

... The stars are twinkling. At least that is something. The light forcing its way through the windows in the back of the house casts a shadow onto the yard, my silhouette breaking the glow on the faded wood fence protecting us from all the pain and trouble outside its boundaries. There's a red shed in the north corner that hasn't been painted in ten years because there was never any money and a clothesline that hangs solidly on metal pipe. They carry memories—not so much memories, but markers of the life we hope to have but often don't attain.

At least I think it's my life.

We've lived here for most of my childhood and in that time, this little town has become home, not because of playing with friends or picnics, but because when you live somewhere for long enough, it's where you're from. It's not a tiny town: Main Street has three stop lights and we get to go down the street to McDonalds now, rather than driving 60 miles for a Big Mac and fries. It smells of manure on days when the wind blows just right. In the Spring, sometimes it's too windy for golf or tennis or baseball practice to be held outdoors. But we have football. It's not Texas-sized football, or California, Florida, or even Ohio for that matter. But we play, and I love it. I actually don't play much because I'm too small, but I love to play. We have basketball, too, and we're pretty good—not exceptional, since we have never made it to state playoffs, but we win more than we lose most years.

We live up on a small hill at the edge of town in a modest, blue, ranch-style house that sits next to other houses that look similar. They're not cookie cutter, like what you see in some of the newer subdivisions down in the valley, but they all match. You can't really see into the neighbors' yards because of the wood fence, but we've peeked over before. Neither of them seems to care much how their yards look. They have patches of Bermuda grass that keep winning the war with the good grass—probably because they rarely fertilize, and the little pinwheel of water from the yellow tractor sprinkler can't beat the Kansas sun.

In the dark, our yard looks a lot better. Sure, a few weeds have replaced the garden, but my mom said she's been too sick to plant it in recent years. And we gave up using our yellow tractor when we upgraded to a rotating sprinkler that we move every hour.

I'm on the porch because I couldn't be inside anymore.

The summer re-run of *Friends* was funny. You know, the one where Monica and Rachel go to prom? But at least out here the stars are twinkling. I've never really noticed them before. People talk about them in songs, and they end movies, but I've never really seen them. Maybe it's because, on the plains, they're so much a part of life that they fade into the background.

Tonight they seem real, and everything else feels like that background—like a pop-up card for your birthday that you open to find some building or animal staring you in the face. For me, nothing has popped up for a long time.

I turn to walk back to the door and stop. I don't want to leave the deck. I don't want to leave the stars. Inside is my life.

The metal screen door is faded, but it swings open easily enough as I walk past the water-stained wood door. It seems nothing stops getting old. We never clean the floor in front of the door, so the linoleum is a pale shade of yellow. I walk downstairs and try to find something on TV. I flip channels because it's the only way to find something new in this world. I'd rather not.

I'd rather not watch the stars vanish through the grease-stained curtain, the walls trapping me inside and reducing my life to nothing, like a box collapsing in on itself. The ceiling is barely six inches above my head, and a table in front of me sits three inches from the wall because that's where it goes. The room isn't big enough for it, but mom wants a table large enough for everyone to sit because that's what families do.

But I keep walking.

A couple steps, and I'm in the kitchen. It's the place where hope looks like pizza or cake. The refrigerator is the slot machine that pays out every time—until now. Again, there's nothing but the hamburger and instant potatoes that we've had for each meal the past three days. I'm not hungry, luckily, because there's nothing else in the refrigerator.

I need something, anything, that gives a feeling of life—water, maybe.

The window above the sink offers the stars, but the bare walls where the paper was stripped and never replaced overwhelm the faint glow. I could stand here longer, letting the water flow over the glass. The gentle pinging of each drop as it hits the sink bottom is somehow soothing. I could shut it off because I care about the water was overflowing. I don't, but I'm told that I should. Anyway, life must depend on saving tap water and a dining room table bigger than the room. My parents keep telling me there is a reason for everything, so they must be linked.

I put down the glass and dry my hand on my shorts. I could use the towel behind me but I'd have to fold it and put it back because we need to keep the kitchen looking "nice."

A couple sips and I pour the rest out. That metallic taste reminds me why I don't trust anything that starts out good. People say tap water is just as good as bottled. It isn't.

I reach down to put the glass in the dishwasher and realize that there isn't one. Being lost in thought is great until I almost drop the glass. We had a dishwasher—a beauty

from the 70's with the brown panel and cream metal below it. My dad took it out to fix it, but after he put it in the shed, it never left. Now, we keep the cat food and water under the sink on the floor, on more yellow linoleum.

