

4-30-2019

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Recommended Citation

McDowell, Jesse (2019) "Brothers of a Different Kind," *The Oval*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol12/iss2/22>

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BROTHERS OF A DIFFERENT KIND

Jesse McDowell

“Honey, can you please make sure that your brother’s things are packed.”

Jason turned to his mother as she walked out of the house with a small box full of kitchen items and dishes. He tried to speak, but she was already out by the car with his dad, who was about to leave for work. His dad was never home anymore, always working overtime hours. He’d never admit it but his work distracted him from the pain.

“Okay mom,” Jason said to himself as he turned toward the empty hallway. Walking past the open doors of empty rooms, he stopped at the closed door. There was a hesitation to his steps. Fearing the emptiness that waited behind this door, he took a few deep breaths. He knew what was on the other side of the door, but he imagined how it used to be, before.

Reaching forward to open the door, he was met with a wisp of chilling air that had been closed up in the room for several days if not several months. The walls were bare. Faint outlines and squares of unfaded paint decorated the walls where posters and picture frames used to be. Several boxes sat in the middle of the room with some personal items, clothes, baseball cards, and a football filling them.

Jason stepped into the room. This was as far as he had entered in almost a year. It was his older brother Ryan’s room. They hadn’t spoken in a long time. He wasn’t the best little brother, even less after Ryan left. He didn’t want his brother to leave, but Ryan always said it was for a good cause.

Jason grabbed the two biggest boxes at the center of the room and left. His feet and arms couldn’t move fast enough as all the memories and guilt seemed suffocating in the empty space. He ran down the hallway and into the living room. He almost tripped over his own foot as he rounded the corner and saw two men in dark clothing standing in the front doorway.

As he saw them, Jason thought back to those months ago, almost a year. Two men in dark uniforms walked up the front porch, a military man who Jason knew was a Casualty Notification Officer and a priest. His parents had noticed them before he did and met them at the top of the steps. They looked distraught as the men approached. His mother was shaking, tears at the base of her eyes.

Jason remembered the Casualty Notifications officers saying, “Are you the parents of Corporal Ryan J. Archer?” These words were dreaded since

Ryan had hopped in the back of a pickup and went off to war.

The following conversation that his parents had with the men in that living room was combination of crying and questions, with little answers. His parents had wanted him to go in his room, but Jason refused. The Officer had continued to tell them that Ryan died saving another soldier during an ambush on their base. The rest of the discussion had been about funeral services and honoring him as they laid him to rest. At this point, Jason had checked out.

All he could think about in that moment was how Ryan would never walk through the front door again, how he would never get to say he was sorry. When Ryan had called and told him and their parents that he had signed on for another six months to a year, Jason couldn't hide his disapproval. They hadn't spoken since that day.

Breaking away from his thoughts, Jason realized that the men in front of him were just the moving men. So he hoisted the boxes higher into his arms and walked out the front door. Met by his mother, he almost dropped one of the boxes trying to avoid her.

"Careful honey, don't strain yourself," his mom said as she caught the box that almost fell. She looked at Jason, seeing that his eyes were a little red near the bottom. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just getting Ryan's stuff like you asked. Where do you want me to put it?"

"Put it in his truck. I want to keep all of his stuff together."

Jason sighed to himself as he walked towards the far side of the house. 'His truck' as his mom put it was Ryan's maroon Chevrolet pickup that Ryan had taken everywhere. No one had even driven it since the day he deployed when it was parked on the side of the house, out of the way of the daily routines. Just like Ryan's room, it had been nearly forgotten.

As Jason rounded the corner of the house, the outline of the pickup could be seen underneath the full-body cover that Jason's father had placed on it after Ryan's death. He put the boxes down and stepped toward the pickup. Grabbing the edge of the cover near the front bumper, he removed it with such care, like pulling a band-aid off of a child's wound. Dust and leaves took to the sky like a flock of birds as he dropped the cover on the ground.

Jason thought about how pristine it still looked after several years of being immobile, a victim of weather and wind, but yet looked as if it hadn't been touched by any of it. Not one spot of fading or chipped paint, just smooth, coated by a thin layer of dust that had settled under the cover. To him it was if Ryan had just parked it after a long summer day.

