

BROTHERLY LOVE



A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY BY SOPHIA RENEE



BROTHERLY LOVE

Words and Photographs by Sophia Renee
Additional Words by Eric and Matthew Eaton

“Yet even in the loneliness of the canyon I knew there were those like me who had brothers they did not understand but wanted to help. We are probably those referred to as “our brother’s keepers,” possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting instincts. It will not let go.”

-Norman Maclean. A River Runs Through It



The Eaton Brothers, Eric (left) and Matthew (right) photographed Summer 2014 on Fort Desoto Island, Florida. *Brotherly Love.*
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FOREWORD

I have long been fascinated by siblings and the various dynamics that exist between them. The peaks and valleys of emotions that occur between children bound by blood and personal history can be endless. As we age, most of us grow out of our sibling rivalries and the petty jealousies of childhood, but some of us never do. Maturity, growing into who we are, has a funny way of pushing people away, especially the ones who know us best and are supposed to love us the most. Yet, there are those who never give up and will fight to the end to make sure these relationships not only work but thrive. For these individuals, a life without his or her brother or sister would be like losing a limb. It's an option they cannot imagine.

The bond that exists between the Eaton brothers, Eric and Matthew, is as solid and strong as any I can think of. They are bound by all of the emotional ties and scars of family including blood, love, faith, secrets, and a personal history peppered with it's fair share of both good and bad times. My profound friendship with Eric has made me privy to many aspects of his personal history. I have always known that Matthew was an important part of Eric's life and recovery. The love he feels for his brother is immense. You can see it in the way he looks at him—and *in the way he looks to him*. In turn, Matthew has grown to understand and accept his younger brother's complex nature and troubled history. He is his fiercest protector and his biggest fan too. Spend just a few moments with them and it's pretty evident that no one is more proud of how far Eric has come than Matthew. A large tattoo covering Matthew's right pec is an ode to the powerful bond they share. It reads, "Blood Runs Thicker Than Water."

When I decided to photograph Eric and Matthew together it was my intent to do something uniquely special. I knew the imagery would tell it's own story. However, in order to shine a light on the very real love that exists between these two men, I knew I needed to go deeper. I wanted the reader to have an informed sense of who these brothers are and what they have been through together. Understanding that no one could explain their feelings as well as they could, I asked each of them to write something honest and open about the other. I thought it would make for a powerful and appropriate compliment to our photographs. I have chosen not to edit their words or prose

Sophia Renee



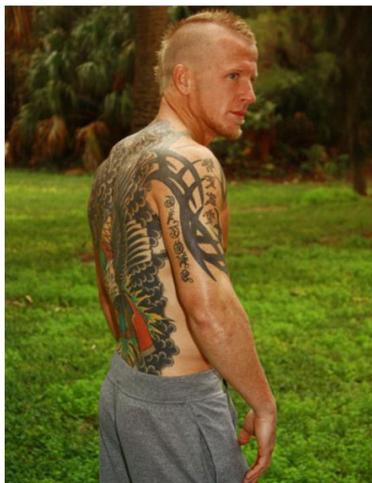
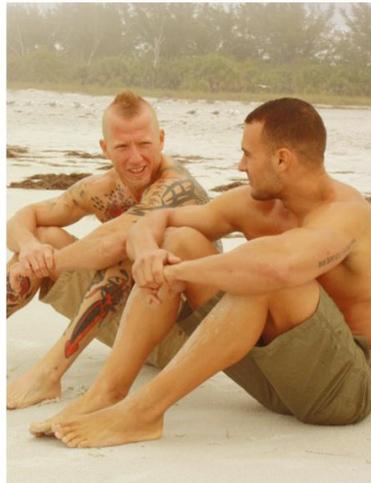
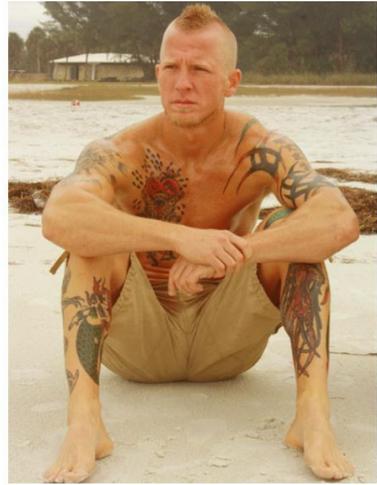