I wash the glass and tip it upside down by the sink.

I can't just stay in the kitchen, but the door downstairs is over by the deck. Like every movie with a desert, the mirage begs me to go a little farther coaxing, "it will be okay." The back door to the garage is next to me, and I've sat on the stacked crates in the dark before. Instead, I drag my feet the six steps that lead to that basement door. The walls are paneled, but not evenly. The light slicing through from the kitchen apparently comes here to die. I walk down slowly, avoiding the lip at the bottom where my brother hit his head last year. It's still cracked.

My brother's bed sits directly in front of me, half of a bunk bed missing its twin. The NFL helmet bedspread he got ten years ago grazes the floor, threadbare enough to be almost transparent. He didn't take it to college but he's back now because he didn't have the money to stay. As I get closer, he lifts his head, which is something new. Normally he never loses focus on his Gameboy.

"Hey, what's up?"

He turns but doesn't show much emotion. He wanted a PSP, but that costs money.

"What are you doing tonight?"

He shrugs, "staying here."

Before college, he didn't go out much with friends. He could go to movies, but my parents would call the theater to confirm when the show ended and then time him. He'd be grounded if he didn't make it within five minutes. It wasn't surprising that his friends stopped asking. He was quiet, and he was the middle kid. My parents didn't need him to prove they could discipline, and he wasn't the last hope they still could. He just sort of got missed.

My bed sat opposite his on the other wall, the missing twin. We each had a small rectangular window above our bed that let in the sun, but in the afternoon, when the sun moved away, light died here too. Most of the basement was an open space. The carpet had been there for years, a gray shag that could have been pulled from an aging Persian cat. We had started a bathroom renovation, but it was now just a concrete floor, a toilet, a sink, and a mirror against a bare sheetrock wall.

I could play pool, I guess.

Someone had given the table to us when they moved out of town, but the worn felt had been water stained and never replaced, leaving the balls to skid like kids playing on wet grass. Several bumpers were loose, held by nails, and the balls didn't match. I pulled them out and began to rack. What was the point?

Even if I sunk a ball or cleared the table, it wasn't like this meant I was good. The table was so damaged there was no way to know whether I was playing well.

"Will it bother you if I turn on the TV?"

"No, I'll put in headphones."

I sat down on the olive couch in front of the pool table and grabbed the remote. We got the couch from my grandparents when my grandpa died and grandma came to live with us. It was a fifties-style so old that it wasn't called a couch. It was a divan and had been out of fashion as long as the name. Thirty minutes, and my back hurt. Thankfully, we had cable. DVD players were great, but we had VCR movies that had been taped, complete with commercials and all the good stuff edited out.

I'll turn the TV back on.

Friends was over, and after 9 p.m. on a Saturday night, there's not much to watch, except an endless string of infomercials before the news the next morning. I still don't know who buys a knife that cuts through wood. I feel bad for people whose "good day" is buying this knife. As usual, flipping channels didn't result in anything better.

Fine, I'll read instead.

I keep my books in a plywood chest by the couch that my grandparents gave me as a birthday present. It is big and smells like varnish. Going to their farm used to be an adventure, the broken-down buildings and weeds that stood waist high and the house that scared me at night because the ancient globes in the hall looked like torches along the path to the monster in the front room. Then I grew up and realized they were poor.

Inside, there are college books and stacks of car magazines. I reach for the few college books. They hold what is left of my knowledge of the outside world: Locke, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Publius. Inside the covers, I belong to a group that really understands me. I had sold the other books at the end of each semester because I needed gas money, but the bookstore wouldn't take these. There must have been a good reason, but I just needed the money. I chose political science as my major because it was the only thing I was convinced mattered. My parents would talk about how politicians were so dishonest, businesspeople were using the system, and poor people were making taxes go up. If I could solve these problems, then it would show I was really worth something.

The Federalist Papers was on top. This was not a book really, but newspaper articles written to argue for the Constitution. The paper cover was worn. I read this book anytime I wanted answers about life. I felt smarter if I could tell myself I understood what the authors meant. It meant I was smart enough to get the answers. The book was long, and I never knew if I fully understood it. I don't want to open it again, like the guy who has been sober for six months but is still convinced what's under the lid will be better this time.

