

Deyon Neal *Conflicted*

“You’ll grow at a rate commensurate with your ability to perceive reality from both sides of the conflict you’re in.” The words were still echoing in my head as my cell door opened and I stepped out. I had just written them in a communication kite to a fellow prisoner named Meechy, whom I considered my brother. It was spiritual advice, my response in an intense, week-long discussion that we were having on paper about self-development. I walked through the metal detector downstairs, then out of the back door of my maximum-security cellblock onto the exercise yard, with our camaraderie in my heart, thinking, “Men sharpen men as steel sharpens steel.”

A bright, mid-August, morning sun kissed me from the sky. I squinted downward from its beaming light while returning its warm greeting with a natural smile. A little after 9 a.m. and it was already muggy with promises of being uncomfortable later, but for now the humid air filling my nostrils and enveloping my body was quite pleasant. My lungs relaxed as I inhaled, inspired. I didn’t need a reason to be happy. I was alive.

Our prison yard was an octagon no bigger than a corner store parking lot, loading with about a dozen preoccupied offenders ready to start their day; four middle-aged white men, one young Latino, and seven young blacks dressed in either white t-shirts and orange shorts or blue prison uniforms. Seven of them rushed to the six pay phones just outside the door to either place calls or make soap, deodorant, and coffee transactions from the previous day’s bets. The two prison guards who formed the checkpoint that I had just walked past outside the doors were too busy performing random searches on the prisoners who were still coming out to catch the transactions being made with the contraband they missed.

The pull-up bars hadn’t gone anywhere; two sets still stood empty near the corner bench that I headed to. The cell block’s exterior, red brick wall was out boundary for half of the octagon. A 15-foot, metal fence with razor-sharp barbed wire at the top formed the other half of the yard’s perimeter, binding us all in together, while the wall’s dark windows of the first floor’s calls, 11 on each side of the back door, mirrored our reality back as us. The wisest of us knew not to try looking beyond the reflection; it could get you stabbed for violating someone’s privacy or flashed by the romancers who often put on masturbation shows for Katrina, the cell block’s lone transsexual. Through the fence, about a hundred feet across the walk, sat the programs building, the healthcare building, and

the chow hall building—all built with the same shape, size, and brick, probably by the same contractors.

There was no grass in sight, nothing green or organic, period; we had to look to the heavens for nature. The concrete beneath my feet had a few grimy puddles from last night's rain, as did the cracked, asphalt blacktop that made up the basketball court on the yard's right side. The foot-paved running track around the perimeter, which once contained grass, was all dust that made my black, state-issue, Oxford shoes look more rundown than they really were (I often avoided it if I wasn't exercising). John B., one of the few white prisoners, had already taken off jogging around it to the tunes of his Walkman. Probably rock. I wondered if it was that old Guns-N-Roses song that he was enlightening me about while leaving my red and black, cardboard chess set on one of the steel card tables for anyone who wanted to play.

I had no plans to, nor did I have any money left on my phone card to call home (the phones were taken anyway). Today was a no-exercise day, no pressure. I felt a little relief while sitting on the steel bench and looking back at the door for Tron, my workout partner. Tron was another prisoner whom I considered my brother. More prisoners poured out and the yard for much louder with chatter, laughter, and brotherly yelling. A semitruck engine groaned and beeped in the distance, probably somewhere behind the program's building. I exchanged greetings, hugs, and handshakes with Jose (the lone Latino), Blue (another considered brother), and L-Boogie (my other workout partner), then looked back up at the door again for Tron. He was finally walking past the guards.

Tron was twenty-seven years old with light-brown skin, dreadlocks, and the physique of a light-heavyweight boxer in training. He grew up "streetbanging" in Detroit's West 7 Mile neighborhood, now he wanted change. Nine years older, I took him under my wing earlier this summer. We planned to discuss the school that he dreamed of building for troubled youth, but when I read the uneasiness in his face, I knew that something else had become priority. He walked up and shook my hand.

"What up, bro?" I greeted.

"What up, though?" he greeted back in Detroit fashion with a tinge of dejection in his voice. "They probably 'bout to—"

Before the words even left his mouth, the center of the yard erupted. I heard it before I even saw it: *wack, wack, wack, wack!*—sounds of knuckles snapping against bare flesh. Who is...? My mind asked and answered the question as my eyes locked in on Charlie's golden, bald head. His arms were launching fist-flurries, combination after combination at the head of—who is he fighting? I strained my eyes to zoom in on the other guy's face. He was swinging away too, a little slower,

with his head turned away at an angle. A big dude. I mean, Charlie was big enough, about 200 pounds of solid muscle. (He was a former amateur boxer out of Flint, Michigan, who now worked out like a professional bodybuilder. Joking, I often called him Lee Haney because he had his shape.) But this dude that he was fighting was huge and fat: about 6-foot-3, 350 pounds of twirling blubber. The two bodies became a whirlwind of blue clothing and black flesh, a tornado of hatred that sucked in everyone's attention. Before I knew it, my blood was racing, and I was on my feet. Rushing adrenaline charged me with compelling motive force as I stopped breathing. Every atom of my body vibrated a hundred times faster, corresponding with the rapid rate and vigor of their performance. My hands had balled into ready fists, and I hadn't even noticed.

