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26 yrs.

Richard's Story

Our family had finally settled into our new house. The last of the boxes had dwindled down to one, a box full of pictures. The kids had already gone off to bed and I decided to get all of the unpacking done before joining my family and letting my tired mind and body rest for some well deserved zzz's.

As I was walking back down the hallway towards the living room the bottom of the box gave out from the weight of its contents and pictures of all sizes from about 25 years of collecting scattered everywhere creating a collage of my life.

"Damn!" I cursed. I flicked the hallway light on and bent down to begin collecting the mess I had created. The first picture that I grasped and focused on was one that I had not seen in years. The sight of it made me stop breathing and my legs go weak so that in that same moment I was on my ass.

The picture was one of four young boys; boys I knew well. Memories of that day filled my mind; memories that I had locked away to the point that I believed I had imagined them. The boys in the picture were all 12 years old. They were standing in front of a light blue two story house that had a cracked front window and a front storm door that would not close right; the house screamed poor. These boys did not care; they stood arms linked over each other's shoulders smiling.

These were the best friends that I had ever had, I thought. I stared at the younger version of myself unable to turn away. They were all there Ryan, Curtis and J.R; I stood on the end. Our youthful faces were tanned a dark brown by the sun mixed with a little dirt and sweat. That summer was the greatest summer ever; we had spent every day together from morning until night.

Ryan and J.R were cousins who lived on the next block. Curtis was my foster brother. My family had taken him in when he was 2 years old. He too was once a neighbour who lived a few doors down. His mother often left him with us because he and I were the same age. My mom was cool with it; she just wanted to make sure that he was taken care of. Eventually Curtis was left with us for days and weeks at a time until one day his mother never came back.

We all lived in the North End of Winnipeg. The North End was once a prosperous neighbourhood filled with recent immigrants trying to build a new life in Canada. They had since raised their families, made their fortunes and moved onto bigger, better and nicer neighbourhoods leaving what was left for us poor Aboriginal families to take over.

Right after the picture was snapped the four of us fell on a heap on the ground wrestling and trying to pin one another while cussing and laughing.

"Everyone gang up on Sammy!" yelled Curtis as he moved to lock my legs. J.R and Ryan followed suit, one jumping on either of my shoulders trying to bring me down. I played along doing nothing at first but building up my mental edge.

They almost had me until with one deep breath, "Rrrraaaahhhhh!" I grunted and with all my strength, I got up off my knees and stood up. With one quick lift I removed J.R and threw him to the ground. As he landed I grabbed Ryan from off around my neck and threw him on top of J.R. As they both tried to catch their breaths I bent down and grabbed a hold of Curtis' belt as he was trying to crawl away. I picked him up and walked over to the other two guys, who looked up just in time to see Curtis come flying at them. They probably would have come back with another attack if only they could stop laughing.

"Hecken Sam just goes all Goliath on us," Ryan joked.

"That's all the bannock his mom feeds him" J.R explained. "It gives him his strength".

“And his fatness” Curtis piped in. All three of them snickered so I dove into the pile of them sitting there and we began grappling once again. It was true that I was bigger and chubbier than the other three boys but I was used to their comments which came at every given opportunity.

J.R was the smallest and it seemed because of this he had more to prove when we sparred. His jabs were faster and twice as hard. Ryan was the darkest out of us even though we were all Ojibway. His family had moved to the city from one of the northern reserves. His accent was difficult to ignore and yet at the same time the rest of us would try to copy it and act like that was how we always talked. Curtis and Ryan were about the same size and skinny but Curtis’ looks were opposite Ryan’s. Curtis had green eyes and light brown almost blonde hair. He got teased quite a bit about being the whitest looking out of us all.

A while later mom called to Curtis and me to come in for supper. We went into the house while J.R and Ryan walked in the direction of their homes. Before going in I stood on the steps just watching my friends walk away. Little did I know that that summer was the last one that we were to spend as innocent young boys without a care in the world.

Junior high proved to be one of the greatest trials on our friendship. As we were introduced to a new school, new peers and new activities our individual personality traits kicked in and slowly the time that we spent together was less and less. I joined different school teams including football and basketball. Curtis became quite serious with a young girl from our neighbourhood. Ryan and J.R because they were cousins stayed close but got involved with more of a rough and tough street crowd that ditched classes and got into slight misdemeanours with the law. Still we hung out at least a few hours a week and if ever we ran into one another in school or on the streets we acknowledged each other with our ‘bro’ handshake and would always reminisce about the days when we were boys together.

Four years passed and it was the summer that we were 16. I was walking down Mountain Avenue headed to a school yard to practice my ball skills. From the distance ahead I could see J.R coming towards me. He had a certain walk to him that he developed over the years, kind of like a limp that he thought looked ‘gangster’. The way he dressed alone was enough to give strangers that opinion of him, he always wore his clothes a few sizes too big and never went anywhere without wearing his black and white ‘NY’ hat.