I watch myself turn the pages to a random dog-eared section. I like to do this sometimes—read an unknown passage and see what it shows me. I tell myself the information I read is destiny, that life wants me to be reading this page. I can show myself that life happens for a reason. This one talks about how even dishonest people see the benefits of the Constitution. This proves there is truth, even if people lie about it.

Finally, I push the black clouds enveloping everything around me back a little.

Feeling better, I try to read another article, but it's too hard. The magazines are better.

Inside, I own a red Ferrari, and when I park to get gas, kids and girls talk to me. There are stories about new cars and road trips in classic cars to idyllic places. My favorite is about a Ruger tourer, a roadster designed in the 70's that looked like a 20's-style car. It's a story about a car created by a guy who had a company that made guns. But I love how the magazine editor loved the car and the places it took him.

I've read it a hundred times and can't do it again. Even my dreams fail at life.

I put the magazine back and walk across the room to my corner, get undressed and put my clothes back into another hand-me-down drawer from my grandparents. They should go in the dirty clothes pile by my bed, but I need to wear them again. Pulling the sheets up, I reach the wall and turn off the light, each stream of photons shriveling into a single burst before getting crushed by darkness.

“Hey, I'm going to sleep.”

“Okay, I'm going to bed, too.”

It's been weeks since I've slept. I try to sleep, but closing my eyes just makes the world play itself out on my eyelids, stories of “what might have been” and “I wish it would have been.” My twin bed becomes its own cinema, where my hopes of me, whoever that was, move across the white plastered walls, breaking into pieces in the corners of the room,

where the light from the bathroom barely reaches and where it becomes obvious these movies are just dreams. There is no escape.

I don't remember anything about the months since, since before the last time I tried to make sense of me. It's as though life in that house consisted of the same thoughts, in the same order, with the same outcomes, just repeating.

And then one day, the sun began to shine. It was one of those Kansas days where the sky is crisp and blue, and the wispy clouds signal that it's safe to breath and maybe to feel. Our living room faced west, and the wood-framed picture window let in streams of light through the white translucent sheers, catching bits of dust and lint spinning around the room like confetti stuck in a tornado.

I can't walk outside onto the porch because people might see me—see me and wonder why I was home, in my house, at 11 a.m. There was no awning, nothing to protect me from view, as I walked down the four concrete steps, the sun glinting off the faded white siding that hadn't been replaced since we'd moved in.

Yet, it was enough to sit on the couch and imagine myself outside, a breeze blowing and maybe even tossing a football with my brother, when the hint of fall makes the grass crunch a little differently than it did only a week ago. The thought was enough to relax me. We didn't have any pillows on the slip-covered, but never-finished couch, so the blue and white-striped fabric moved out of place each time I sat on it. For once, it didn't seem to matter. I laid my head on the armrest, stretched out with my legs over the far edge, and slept.

Then I heard ringing. It wasn't close, but far away—one of those 18th century bells that swung back and forth from a wood beam. It got closer, until it was right behind my eyes. They opened. I was gazing at the wood paneling across from the couch. The TV screen reflected back my shape, but no one else in the room. The sun still shone through the sheers, but mid-morning had turned to afternoon, and the sun had shifted away from the window.

The bells were still ringing but a quick glance back to the dining room revealed no one. It must be the doorbell. I nodded to break the haze that was resting in front of the door. I unlocked the faded gold clasp, turned the knob and looked directly at the badge on the chest in front of me.

“Hi, how are you?” he asked, the monotone, but kind voice wafting to my head, which was slowly clearing.

“I'm good. Thanks.”

What more could I say? I didn't know why he was there.

"We've received a report that you assaulted your father, and I need you to come down to the station"

"Oh."

It was true, sort of. I had shoved him across the living room and pinned him to a bed in his room—the room behind the TV where his single bed and plywood desk made the room smell of old age and lethargy. I would pin him again. You don't get to talk to women the way he screams at my mom, and you don't get to tell your sons that they'll amount to nothing. He couldn't hold a job. The last one ended months ago amid charges of fraud. There needs to be justice in the world and if someone doesn't stand up, it just keeps going.

I sat back on the couch. The shadows that signaled evening were starting to appear on the wooden rocking chair beside me and my skin began to tingle. Thoughts moved in and out of my head—half a sentence here, a fragment there. This had to make sense. There had to be a reason the officer was here. There was a reason, but I mean a *reason*. Some explanation why this would happen.

