

Chains

by Christian Rex Sears

The first thing you should know is that Idaho is different. When I was just a little kid, I got kicked out of a friend's house during a playdate because his family found out I wasn't Mormon. And in fifth grade, I got sent to the principal's office for playing a trading card game, *Magic the Gathering*, because of the "magic" part—the teacher thought the game was satanic. Idaho's different for other reasons, too, but mainly it's because God takes special interest in it.

You should also know that at home, Mom and my sister Ruth both loved me, but Dad and I didn't get along too well. I always liked to ask questions as a kid. So did Ruth. But while Dad didn't mind answering hers, he just liked giving orders to me. For example, he said I need to get good grades and never skip school. Sounds reasonable. But when school was scared of a card game, why not skip?

In eighth grade, I skipped a lot and had the grades to show it. My buddy, Peter, was in a similar situation. So on the way home from school, we beat the living shit out of each other. That way, we figured, our dads wouldn't. We told them we were sorry about our report cards, but that we'd been jumped after school. It worked like a charm! We both got off without another hit.

A few years later, I got deep into the punk rock scene, listening to a lot of Anti-Flag and The Exploited. At home, I'd turn up the music loud enough to make Dad mad. He'd yell at me to turn it down. If I gave him lip about that, or anything else, he wouldn't let me have any dinner.

Well, stupid as it was, I liked to give him lip. So I started to keep rations under my bed in a shoe box. Apple juice, saltines, a few graham crackers.

The last thing you should know is what went on at Pocatello High.

Early on, punk rock helped me find my tribe. It was a secret handshake for all the kids in Idaho who had the wrong religion. It brought us together, and we'd stay out late, smoking, drinking, and blasting our music.

So the punk crowd introduced me to alcohol. But this was when OxyContin went viral. Imagine a pandemic where symptoms don't surface until years after infection. That's what we were living in, though nobody knew it. By the time I was a sophomore, *everyone* was getting ripped on a daily basis.

Mormons have this thing called the Word of Wisdom, which is why they're such a buzzkill at parties—they're not allowed to smoke, or drink alcohol. But this set of rules doesn't say anything about pills. When old Joe Smith received the Word of Wisdom "from God," pills didn't exist. OxyContin sure as hell didn't exist.

That's why, in Pocatello, oxies became the great equalizer. It was almost disappointing. Right when I found my people, every clique went crazy for the exact same thing. But it was also great, because suddenly I was friends with everyone.

Usually, in those days, it was easy to score, and we all kept each other afloat. If Katie didn't have a prescription for her knee injury from cheer, then her dad had one for his back. And even if Katie was out, there was Martin, a choir kid who lived with his grandmother, and she was like a vending machine. You could even get Dilaudid from her.

But every once in a while, the river ran dry. This happened when all the fucking doctors would suddenly grow a conscience for about a month. They'd look around and say, "Huh. I'm doling out an awful lot of lab-engineered downers. Maybe I should pump the brakes, tell them to handle their pain the old-fashioned way." Then, those assholes would see their bottom line start to sink and say, "I probably overreacted. I'm sure if there was a real problem, we'd see it. Someone would do something about it."

Then we'd be back in business. But how do you survive those dry spells?

A friend of mine named Mikey was never dry. Never. That's because Idaho, again, is different. It has these towns in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere that are small, but they still have the basics of civilization, including a pharmacy. And for law enforcement, these towns usually have just one sheriff with a handful of part-time deputies.

Mikey was like the Jesse James of OxyContin, riding the western plains in a used Honda Civic, plundering the pharma-banks of different towns—and always outrunning the law. Like Jesse James, Mikey had a gang. It was usually Will, Nephi, and Gus, but a drought came once while Gus was out of town. Mikey asked me to take his place.

At this point, we had graduated high school. But places like Pocatello have gravity, and few people build up the kind of escape velocity you need to leave. So after graduation, I moved in with Mikey. I knew Dad wouldn't miss me much, even if Mom and Ruth would. But since Mikey's brother had gone to trade school in Wyoming, they had an extra room and I took it.

