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## Finding Light

We would sit at the top of the stairs by the light wooden bannister overlooking the staircase. Beside it sat the large aquarium that housed our bearded dragons, Eduardo and Spike. There we were sitting on the floor, full of youth, faces resonating with innocence; a bright orange glow shined through the arched window from the incandescent sun rays. Our mother would read us a chapter a day, in that exact spot, maybe two if we were well-behaved or if she was in a good mood. The sun shined brighter back then. I specifically remember the 'Narnia' series being read to us, though I cannot recall if it was before or after the movies. Her reading took us to magical place, where satyrs were our companions, where lions spoke with confidence and faith, where time was almost non-existent, and where a family worked through conflict and came together.

Not too long after, my father left for Germany to work, and my mom slowly read to us less and less, until she never read to us again. Until one day, my father called to check on us and I told him that I wasn't happy; I said I was sad and confused. "Why is Mommy with another man?" I asked my dad, "Why were they holding hands the other day when we all went out together?" At the tender age of seven, my dad filed for a divorce almost immediately after our call. My older siblings had a different dad than I did, their father was in prison for 15 years since they were 2 and 3 years old. It was my father that raised them for as long as they could remember. My mother wouldn't let my dad be a part of their lives, but he was able to be a part of mine. My older brother and sister would ask my mom why I had a dad and they didn't, to which she would reply that it was my fault, "Your brother can't keep his big mouth shut," she'd say. From then on, my ritual beatings began.

Squealing tires, metal colliding against metal, and glass shattering across the driveway pavement, as the mixed smell of oil, gas, and smoke-tainted blood filled my senses. I smelled the decay, eating away at the support beams that once held up a happy family. I felt too much regret, pain, depression, and disappointment. I didn't know if I did the right thing or the wrong thing. I only knew that I deserved the pain my siblings delivered. During beatings, I would flashback to the days of Fall, bright

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and colorful leaves decorated the grass, while my siblings and I jumped on the trampoline with the water hose turned on, and when me and my brother would argue over the controller for the PS1.

Another punch to the face brought me back into my current reality. My back against the wall, my brother's hand around my neck squeezing hard against my esophagus; I cried. I no longer cried from the punches, the bruises on my neck, or the cuts on my arms. I cried because I saw the despair in his eyes, as he contemplated letting me go or squeezing harder. I saw the pain that I believed I had caused him. My 11-year-old mind believed I deserved that pain. I could have chosen to go live with my father and the new family he started, with his second wife, but I felt I didn't deserve to have a father. I deserved to suffer alongside my brother and sister, whose lives I had torn apart by opening my "big mouth". Any time I tried to talk about my feelings, I would be mocked, belittled, and often greeted with more punches. They conditioned me to not talk about my feelings anymore. In fact, I just didn't want to feel anything anymore. I lacked the strength, or lacked the weakness, to take my own life. I remember at one point; I almost hoped my brother would finally succeed in what I couldn't. I was the youngest sibling, but I was the only one that got a lock on my door. It was easier for my mom to give me a lock on my door than it was to address the conflict and resolve it. Maybe there just wasn't a resolution for so much anger, bitterness, and resentment.

I spent most of my days locked in my room. Self-inflicted solitary confinement. My brother and sister went outside and hung out with their friends, but I didn't want to. I didn't really have friends; my friend was my pencil or laptop. Specifically, in moments of deep thoughts and feelings, I would write poems. Once my fingers hit the keyboard, or my pen hit the paper, it would flow like a flood gate that hadn't been opened for years. I'd become immersed in a world of my own expression. Often, I would read back through my own writing and find new meanings in what I had written. It seemed to me like my subconscious was speaking to me through words that weren't entirely mine. I shut myself off from everyone and everything; instead of communicating with others I'd rather write to myself. This behavior

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carried over into school, as I sat in the very back of class and tried to avoid everyone else. I hated being called on to read or speak in front of the class because I didn't believe my opinion mattered. I hated most of the kids in school because they'd complain about being grounded, or brag that their parent's divorce meant they got twice the presents for every holiday, and just be concerned with trifle matters. As a result, I got into a lot of fights. I also would walk out of classes, talk back, or skip classes just to get put into in-school suspension (ISS). I had spent more days in ISS than I did in my actual classes, I had an almost permanent residence in the little wood cubicle in which I would sit. I liked the small box with the thin little black curtain blocking my entrance because I didn't have to talk or interact with anyone. I could just finish my schoolwork then draw, read, or write the rest of the school day, dreading going home.

