

# THE OTHER BROTHER

**By N.E Moone**

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It happened slowly, the way my brother died. My therapist has been helping me...come to terms with the entire ordeal these last few years. I don't know why I became so curious about what happened. Ever since I was taken away from my parents, I've been coping in my own way since his death and I've been fine. Well, fine enough. I don't know why I started looking deeper into it, maybe for closure or...I don't know. I started looking into the old police reports and like a flood, lost memories came rushing back to me. More and more each passing day. When I'm awake I recall flashes of my childhood. When I sleep at night my mind fills in any missing details. I can't tell if I'm making it worse than it truly is or if what I see at night is genuine. I wish I listened to my therapist and didn't try to dig deeper. If I did, I would still have some fond memories of my family left. Now?... Sometimes I catch myself wishing I had taken his place, to have felt the love that he did. Even if it means that my life was cut short.

My name is Michael and my older brother Josea passed away when I was eight years old. To my best recollection, it was a normal day when everything went wrong. We were at one of his football games, he'd been playing for a few years now, and Mom and Dad always dragged me out to go watch. It was nearly the end of the game when a sudden silence choked the air. Josea was running with the ball towards the endzone when an opposing player lept for him and caught his foot. It wasn't a violent hit by any means, but Josea tripped and slammed into the ground.

The refs whistled to end the play and our bleacher was cheering for the thirty yards that Josea had just gained them. Everyone was jumping up and down, but Josea still hadn't gotten up. It seemed like only my parents noticed at first. A ref trotted over to where he was on the ground and shook him, seeing if he was fooling around. He soon raised his arm in the air and called for the sidelines. Mom and Dad stood telling me to wait where we were seated as they rushed to the field.

The stands went silent as my parents ran close behind the medical team. I watched them crowd Josea, despite the swarm of activity I still couldn't see him move. The fans in the stands who watched my parents rush the field kept looking at them and back at me, I felt like a broken-down car everyone slowed down to watch.

Shortly after, I watched an ambulance drive onto the field. Mom was crying in Dad's arms at that point. One of Josea's friend's moms came over to sit with me as they loaded him into the back of the ambulance. All the players were on their knees watching this unfold. At the time, I wasn't really worried. I mean, I've seen players injured all the time and they came back just fine. I was sure Josea would be fine. Mom went into the back of the ambulance with him and Dad came back to the stands to get me. He thanked the woman who came to stand by me before picking me up and taking me to his truck. I asked him if Josea was okay. He didn't respond.

What came next was a blur for me. I kind of just sat around in the hospital as we waited for test after test to come back. All I could do was sit in the corner and play on my Gameboy. It smelt funky in his hospital room, like hand sanitizer and stale rain. Everyone thought he had a concussion. Josea woke up a few hours later and was fawned over by my parents and the nurses. He seemed fine really. Later that night, the doctors told us that they were right in their initial

thoughts...but had worse news to share. He did have a concussion. And he had a brain tumor. With where it was located, surgery...wasn't an option.

I didn't know what this meant at the time, but now that I'm older I see why Mom broke down and why Dad closed up the way he did. When Josea was awake, nothing seemed wrong with him other than that he had a migraine. He had to wear cool sunglasses around bright lights but as my older brother, he was as invincible as ever. He was pretty quiet about all of it, Mom was the most hysterical. We started going to church twice a week and got involved with charity organizations I can't bother to recall the name of. Josea had to give up football because of the concussion but I still remember our parents taking us to games frequently.

It didn't take long before we started staying home more often. Josea had nearly constant headaches and trouble hearing. My parents would focus all of their attention on my brother. I learned pretty quickly how to make food for myself and plan out how I would be getting to and from school. Every time I'd come home, Mom and Dad would be in Josea's room down in the basement. As the older brother, he got to have the bigger room out of the both of us. As he became more homebound, he got to have all the attention as well. Our parents bought him the best toys, gaming consoles, whatever a kid his age would want. I wasn't allowed to use his toys or anything, I would be too distracting, they said. I was jealous as a young boy, I don't think any child would be able to understand this as a coping strategy from their parents. They truly did try and provide for him as best as they could. This just meant that I was left to fend for myself.

