue to use a blanket policy not to hire a felon. Rates for returning to prison are highest in the first two years after an offender's release. An estimated 37 percent of parolees are rearrested while on parole.

Think about what you would do if you had no job, no money and no identification. Jason's first weeks out of prison were difficult even though he had much more personal support than the average parolee. Mike slipped him \$50, Harry paid for his first week of groceries, Edna handed him a copy of his birth certificate and I covered the cost of his lodging. He and I visited the Department of Motor Vehicles, where staffers told him he needed a photo I.D. to get a photo I.D. Jason persevered. He showed me his identification and medical card at the end of his second week out of incarceration.

He had entered prison without many job skills and left that same way. The state of Illinois' stated mission was "providing a rehabilitative foundation for the offender's reintegration into society." We all believed that meant actively helping the offenders during their years of incarceration. Jason didn't get a job as a kitchen helper until his last few months at Shawnee and, though he received a new text book, he never did get a seat in the GED classes. John, the man who founded and owned the halfway house, came through on his promise to direct Jason to a local employment agency that helped parolees find \$10/hour factory jobs.

Fall and Winter, 2016

John's place, in a neighborhood where Jason often heard sirens and gunshots, provided each man with minimal facilities for \$125 per week. Jason

slept for his first month on a sofa until another parolee moved out, leaving a vacant bed. It was infested with bedbugs. When Jason had his wallet lifted during his shower and complained, John made it clear, the fault was Jason's for not taking better precautions with his valuables. The halfway house offered Jason one silver lining: The residents bought their own food, which they cooked for themselves in a shared kitchen. Jason loved to cook. He prepared meals for the other men and became not only an integral part of the household community, but also was valued by his fellow parolees.

That November, Jason turned 35. He told me he knew what he'd accomplished in the past year and that he hadn't been alone in his efforts. Not once had his Mom said, "Jason, you've got to get your act together!" He acknowledged her help and said, "She knows how much work it's taken."

He also knew that he could call Mike or Harry or me, that he had the support of those at his new job and the employment placement agency. He worked hard and was dependable. And he had two more things going for him, "One, I know God has a plan for me," he said "and two, I've got a phrase that I tell myself when I come up against a problem: "I CAN do it."

During the holiday season, the halfway house prepared care boxes for some of the state's 50,000 prisoners. Jason helped fill the boxes and stack them for delivery. Organizers encouraged Jason to write a note with his name and prison number. He wrote fifty men incarcerated at Shawnee, telling each he was OK and encouraging them to keep up their spirits.

He spent Christmas with us and announced to Harry, my son, Mike and me over the breakfast he cooked, "2017 will be my pinnacle year." I was full of hope for my little brother. To see him in our kitchen, flipping eggs over-easy, with plenty of his favorite bacon grease—you would have felt the same.

Spring, 2017

Halfway-house John had warned me that the Department of Corrections would release Jason with a minimal amount of medication. John encouraged me to pay for a private psychiatrist instead of letting Jason wait six months to see a doctor via the public medical system. I found a doctor and took Jason to his appointment. However, the psychiatrist re-diagnosed Jason as anxiety-prone — not schizophrenic — and prescribed a low-dose of Ambien. When Jason and I ate lunch some weeks later, I watched him nod off to sleep in the middle of his burger. By our next visit, he'd stopped taking the drug.

As the story went, John ran prostitutes before his own incarceration. Not only did he know the system and those who participated in it from first-hand experience, but he had dirt on all the local officials as well. Soon after he exited prison, he founded the parolee resource, putting together the funding for the house and receiving the necessary local official support.

Jason complained that John insisted the parolees miss some of their paid shifts at the factory to do “volunteer work” to support the non-profit designation under which the halfway house was formed or help put money in John’s own pocket. There was little recourse for the parolees. John always held the upper hand as he had good connections with the parole officer to whom the men regularly reported.

Seven months after arriving, Jason could take no more of John’s house. I felt proud that Jason’s self-assurance had grown to the point that he could cut those ties. John’s place, as difficult as it was, served as my little brother’s first home after prison and gave him some grounding. Jason moved nearby to a homeless men’s shelter. A group of churches took in the men, provided them with beds, two meals, and a connection to social service support. In exchange, the administrators required them to attend church and leave the shelter during the day. Jason found the shelter’s rules and arrangements easier to navigate than John’s.

Some weeks later, the manufacturing company changed his shift to third. Jason had a difficult time getting the necessary sleep and leaving the shelter every day as required. He called Mike and me one day from the psych ward of the local hospital after an episode at the shelter. Instead of arguing or fighting, like before, “I just left and checked myself in,” Jason said. He had taken a big step, controlling himself and his issues. He was re-diagnosed with schizophrenia and given new meds.