Jason thought of the day that Ryan first brought that pickup home. The first time they traveled up the ridge to the overlook outside of town. The day that Ryan joined the junior ROTC program at the school. Back then, Jason never thought Ryan was serious about the military, that he was just trying out something new. It was just like Ryan to move onto something

else every year when he got bored of the last thing.

Jason went back into the house before he could get lost in nostalgia. He returned with the rest of the boxes. He figured it would be easier to put them in the pickup all at once rather than drag out the process by going back and forth between Ryan's room and his pickup.

Each time he entered Ryan's room it was easier, less memories lingered as he emptied it of its contents. When he grabbed the last box, he left the door open, signaling to his mother that the room was now empty. There was a relief in it, but also a sense of loss that Jason felt as he walked out of the room for the last time. Even with all the boxes and personal items removed, there was still a few memories that lingered among the walls. As he walked through the house, he realized that the whole house was now empty, not a single door or cupboard was closed. All of them lay open as if they had never contained anything. Besides the faded paint outlining where bookcases or pictures had been, it was as if no one had ever entered the house.

As Jason left the house and walked around the corner, he saw a man standing next to Ryan's pickup. He didn't recognize the man at first because of his thick beard and dark sunglasses. When the man removed the shades, Jason recognized him as Sam, Ryan's best friend since pre-school. They had deployed together.

"Sam, what are you doing here?" Jason's tone was unenthused. He put the box that he was carrying on top of the others. Sam gave a shy smile as he turned to Jason.

"What's up little man?"

"Just packing up Ryan's things. We're moving."

"I can help. Where do you want them, in the back seat or the bed," Sam asked.

Jason started to speak, wanted to tell him to leave, but his mom came over. "The back seat. We're moving pretty far and we're supposed to get a storm."

"Good point." Sam turned to grab a box from the stack.

"Jason, be nice. Sam's been through a lot. He was there," Jason's mom whispered. "Mom, come on. For all we know, he's the reason why..."

"Jason, stop. You know that's not true. Now grab a box and get the pickup loaded. I'll be back with food in twenty minutes." She turned and walked to her car.

Jason sighed. He moved to open the door for Sam. As he did, the combination of Ryan's cologne and that of an older model vehicle wafted from fabric of the bench seat. The scent stirred up several memories of Ryan and him driving around town or to the Outlook outside of town. He remembered the last beautiful sunset that they watched from the Outlook. Jason and Ryan had sat on the tailgate of the pickup, root beer and burgers in their hands. School had just got out for the summer and they were celebrating Ryan's graduation and Jason making the honors list. It would

have been a perfect moment, just them sitting there, devouring their meal in perfect silence. Ryan had to break that silence.

“Hey Jay, I have to tell you something.”

“What?”

Ryan had taken a few moments to form the words in his head. “I’m deploying next month. I’ve already told mom and dad.”

Jason had tipped back his can, searching for any last remnants of his root beer so he wouldn’t have to respond. Ryan had just looked at him, waiting. After another minute of his incessant avoidance, Jason had reached for his burger.

Ryan had took it from him, placing it beside him away from Jason. “Come on. Say something. I know you have something to say. The food and drink avoidance you got from me.”

Jason had just stared forward, not looking at Ryan. “Why? You clearly haven’t listened to a thing that I’ve said before.”

“Hey, this isn’t easy. I’ve prayed about this for months, and I feel called to go. I know it’s seems stupid to you, but I have to.”

“I don’t want you to go. I do think you’re being stupid, but it’s because the war is almost over. There’s no need for you risk your life,” Jason had said as he hopped off the tailgate and rounded the pickup to get another root beer out of the cooler in the back seat.

Ryan had locked the pickup from his key fob, then followed Jason. Even if I wanted to stay now, I can’t leave Sam to go alone.”

“Ol’ Smoke-pot Sam. Yeah, that’s a great idea, you won’t get yourself killed, he will.” “Jay, I know you don’t get along with him, but he’s a good guy. He’s really straightened himself out the last year. There’s no one else I would want watching my back.”

“Well, let’s hope you’re right. Because you’re leaving me here so no one will have mine.” Jason had regretted those words, even though he had apologized a few days later. Over a year had gone by and they still haunted him, as now they were true.

