

Brotherhood

by Jeffrey B. Burton

[Note: the italicized passages that introduce sections of this essay are text messages between the author (Jeff) and his close friend (Eric)]

Don't tell anyone I'm going on hospice. My family will just fuck up the works. – Eric

I met Eric in third grade when my family moved suburbs. Our introduction was abrupt and memorable. Eric's bully-prick of an older brother set the two of us up to fight for the enjoyment of himself and his friends. Eric's brother invented the "Thunderdome" rule before the *Mad Max* movie made it famous—"two men enter, one man leaves." Fortunately, the seventy-five-year-old recess lady broke it up before any damage could be done, but Eric's brother dragged us aside and whispered, "You two are going to fight tomorrow until we get this thing settled."

I've never been sure exactly what Eric and I needed to get *settled*, but his brother was adamant about it. Terrified, I didn't sleep that night and at recess the next day, I headed toward Eric, where he sat near the tetherball court, as though I were walking the plank.

"I guess we're supposed to fight," I mumbled.

He glanced at me, then looked up at the sky, and said, "It's too sunny to fight."

I exhaled with relief and nodded in total agreement. *It was too sunny to fight.* Fortunately, his brother was nowhere to be found. Maybe he'd moved on to fresher prey.

As kids do, instead of fighting, we became friends.

And, like all kids, we couldn't imagine a future where Eric would be in a fight for his life.

I wouldn't mind the cancer; I'm just so effing tired of dealing with my shit morning, noon and night. Shit has become my life ... my life is shit. – Eric

Eric lived in Colorado, where he spent the bulk of his career working for the railroad. He texted our friend group last fall that he'd been diagnosed with colon cancer along with spots on his liver. Eric immediately underwent colostomy surgery. A colostomy bag became part of his daily life.

Eric had always been a head turner. He grew several inches in high school and by the time he headed off to college Eric looked like a six-foot-five Brad Pitt. He got into weightlifting soon after and muscled up like Arnold Schwarzenegger, only without the hint of steroids.

The colostomy bag hit Eric hard.

It would hit anyone hard.

6 months Jeff, that's what they're giving me. I go bed now. – Eric

I love ya, Er. Get a good night's sleep. – Jeff

Eric was Mr. Popular at our elementary school—dating the hottest girls in our sixth-grade class. Of course, dating in grade school meant you sat by them during lunch or on the bus for a week or so until one of you looked at the other askance, and then it was Quitsville.

I attended our most recent class reunion and called Eric to provide an update. “Kelley was there,” I said. “She’s still a stunner.”

“Kelley hasn’t spoken to me since I stuck underwear in her mailbox.”

“You did what?!”

“When we broke up, I stuffed a pair of my underwear in her mailbox.”

“How come I’ve never heard this until now?”

“If I’d told you back in the day, it would have spread like wildfire.”

I couldn’t argue with Eric’s logic. “Were they clean?”

“Of course they were clean,” he replied. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“What’s the matter with me? You’re the one shoving underwear in someone’s mailbox.”

I’m almost down to 200 pounds!!! This chemo makes everything taste the same. – Eric

I liberated *Playboy* magazines from Jerry’s Market, the grocery store across from our junior high, ironically shoving them down the front of my pants to sneak the issues out of the store. Since I was only thirteen, the bouffant at the register would never sell them to me. I didn’t consider it shoplifting. I was being denied access—it was a Civil Rights issue.

Eric would borrow magazines, which he snuck home in his jacket and, when not in use, hid between his mattress and box spring. Once I accumulated a dozen or so copies, concealed behind my stash of *Mad* magazines on my closet shelf, I got worried. It’d be only a matter of time before my parents tripped over them in their semi-annual search of my bedroom.

So, Eric and I figured it’d be best to place the magazines in a garbage bag, seal it tightly, and hide them in the woods near Mount Villa’s bunny hill. It took a mere twenty-four hours for us to come to our senses—*My God, what have we done!?* We ran like hell back to Villa to retrieve the Hefty bag . . . but it was nowhere to be found.

Where our boyhood memory ended, someone else’s began.

That Go Fund Me page Mike setup for you has been going great guns. Todd’s been able to put a deck on his cabin, Dick’s got a new pontoon boat, Mike’s got another FIAT, and Cindy and I are off to Europe. – Jeff

Now that’s fuckin’ funny!!!!!! – Eric

A year or two out of high school, Eric discovered they had *Playboys* at the local library. He shoved a copy into his backpack and, on his way out, the alarm went off. Some poor librarian had to jog out to the parking lot and retrieve the magazine from him.

I doubt Eric returned to that library anytime soon . . . if ever again.

