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Report by Joseph Walsh

Investigating Why a Brother Died



It took eight weeks after my brother Mike's death last October to find out fentanyl was the likely cause. But I had an insatiable longing to do my own sleuthing before the official word came down from the medical examiner—not just to distract me from grief, but to relieve the anxiety my family and I felt.

It was a press secretary's anxiety, after a major incident, a reaction to the heat of reporters bearing down. My parents and other brothers and I all knew Mike had had health issues and a history of drinking a lot. Our loved ones kept a respectful distance, but I wanted answers: Could we have prevented it? Had we done and known enough? Had we failed as a family? Any information before the police report appeared would have felt like a balm.

In Mike's bachelor pad in Burlington, Vermont, lay a thousand-and-one clues, but we had only a day to decide what to keep and what to discard. As we began cleaning, one of my brothers found a small envelope with white powder. Heroin

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or coke? We couldn't be sure. Out with the trash.

On Mike's bed sat a steel-blue lockbox—and this I recognized. It was the size of a shoebox, seemingly innocuous. Mike had bought it long ago from Sears.

As a sixth grader, I'd snooped through his bedroom each day after school before he got home from work, and I remember discovering the blue lockbox under his dresser in the spring of 1986. Thanks to that box, I had a front-row seat during Mike's junior and senior years of high school for the development of a rebel. Cigarettes, love letters, and other detritus of teen angst found their way inside the box.

If Mike ever knew that I knew, he didn't let on. And I wasn't taking anything from the box anyway. Just studying him, fronting only the essential facts of adolescence to see what they had to teach—my version of Thoreau's trip into the woods.

But the day after Mike's death, something else struck me about the box: the dent around the combo-lock was inches wide. Someone had jimmed it open, crudely so. Inside was nothing remarkable: utility bills, a few birthday cards, some old IDs.

The sixth-grade sleuth in me jumped to conclusions. Did the police pry into the box during their search? Was Mike robbed? Did he forget the combination and do it himself? Was the dent a decade old? No answers, no balm.

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Back at home the following week, I went digital. The police had taken Mike's laptop and phone, so I had to find what I could without them. Amid piles of paper scraps that we loaded into our trunk and took home, I sought out passwords and finally found one—on a bank statement tucked into a checkbook.

It worked. Mike's entire digital landscape suddenly lay before me. I had a second box to investigate now, although this one was virtual: his inbox.

My first search was on the word *drugs*. The one result was a note from Mike to himself, written a year prior to his death:

It's just too much. Every day. Kidney stone pain is terrifying. Whenever I tried to get help, the doctor would prescribe me Advil or something.

I have a stone in my right one that is "too big to pass," they say. "As big as a dime."

When it hurts, some things make it worse: carbonated beverages, coffee, and walking are the three worst. Some things relieve the pain a bit: booze, fresh lemonade, and lying down are the most effective. And drugs.

After several failed efforts to get decent drugs legally, I finally resorted to the good ol' street. Self-medication got worse and worse, and here I am. A heroin addict.

Reading those last five words in print. Wow.

That, my friends, has ruined my life.

I have been trying to get help, but the waiting list is so long. When my name comes, I'm not sure I will be able to jump through all of the hoops that have been set up. More attention and funding is needed here.

I showed the note to my wife, who was sitting beside me late that Sunday night.

"There it is," I said.

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I felt fresh grief but also profound relief. I returned to my basement, where I had stowed what we'd taken home with us. Maybe I'd missed something in the scraps. Again, I sorted it out, one piece at a time, until I found what I needed to see.

It was a letter from city's medical center. Subject: *Medication Assisted Treatment Waiting List*. On it were instructions for applying to the methadone clinic a mile from Mike's apartment and for staying on the waitlist for one of a few spots afforded by the city's few clinics.

The letter was dated September 2015, a month before that email to himself and a year before his death. To maintain a place on the list, the letter said, one had to call an automated voice hotline monthly to declare yourself willing, still, to participate in the program if selected. Miss the monthly call, and you lost your place in line.

Down the right margin of the same page, Mike had handwritten a dozen dates, each a month apart, etched as onto the wall of a prison with a penknife. Apparently, the last call he made was just two weeks before his death.

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The third box is plain cardboard and easy to open.

It's about half the size of the lockbox, with an ID label on top in a respectable font face. Inside is a plastic bag, vacuum-sealed by the crematory. You can open the self-enclosing flaps on the hinged lid and look inside. But I haven't, and I won't. I've lost the taste for sleuthing.

And I know what's inside this third box: a crushed kidney stone, according to the autopsy report, a "large staghorn calculus, 3 x 4 x 1 cm"—bigger than a nine-millimeter bullet.

Mike's pain and the relief are in the box, too, the fentanyl and the fears, the pleas for research and longing for a balm, the hide-and-peek, the truth. It's a dry heavy box of heartache.

I'm certain we carry nothing out of this life. But I'll cling to that one page, recounting its dates like small beaded prayers in the days remaining.

Publication Information

- The reference to Henry David Thoreau is from *Walden*, originally published in 1854 (Ticknor & Fields): "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.?"

Art Information

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Joseph Walsh is the pen name of a writer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, used because his family fears the stigma of a drug-related death. Also see Joseph Walsh's recent opinion piece, "[I Don't See How Better Opioid Policy Could Have Saved My Brother's Life](#) [6]," on the *CommonHealth* site of WBUR, one of Boston's NPR stations.

Source URL: <https://www.talkingwriting.com/three-boxes>

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