“Boi...still chasing that ball around I see,” he greeted me. His breath had the stench of hard liquor on it.

“What can I say J.R, I’ve got a God given talent here and I am going to make use of it,” I responded. “But you already know that, your proly still trippin’ after the last spanking I gave you on the court”. We walked together towards the school yard; J.R was shaking his head in disbelief.

“Yeah, you got game bro, but I’ve got other things on my mind then just ball, it would do you some good too if you focused your attention on something else”.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like making money” he replied. He then took out a wad of bills that he had stuffed in his sock. He winked as he took it out, “have to keep it safe from the jackers”.

The war against jackers was never ending. We all learned the hard way that no matter what there was always someone on the streets who was bigger and stronger than we were. Whatever valuables that we had on us from money and music players to smokes and lighters could never be really ours for the keeping if we were out walking around. I always wondered why full grown men would want to mess with young boys but eventually I realized that it was just another vicious cycle of poverty. The men that did this to us were poor and by targeting young boys who had no other means of defending themselves they instilled fear into us. If we didn’t hand over what we had we endured a swift and hard beating, if we tried to defend ourselves or run away we were caught and then given a beating. This went on until we learned to defend ourselves properly. The play fighting and sparring that we did during our childhood served us good and the cycle perpetuated itself as J.R and Curtis began jacking boys that were younger than us.

“Well I know better than to play against you baller” J.R joked. “What are you doing tonight?”

“Nothing much, maybe stay in or go see Curtis to watch a movie” I replied.

“Well come stop by my place later, I have the address of this wicked party that will be going down tonight and bring that shacked up sucka Curtis with you”. J.R put his cash away and began walking towards his home. “Later bro”.

“Later,” I called to him as I began dribbling my ball towards the hoops to begin my practice. I thought about what J.R had said about making money. I knew where he made his money and even though it sounded easy enough I knew better than to get involved with activity like that.

J.R was a small time drug dealer. He was always bringing his new clothes and electronics over to my place to show off. I was curious about the lifestyle that my friend now led so when he talked about it, I listened. He described long nights of driving up and down the streets of our neighbourhood and stopping at old, beat up, run down, decrepit houses. The customers who were usually as ugly as the houses themselves with their unwashed bodies and scraggly clothes would meet J.R outside and exchange money for a piece of small tinfoil. The customer would then scurry back into its rat nest of a home while J.R and his driver sped away only to have another call come in from the same customer 15 minutes later asking for more ‘stuff’ and right away. J.R revealed that he was surprised at times when he would show up for a sale and the customer would be some kid that we went to elementary with; that I had a hard time believing.

After practice I decided to drop by Curtis’ place. He now lived with his girlfriend’s family and the two of them were expecting their first child. It was unreal to think that this person that I grew up with was now beginning a family of his own. I didn’t stay too long but just popped in to see if Curtis was down to come with me to the party that J.R was talking about. He told me to swing by his place around 10 and pick him up. I agreed and went home to get ready.

When the time came I was all spiffed up and ready to go. When I got to Curtis’ his girlfriend’s mom told me that Ryan had already picked him up and that I was to meet them at J.R’s place. So I began the trek to J.R’s walking down Salter Street towards Burrows Avenue. The further south that one headed towards downtown Winnipeg, the more visible the signs of poverty became. Houses were condemned and boarded up, kids wandered the streets at all hours of the night, garbage and junk littered the streets and front lawns of properties. How depressing, I thought, anyone who can survive living in these conditions deserved some kind of reward. It was then that I noticed three people running across the street about a block in front of me. Two young boys were chasing another young boy across the street while swearing and brandishing weapons.

“Typical North Side street fight” I said to myself. From the distance I was at I could make out the voices of the pursuers and instantly recognized them as belonging to Curtis and Ryan. I began running in the direction that they had headed; if my friends were in trouble, I was going to be there to help them out. They had disappeared down a back alley and I was still about a block behind them and they were nearing the busy intersection of McGregor. Suddenly Curtis tripped over something that he had stepped on and he fell to the pavement while Ryan kept close pursuit of the fellow they were chasing. I caught up to Curtis and we slowed down a little just to catch our breaths.

“What’s going on man, who are we chasing?” I asked.

“This is Ryan’s scrap, do you remember him always talking about this one guy who he kept running into and the guy would make Ryan look like a punk in front of other people? Well that’s the guy we ran into him while he was walking by himself and Ryan called him out. The guy began running so we chased him. Can you believe this, all of this over Ryan’s stupid street credit?” Curtis was breathing hard.