"Do I need to bring anything with me? Can I change clothes?" suddenly realizing I wasn't wearing a shirt.

I needed to go downstairs but didn't want the officer to think I was trying to escape.

"Sure, but be quick."

The gray carpeted stairs felt longer, and their roughness on my toes seemed new, as I grabbed the broken handrail on the way down. At the bottom of the stairs, I turned into the bathroom. I needed to brush my teeth. There hadn't been a need till now, although this wasn't the reason I expected. In the movies, this was the scene where the hero caught a glimpse into his soul, but looking in the mirror sent only a reflection of the wood door behind me—bare wood, rough from use but no finish, just another empty space.

By my bed was a red t-shirt from yesterday, and I sat down, the pool table and TV clothed in the encroaching darkness of a basement in late afternoon. My shirt slid down my arms and chest, the sewn bottom grazing each rib in a way I had never noticed. I wanted out of my clothes, but the officer was waiting. There had to be an answer. I didn't want this to happen. I hadn't done anything dishonestly. It wasn't wrong.

The window over my brother's bed sent a stream of light across the floor to the foot of the stairs, as I pulled one foot in front of the other. The approach to the wood and carpet

steps cast dark lines and light areas equidistant from each other. As I walked up the steps, I tried to catch a glimpse of the chest through the gaps, but there was nothing to see.

The police had knocked on our door a month earlier, asking about the incident with my father. Apparently, he had taken Polaroid pictures of carpet burns on his knees, gone down to the police station the next day and asked them to press charges. I realized then—that day was the last I saw him. He left no forwarding address, and these two officers in black polo shirts and cargo pants sitting on the couch were the first time we had heard anything from him.

I sat on the piano bench to the left of the couch, trying to piece together a story that was true. One that explained why I was right—right to have done it. They had to understand I had no choice.

“Yes, it happened.”

“Yes, it occurred as he described.”

“Yes, it happened more than once.”

“No, I haven’t spoken to him since he left.”

There had to be a way to shrink the truth. To blunt its effect. I had shoved him across a room, but it wasn’t that simple. I hadn’t done it to break the law. I hadn’t done it to hurt society. This action was necessary for society. He was hurting us.

The explanation was on the tip of my tongue, each question they asked framing a space for the justification where it belonged, but I couldn’t speak the words. I rummaged through the back of my brain to every social theory I had learned in college. There had to be an idea there, something to show I was right. I didn’t want to go to jail. I think even John Locke said that defense of justice was necessary.

Nothing came out but a cough. It could sound crazy.

“Thanks for your time. We’ll contact you again if we have more questions.”

The back wall was gray, drab, and closed. This was my first time in a cell. I had often imagined my brain as one, peering out through the bars, looking at the lives, and jobs, and friends that weren’t mine. The diorama spun around me as I grasped at the air on the other side. I reached for the images as they flashed against one another, the colors moving in the shapes of buildings and people and smiles. This didn’t seem that different.

Yet the spin was mostly dull and colorless. The gray bars opposed the wall behind me, with walls on either side, not far apart, and the metal bed was bolted on the left. The mattress was thinner than my own but newer. Sheets and a blanket were folded neatly in the corner, under the thin fluorescent light hanging from the ceiling. I gazed down at the toothbrush in the white plastic drinking cup. It was new as well.

How did I get here?

I tried at life—really tried. I wanted a good life, a happy life, with a home and a safe job. I didn't need lots of money, just to be comfortable. And honest people have success. And being honest doesn't hurt others. There were lots of bad people in the world. If more were good, the world would be better. How did I get here?

I laid down on the bed, arms folded behind my head and stared. The ceiling was more gray, matching the square-tiled floor in a way that seemed restful. Each corner seemed strangely clean, a hint to one of those post-modern homes in magazines, all square angles and furniture. And it was quiet. And dinner would be in forty-five minutes and I would get three meals. It had been awhile since my stomach had felt the heaviness of food, when you crossed the line for mashed potatoes a couple helpings ago. A couple days actually.

“Florquist. You've made bail.”

I didn't expect that. How much could it have cost? We couldn't eat. Why so fast?

Now, I wasn't going to get to eat tonight either. Again.

I got up, glanced at the overhead light with its faint but soft glow, and walked out.