Remember my UofM girlfriend, Debbie? Our last date was the evening after I'd thrown dad into the X-Mas tree. I told her everything, thinking she'd understand, like a girl in a John Hughes movie. Alas, her family celebrated the birth of Christ with love and worship. My family celebrated Christ's birth with domestic violence. I never had a fucking chance. – Jeff

Aaawww, c'mon now, I never had the balls to chuck Lar into our Christmas tree. I just told God/Jesus that my death will wipe your slate clean!!! NOW you've gotta fucking chance!!! Don't waste it. – Eric

Thanks for wiping my slate clean. It's a long effing slate. – Jeff

Aren't they all? – Eric

Eric and I grew up in the Seventies, back when dads could knock their kids around with impunity. Our close friend Todd's father came home intoxicated one night, got out his gun, and threatened to shoot everyone in the household. The police and the pastor showed up outside with a bullhorn to talk him out of it. When he surrendered, the cops let him sleep it off as though he were Otis on *Mayberry RFD*. He even got to return home the next day.

Hell, the cops probably oiled his gun for him while he slept.

My father could fill a chapter in a Psych book—possibly bipolar, perhaps short man syndrome, most certainly depression—and would lash out emotionally and, every so often, physically, at the tiniest of slights, either real or imagined. Quite the mystical power dear old dad yielded—the ability to seethe for seasons at a time. His was a brooding presence, lumbering about the household, making everyone's life miserable.

We learned early on to set the thermostat per his mood-du-jour.

Even after the inevitable divorce, dad came over and harangued my mother, which led to an unpleasant and certainly unforgettable yuletide celebration.

All things considered, it's a miracle I don't eat with my feet.

Eric had it worse.

First off, Eric's father—Larry, truncated to Lar—was a much bigger man. I'd heard the stories about him and always scampered away before he arrived home from

his shift at the milk plant. Lar never had an encouraging word, not a one, for any of the five kids they raised in his thousand square-foot rambler. Instead, he called them “Dunkies,” which, to this day, I haven’t a clue what it means, but knew it to be the opposite of a compliment.

And, if Eric or his brother ever looked at Lar wrong, the belt came out.

I get the old spare the rod and spoil the child adage, but it presupposes there’s some kind of Solomonic wisdom at play. I’ve also heard many a man wax fondly about their father; how whenever they did something wrong, their father reluctantly brought out the belt or paddle in order to teach their son a life lesson. For me or Todd or Eric, it was impossible to grasp the master plan involved—much less decipher what in hell we’d done to merit such *life lessons*.

Just when I think Cut-butt (Eric’s brother) is returning to his old self, he turns into Lar and I wanna kill him. – Eric

What’d the effer do? Is he with you right now? Just cough if he is so he doesn’t know we’re talking about him. – Jeff

The asshole ain’t here. I had written him off a while back, then he starts being nice again, and I get sucked in AGAIN!!! No more!!! He’s angry at the world and himself. That’s why I’m gonna kill him. – Eric

Er-remember when we visited that old lady in the room next to you who kept singing Happy Birthday to herself as though she were in some creepy M. Night Shyamalan movie? When Cut-butt comes to visit, and no one’s looking, get him into her room, stab him in the throat, give her the knife, then sneak back to your room, take a handful of gummies, and act all confused when they come to tell you what happened. – Jeff

That “old lady” across the hall is gonna have my child in about a month, but good idea!!!! – Eric

As much as Eric despised his father, he worshipped the ground his mother walked on. “Me Mum” he called her. She was so sweet and kind and thoughtful whenever I came over.

Once, Eric teared up as he recounted a recent altercation with Lar. He told me when his father left for work the next morning; he quizzed his mother on why she stayed with the son of a bitch.

But even as kids we knew why. Where would she go with five kids? Would her parents be willing to take this on? If not, what would she do for money?

She was trapped; same as Eric.

Doc call went well. Chemo's shrunk the tumors. 1st step; remove tumors on liver, 2nd step; radiate rectal tumor, 3rd step; removal of rectal tumor. – Eric

Meaning surgery to take tumors out and Eric lives to fight another day? – Jeff

Sumpin' like that. Don't get too excited, God only knows what they'll find when they start rootin' around in my butt. – Eric

Remember that pet rock I lost when we were roommates? Let me know if they find that. I'd like it back. – Jeff

I think your pet rock is in my colon!!! It sure feels like it!!! – Eric

I always thought with his size and good looks, Eric should have beelined it to Hollywood. He couldn't act worth a damn, but what would it take to get killed by James Bond in one movie, then have *Indiana Jones* take you out in another, or have Bruce Willis pop a cap in your ass in a *Die Hard* sequel?

Although, once upon a time, he and I did put on a show.

I dodged into the middle of Elmer Street. The car's headlights were maybe fifty yards away. I held up both palms as though to wave the driver down, a look of terror smeared across my features. I glanced back from whence I'd fled; from the lakeside—from his lair—and saw the madman gaining on me. There'd be no time for help from a passing motorist.

I tore across the street.

The man in the potato-sack mask sprinted after me, axe held high above his head as he flew past the car I'd tried to flag down.

It was the summer after eighth grade. I was a bit tall for my age, but Eric was way tall for his, ergo he got to play potato-mask killer for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* scene we put on for the benefit of oncoming vehicles.

