

Clint Eastwood can...

by

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When I was 23, I took my friend Benson home in a coffin. Benson and I worked in the same Navy personnel office. I was a Personnel-man with the duty of taking care of the personnel records of the enlisted men in our squadron. Benson was a Yeoman; he took care of the records of the officers.

About five-foot, eight inches, stocky with massive shoulders and arms from weight lifting, Benson was a burly, bearded, thirty-eight year old black man who had been in the Navy fifteen years. By the time I met him, he should have had a higher enlisted rank, and in fact had in the past, but an officer, a destroyer's commander had pissed him off and Benson had knocked the man out cold. He told me this story and laughed about that moment and about losing his rank.

For some reason, when I met him on board the USS Intrepid in 1972, Benson took me under his wing. He talked to me about life on board an aircraft carrier, what to watch out for, why when we were at sea there was no point in withdrawing all of my pay, how to have fun in a foreign country. During a second cruise in 1974, this one aboard the USS Independence, when we were docked in Naples one time, Benson said let's take a train to Rome, and three of us black boys went and toured Rome following behind Benson who was a man.

After that cruise, mine and Benson's last, for a while we shared a two-bedroom apartment off base in Jacksonville, Florida. We did this until some guys started coming

around looking for Benson to buy drugs. Knowing this put me in jeopardy, I told Benson I was going to move out. He was very gracious.

“Look man,” he said. “I’m transferring in a month anyway, so I’ll move out.”

“Are you sure,” I asked.

“No problem. Keep the place; get one of your pals to move in to cover the rent. Don’t worry, I understand. You’re in the right on this.”

Benson moved out. A week or so later, a knock on the door of my apartment, I opened it and there were two men in suits.

“Good evening sir,” one said. “Do you know a Manual Benson?”

“Yes... he doesn’t live here anymore, but I’ll see him at work tomorrow...”

“Sir... no you won’t.”

“What? Why not?”

“Mr. Benson is dead, sir. He’s been murdered. Our funeral home has been asked to handle his body after someone identifies it.”

My military responsibilities were clear. I called the squadron office, spoke to the duty officer who ordered me to the base. Once there, the duty officer and I drove into the city of Jacksonville, to the morgue.

When we arrived, around six pm, on the wrong level, no one was there to tell the duty officer and me where to go, what to do. We found a janitor who told us he thought that body had just been delivered.

“The vault’s right over there,” he said pointing. “Go in and you can see if that’s the person you know and then go upstairs and tell them.”

I lost my breath when I walked into the vault and, unexpectedly, saw bodies, black and white, male and female, covered and uncovered, naked and clothed, everywhere on tables and slabs. I had made the poor assumption that there would only be Benson's body in the vault. I spun around and walked out, trying to catch my breath. In the end, standing over his body, looking at the familiar green and gold dashiki he wore, at his thick hairy forearms, at his dark, round, mustached but otherwise now clean shaved face, I knew Benson was dead. For the first time I had encountered death up close.

"Mystic River" and "Million Dollar Baby" are movies directed by Clint Eastwood. Both movies take us into social worlds where loss has come to the people who live there. In these two movies Mr. Eastwood seems to be working out of the fundamental truth of our social nature. Being that we are, by design, social, no matter who we are, loss will come to us; loss will find us.

In my life, Benson's was the first loss to come to me. I knew this man. I knew he drank and partied too much. I had heard him come in on a Saturday night dragging some woman with him. I pulled him out of the apartment complex swimming pool one night after he had jumped in off the diving board with all his clothes on, to show off for a woman and with all the alcohol in him was having trouble climbing out. I knew that when he wanted to know the time, he would bellow out "What time it is, anyhow?" I knew that after teaching you how, and watching you do a job well, that from him it was a compliment when he walked away saying, "...you can kiss my ass." I knew he was a man not to be played with and that if he trusted you he would go down in battle for you. I had listened to his hardened wisdom.

But a drug deal had gone bad. Benson had the drugs, the buyers had the money. Unfortunately his buyers decided they wanted the drugs and the money. Apparently one buyer sat next to Benson in his car, and another sat in the back seat. Once Benson showed the drugs, the buyer in the back seat stabbed Benson, once in the neck. Strong as a bull Benson opened the driver's side door, leaned to get out and was stabbed in the back. Still, apparently, he got out of the car and struggled to get to a more open space. He was found about fifteen feet from the car; the driver's side door open.