The summer sun was fading behind the trees as I walked out the glass doors of the police station. The red and orange streaked across the sky with a few patches of clouds. It wasn't windy but the air hit my face in pellets as I walked to the truck. The outside stung and the collage was back. No bars this time, but spinning around, voices and faces meshing with the courthouse in front of me and Main Street behind me.

“Mr. Florquist, we'll be in touch. We didn't expect this of you so try to get yourself sorted out.”

That was nice of the officer to say, actually.

“I will. Thank you.”

“You okay?” my brother asked from the pickup.

“Ready to go?” his eyes wet, the words dropping on the floorboard as I slid across the bench seat covered with the automotive version of a horse blanket, so popular in older pickups to cover vinyl seats that had long since cracked and spilled their yellow foam.

“Yeah. I guess.” I turned around and watched the red brick of the police station fade into the evening light, the engine laboring noisily as we drove up the hill to the house.

My brother and I had been working odd jobs for the last couple months. A man in town had rental houses and he needed roofs and garages built. We started on a square house on a hill north of town, the only farm for two miles. The trees were sparse, and the wind whipped around the house quickly, with gusts that made my stomach turn as it tipped me away from the angled, blue, metal surface. I could see for miles, down into the small valley, where houses, a grain elevator and a highway were the only break in the eternity of farmland and sky.

I had purchased cloth gloves at the hardware store, thinking these would protect my hands, and they were cheaper, but the combination of wind and ten-foot metal sheets quickly taught me to trade for my brother’s leather gloves whenever I grabbed a new sheet from the box at the end of the roof. My knees bare from the holes in my jeans would get hot or cold, depending on the clouds, but the job wasn’t difficult, and the repetition made the day go quickly and gave time to think.

But time was passing too quickly. Each day on the roof was another day my friends and everyone else got promoted or married or bought a car. And I learned to hammer better. Between nails and five quick hammer strokes, my eyes drifted north, the two-lane road past the house winding through the wheat and corn, cresting with a crisp break into wispy clouds. But I knew what was on the other side. Twenty miles down the double yellow lines, was another town, smaller than my own. I had stopped there once, filling up with gas at the convenience store next to the blinking stoplight. Any of the three roads beyond led to towns. Some I knew. Some I didn’t. But they were all the same.

The sun was finally near its peak, peering over the grey clouds casting a half shadow on the metal we had finished. The afternoon was going to be hot but at least we had food. My brother walked to the edge of the metal, slid his legs over the edge and dangled his feet to catch the metal ladder leaning against the two-story blue siding. I followed, each rung creaking with my weight as I let myself slowly down. The buffalo grass by the ladder was worn but still light green, patches creeping up beneath our jeans as we ate.

The store at the bottom of the hill sold the sausage, egg and cheese croissants we had picked up that morning. For a couple dollars, two filled us until dinner, and the store

didn't deposit checks immediately. The three days that we hadn't eaten early in summer made it worthwhile, even if people thought we were like our father.

But it wasn't right, and I knew it. I knew it from my college Old Testament class, where I helped others study for the test, and I got the A. Or from economics. I don't remember much, but I got an A in that class, too. And our paychecks were coming tomorrow so the checks would clear our bank. Besides, there was something nice about the ball of food in my stomach, convincing me I was safe for four more hours, before thinking about dinner and writing another check for a couple more croissants.

"You full?" I heard the words dribbling out in hesitation, to avoid a response I didn't want to hear.

"Yeah. Your knees okay?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me up before putting his foot on the bottom rung.

The roofing jobs slowed, and we needed more work. More days of walking out of the house followed, the sun peering over the clouds in sharp, piercing bursts signaling promise, only to realize that the glimmer of hope was on repeat. But somehow, I kept stepping out the front door.

The local hospital sat on the same hill as us, down the block to the right. The farmhouse next to it seemed lost in time, with horses and a rusty metal lean-to, covered on three sides, and a roof protecting broken ground and manure. Across from the farm sat a block of weeds next to the hospital. There was a row of brick homes, opposite, where the banker, and the family who owned the oil delivery company lived.

Hospital management wanted the block mowed and we were cheaper than hiring real employees. The summer winds whipped, blowing stickers and pollen into cleanly-edged yards of green, kicking dust as my brother and I parked behind the hospital. We were hidden. Maybe no one would see the truck.