Things took a turn one day when he woke up one morning and couldn't balance on his own two legs. My parents rushed him to the ER, I don't recall them saying goodbye to me before leaving. They were gone from sun up to sun down and when they came back...Josea was sitting

in a wheelchair. The moment I saw his red, puffy face. That's when it finally clicked. My older brother never cried in front of me...nor did I ever see him walk again.

Dad carried him to his bedroom while Mom tugged the wheelchair down the stairs. From what snippets of conversation I could hear as the night went on, he only had a few weeks left. A month or two at best before the tumor wouldn't leave enough room for his brain. From that night on, I would fall asleep to the sound of him crying in the basement. Each day he grew more and more lethargic. My parents wouldn't let anyone come and visit. Any company would distract him from the healing process.

I was allowed to see him every so often when he wasn't sleeping or "too busy recovering." He wouldn't say much, so I attempted to play games with him. Tried to toss a football to him. Mom would quickly sweep me away saying that it was time for Josea to rest.

The crying continued every night, I could hear him through the floorboards. I would toss and turn, cover my head with a pillow but even so I kept hearing him even in my dreams.

When my birthday sprung up on the calendar, I asked Dad if I could see Josea. "We have to let him rest son, if we want him to get better he needs to rest." I would argue with him and storm over to Mom who promptly gave me a spanking for arguing with Dad. It was the first time either of them ever laid a finger on me. I didn't ask to see him after that, the closest thing to a conversation we could have was me listening to him cry. Our aunts and uncles stopped calling to check in on us and we grew away from the rest of our family.

Dad would come home from work and go right to the basement. Mom, well, she could go days without me ever seeing her. She would look worse and worse each time she came up from downstairs. Her hair started to look thin and matted and her skin grew pale from rarely seeing light from the outside.

I had to start washing my clothes in the bathroom sink because the washer and dryer were downstairs and I figured I shouldn't even bother asking my parents. I only had a handful of friends I could see after I walked to school. My hair was greasy, my clothes were all wrinkled, and I couldn't make it to any of our school events. School became ... hard. The only thing I could rely on were the sounds from the basement at night.

One night, it must have been 2 or 3 when I randomly woke up. I didn't have to use the bathroom or have any bad dreams. I just woke up, knowing that something was wrong. I turned to lay on my opposite side when I saw a dark shadow in the corner. I froze. My heart immediately started to pound in my chest. There shouldn't be anything there. It didn't look like anything was there, but it was just so dark. So much darker than black it seemed to be devoid of color and shape. It was terrifyingly empty. All I could do was stare at the blank space.

As time passed my eyes burned as I stared. I didn't want to blink and have it disappear or move. It stayed there, as minutes turned into hours. I don't know why. Eventually, I sat up. The Moon was the only thing illuminating my room, its white light bouncing off the wood floor and light blue walls. It was sucked into the darkness and no light reflected back. Just like a black hole.

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It was Christmas morning, the first Christmas without Josea sitting next to me under the tree, today would be the day I would see him. When I woke up that morning, a small part of me thought that everything would be back to normal. I'd rush over to Mom and Dad's room where they would be tired but so excited to see us unwrap our presents. It was once my favorite time of the year.

I awoke to a grey morning sun shining against my eyelids. My room was cold from the winter weather and in that grey light, I no longer expected the day to get better. The house was quiet. Without any doubt, I knew that Mom and Dad were downstairs with Josea. I can't remember the last time that I saw him. It's been months since the football game I crawled out of bed to start what pitiful morning would be awaiting me. To no surprise, no sign of Mom or Dad.

I miss the smell of our Christmas tree, I haven't had a Christmas tree for the holidays since, I miss baking cookies for Santa and doing my best to stay awake to hear the sound of reindeer clopping against our roof. I assumed Santa would skip my house that night. I was right.