“Hey, Jason, you okay?”

Jason stepped out of Sam’s way and nodded. He turned to grab a box. He placed it right next to the one that Sam had put in, then slid them over to the other side. They continued to load the boxes in silence until there was none on the sidewalk.

“Well, now that’s done. Is there anything else I can do,” Sam asked as he slid the last box firmly behind the back passenger seat floorboard.

“No, I think that’s it. The movers have done most of the stuff. Mom just wanted me to do Ryan’s stuff.”

“What are you going to do with all of it?”

“Not sure,” Jason closed the pickup doors.

“Boxing away the boxes inside a garage. That’s what we do when we don’t know what to do.” Sam stared at the side of the house, but he wasn’t staring at anything in particular, he was just staring. His eyes were sta-

tionary, fixed as if they were entranced in memories. As if he was seeing them play out before him again and again. One made him smile, but it was a glimmer of a smile, not there but almost present.

Jason wondered what mischief Sam was replaying in his head. No doubt it was with Ryan by his side. They used to get into some much trouble growing up, always coming up with schemes and pranks to pull on the neighborhood or teachers. They were the kids that all the parents told their kids to stay away from, but were 'too cool' to not be friends with.

A small squeak from the moving truck as the movers loaded the couch into the back shook Sam from his trance. His body tensed. A soldier's reaction. He turned to Jason again.

"Hey, I think I'll be heading out now. I'll just get in the way if I stick around any longer."

"Sounds good."

Sam gave another shy smile. He knew he was unwanted. He waved and turned around, walking down the lawn to his car. His walk was more uniform, different than the last time Jason had seen him. There wasn't that stupid fake gangster sway, there was authority to his steps. His voice and words were direct, not full of slang like when he was in high school. Even his car was different, before he drove a sports car with showy wheels and a loud engine that was always covered in mud or dirt. The car that was sitting before him was a new crossover, no modifications, and immaculately clean. Jason didn't want to admit it, but maybe Ryan was right, Sam had grown up.

Sam opened the back hatch of his car. "Before I leave, I have to give you this." He pulled out a box and an envelope. Closing the hatch, he ran back over to Jason and handed him the box.

"What is this," Jason asked, placing the box on the hood of the pickup.

"It's your brother's jacket. The guys that collected his personal effects missed it on their sweep of camp."

"What?" Jason ripped back the folds of the box, revealing a camouflage jacket. It had two curved arrows on the shoulder and a strip that read, 'Archer.'

"I found it across base a few days before I was shipped home. I don't know why it was there, but I kept it until now. It was the only thing left of him at the base."

"Why you giving it to me? I pushed him away and we've never been friends."

"Yeah. I know. Your feelings for me aside, Ryan made me promise to look out for you if anything ever happened to him. I don't intend to let him down."

"He must have hated me, pushing him away like I did. I didn't know what to do without him here."

"There wasn't a day that went by that he wasn't thinking of you," Sam said as he reached over to put a hand on Jason's shoulder. "He didn't hate

you, he missed you. He was confused and a little angry at first, he loved being looked up to by you. Then after one of the guys in our squad died, he understood the way you felt. He said that he felt as if a hole had been blown through his life. There wasn't that person watching his back, making sure that he was safe." Sam paused for a moment as he took a deep breath. "I know what he meant."

"Yeah. I guess that's what I was feeling, I still don't know."

"There was nothing any of us could have done, it was all too fast." There was a pause, a crack in Sam's voice as he spoke. He didn't believe what he was saying, but was trying to convince Jason that he did. He looked over at Jason and lifted up the envelope to him. "The whole squad wrote letters to their loved ones to be given to them in case of their deaths. They're supposed to be delivered by the Notification Officers, but Ryan made me promise to deliver this one myself. He gave it to me a few days before he died."

"Should I wait and read it with my parents?" Jason asked

"No, it's just for you. I'm sorry it took me so long to give it to you. I didn't know when the right time would be. I didn't know how you'd react with me having it."

Jason was quiet as he stared at the envelope, then at Sam. Putting his own thoughts about Sam, at least the old Sam, Jason knew how much he meant to Ryan. He was like another brother to Ryan, seemingly even more now.