I volunteered to take his body home for the Navy. This is a sacred duty. The escort is responsible to oversee every movement of the coffin. When it was loaded into the cargo bay of the commercial airliner, I stood below and watched, at salute. When we arrived in Palm Springs, I supervised the movement of the coffin from the cargo area to the hearse. I draped the US flag over the coffin for the ride to the funeral home. There I stayed until the funeral director closed up, and I was back there when the doors of the funeral home were opened again the next morning. That day, when all was set, I greeted the family for their first viewing. Benson's mother and four sisters stood there listening to me say that the Navy sent its sympathies.

"Did you know him," his mother asked.

"Yes mam. Benson and I served on board the same ship. We roomed together for a while. We were friends. He was a good guy."

Then I escorted his sisters and his mother to the open coffin and listened to them wail. I held his mother when the emotion hit her and she reached out for help.

Such moments are captured in the hypnotic, ether of the music Mr. Eastwood wrote for Mystic River and Million Dollar Baby. These are moments in which we lose our breath,

and when all movements become slow. Barely able to breath, we slog through a bog of doing what has to be done.

Benson's sisters' called out cries and rained tears, his mother's wailing, created a music that made my limbs heavy, and caused a tension in my stomach. That experience of hearing music was also with me when one of my duties was to clean Benson's car before it was shipped to his family. I washed Benson's blood from the dashboard, from the front seat, the driver's side door. I washed and sprayed to try to remove not just his blood, but to remove the smell of his death.

There was a hymn in the air somewhere.

My thoughts have gone back to all this because of Clint Eastwood's artistry. Mr. Eastwood has taken his work to the highest level by helping us explore the anguish of being social. What would we, will we, do, when loss comes calling?

My parents died in the natural. Daddy was eighty. At eighty-one, Momma had lived four years beyond Daddy's leaving. In the natural, given their long lives, but losses that still slowed everything, putting me, my two brothers and our sister in that thick ether.

And then eight months after our mother, the ether starting to lighten, our brother died. Not in the natural; to lose a brother barely in his fifties. And yet, our brother's death did fit in with that of our parents. Maybe all death is natural, for us social creatures. Even when by our reckoning it seems untimely. Sometimes, leaving is all a person can do.

A junior to Daddy, August James was his name, but we had always called him Brother. Elinor and August Jr., were the first children in the family. When I was born, Momma and Daddy wanted me to know who these other two people were, so they always told me "this is your big sister and this is your big brother." They did this with Phillip too. When

Phillip and I started to talk to each other that's what we called them; Sister and Brother. And for a long time our parents followed suit. Until the day they died, Daddy and Momma still slipped and called Elinor, Sister, every now and then. But for some reason with Brother it stuck.

I remember being in first grade at Holy Ghost Catholic School. Sometime early in that year, the teacher Mother Norba was calling up each of us to ask us some questions. When my time came and she called me up, I went and Mother Norba asked me, "Do you have any relatives who go to school here?"

"Yes sister."

"Who is that?"

"Brother."

"What is your brother's name," she asked.

"Brother," I answered.

"No I know he's your brother. I need his name. What is it?"

With firm conviction I said, "Brother."

Her eyes on me with frustration, Mother Norba now spoke at a deliberately slow pace.

"No, no... my child; what is... your brother's... name."

"Brother," I said firmly.

With arm in the air, and her hand pointing to my desk, eyes glaring and voice almost growling, Mother Norba said, "Go sit down boy."

Elinor took the responsibility of giving Brother's eulogy. Over his last three or four years, she and Brother had become unshakable friends. It was Elinor Brother sought out

for conversation, silly and serious. It was Brother Elinor could always count on to be there, to help with something, like keeping Bailey their dog.

I would call and say into the phone, “Hey Brother, what are you up too.”

“I’m watching your sister’s damn dog while she’s out of town.”

“Why do you have it man?”

“You know them niggers always leave that little shit with me.”

He complained about it; laughed about it; loved that little dog.

Brother had always struggled. Alcoholism had haunted him. For a long time, until Elinor got him into rehab, Brother’s life had been out of control. After rehab, before Daddy died, Brother moved in with our parents. In that circumstance, he found himself, his spirit, his purpose in the janitorial work he did, and in watching over our aging parents.