“Well, what’s with the weapons? You’re not actually planning on using them on the guy are you?” I wondered.

“Nah, the weapons are for show, we were just trying to scare him up a little” he explained. “Besides this is North Side or have you forgotten? A man needs to have some kind of protection on him if he’s walking around this part of town”.

We watched as Ryan finally caught the guy he was chasing and the two of them stood on the corner of McGregor and Burrows giving each other shot for shot. Curtis and I were just arriving at the corner and the lights at the intersection changed so we had to wait as cars began to pass by. We watched as our buddy began to win the fight landing blow after blow to the guys head. Ryan’s opponent looked a

little dazed for a bit and in an instant almost too quick to be seen he pulled out a knife from his back pocket and stabbed Ryan in the side. After this the guy ran began to run again, this time running through an open field.

We crossed the street and met up with Ryan; Curtis took a look at his side. "Looks like he got you there" Curtis said as he pointed to a red spot on Ryan's white shirt. "We should go get that looked at".

"What are you guys just standing there for?" Ryan yelled at us. "He's getting away. HEY! I'm not finished with you!" and with that Ryan took off after his opponent. Once again we followed Ryan until he stopped short suddenly and turned to look at us. His skin had turned a sickly yellow within that short amount of time.

"I-I don't feel so well" he began. "I can't breathe...I can't breathe".

"Well that's what you get for trying to run all stabbed up" Curtis scolded Ryan. "Here let me help you lay down". Ryan willingly let Curtis help him to the ground. "Come on catch your breath and then we can just forget about this and head to J.R's". Curtis sounded so confident in his plan until he looked down and realized that Ryan had lost consciousness. "What the hell!" He bent down and felt for Ryan's pulse. "Sam, go get J.R, NOW!"

"What? Why?" I could hear the panic in my own voice.

"His pulse is slow. GO! Get J.R down here now! I'll stay here until Ryan gets some help and then the three of us can go looking for that punk who did this. GO! RUN!"

So I ran. Crazy thoughts raced through my mind. He'll be okay...he'll be okay; I repeated the saying over and over again in my head, allowing myself to believe it. "Call the police" I said to myself. "Call an ambulance". No, I thought, I have to get J.R; he'll make sure that guy gets what he deserves.

I crossed Salter Street for the second time that night. I continued running taking short cuts through abandoned yards to get to J.R's house. I rounded a corner near Alfred and Aikins and what lay before me brought me back to reality. There the cops are I thought, but why are they here? They should be back where I just came from. Did they follow me here? Confusion set in and made me stop in my tracks. Instinct kicked in and I realized that this was a totally different scenario that I had stumbled upon; yet it involved people I knew well.

There cornered by four cop cars was J.R. From the distance I was at I could see the fear in his eyes mixed with that red glaze that let me know he was messed up. He hadn't spotted me yet and neither had any of the police officers. I quickly stepped back into the shadows and crept low in some nearby bushes that would still allow me to see what was going on.

"Bradley Red Deer" one officer with a bullhorn announced. "We have several warrants out for your arrest".

"That's not who I am-" began J.R. In his right hand was a blade.

"Drop your weapon" the officer continued, "or we will be forced to subdue you".

"You don't understand-" J.R tried again to explain himself. From behind him another young officer came out of the shadows trying to be quiet and tackle J.R without him knowing. An impossible feat I knew, no one could sneak up on J.R, he had intense hearing and in that same moment he turned around to face the officer and then J.R raised his knife in the air. The knife glinted in the streetlight but only for a moment. J.R stepped out of the way of the policeman who ended up falling face first onto the pavement. Thunder exploded from the left of J.R and the knife fell to the ground. My heart stopped beating and my breath caught in my throat. My eyes would not let me turn away from what was now going on.

J.R fell to his knees with his glazed eyes open wide in shock. He clutched his chest where a red stain grew bigger and bigger eventually turning black.

"Nnnnnoooooo!!!....." a scream of grief came from behind a parked car on the street. It was Candace, one of J.R's younger sisters; she kept screaming as she ran towards her brother. "That's my brother, that's my brother, you shot my brother!" I noticed that her clothes were torn before two officers stepped in front of her and held her back. She clawed at them, screaming for them to let her go. "Junior! Junior! Junior!"

Blood was now starting to come out of J.R.'s mouth and he started coughing. I stood up out of my hiding place. He looked in my direction, looked me in the eyes before falling onto the blood stained pavement face up.

It was my turn to make a move. I ran as fast as I could towards my fallen friend. I could see steam rising from his mouth as his chest sporadically rose up and down in an effort to keep breathing.

All I could hear in my head was the echo of that fatal gunshot. I reached J.R.'s side in time for him to turn and see me. His voice was weak as he continued to cough. "Tell my family that I love them" he said. "I'm not strong enough...I'm going...Ryan said...we're going together".