The kitchen was nearly bare, save for a few slices of bread and some old milk in the fridge. As I sat alone eating toast, I looked out our kitchen window. The neighbors had their lights all up. Cars were lined down the street for parties or other holiday get-togethers. I barely started eating when I decided, no I didn't decide, I just stood from my chair and walked down the hall to the basement door. I thought my hands would shake as I reached for the doorknob but they were as still as ever.

There was a slight click as the door opened. It seemed so loud in the pale silence of the house. The lights weren't on but the flickering light of Josea's TV illuminated the stairs. I took the first step down while holding my breath. The smell of stale stink and must grew stronger with each step. It felt like forever before I could see into the room, I knelt down on the stairs to peek at the state of things. On the couch facing away from me, I could see the top of someone's head. They were framed in the flashing light of the TV so they were nothing more than a dark shape.

I made it to the final step before the stairs creaked. It's been like that for as long as we've lived here, but it slipped my mind. Quicker than a bullet leaving a gun, I saw both my parents' faces appear over the couch. Of course, they slept down here.

“What do you think you are doing,” Mom cried.

“I just wanted to see—”

Dad cut me off yelling, “You know better than to come down here!” He stomped over to me.

I called out to Josea, begging for him to turn around. He didn’t even move an inch as Dad gripped me tightly by the collar and carried me up the stairs. As he did, I watched Mom sit up and begin running her hands through Josea’s hair almost like she was calming him down. His hair was much longer than I’d ever seen it before.

The only gift I got that Christmas was being locked in my room. I begged and pleaded to see Josea but Mom and Dad wouldn’t hear it. That night as I tried to sleep, the dark shadow appeared once again. Hidden in its foggy blackness, there was something at its center. Like a glowing light in the middle of a deep ocean. Every night after, it would appear there in the room with me. I wasn’t scared of it, but it came with a sense of foreboding and a smell like that of the basement.

After Christmas, things went from horrible to even worse. The few moments that I would see Dad, he would look at me with disgust. He didn’t have to say what he was thinking for me to know. Josea was the favorite and if it were me that was suffering...it would have been better.

I stopped showing up to school. I would mainly sit in front of the TV all day and hide in my room when Dad was around. The smell from downstairs was getting worse, so much so that I could swear it was seeping up through the floorboards. I went nose blind to it after a while, but everything was just so much harder.

When I would retreat to my room at the end of the day I would be joined by the shadow. By this point, the shadow now had a bright light at its center that was obscured by a silhouette in front of it. My parents have since bolted the basement closed so that no one could get in or out.

It all came to a head one night as I lay there in bed. My stomach no longer hurt from the minimal scraps of food I would eat. I would end the day with headaches from staring at the TV all day. I welcomed the mysterious shadow as I lay down, it was silent, but it was company. The silhouette grew sharper against the mysterious light with each night. Tonight, I recognized it. It may have been a trick of the dark, but I swear it shifted slightly, causing the long hair around the figure to shift. Its back was to me, just like Josea's was Christmas morning. It was then I could see the obscure light as the TV he'd been sitting in front of.

"Josea," I asked weakly.

There before my very eyes, the shadow became as bright as the sun. My eyelids slammed shut and I tossed the sheets over my head. Even under the fabric, bright white light burned through and the slim shadow of the figure was the only thing standing out from the light. It grew larger and larger, stepping closer to where I slept.

A voice I hadn't heard in a long time said, "Michael?"

I swallowed. It was Josea's voice. I took a breath and gently lowered the sheets. The light vanished and there an arm's length away from me was my brother. I was choked up, blinking to try and adjust to the darkness once more.

I cried, "I've been trying so hard, Mom and Dad won't let me see you. I miss you so much."



“I miss you too,” He said softly, his voice was just as I remembered it. He stayed away from me, his face being obscured in the dark. “When they come tomorrow, I need you to tell them about me.”

I asked, “Tell who?”

He stretched out his arm to me which I instantly reached for. It was cold and rough like stone.

“I’ve always been right here. I will always be right here next to you.” His grip suddenly tightened, hard enough for a bruise to appear on my hand the following morning. “Remember me,” was all he asked.