He looked down at the envelope again. The edges of it were worn, it was covered in sand and dust from the Middle East. Right in the middle of the otherwise blank side was his name written in Ryan's handwriting. He turned it over to find that it wasn't sealed, the flap was just tucked into the main body of the envelope.

"Did you open it, read it?"

"No...admittedly I was tempted many times, but no. I knew that Ryan wrote this for your eyes only. It wouldn't have been right."

Jason went back to staring at the envelope. His fingers picked at the flap, not knowing if he should open it or put it down. He wanted to know what it said, but he also didn't want to be disappointed if it didn't say what he really needed it to say.

"I'll give you a minute. Just remember, there's nothing that this can say that will change the fact that he loved you. I hope you know that."

Jason nodded, he knew Sam was right, but it still felt wrong coming from his mouth. Sam took a few steps away to the bed of the pickup. Jason flipped open the flap of the envelope. He pulled out the paper that was inside. A single sheet, folded three times. Jason took a deep breath as he unfolded the paper, placing the envelope inside the box with the jacket. He began to read the letter to himself at a whisper, his own voice keeping him focused,

“Dear Jason, I’m sorry that you have to receive this letter, and I’m sorry that I have to write it. I just want to say that I’m sorry for leaving you, it was the hardest decision of my life. That said, I would make the same choice that I did. God called me to defend the world from evil, and I have while also spreading His message to the world. I hope you can forgive me for leaving you all alone, if not now, then someday in the future. I know you felt abandoned when I left and that’s why I know that you’re blaming yourself for a lot of things. I want you to forgive yourself for being angry with me, because I forgive you and I don’t blame you for anything. I wish I could say these things in person, but I have a feeling I’ll never get the chance. Just remember I’ll always be watching over you, even if I’m not there beside you. Take care of Mom and Dad, they’ll need you more than ever now.”

Jason started to break at the last of the lines. Tears lined the thin space above his eyelid.

He took a deep breath as he continued through a trembling whisper.

“Sam will need you too. I know that you haven’t had a good relationship with him in the past, but he has changed. Just like I said that I wouldn’t want anyone else watching my back, I wouldn’t trust anyone else to watch yours. He’ll need someone to remind him of the good things in life. You should take a drive up to the Outlook with him, reminisce. I know that you both will need it. By the way, my truck is now yours. Mom and Dad should have received a letter where I told them to put the truck in your name. I asked them not to tell you until you received this letter. So treat her well and she’ll do the same. I wish I could be there to hand over the keys myself. I love and miss you little brother. Ryan.”

As he finished reading he began to stare at the pickup, his hands were shaking. Tears streamed down his face, the saltiness of them lingering in his mouth. He opened his mouth to breathe as his nose was plugged from crying.

“You okay little man?”

Jason turned his head away from the pickup and looked down at the army jacket and envelope in the box. He handed the letter to Sam. He gave him a minute to read it. He saw Sam pause and teared up, no doubt at the part about him.

“She’s mine. He gave me the pickup. I want to see if she runs,” Jason said, motioning towards the pickup.

Sam smiled and nodded. He gave the letter back to Jason as his mom drove up to the house. She waved as Jason started to walk over to her. He showed her the envelope. She smiled and handed over the keys without opposition. She hugged him with a few tears in her eyes.

Jason ran back and found Sam folding the flaps on the box. “Where we going first?” “Where Ryan told us to go.” Jason opened the drivers door and climbed in. He motioned for Sam to get in too.

Sam opened the door and looked around the inside as he slipped onto the passenger seat. He was no doubt remembering the times he spent with Ryan causing mischief. He looked up at Jason as he slid the key into the ignition and turned it. The starter sputtered but wouldn't turn over. Sam snickered from the passenger seat and motioned at the steering wheel.

"The sleeping lioness I guess doesn't want to wake," Sam said, patting the dashboard.

"Don't give up on her yet. She just needs to be nudged a bit." Jason rubbed the steering wheel then tried the ignition again. The pickup roared to life and purred as the engine idled. Jason smiled and grabbed the stick shift. "Shall we see how good she hunts?"