We walked to the red metal shed, on the north side of the block, too close to the farmhouse, where the green John Deere mower sat lifelessly against the wall. Every day, we filled the tank from a red gas can, where the vapors escaping left a tiny illusion against the dim walls. There were stories of kids sniffing gasoline for a fix, a shot of emotion to stall the return of real sensation and the pain that followed it. Sometimes it seemed worth it.

“You got it full?”

“Yeah, just a second.” The mirage vanished beneath the cap as I twisted it on.

He took one step inside and reached for the edger.

“It’s going to be hot,” fell the words, with the flat tone of a prayer, pushed out hoping for a response.

“Yeah.”

“I’m behind you,” I replied, as I led the mower down the ramp, slipping on the stale grass and oil clinging to my shoes.

He started at the corner of the block, imposing order on the rocks, as weeds flung into the street from the edger’s rotating red wire. I climbed onto the yellow plastic seat, sat back and pushed in the starter. The blade’s moved with a grind, before coming fully to life, gravel spraying into cars ten feet away

“Shoot,” wasn’t exactly what I was thinking. But it’s all I could say. People who want to succeed shouldn’t cuss.

I’d forgotten to disengage the blade. Again. I turned my head, looking for anyone who could verify that I shouldn’t even be running a lawn mower. No one. I breathed finally, my heart slowing to pace the engine humming with each push of the gas as I turned to the opposite corner of the lot.

We mowed in shifts, stopping to dump bags when the hay-like weeds began to peer over the bag behind me. Mowing took all day, but being home in mid-afternoon was worse. Neighbors would see. But wait too long, and successful people started to come home. They had gone to college. They knew what they wanted to do, and how to do it. I had gone to college. And I was wearing a t-shirt and baseball cap, sitting on a mower, riding circles, while the hospital I kept passing was full of doctors, managers, and accountants.

Halfway through, and I traded for the edger, standing close enough to the curious drivers passing that I probably looked familiar. In my town, you don’t avoid people who know your face. Everyone knows. And they know your family, especially when it fails.

My brother had ended where I started, at the far corner, by a big green yard. Back up the hill, I would have to walk by the entire row of houses, dirty jeans and shoes within view. I had been in choir with one of the guys who lived here. We had made a calendar for the choir girls once, complete with bare chests, bow ties and vests. He was in college now, studying to become a doctor.

I spent the next hour fighting back rocks at my knees and tears in my eyes, keeping my back turned and head down in a left-right sideways gait inching towards the corner. Up there was the farmhouse, and the horses looked as bad as I did.

I was about there, but my brother had finished early, the pinwheel of cut weeds neatly completed in the center. He was standing beside me, same dirty t-shirt and jeans, hands out.

“I’ll take this. You go put the mower away.”

“Okay.”

I climbed back into the seat, the warm plastic sticking to my back, distracting me from the running engine.

“Don’t forget that the blade is disengaged,” he murmured, a hint of sarcasm wedged inside the words.

I almost smiled.

I looked up too soon to miss the car on the way to the row of houses. They saw me, the hat I always wore not enough to hide my eyes and the yellow glint of the sun in the background, gliding slightly down behind the row of trees, too low to dim the spotlight of reality pointing out my failure for everyone to see.

That happened. And they knew.

At the shed, I emptied the bags, and the lighter mower now pulled easily up the ramp. My brother was coming soon, and we would both walk to the truck. At least it would be dark soon.

Work meant we could eat more often. Not good food—it was still hamburger, the greasy kind with the high fat content, and noodles—but it was food.

We had just gotten paid, and the buy-food reminder in white at the back of the refrigerator could now be muted with bread or meat or milk.

The grocery store spanned the flat patch at the bottom of the hill, a parking lot flanked by a burger joint and a hardware store, across from the gas station that sold croissants. The white and blue metal building had a single row of windows nearest the door directly in front of the two cash registers. From the first register, you could see everyone who walked in.

It was safest to go right before closing. The clerks were busy counting their drawers and rarely watched who walked in and out. At night, especially, the long, fluorescent tubes on the ceiling cast a faint glow on the shelves. The labels on the rows of canned green beans and corn looked more generic and unpleasant than they had four hours earlier.

It wasn't a place you went together. My brothers were younger and might be recognized.

I pulled the pickup off the highway, the bed flexing on the frame, and the tired wheels inching up the jutted incline to the parking lot. The last parking spot was the best; it was away from the door, and no one really paid attention to vehicles out of view.

Head down, and cocked to the left, I pulled the door open slightly and slid in, hoping the light's glare off the aluminum frame wouldn't signal my presence.