“What do you mean, I—”

He leaned in close to me and the light appeared once more. What face that was once there was now something all too unfamiliar. Dark holes took place where his eyes were. His skin looked three sizes too small as it cracked and stuck to him. His hair was unnaturally long and long nails stabbed into my skin. I felt like he didn’t mean to scare me, but I broke down crying at seeing what had become of my big brother. Someone once invincible was now rotting in front of me. The rest of the night I sat alone in the dark hiding under the sheets waiting for the morning to come.

At some point, I awoke to the sound of the doorbell. I jumped out of bed to see who it was. I exited my room and peeked around the corner to see my dad at the door. He was talking to someone and I heard a feminine voice mention my name. I quickly ran over to Dad and he did his best to stop me from entering the door frame.

He put his hand on my shoulder and gripped hard, he was trying to burn holes into me with his eyes but I was no longer afraid of him. Josea said he was by my side. And I trusted him.

There were two officers at the door, one of them was a tall gentleman with big muscles and the other was a lady with dark brain hair and a face that didn't look too kind.

She was the one to speak up, asking me why I hadn't been in school. Dad rushed to speak up but the male officer shot him down saying that they were talking to me. Not him. I didn't get to speak for long before Dad pushed me from their view and told them to come back with a warrant. He was about to slam the door in their face when one of the officers pushed the door back and warned him that they would call for backup if he continued.

Dad backed off begrudgingly and did what he was told. The female officer asked me where Mom was and I said that she was downstairs with Josea. The officer looked at me confused at first.

"That's where his room is, she likes to go there for comfort," Dad said.

"She says that he needs the space to recover," I responded.

The lady looked from me to my father and I saw her as she placed her hand on her gun.

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Dad butted in, "He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Last night he asked me to tell you about him."

Dad's face went red and he started to argue with the cops, stating that something was wrong with me and that's the reason why I hadn't been going to school. The female officer gently took me by the hand and led me outside after talking into her walkie attached to her chest. She led me to her car and sat with me as more police officers arrived.

I watched my dad get escorted from the house, kicking and screaming that it should have been me. I heard Mom screeching shortly after. The woman attending to me left me for a moment to talk with her colleagues. I took this chance to slip out of the car and run into the house. I heard

multiple people calling after me. But I didn't bother to listen to them. I ran to the basement door which was wide open for the first time in months. Mom must have bolted from the room when she heard Dad yelling. I shot down the stairs and saw Josea in the same spot as he was last time. I ran to the other side of the couch and froze. He was there all alright. The smile on my face quickly faded as he looked all too familiar. I stared into the dark sockets for where his eyes should be. His body was limp on the couch, he had fresh clothes on and had a few toys in his lap.

I couldn't take my eyes away from him. Soon enough, someone else came running down the stairs. I heard their shock as they blocked me from seeing Josea. They told me to close my eyes, but I couldn't.

I let out a blood-curdling scream, I didn't want him to be left alone in what was now his tomb. The cop who tried to lead me up the stairs stopped trying after I kept escaping his grip. Only after someone else came downstairs did I let the officer pick me up and carry me out of the house.

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As the years went by, I was able to learn more about what truly happened. It was never Josea that I would hear crying at night. It was Mom, the tumor took him well before Christmas came around. My parents were able to hide the fact that they kept his body. Mom would bathe him, and buy him new clothes, doing her best to continue the life that had already expired. They went to prison for hiding Josea and for the abuse that they put me through. I went to visit her once, but she's lost in the past asking for Josea to come visit her. I've since stopped communicating with her and Dad.

Some nights, I swear Josea comes to visit me. He stands in the corner of the room watching me as I sleep. I still say goodnight to him after all these years even though my therapist

recommends against feeding into the idea that he's still with us in that way. I know he's not. His body is long gone and buried in the earth, that I can confirm. I guess I'll never know the night that Josea truly did pass away. But I do know that I can hear him now, crying through the floorboards. This time, I know it's not Mom. It must be him, I don't have a basement.