Home for a visit three years after Daddy’s death, I got to see what Momma and Brother had become. At that point using a wheel chair, Momma pushed herself around the house. When she cooked, she would get to the spot she wanted to stay for a while, use her three-footed orthopedic cane to stand-up her five-foot nine inch, 200 pound body, do what she needed to do, and then sit back down and move on.

“How you doing Wayne,” Momma said when I walked in to the house. “You hungry... there’s some crawfish in there,” she said. As if the smell of the house had not already told me that.

Six-foot, five inches, thin, milk chocolate, he came through the door from work.

“Hey boy,” Brother said to me.

“Hey man,” I said in return.

“Mom” he called out. “What have you been doing?” His voice was loud and high pitched.

“I’ve been cooking in my kitchen,” she replied.

“Old lady,” Brother said, “I done told you, don’t be in that kitchen when I’m not here.”

“I’ll do what I feel like I can do. This is still my house.”

“Humph,” Brother mumbled looking in my direction. “You hear her don’t you. She hard headed yeah.”

Brother sat in Daddy’s recliner. Mom had wheeled herself in front of her recliner, right next to Daddy’s, so now she and Brother were about side by side, looking at the television. Sitting across from them on the couch, eating crawfish etouffee, watching and listening to them, I saw what they were now. Mom and Brother had become an old couple, fussing with each other about this and that; counting on each other for company, for a steady, always there, love.

After Momma died, we worried about Brother. Would he, could he, handle another leaving? Would he go back to drinking? But something was different.

“In the last four months, it was funny,” Elinor said at Brother’s sudden death. “Your brother was the happiest I had ever seen him. Oh y’all,” she said to Phillip and I, “I just don’t know the words to tell you what I saw in him.”

Brother had invited Elinor to go with him to the casino in Kinder, La. Feeling tired, Elinor had declined. In good spirit, Elinor said, Brother had gone anyway. On that Friday night, when he had done enough gambling, he had gone out to his car, gotten in, put the key in the ignition and died.

Saturday he was scheduled to work as a voting precinct supervisor. When he didn't show, so unlike him they said, one of the precinct workers called Elinor. She and her husband JC drove to the Casino and found Brother, looking like he was just sitting in his car.

A heart attack; it seemed a funny thing to call it in Brother's case. Physically that was surely what had taken him. But we all knew he was without what he needed. He had no one to care for, to keep his heart intact. Daddy's death was tough enough. Losing Mom was too much. Brother's heart was broken and it just stopped so that Brother could leave.

At that point in our lives, Phillip lived in Jacksonville, Fl and I in Raleigh, NC. We both stayed in Opelousas for about a week. We worked to clean up the house in which we had grown up. We worked especially on Brother's room so Elinor would not be left with that responsibility. In the evenings, Phillip and I went to sit with Elinor, her husband JC, and their children Carlos and Tresha, to talk and be the family we could be to each other. We reminisced about the three who had now gone before us.

Reminisces, holdings on, is what I felt in Mr. Eastwood's music. Hymn like, the music is the mix of feelings we social creatures experience. It, the music, gives off the feel of a fleeting touch and a remembered presence now an absence. There is in the melody and chords a sense of a longing that reaches for life while fighting and accepting loss, leaving and death. The music is the very mix that is our social nature, the bittersweet of being connected and then disconnected. It was this music, so much the texture of Mr. Eastwood's storytelling, which took me back to losing my friend Benson.

Loss does not fade. It is heartrending music. A melody once known, it only takes hearing a few notes, a chord, to bring it back into us. And Mr. Eastwood's music sounded

a chord through the other losses of my social being; Daddy, Momma and my big brother, Brother. That music takes my breath, makes my limbs heavy, and places in my stomach a tension of clawing hunger.

I do wonder how Mr. Eastwood has brought this transcendent experience to these movies. Yet however he has done it I thank him in the way my friend Benson would have. When someone had done a job well, he, and we other sailors, knew saying “good job” was not enough. You had to say that this thing you have done, you have done so outrageously beyond expectation that no one else could. You had to admit to a joyous envy. You had to say thank you in a way that would turn meaning on its head. And so, for Mr. Eastwood’s capture of the profound melody of being social, and for artfully taking us into that experience, like Benson would, I say to you and him, “Clint Eastwood can kiss my ass.”