Aisle 1 went back to the meat department, the left side covered with firewood and extension cords and red plastic jugs for gasoline. I just needed a couple things but got stopped in my tracks by the image in the round mirror in the corner. It hurt.

I hurried down the rest of the aisle, grabbing the cans and bags and packages that would be our next six meals and made my way to the far back corner of the store. The on-sale meat was here, and I had to pick something cheap that wasn't too brown.

Milk was easier. The rows of freezers were labeled with prices that said I could buy the same milk that people with actual money bought.

The path to checkout line one was clear. Only a single person was in front of me because five minutes before closing meant everyone was home except the truckers passing through. They were strangers to everyone anyway.

“Hey, I didn't know you were back.”

The person at the front of the line knew me.

Tears began to form at the corners of my eyes. Any answer was going to make my reality even less avoidable. I was back.

Worse, this town wasn't going to let go of me.

A month had passed since the police notified me that my dad would not be dropping the charges. There were pictures. Polaroids of skinned knees and a story about threats and anger and a shove across the living room. There was probably more. I had pinned him down in his bedroom, my hurt infused in clenched fingers fashioned into a fist that never made contact.

I wanted it to all go away, yet I couldn't remember what he looked like in that moment. The green bedspread covering the twin bed, and the metal box spring squeaking with every emotion that slammed it up against the cheap paneling were seared in me. His darkly stained, plywood desk with the 20-year old accountant's lamp that never seemed to die, was still stacked high with bills. The envelopes were torn but never discarded.

And if the judge asked me what started the second altercation, I wouldn't have words. I don't know why it ended so suddenly. But the room haunted me because of what I began to see in that 5 by 10 ft room.

The past several months hadn't brought much clarity, but I had stumbled on a question that now wrapped around every fear and every pain.

Was this all my fault?

Locke, Aquinas, and Publius would surely argue "yes." They believed personal responsibility underpinned society and I had sinned against society. Even if I had been honest with the cops or would be honest in court, I was going to pay, because justice demanded it.

And there's something horrible about blame, when you don't want to be the person that the evidence says you are. I tried to prepare for jail—again. People will know it was my fault. I wanted to tell my brother, but making him part of my failure wouldn't be fair. He didn't deserve that.

The drive down to the courthouse with him and my mom was a blur. The building sat next to the police station across from a small grassy yard and a shade tree that had always looked peaceful when I walked by during high school. The pizza place was just down the street, and every day this was our lunchtime routine, heading past from the high school just up the hill.

I walked up the stone steps to the door and froze.

I can't go in. Visions of a future of nothing flashed before my eyes and then, I saw my dad.

Sitting in the courtroom, head down, eyes peering through those brown plastic glasses he'd had for years, my stomach fell. The front of the court was beyond the bench he'd chosen, and my required path can't avoid him.

He looks up for just a moment, then looks back down at the yellow legal notepad in his lap as my brother and mom slide into their seats in the first wooden bench behind the table.

I sit down facing the judge.

The hole being bored in my back made me look back just as my Dad raised his head.

"Do you have an attorney?" asked the judge.

"I can't afford one."

Besides, I'm going to tell the truth.

But I never got the chance. I never described the event or what happened or why I had acted the way I had. I don't remember the prosecutor accusing me of anything.

And then a form of justice I'd never considered an option occurred.

"Well, I've decided to enter you into a diversion program. If you complete anger management classes, this arrest won't go on your record."

"Would you be able to come back to my office and sign the agreement?"

The judge pushed his chair back, cast a look to the lone man sitting on the far side of the courtroom and walked the 3 steps down the platform to the door that led out of the courtroom.

He waited for me to exit my chair. I turned around one last time and walked to the door on the left of the bench.

The judge walked out next to me.

I spent the next week at home. My brother and I worked a couple days, but our jobs weren't coming as quickly.

Maybe avoiding jail had occurred because honesty paid off in the end. I wanted it to be that simple. I had done nothing to deserve the diversion. In my own head, I was wrong. Worse, I had acted in a way that made the world less safe. I took justice into my own hands.

I tried sitting on the back porch, in the dark of the basement, and at the kitchen table long past breakfast, when only the butter was left, slowly softening into a glazed, rounded block. Each question took what remained of my explanation for me.

“Why did I do this?”

“Why didn’t I go to jail?”

“What happens next?”