Matthew Eaton

“Eric is an amazing individual. He has a great heart and a spirit filled with strength and determination. He is living proof that you CAN hit rock bottom and build yourself back up again. Our life together hasn’t always been easy. At times, it has been downright painful. It isn’t always easy for me to talk about Eric’s addiction. It had a major impact on me and it took me a long time to personally recover from the pain it caused. His addiction affected nearly every facet of my life and eventually led me into using drugs as well. Using drugs and trying to protect my brother ruined my relationship with a woman I loved and a little boy I was raising as my son. It was a very dark time for my family. But I love my brother. I couldn’t turn my back on him. When Eric told me he was gay, I lost it. My first reaction was that he was using this inner turmoil, this struggle with his sexuality, as an excuse to get high. You wouldn’t believe some of the things people come up with to justify their behavior when they’re using drugs. I didn’t realize it then, but he was using because he was in pain and in denial. He’s gay. I get it now. At the time, he just didn’t know how to process or come to terms with that. The fact that he nearly killed himself trying to hide that from us broke my heart. I vowed then and there to support him, to help him get clean, and to accept him for who he is. Now, I will occasionally go to gay clubs with my brother. I do it because I love him. I want him to know that I support him with all of my heart and with everything I have. My hope for Eric is that he lives a happy life. I want him to live his dream. I want him to love—with all of his heart—whomever he chooses. In ways he probably can’t imagine, he has made me a new and better man. He is my brother. He is my best friend. He is everything in the world to me.”

Eric Eaton

“Matt and I have always been close. We are only separated by 15 months and we have lived together our entire lives. We share many of the same personality traits and characteristics, but we are also very different. Over the years, I have looked to Matt for encouragement, love, acceptance, support, strength, and forgiveness. I hurt him tremendously with my addiction, but he stood by my side. Today, he reminds me that every day is beautiful and that sticking a needle in my arm is no longer an option. I could say so much about my brother. He is a strong, selfless man. He is brutally honest. He is a fighter. If Matt believes in someone or something, he’ll fight for it. He fought for me, for us. In all honesty, I would have to say he has been protecting and guiding me for as long as I can remember. The roots of my addiction stemmed from my inability to admit to myself and to my family that I was/am gay. I wanted to hide and drugs made it easy to do that. My choice to use impacted everyone around me and it nearly cost me my life. I was not a casual user. I used needles and I used daily. I lied. I hurt people close to me. I ended up in the hospital for a long time with a serious infection. And Matthew came to see me every single day. When I left the hospital, I began the long road to recovery. With Matt’s help, I stayed clean and I began living—really living—for the first time in a long time. He has helped me in ways I can’t even begin to explain. Because of him, I am healthy. I am strong. I love myself again. I am alive today because I have Matthew and because I have the love and support of our family behind me. If there is one thing I learned after hitting rock bottom it’s that you are only as strong as the people around you. I was in a very bad place, but my brother and my incredible family never gave up on me. I can now say with 100% certainty, Matthew accepts me for who I am. Truthfully, I think he always would have. I feel like I could have given him the benefit of the doubt, but my fears prevented me from doing that. I believe everything happens for a reason. Our bad times certainly made us stronger. I wouldn’t change anything because I gained perspective and that is the lesson I choose to take with me. I came to appreciate my brother’s unconditional love in a way I never had before. My hope for my brother’s life is that he always has peace and joy. I hope he finds a strong, beautiful woman to love, someone who deserves him. I hope he has children so I can be an uncle and also because I want to watch him be the amazing Dad I know he can and will be. I hope he finds a moment in every day to laugh. I hope in the deepest part of him, he truly forgives me for the pain and damage I caused him and our family. I want my brother to be secure in the knowledge that I love him and that I will always be here for him—for the rest of our lives. I can’t make up for the wrong I did, but I can move forward from here and try to be the best person I can be; a man my big brother can be proud of.”



Brotherly Love. Featuring Eric and Matthew Eaton.

This is an original photographic essay by

SOPHIA RENEE

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