Jason quit the factory job and picked up work part-time with a landscaper. When Mike and I met him at a Pizza Hut near the shelter, Jason looked good and sounded well. He flirted with our female server as he told us a staff person in social services was helping him set up some life objectives. He appeared on track, hitting his one-year anniversary of parole. He had beaten the odds and stayed out of prison. He remained employed, kept a roof over his head and held onto his good behavior. It seemed pretty close to the “pinnacle year” he foretold in January.

The positive energy flowed forward. A few weeks later, Jason shouted through the phone, “I got my check!” I didn’t know what he was talking about. The social worker at the shelter had encouraged him to file for Social Security Supplemental Income, based on his psychiatric disability of schizophrenia. With that secure, though minimal, income, he would head

south to live in Bloomington, a city 45 minutes away from his hometown of Peoria. Bloomington was where the buses ran from Chicago, and employment seemed more certain.

Mike and I were happy for him but concerned. Edna had told us that during his twenties, Jason received supplemental income because of his diagnosis. He had not worked, but lived on the small stipend and housing allowance provided by the government. By his own admission, he had little incentive to do anything and fell in with the wrong crowd. Misdemeanor arrests peppered his life. Now, again, he was on medication, receiving government support, and without any real structure in his life. We didn't think it spoke well for his future. The rate that incarcerated males returning to prison lessened only slightly every year they were out. In 2016, Illinois saw 71,551 new convictions; of those, 89 percent were reoffenders headed back to prison. The chances of Jason returning remained high.

October, 2017

Jason and I exchanged only a few text messages or phone calls during the fall. I was uncomfortable but tried to be patient. One day, he called out of the blue. He had gone through with his plans to move to a homeless shelter in Bloomington.

On the one hand, he had taken a big step to make that move on his own and I was proud of him. He had jumped forward on the trajectory he wanted. On the other hand, he was calling to ask for money. I hesitated and then said, "I'm sorry, Jason, I can't right now." I hoped that was the right thing to do.

A few weeks later I texted, asking how he was. He answered, "I'm going this week to see Mom in Peoria. Had permission issues, but been working with DHS." He was still advising the Department of Human Services of his travels as part of his parolee requirements. Jason never arrived at his mom's.

Edna called his mobile repeatedly. I texted him many times, including on his November birthday. Neither Edna nor I received a response.

Numerous times during and after prison, Jason had said he wanted a job, a money, a car, an apartment and, on good days, he added in "a girlfriend." But Jason was part of a group, in fact, many groups, each of which often have difficulties achieving those simple goals: He's Black, poor, raised by a single parent, has a disability, and holds a felony record.

It's my nature—isn't it all of our natures—to point a finger, to find someone to blame, to get the problem fixed by him, or her, or them? I tend to think that a simple obvious, immediate solution can fix a problem when really the issue is too lengthy and complex for a quick fix. In looking back at the small, individual pieces that assembled the whole of Jason's life, I'm fairly certain all participants worked to capacity to help Jason, but the opportunity to place blame pulls at me strongly.

Edna was a hard-working woman who was a loving, responsible mother. Should she have been tougher with him? The Peoria District schools, which Jason attended, manage 36,000 students every year and pride themselves on a 93 percent graduation rate. What do they do about the 7 percent in which Jason fell? Jason's series of misdemeanors were small infractions for Illinois' departments, programs, and processes tasked with readjusting wayward youth. Should his many nickel-dime arrests have been a bigger red flag to the agencies, his family and friends? The Public Defender allowed Jason to waive his Pre-Sentence Investigation and Report, eliminating the individual attention that the justice system offered through that document. Didn't his psychiatric diagnoses deserve more attention? And finally, Social Security provided Jason with money to live, accommodating his disability. If the stipend isn't enough money to survive but restricts recipients from earning more, what can we expect them to do legally?

December, 2017

November stretched into December that gave way towards Christmas — with no word from Jason.

His mother, Mike and I had spent the last month of the year contacting shelters, social service agencies, hospitals, and finally the sheriff, thinking Jason lay on a slab somewhere as a John Doe. Every few days, I called or texted his mobile with some upbeat "Happy Holidays" or "Hoping to celebrate Christmas with you." No reply. Late afternoon December 28, I texted: "I'm worried. So's your mom. Please call."

Within a minute, I received a text in response, "I was at inpatient for alcohol abuse," he said. "It was getting out of hand, so I got help." He wasn't exactly clear how long he'd been there to get the support he needed—maybe a week, maybe four. Sometimes the details don't really matter, right? I felt so relieved.

Released, Jason returned to a private apartment he shared with a roommate and the part-time job he held. He helped remove and clean out

properties where debris or personal possessions were left behind after an eviction. It was one of those types of jobs that felons could get.

I said to Mike that night, "Jason's story never seems to end."