Emotion got the best of me and I sobbed openly. "J.R, Ryan got stabbed. That is what I came to tell you".

"He's right beside you bro...he's waiting for me". My blood froze as J.R said this. The right side of my body tingled immensely proof of what J.R had just said. "Take care of Candace...she'll need it." Those were the last words I ever heard him say.

On either side of me two men wearing dark blue uniforms with red stripes running down both sides picked me up and handcuffed me. They had me laying face down on the ground, I turned my head towards my friend just in time to see him close his eyes and watch as a white shadow seemed to escape from the top of his head.

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!!" the scream escaped my throat. I screamed until there was no more breath in me. Even in handcuffs, I thrashed around on the ground kicking at what I could, trying to escape from what held my hands behind my back; I didn't care if I ripped my hands off. The only urge that I had was to be with J.R and hold him close to me; that was the only thought in my head. I continued to convulse and spit out obscenities, cursing those who took the lives of my best friends. I did this until a solid black boot struck the side of my head and I passed out. Before I gave into the blackness I silently prayed that wherever this darkness led to that when it ended this night would have all been a dream. I surrendered to the darkness and it engulfed me along with the sound of Candace's screams sounding in my ears.

I awoke the next day in police custody. They kept me there for two nights as they tried to sort out the events of the night before. I was given the news that J.R had already confirmed to me; Ryan died on that street corner with Curtis by his side. The one stab wound that he received was a fatal one that punctured his right lung which was why he complained that he couldn't breathe. After the ambulance arrived and took Ryan's body away; with no one around to talk any sense into him or to comfort him with his loss Curtis set out to find Ryan's killer. Not only did he find the guy, as I was later told but Curtis ended up killing the guy who had killed our best friend. He was charged with first degree murder and was kept in custody.

I sat through different inquests as J.R's killer was brought to trial. He was found not guilty of any wrong doing because he was doing his duty as a police officer. Throughout the different testimonies of the witnesses from that night I learned that Candace had been there through the whole ordeal, in fact she was a part of it. She admitted to the judge that she had been selling herself that night to make money for one of her addictions. She had taken on a John who ended up attacking her which was why her clothes were torn. J.R just happened to be walking by at the same time that the attack was going on. He came to his sister's defence by pulling her out of the car and yelling at her to go home. J.R then pulled his knife out and was about to take it to the guy who had hurt his sister when the cops happened to be rolling by and catch the last of the confrontation. They had been looking for some other criminal who matched J.R's description and that was where I came in.

My life was never the same from that day on. Everything became unreal so that I only existed rather than experience anything. Without those three boys in my life, who was I? Everything that was once important to me no longer held any value. I became uncaring and withdrawn from everything and everyone. I sunk deeper and deeper into despair and eventually cursed my friends for leading the lives that they did. I tried to forget everything by pumping my brain and body with every narcotic that I could get my hands on. I became every negative stereotype that had ever been uttered against Aboriginal people. I was a drug addicted, alcoholic, jobless, bum who drifted day to day in a cloud of false reality.

The drugs took the pain away and to me that was good because the hurt was so excruciating when I was sober. It truly was rock bottom.

By some chance one day, I ran into an old coach of mine who remembered the talent I once had as an athlete. He invited me over to his place one day and we got to talking about the tragedies that made me take a turn for the worst. It was the first time in years that I had ever talked about what happened and it was a huge relief to share my pain with someone. Coach pulled some strings that he had with some of his contacts and got me a job as an assistant coach to a team he was working with. I began playing ball again and that is where I decided to focus my wasted energy on. I really got actively involved in the coaching aspect of the game. The team that we worked with was a core area minor league team of young boys between the ages of 13-15. When I worked with those boys and looked at their faces, I was reminded of myself and my friends at that age. It was motivating to work with fresh young talent that were trying to survive in the same environment that I had come from. It was then that I decided to become more of a role model to these boys and try to be a proper role model that they could look up to.

Since then things have become a lot brighter for me. I met someone that genuinely cared about me and we started a family. Which brings me back to the present and the picture that I held in my hands. Upstairs my newborn daughter began to cry. I raced upstairs to comfort her until she fell back asleep. Watching her sleep made me realize something deep; how can I continue to mourn over the people that I have lost when there are others who have come into my life that need that same love from me?

It was then that I returned to the mess I had created. I picked up all the pictures and put them back in the box and then carried the box to the storage closet down the hall. I returned to the living room and picked up the picture of the four young, happy and smiling boys. I put the picture on the mantle next to all the other pictures of people that I loved.

“Goodnight Bros” I whispered as I shut off all the lights and headed back upstairs to bed.