By the time I was 14 I had developed my own group of friends, the 'troubled' kids. I would skip entire days of school to get high and often be at parties getting drunk and making stupid choices. My siblings and I had been separated and sent to different places. My brother lived with his friends, or girlfriends, or my tia. My sister bounced between her boyfriend's house, to her grandparent's, and back to her boyfriend's. I had followed a similar route; I lived with my grandparents, friends, cousins, and uncles. We all had one common factor and that was that we all bounced from one broken home to another broken home, each as dysfunctional as the last. I felt comfort in my abuse, so when the physical abuse from others stopped, I continued the cycle in substance abuse and self-inflicted harm. I felt a reassurance in the ability to *feel* something. It reminded me that I was still a living creature despite living in a hollow shell. I didn't read as much anymore, but I wrote a lot. I wrote poems and songs mostly, each one dark and full of expression. At least it helped me to pass all my English classes.

A year later, I was sitting on a cold concrete slab, in a small four corner room with a metal door that had a terribly scratched plastic window. My toilet was next to my concrete bed, a stainless-steel toilet with a sink attached to the top of it. I was in a juvenile corrections facility. It was in juvie that I

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picked up reading once more. In my free time I would read whatever books I could get my hands on. I remember reading “Desperation” by Stephen King. King’s book touched me because it told a story about a small town that looked normal on the outside to the travelers passing by. However, underneath the façade was something dark festering and terrorizing the lives of the people within. I was back in my comfortable little isolated bubble, neatly tucked away from society and family. I thought I would have been happy, but I wasn’t. I still remember each step I took through the court room; shackled at my ankles with a chain connected to my handcuffs. There was a police officer on either side of me leading me down the court hall holding the inside of my arms. They lead me into a room where I was surprised to see my family in tears, not disappointed, but sad. Most surprising of all, my mother was there. She tried to take me home with her, but the court wouldn’t allow me to be released to her because they deemed her an unfit parent. Instead, the court decided that I should be sentenced to a minimum of 180 days in a juvenile bootcamp program. It was there that I learned about responsibility, discipline, and leadership. It was there that I learned that we’re all a little damaged on the inside.

Some time had passed after my incarceration. Although I had experienced some negative pressures, it had forced me to evolve and seek a new perspective. Up until that point I had never posted, or publicized, any of my writings and especially not any recordings of my songs. There was one song that I wrote as a form of therapy to an instrumental track I found on YouTube when I was 16 years old. I recorded this song with the music playing from my computer while I spoke into the microphone on my phone. The sound quality was terrible, but the emotions poured into the words was worth sharing. Maybe a few weeks after posting the song, I had got a new message from someone that wasn’t my friend. Curious, I accepted the message request and what I read shook me to the core. Someone that I had never met, from a place I had never been, reached out to me about my song. They told me that they were depressed and had endured a form of abuse as well. I can’t remember their name, but they told me they had felt so alone in this world and believed that nobody could relate to how they felt inside

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until they heard my song. They told me that my song helped them to not feel so alone and helped them to know that there are others that have made it through dark times. That's the moment that made me realize that my words impacted the world in some way. I had decided that I'd share my therapy with others so that they might find refuge in it as well.

Through reading and writing I had learned that there are ways to express yourself safely. I had learned that every story only ends with death, and anything beyond is uncharted territory. I found a way to write all my feelings away when I was overwhelmed. I found a way to suppress my hurt, anger, shame, and sadness. I began to work on the one thing I could control and that was myself. I didn't believe I would ever get sober, nor did I ever believe that I would complete my education. Reading taught me many things, but of those things, two have stuck to this day: "knowledge is power" and "all I know is I know nothing".

It was a surprise to find out that my family knew I was capable of being the first to go to college. I was relieved to hear they were proud of me after all the pain and stress I had caused them. When I look up on my wall and see the little framed paper that reads "Karnes/Wilson County ELITE Boot Camp: Certificate of Completion" dated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2014, it reminds me of the lessons I learned. It serves as a reminder that you can choose to become bitter or better, but the choice can only be made by you. So, from this first semester's Eng-101 class my goal is to reengage myself in reading and to utilize the tools taught when writing my next steps. My story isn't finished yet and here I am pen in hand ready to write the next chapter of my book. I know that I can achieve my goals by staying dedicated and keeping an open mind. With the proper motives and the right guidance, I will be able to stay on the path forward.