We staged half a dozen performances that night before becoming bored. No vehicles swerved to the side of the road, no foot chase ensued, and no squad cars were summoned. Either the drivers knew they were being pranked or they recognized me and figured: Bout time that kid got chopped into kindling. Been wanting to do it myself.

Tomorrow at this time I'll only have half of a liver!!! I'll try to get word to y'all after surgery. Thanks for being the best friends a guy could ever ask for. – Eric

Eric was a neat freak. I've never lived in apartments cleaner than the two we shared. While eating dinner one night, I glanced over at Eric and said, "Let's see how deep this runs," and tossed my napkin onto the carpeting beyond the kitchen. We resumed eating for another few seconds before he shook his head, got up, retrieved the errant napkin, brought it back to the table, and said, "You're right. I can't let it go."

In one dump we lived in, Eric figured out if any of the tenants below—a flock of busboys from a nearby restaurant—took a shower at the same time we did, it screwed up the water temperature. The place was cheaply made so we could hear whenever any of the busboys showered. Upon hearing a victim start the shower, Eric dropped everything, ran into our bathroom and cranked the cold water so the shower-taker would get a blast of extra-hot water. We'd hear a shriek from below, and then Eric would crank the hot water so their shower would turn into a blizzard.

In a different dump, we had a family above us where their kid was always bouncing up and down as though he lived on a pogo stick. With Eric's height, he took off his boots, put them over his hands, and pounded on the ceiling as he marched down the hallway. "Here I am walking to the bathroom," he'd bellow and pound, and then, "Now I'm heading to the kitchen."

Alas, that episode ended with a less-than-pleasant visit from the facility's landlord.

Hi Jeff. Eric moved from the ICU to hospice today at 2:00 pm. He developed an infection at the surgical site. He's been withdrawing more each day. They are keeping him comfortable with all the meds. I know his friendship with you guys meant the world to him. – Eric's sister

Heartbreaking. I've loved Eric for nearly half a century. We all had such hope when the chemo appeared to work for surgeries to take place, but he's been through so much. – Jeff

There was an abandoned house—haunted, we reckoned—in a patch of woods near Rice Street. Windows smashed in; dilapidated siding; lawn neglected. Kids were able to squeeze through the chained door on the detached two-story barn/garage. Eric and I played there. We even nailed an ancient hose to a wall stud on the second floor and strung it out a busted window in case we ever needed to make a hasty getaway. Eric tested it out, scaling down the siding as kids flew past on their bikes below, miraculously not even noticing him.

Bored with the barn/garage, one day we decided to go inside the abandoned house. So, we suited up—pocket knives and flashlights—and headed out. On our trek to the house, we began chatting about *The Night Stalker*, which we'd caught on TV, and how Kolchak found the vampire's coffin in the basement and about the creepy ending of *Psycho*, which we'd also seen, and about *The Last House on the Left*, which we'd heard about but not seen on account of being a half decade too young for R-rated movies.

As we approached the decaying structure, Eric came to a stop. "I don't want to do this anymore."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I don't want to wake up any vampire."

We wound up back at my house, lying on the grass of the front yard, trying to think up something else to do with the day. "You got anything, Er?"

He shook his head. "You?"

"My mind's a complete blank," I said. "I've got no thoughts."

"So is mine," Eric replied. "No thoughts at all." He then added, "Feels kind of good, doesn't it?"

Big Eric passed away at 9:12 a.m. mountain time this morning. Minutes later the train whistle blew. RIP brother. – Eric’s sister

I read the final text to my wife and then called the gang to let them know Eric had passed. After completing the calls, I sat on the bed for fifteen minutes, working my way through a box of Kleenex. The decades spun past. Eric and I had seen less and less of each other throughout the years, but the memories washed over me, wave after wave.

I scrolled through a private text chain with Eric, until I found the text he’d sent soon after he’d entered hospice . . . the one that broke my heart.

I’m gonna miss you the most. – Eric

Helpless.

That’s how you feel when you can’t do anything—not a damned thing—for a lifelong friend who’s battling a terminal illness, so I defaulted to junior-high-school banter in the hope that maybe, just maybe, he’d get a chuckle.

You’re Dorothy and I’m the Scarecrow (only with a bigger dick). – Jeff

But now it was over. My best friend had died.

Eric insisted we shouldn’t grieve or mourn his passing, or even shed a tear, but I found that a bridge too far. Eventually, I took a couple of deep breaths and pictured Eric camped out near the tetherball court—as he’d been in elementary school, at recess on the day we were scheduled to fight—and I pictured him looking up into a cloudless sky . . . and I imagined Eric telling me, “It’s too sunny to cry.”



Eric (l) and Jeff

Jeffrey B. Burton's latest mystery/thriller, [The Second Grave](#) (Severn House) came out in February of 2025. It's the second in his Chicago K-9 series, following [The Dead Years](#). Burton's critically-acclaimed Mace Reid K-9 mystery series (St. Martin's Press/Minotaur) include [The Finders](#), [The Keepers](#), and [The Lost](#). Jeff's short

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