

In Pursuit of Treatment
By Jane Cartmell
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Life for my older brother since about the age of twenty has been a gradual downhill slide. A good looking, better than average student, who played sports through school (basketball, football, baseball), he was an altar boy who walked four miles to serve 7:00 daily mass from the fourth through the eighth grade. An excellent swimmer and diver, he was a hard worker who, as his mom described him, "Went at his chores like he was killing snakes."

About mid-teenage he began acting out in a way that got him the wrong kind of attention, which led to a record of car mishaps and some alcohol abuse. We were surprised and disappointed that he never seemed to learn from his mistakes, he only got bitter, developing a chip on his shoulder, and a little suspicious that the police were after him.

All this time, I watched with deep concern as he continued to act unwisely. Our family waited for him to "grow up". At age twenty-five, he had responsibility for two small children and a working wife, a job for a major grocery store chain as a produce manager, and major difficulty coping with what we now see were his paranoid tendencies. At that time, I think we all hoped that when he "settled down", life would be better for him. In 1971 in a small town, nobody we knew ever saw a psychiatrist. Young people certainly didn't, they just "grew out" of their problems.

There were some signs...as we piece together his untreated history. And we watched while he continued that slow downhill slide. A second marriage ended, now he was financially responsible for three children. In 1978, my brother and I went in different directions, I was moving to Hawaii for a year and he to Montana, saying only that he "wanted to live out in the country where people will leave me alone."

When I saw him again in 1980, he seemed preoccupied with the thought that he was somehow being singled out. As he continued to be irresponsible regarding his child support, we had an increasingly difficult time understanding his attitude. His bitterness and suspicion and his defeatist thoughts were beginning to completely displace the old "I can do anything" mentality my brother had growing up.

His good looks and personality had brought him into a third marriage out in Montana. We were dismayed, but happy to hear that at least he had companionship so far away from all of us.

In 1985, he called me to ask what I thought of the idea of his going to live with our widowed father for awhile. His third marriage had broken up and he needed a short term place to start again. For the next three years he stayed home, doing small carpentry, household chores and cooking. During this time, he sold his truck, stopped driving, and did not engage in any activities outside of our family gatherings. Clearly, he needed help, but when we suggested a doctor he resisted.

In April of 1989, my oldest brother called our father, who had taken a month to visit his sister and my family in California. No one had been at the house on a Saturday afternoon when someone noticed smoke and alerted the Fire Department that the neighbor's house was on fire. My brother had left our father's house on the same day and was next seen a few days later when he appeared at our older brother's home looking very tired and disoriented. My dad and I drove together to my old home town, apprehensive about what was awaiting us. When we arrived at the house, my brother was sitting at the dining room table writing letters to the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. asking for

their records on him. Later my father approached him about the fire and he admitted no involvement, blurting out words and sentences that didn't make sense.

Soon after, an eyewitness came forward to say that, indeed, my brother had been seen pouring gasoline into the neighbor's kitchen window shortly before the fire erupted. We alerted the police who told us that it would be difficult to locate my brother since he had hitchhiked across state lines to visit an uncle after our family had a talk with him.

What struck me is that we seemed to be functioning in a void. No one would care if we let him idle out there in society where he felt completely alienated, or we could take this opportunity to bring him into a treatment program even if jail would be the entry point. My father and I both social work professionals, carry no illusions about our society or our treatment system coming to save anyone.

But, when the police weren't particularly interested in picking him up after the house fire next door, I was flabbergasted and knew it was up to me to force the issue. I called the mayor and told her about my concern. I wrote her a follow-up letter which outlined our conversation. She called the Chief of Police and we finally got results.

A psychiatrist, who was assigned to evaluate my brother's competency to stand trial, told us that since my brother was not acting out in any bizarre fashion and since he refused to discuss the fire, the doctor's only choice was to judge him competent. It is just short of criminal that our legal system in this country does not support the activity of obtaining services for those who are seriously mentally ill and unwilling to procure aid for themselves.

After several weeks, my brother finally accepted his attorney's advice to plead guilty. The day after he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to seventeen months in the state correctional system.

At the time of my brother's entrance to this facility, I wrote a letter to the Associate Superintendent on behalf of our family, introducing us and expressing our concerns. I never received a reply. I felt cut off from my brother. He was in prison, sick but not being treated and we were on the outside, powerless to help him.

After only 11 months we were suddenly informed that my brother would be released into the community in two months...eight weeks to be exact. This was due to a new law written by the state legislature during 1990, designed to shorten prison terms to alleviate overcrowding. Fortunately, about this time, my brother received a new case manager. Without hiding behind the "confidentiality" barrier she shared information with us so we could participate in his discharge planning. She communicated well with the psychiatrist for the facility, and a diagnosis of mental illness was formally made. But my brother remained noncompliant regarding medication or treatment.

People talk a lot about "falling through cracks in the system". What we were facing with my untreated brother's upcoming release did not feel like a "crack" to me. It felt more like a chasm. If he was released with \$100 and a bus ticket, as sick as he was, he could trip and fall through a "crack" and be lost forever.

I should make clear that his crime of arson was considered "paid for" at this time and was no longer a substantive reason to hold him in the "system". I was learning once again, how difficult it is to obtain service, and how important it was for me to clearly ask for what we wanted.

Frankly, now I felt fear and dread. I was passionately committed to procuring treatment for my brother and at the same time felt strongly committed to protecting the community from his delusional and potentially dangerous behavior. I composed a three year chronology, about three pages long and a cover letter expressing our deep

concern about his situation. My brother had expressed no remorse about the arson, was exhibiting delusional behavior and yet could probably remain composed for thirty minutes of interview time, which was all it took to be released. I sent letters to the Governor of the state, the two national senators, all of the state legislators representing my father's district, the Director of Social and Health Services, and the Director of Corrections, and finally, I got results.

The Assistant to the Director of Corrections was on the phone to me, in about a week, asking how she could assist me. I told her that we wanted a very careful interview done by a professional who was well aware of all of the facts surrounding the case. In the following days, I received responses from the Governor, the senators, and some state representatives who replied that they had referred the matter to the Director of Corrections and if I required further assistance regarding my brother, to please let them know.

We were all on pins and needles during that period of time preceding the evaluation, however, we got results once again.

As of this writing, he continues to remain formally noncompliant regarding medication. At this point, we progressed through a jury hearing (requested by my brother after prompting by his attorney) for a 90 day authorization for involuntary treatment. And we have also completed an in-hospital hearing for an additional 180 days of authorized involuntary treatment. The battle for treatment goes on endlessly.

But, because of treatment, he is getting better! Seven months and it seems to be helping. With my father's weekly visits and my continued intervention with staff, he has been approved for a program for adaptive living skills where he will learn over a three month period, how to care for himself again. From there he will go to on-campus detached housing where he will live with four roommates and a case manager and learn to put his adaptive living skills into practice.

I have tremendous respect for my brother. He has now been institutionalized for two years and he still has his spirit and his sense of humor. He is now, after twenty years, willing to receive dental and eye care. Despite the depressing environment, which at times, can be fear producing and terrible lonely, he holds on. These days he just keeps asking me if I think that he will ever have his own home again where his children can come to visit him. I tell him that we're all working on it and if he continues to do well, I don't see why not. I hope I can keep my promise to him.

End

Prologue

In 1994 my brother was released from the state psychiatric hospital. He has been living independently, in a quiet mobile home park ever since. He sees his doctor regularly, takes his medication faithfully, and exercises daily. His three children and seven grandchildren visit him, and he visits them. We are all very grateful.