Mikey and I worked construction jobs that let us come late, leave early, and get paid the same day. Mostly, we hung out in his room, playing *Metal Gear Solid* on his PlayStation and snorting pills.

He asked me to join him for the next burglary while we were doing just that. I remember he had the controller and was taking cover behind an M1 Abrams tank in the game, getting ready to pop a few more bad guys.

“Oh by the way, we’re gonna do another hit, but Gus is going to be out of town. You wanna get in on it?” he asked me.

I’d heard about the burglaries before. Everyone had. They did the first one during the summer between our junior and senior years of high school, and people had been whispering about it ever since. No one was sure how many more times they’d done it. I didn’t even know, and I lived with Mikey. But since he always had pills, no matter what, one thing was perfectly clear—whatever they were doing fucking worked.

“Yeah. Yeah I’d be down,” I said.

I felt like a struggling actor getting called back for a big audition. Sitting there on Mikey’s floor, with a box of Cheez-Its in my hands and his brown, fluffy carpet beneath me, it was hard to contain myself. But I just kept snacking on those crackers and waited for my turn to take the controller. I didn’t want to blow it.

Time was of the essence, especially for Mikey’s mom, Sandra. We’d been giving her fentanyl patches, morphine, Dilaudid, Demerol, and of course oxies. In return, she would buy our cigarettes and let us do damn near anything in that house. Our drug use had eroded most of the fabric that should have kept Mikey’s family bound together. But he still cared about her, and wanted to make sure we made a new score before she hit the worst part of withdrawal. She already felt like she had a bad cold.

Mikey invited me to join the next burglary on a Tuesday. That Saturday, Will and Nephi came over to discuss the plan. We spent most of the night talking shit and getting high. But before that, they explained how their operation worked.

“You’re gonna be the glass guy, Jack,” Mikey told me. “You’re going to smash the glass door before Will and I go in.”

Nephi and I were sitting on Mikey’s floor, on that carpet that must’ve held a metric ton of dust. Our backs were up against a stout dresser, which had the TV and PlayStation on top of it.

Will and Mikey were sitting on his bed, across from us. Mikey was animated while he explained things. He slashed at the air with his arms, like he was one of the commandos in *Metal Gear Solid* giving orders to his troops.

“Once you smash the glass, Will is going to clear out the frame with a hammer. Then he and I’ll run in, he’ll hammer open the safe, and we’ll load all of the shit into my bag and run out. Then we’ll jump in the car, and Nephi will carry us away.”

I nodded.

“After that, we’ll go to my cabin in Taber, divvy up the goods, and party.”

I nodded again. I almost laughed at the thought of us splitting a pot of stolen narcotics with each other, like kids at a birthday party with a piñata.

“Any questions?” Mikey asked. I shrugged. He said, “Okay. Do you guys wanna warm up those chicken nuggets or something? I’m fucking hungry.”

“Yeah that sounds super good right now,” Nephi said.

The next Tuesday, we all piled in Nephi’s Civic and drove to Firth, Idaho. Population: 477. There was a pharmacy, Alvin Family Drug, on the corner of Main Street and Roosevelt.

Across from that was Collets Bar (no apostrophe). We parked in that bar's parking lot, then smoked cigarettes and talked about girls we knew until it got dark.

Under a canopy of streetlamps and their sickly orange light, we slithered to the drugstore parking lot in Nephi's Civic, parked behind the store, put on our balaclavas, and tumbled out of the car doors. We approached the back door like shy delivery boys. Sensing our weakness, Mikey prodded his tiny pack.

"Get your head in the game. Don't fuck this up."

It wasn't much, but it worked. I decided to go all in, to act now and feel later.

A camera hanging from a corner of the store seemed to be quietly judging us. Without thinking, I picked a baseball-sized rock out of a crack in the asphalt, and like a stealth mission in *Metal Gear Solid*, hurled it at the camera. Surprisingly, I actually hit the fucking thing, knocking it from its perch onto the ground with a satisfying *clunk*.