I looked around; first, to see if anyone else would move towards the brawl; then, to see who else was living out the experience in their physiology. Four dozen prisoners. No one moved except the two checkpoint guards, and they moved with pepper spray and tasers aimed: "Alright, come on, guys. Knock it off." Their first warning was passive, full of exhaustion and exasperation—just another day at the workplace. They lingered around the fight like tentative kids timing the rope of a double Dutch session, but they weren't about to break up the fight by themselves. Three more guards rushed through the door, providing backup. More confident, the passive guard ordered: "Okay, that's enough! Get on the ground, Austin!" Austin was Charlie's last name. He kept swinging. Brightmoor went down. Brightmoor! I finally saw his face when he rolled onto his hands and the fight rotated our way.

Named after his Detroit, Westside neighborhood, Brightmoor was a 23-year-old kid, doing no more than five years for a petty drug offense. He was maxing out his sentence next year, going home no different than he was when he came in. The small prison shank in his right hand said so. Someone stabbed my mom to death out in Brightmoor 26 years ago; she died fighting just as hard. He wasn't even alive when my fight began.

The shank didn't do much good against Charlie, but he held onto it tight while struggling to get back up onto his feet under Charlie's raining blows. One taser popped like a static, electric rubber band. Charlie swung on without flinching. A second guard fired his taser next. Charlie went down with Brightmoor, then they lay silent on their heaving chests and throbbing faces, practicing good prison etiquette (everyone knew to remain silent whenever things popped off on the yard) while the guards looked for the shank. Bright red blood trickled from Charlie's shiny bald head. Eight more guards rushed outside far too late. The fight lasted about 20 seconds.

My racing heart throbbed for a logical explanation. Tron waited until

the guards led them away, spat in the dirt near the fence then addressed me.

“I was just about to say they was about to fight.”

“What they get into it fo’?” I asked.

“Sellin’ slum behind the door,” Tron said. “Selling slum” was slang for exchanging insults and threats. Charlie and Brightmoor locked right across the hall from each other and argued all the time. Tron shook his head, sighing. “Charlie just got a 12-month flop, too... over some words.”

I sat and wondered which words could possibly be worth a parole opportunity. In Michigan’s penal system, a 12-month parole denial (we call them “flops”) meant you had one foot out of the door; that if you stayed out of trouble for another year, your parole was certain. Charlie was also on his way home after serving 23 consecutive years. Brightmoor wasn’t even alive when he got arrested for a robbery murder in the 90s, but somehow they had enough in common for Charlie, a 48-year-old man, to stand up in the door all day bickering about sports, crime, women, and entertainment with him. Until they fell out. Words create, heal, build, and destroy. If you’re not discussing something productive, especially in this atmosphere, it will eventually lead to destruction—swinging fists and bloody shanks. I’ve seen it a million times during my 16 years in, which was why no matter how much I liked Charlie, I couldn’t help resenting him for not knowing better.

For hurting me. I had 16 years left before the parole board even thought of me. I would’ve gladly traded shoes with him, so my disappointment was personal, like I’d just been slapped in the face. By ingratitude. Recklessness. Indifference. Despair. Senseless Black-on-black violence that we all should’ve been tired of. Self-hatred.

It tapped a well of trauma deep within me: How stupid? Wasn’t even worth it. That little stuff? A 12-month flop gone for 20 seconds of release. They didn’t even get any rec’. In the inner city, we fought uninterrupted for like 10 to 12 full minutes, until someone nearly died. This little stuff wasn’t even an appetizer.

I stood there with my equilibrium shot, taking stock of each of my polarized thoughts, looking around at all of my potential enemies, four dozen: I wish one of ya’ll would run up on me! I’m a try to kill one of y’all! Wow, I really thought that. I haven’t had a good one in nearly 10 years. What if I’m rusty? What if the younger and quicker of them are thinking the same thing? And to think, we almost got through the summer with no fights. For those 20 seconds, they were free. Too free. I lamented, not just for Charlie and Brightmoor’s misfortune, but for my own. As tired as I wanted to be of the madness, I still loved it.