This analogy was something that Jason had started with Ryan a week after he bought the pickup and it became a tradition between brothers after that. So Jason and Sam were well versed in the dialogue and actions. This was the first time that Ryan hadn't been present in the vehicle when it was said and it could be felt as Jason shifted the pickup into gear.

They were both silent as they moved forward, but the excitement rose the farther they drove. The memories of the many adventures in the pickup rolled by like the road beneath them. They drove through the town by all the cars that had their own memories with their own drivers.

As they reached the other side of town, the mountains towered around them. Jason remembered the path that Ryan had taken every time to get to the Outlook. It was cemented in his memory like the recognition of his own name. Each mile they drove, surfaced more and more distant but distinct memories to both of their minds. They did not speak, but the quick smiles and laughs relayed that they both had so many memories in their heads that any longer of a smile or laugh would be taking away the recognition of another memory.

Soon they reached the legendary Outlook. Jason backed the pickup up to about thirty feet from the ledge and parked it. The sun was setting on the horizon behind them as they stared forward at the path that had brought them there.

"We're here, but I don't want to get out," Jason said after the long silence. "I know, it's weird not having him here. Almost like it's somehow wrong."

Jason completely agreed, not hearing Ryan tap on the bed of the pickup as he moved to the tailgate or the excited hoots as he pulled down the tailgate seemed too different. Without them, the place was barren, empty.

"He would want us to try. He even said in the letter." Jason picked up the letter from the seat beside him. As he raised it in the air, something fell out.

Jason reached onto the floor where it fell and picked it up. It was an old polaroid style photo. The edges were wrinkled and torn in places, the image on the front was faded, but Jason recognized it. It was the last photo that Jason had taken with Ryan before he deployed. They were in the back

of the pickup eating hot dogs and burgers at Ryan's send off barbecue in the back yard. Jason had given it to him moments before Ryan left for deployment. Their last memory together. Even the six word note that Jason had wrote on the back was fading as he turned it over.

Sam reached over and gently slipped it out of Jason's hand to look. A smile accompanied his recognition.

"This is the photo he kept with him at all times. I always saw him staring at it before he went to sleep every night. The boys always joked that he was staring at his girl, but I knew it was of you. How did it get in there?"

"I don't know, but Ryan must have wanted to make sure that I got it back." There was a pause in the pickup again as Jason thought. "Do you think that he knew?"

"Knew what?"

"That he was going to die."

Sam leaned back against the passenger door and stared at the photo. He couldn't think of any solid reason why Ryan would place that photo in the envelope. Ryan took the photo everywhere, even when they were on missions. Ryan wanted to get it back to Jason, but he also wouldn't give up what he considered his good luck charm without a good reason.

"I don't know. Anything I can think of doesn't feel right. Maybe he did, do you really believe that he did?"

"Maybe. I don't think we'll ever know though," Jason said taking back the photo. He held up to the light that was piercing through the back window. The image faded with the light of the sun being pulled behind the mountains.

They sat in silence for a little while longer. Then Sam took the initiative and opened the passenger door. The cool evening air rushed in and brushed against Jason's skin, waking him from his thoughts. He turned to Sam, who was turning to step out of the pickup.

"Hey Sam?"

"Yeah little man?" Sam looked over his shoulder at Jason.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Sam pulled himself back into the passenger seat.

"Not giving you a chance to prove me wrong. Ryan thought that you had changed, and I didn't give you the chance to prove it. So I'm sorry."

"No worries. That was a long time ago, I was a different person back then," Sam said. It was the first time that Sam had spoken to him that day without having an underlying tremble of fear or despair. He sounded comfortable, a little like the old Sam, but mature.

Jason smiled as Sam leaned back and tapped him on the shoulder. They fist bumped and Sam slid out of the pickup and grabbed the door to close it. He lingered there while Jason worked up the courage to open his door and get out.

He took a deep breath as he looked at the photo again. He reached up and pulled down the visor above his head. He tucked the photo into the

flap of the visor just enough that it still peeked out from behind the flap. He brushed his hand across it and smiled. It was almost the same kind of smile that Ryan had in the photo, almost a mirror image.

“You will always be my hero,” Jason said pulling the handle to the door and opening it.

“Mine too little man, mine too.”