"And it won't." Mike responded. "It's his reality and, like everyone's, his holds a number of twists and turns." Mike pointed out that Jason's life held both bad and good—the full spectrum. He thought the best we all could hope and work for was to increase the number of good over the bad—or at least minimize the depth of both to move Jason closer to the center. "I do think he trusts you—us—and we will keep hearing from him," Mike said. "We didn't always know that."

Jason called again a few months later from the mental ward of another hospital. This time, Mike and I drove south and picked up Edna in neighboring Peoria. We stopped at Walmart. Each of us disappeared in a separate direction into the endless aisles. We met at the checkout counter with the items we thought Jason needed from the thousands available. Edna came with boxer shorts and two t-shirts, hoping size 2XX was right. Mike tossed in a large bag of Skittles, saying if he were in the hospital, he knew what he couldn't live without. And I added to the check-out belt a crossword puzzle workbook and a science magazine—items he liked me to send while in prison.

Visiting hours began at 5 p.m. Mike knocked on the single door at the end of a long quiet hallway. I expected Nurse Ratched from "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest" to answer. Instead, a smiling security guard said nicely, "Come on in. Leave everything, including the stuff in your pockets and those Walmart bags, in those lockers over there."

We entered the hallway of patient rooms. I didn't recognize Jason, who stood almost in front of me. He weighed 25 pounds more than the last time I saw him and wore glasses. He was dressed in green scrubs and I thought he worked for the hospital. But his big smile, the one I knew from when he was a 12-year old, made me relax and stop thinking about Nurse Ratched.

They had admitted Jason at his own request. He was going to two different hospitals at the same time and was prescribed three medications — at least one of which caused him to hallucinate. The doctors at this facility checked his urine and blood levels often and planned to keep him there for five days. They changed his diagnosis to bipolar disorder with anxiety.

Edna viewed him with motherly concern. "Jason, you're so heavy. You gotta move!" He nodded, but it was probable that his meds caused him the weight gain. He told us he stayed on them as much as he could, but when they gave him diarrhea or hallucinations, he stopped taking them.

Mike and I drove Edna back to Peoria and then headed north to Wisconsin. Both of us were thinking about Jason when Mike broke the silence. “This might be as good as it gets for him.” I nodded my understanding in the darkness.

At 10 the next morning, my mobile buzzed. I recognized the number from the hospital, and held my breath as I answered. It was Jason wanting to ensure we made it home safely and thank us for the gifts that security gave him after we left. “It was really nice that you came to see me,” he said, “and brought my mom too.”

July, 2018

Jason always talked openly with Mike and me, but I never felt wholly comfortable with the subject of his psychological diagnoses—it seemed too intrusive. He had been diagnosed with anxiety, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder but how did he feel about the accuracy of any of them? He said he didn’t hear voices, didn’t fly from really happy to really sad nor sit in a corner in a ball. “None of them describes me,” he said. “But I guess I spent 21 out of every 24 hours locked up because of one of those.”

How would he analyze himself at that moment? “Probably PTSD. It’s the things I’ve seen, like my friend getting shot,” he said. “I haven’t told you, but it was pretty bad in Peoria.”

I was quiet—dumbfounded. I hadn’t heard this before and I wondered if Jason had told any of his psychiatrists. I felt inadequate that I couldn’t say anything appropriate yet felt, somehow, a sense of relief. I always thought Jason was a good boy. This one event suggested he was but, shaken from what he’d seen years ago, went bad. OK. It wasn’t that simple. Jason had to take some responsibility for the many occurrences and decisions that followed. This story gave me a start date for the difficulties that snowballed out of control.

I said at the beginning that I read Jason’s crimes of stealing two bottles of Crown Royal from the same location as a cry for help. Now, do you also see that?

Jason was reaching his goals on his own. Despite the high recidivism rate for those incarcerated, Jason appeared to be the exception. He had learned from his mistakes, righted them, and moved ahead. He knew the family and friends on which he could fall back, and he trusted himself as well. He knew that when his meds were off, life wouldn’t go well. And he had learned that he had every reason to strive for personal wins to celebrate.

As with any brother-sister relationship, I've watched Jason go through excitement, joy, heartache, frustration and sadness for 28 years. I've learned I can't live his life, nor can I fully understand the difficulty of his challenges. I do appreciate that he's shared so much with me, for he has enriched my life. I hope I've added to his and look forward to another 28 years as his big sister.

It was a hot, sultry day in the middle of summer. I hadn't seen or heard from Jason for some months. Edna told me he was doing some work at a rib joint in Bloomington and was thinking about moving in with a girlfriend. I still held my breath when I saw Jason identified on my phone as the caller. Today was no different until I remembered it was July 21. I picked it up to hear Jason on the other end.

"I'm off parole!"