I had believed in justice and it didn’t even apply to me. It didn’t apply to anyone. I had pushed my dad and in doing so, I had taken the easy way out.

“But I didn’t mean to. Why would I do this to myself?”

“Why was the judge nice to me?”

“Maybe they will tell me at my counseling session.”

The agreement required me to return to that building without my dad and without my brother. I walked into the courthouse alone through the glass and metal double doors that slammed as the wind pulled them back to the building’s frame. The administrative room was in the rear of the building to the left, down a yellow hall with 1960’s tile and hanging fluorescent lights. Sun streamed in through the metal blinds along the hall, casting shadows across me as I walked towards the half-open wooden door.

I knocked slowly, because my knuckles were more tender than usual.

“Come in.”

“Have a seat.”

The chair opposite the counselor was square and wooden and sitting against the back wall, and the green fabric balled up enough that I felt it below my jeans. I clenched the armrest and gazed at the row of framed pictures many years old.

“Do you understand why you are here?”

I didn’t.

“My job is to evaluate you to and help you understand why you got so angry.”

“Okay,” was all I could push through my lips.

He took me through so many questions. I couldn’t remember them if someone asked. And I don’t remember the answers.

But the sun poured down on the back of my head, and my heart never left the front of my chest, pressing tighter each time I had to speak because each question made me feel worse about what I had done.

Thirty minutes later he paused abruptly, lifted his head and looked at me.

“You realize that if anything like this happens again, your diversion will be revoked?”

“Yes.”

I held my breath for fear I was exactly who I thought I was.

“Okay. Well, I’m going to recommend that you skip the rest of our scheduled sessions. You don’t need to be here anymore.”

The earth didn’t move, the air didn’t leave my lungs, and I felt slightly free.

“Okay. Is there anything else I need to do?”

“Here, sign this document. I’ll take it to the judge and get it signed off on.”

I looked around the room, searching for an explanation. This person let me go? Again?

My legs stood up, my hand shook, and I walked out the door, not sure why all feeling had left, but I wasn’t in pain.

I never found out why I received a diversion. I was too scared to know.

The work never came easily. We built metal lean-to sheds for a landlord—three sides, covered in sheet metal, big enough to park a car, attached to trailer homes.

We built a deck onto a pre-fab wooden home that sat out of place among the small ranch-style houses that dotted the hill in town.

I wanted a path to take. I needed one to appear, and it didn’t. There was no event that stood out as significant—nothing, except the newly-opened mattress store.

The downtown hotel, with brown exposed wood and slightly warped glass, sat on the corner of main street and hadn’t been occupied for years. A local entrepreneur thought the lobby would make a nice mattress showroom and asked me to help.

I was selling mattresses at minimum wage.

The elderly lady who lived upstairs owned the hotel and kept a pawn shop in the back. She offered me time in her store on Saturday mornings, but with no advertising and a side entrance, few customers showed up.

Every Saturday at 8 o'clock I unlocked the wooden door, the glass rattling as the frame shook under my weight.

The products were laid out across folding tables and priced as though at a garage sale. Each one was a memory from someone else's life, discarded or lost, sold or stolen, that had somehow met in this room, being watched over by someone with an even shorter story.

I mostly sat in a folding chair in the back corner, so I could greet customers and re-read my books from college.

The past was everywhere and seemed to have found permanent residence in the seventies. The gold tableware that once matched the shag carpet sat next to polyester clothes that weren't going to decay for hundreds of years.

There were glasses with girls whose clothes magically disappeared in the presence of cold liquid and the vinyl soundtrack to *Deliverance*, whose first couple notes created the only smile I'd had in months. The people who created these must have dreamed of happiness. But sitting on the table, they seemed somehow sad.

Yet, they were my only references to something like life. Looking at all this history, I wasn't sure why the seventies had given way to the eighties, a decade I observed from behind a glass. My parents had kept me from movies rated worse than PG and Michael Jackson was an artist I only heard about at school.

The eighties seemed to have emerged from the previous decade with a burst of hope, people dressing with a sense that life mattered and that tomorrow would be better.

Something seemed to have changed, in the clothes, the movies and the cars.

"Hi, how are you?"

I was startled by the customer who had walked in the door sometime before.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"No, just saw your sign outside."

I didn't know what to do next. I was supposed to sell, but what was the use? Nothing in this room seemed to matter now.

So, I sat and began reading again.

The customer left a few minutes later...