

MICHAEL BELL | *LIFE LETTER*

Mike (internal dialogue):

What you gonna do... you've been thinking about this for months... Yea but I can still turn this around though. No you can't. You gon die here... at least this way it's on your terms and you'll avoid years of suffering. Man just write the letter and get it over with. Just do it.

Mike (externally):

Yeah, you right; it's time.

Dear Mom,

I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused, and that my life has come to this, and would end this way. But this is what's best for everyone. Please tell Monk, my nephews, brothers and aunties I love them. Tell Nat, Z baby and G I love them too. Please tell those I've harmed I'm sorry. And.....

Other Person:

Bell you gotta mail

Mike:

At 2am? Man put it on the door.

Other Person:

I was told to make sure you got this.

Mike:

By who?

Other Person:

By you.

Mike:

What? What is this?

Dear Mike,

If you're reading this letter, it means I've reached you in the nick of time. Because in exactly six minutes and 38 seconds, you're going to climb onto your bunk, thread one end of the sheet through a hole on the top of your door, wrap the other end around your neck, and then you're going to die. So the letter you have in your hands right now is as important as life and death. You've come to the point in every long term prison sentence that I like to refer to as "the moment". The moment is the very second "it" hits you. "It" is a four way collision between you, your future, your past, and the way you've lived your life. When that happens, the decisions you make at that point will determine the rest of your life. That's only if you survive the initial render. "It" is a profound revelation. It's a soul crushing knowledge, a sudden understanding, and a complete comprehension of who you are, what you are, and what others see when they look at you. And that includes... your very own mother. For the first time in life, you have a high definition image of... you. You understand the havoc, chaos and utter destruction you vested upon your own family, friends, community and those you've harmed. You realize your violation of the struggles and battles fought by those who have sacrificed sometimes their very own lives for the freedoms you enjoy today. You understand your part in the perpetuation of the negative narratives and stereotypes of males who look like you do. You feel the full weight of the shame, sorrow, (long pause) and crippling remorse, suddenly come crashing down upon your shoulders, and you will be forced (long pause) to your knees. I've been exactly where you are, alone, in a cell, going through hell. Just you and a life worth of pain in a battle of one trying to kill the other. But what you don't know (long pause) is that God is there also. She's in the room watching, listening and waiting for us to simply add. But at this point, all we can think about is being an embarrassment and burden to our loved ones. And the shame and stain we left upon our families name and sadly, and counting, we could end all this pain and suffering today. And everyone will be better off for. We've cursed God because he wouldn't simply let us die. And we fought the devil as he's tried to convince us to do it ourselves. Then finally, at rock bottom, lying flat on our faces, we asked (long pause) "God (long pause) what do you want us to do?" Without hesitation he responded, "Surrender and I'll take care of the rest." We were terrified, because he spoke in our dead father's voice. Then he spoke again. And this time we heard our granny,

“Boy, get your ass up, clean this room, be a man and think about your mothers and brothers. Not to mention, you have a debt to pay, and you're going to pay it.” This was no dream. We heard her. We felt it. And for the first time in decades, we've bent our knees, and we pray.

This letter was about mental health, hope, healing, and survival. It's about accepting responsibility. And living life differently. It's dedicated to anyone who's at the end of their rope on the brink of non-existence, searching for a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Hold on. Tough times don't last forever. Keep your head up, stay strong, and do the work. Our best days are ahead of us.

Sincerely,

You from 2022.

Oh, and by the way, that prayer, it gets answered.

Mike:

People living with mental illness are more likely to encounter the criminal justice system and to be arrested. This leads to the overrepresentation of people with mental illness in America's jails and prisons. Once in prison, non white individuals with mental health conditions are more likely to be held in solitary confinement, be injured and stay longer. Young people are also affected, with 70% of youth in the juvenile justice system having a diagnosable mental condition. Of the estimated 50,000 veterans held in local jails, 55% report experiencing mental illness. And since 2012, more US soldiers have died by suicide than by combat. COs are also negatively affected when they witnessed Suicide. Suicide is the leading cause of death among the incarcerated, accounting for 1/3 of the total deaths inside of America's jails. This doesn't have to be.

Our children, soldiers, citizens who are incarcerated, deserve proper care and treatment. They, we, deserve help not handcuffs. In the words of James Baldwin. "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it's faced". Let's face this together.

Other Person:

MBMB you're good over there?

Mike:

I think I am.

Other Person:

Bro, who you talking to?

Mike:

(Chuckles) I'm talking to myself.

Michael Bell is a student mentor, writer, and tireless advocate for offering higher education opportunities to men and women housed in America's prisons. He's a recent graduate of NEIU and his studies focused on Justice Centered Youth Development and Violence Prevention. He's guided by a deep sense of justice and hopes to use his scholarship and firsthand experience on both sides of crime and violence to serve and create safer communities.

Michael has also been a house DJ since he was 12 years old.