"Jack. The door."

I picked up another rock from the same crack. This one was bigger, the size of a grown man's shoe. I pulled a folded pillow case out of my back pocket, opened it, and dropped the rock into it. Truth be told, we were in no rush until I broke that door. That would trigger the silent alarm, and then we'd need to be as fast as fucking possible.

I strode towards the back door, clenching what would be the open end of the pillowcase with my left hand, and grasping the middle firmly with my right. As I got closer to the door, I started swinging the rock around in a circle, before lunging at the door with one last step and slamming my makeshift mace into the glass.

Will rushed in behind me with his hammer and punched out the largest remaining chunks of glass. Mikey dashed into the store, followed by Will, while I ran back to the car and hopped in the back seat.

Nephi and I waited and watched. Waited and watched. Waited and watched.

“Jesus fucking Christ where are they?” Nephi whined.

A few seconds passed. Then Mikey and Will came sprinting out, empty-handed.

They plunged into the car.

“Did you....did you seriously not get—”

“Fucking *drive*, Nephi,” Mikey roared.

Nephi put the car in drive and screeched out of the parking lot. As we exited the lot, he didn’t hit the brakes, so the dip into the gutter made the car violently buck.

We were back onto the Yellowstone Highway, driving south, and for about fifteen minutes, all was calm. Then we missed the exit at mile marker sixty. A moment passed before I realized no one else had noticed.

“Nephi, where are you going? You were supposed to pull off for the cabin.”

“Shit.” We fell silent again.

“Nephi—”

“Fuck it man, we’ve already made it this far. I think it’s fine,” Mikey said.

“We fucking better be fine. What happened?” Nephi snarled.

“What do you think happened? We couldn’t open the safe, dipshit.”

“Why not?”

“Because normally Will can just hit the fucking thing with a hammer—*whack*—on the handle, and that’s all it takes. But this—”

“Actually that only worked the first time. Last time I had to use a chisel too, remember?” Will interrupted.

“Fine. Whatever. A hammer and maybe a chisel was all we needed in the past. But this time, that didn’t work. The safe didn’t have a handle, and Will found the bars of the lock but couldn’t break them with the chisel. And a hammer and chisel is all we had.”

“Wait...you’ve only done this twice before???” I asked.

“Yeah,” Mikey said. “Why?”

“As much shit as you always had, as much as people talked about it, I thought you’d done this, I dunno, four or five times!”

“Well...we didn’t. We hit this place twice before, and it worked fine both times.”

I paused for a second, hoping I didn’t hear him right.

“*This place, twice?*”

He didn’t say anything.

“Are you...are you fucking shitting me? You fucking retard thought we could hit the *same place three times????*”

No one answered me. I was stunned into silence, too.

We drove for maybe another sixty seconds before we heard the wail of sirens and saw red and blue lights rocketing towards us from behind.

“Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Nephi gasped.

“Just stay calm, bro. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine, Mikey. It’s *not* fucking fine.”

A voice over a loudspeaker boomed. “Stop! Pull over immediately! Do not exit the vehicle!”

“Oh Jesus Christ,” I said. It felt like my heart was about to fall out of my ass.

“Will you shut up, Jack? Look, if we pick a story and stick to it, we’ll be fine.”

Nephi pulled off to the side of the road. The police car did, too, and as he parked behind us, bluish white light poured through the Civic’s windows.

“What’s our story, then?” I asked, my voice wavering.

“We’re coming back from Mikey’s cabin,” Will said.

“Ok, but why are we coming back on a Tuesday?” Nephi asked.

“We were there to have fun. But we have to come back early because Mikey got called into work tomorrow. Keep it simple and avoid giving detail—”

Will was interrupted by the cry of more sirens, converging on us from both sides.

From behind, a pair of Ford Explorers, one shortly followed by the other, materialized in the rearview mirror and charged toward us. They only slowed when they were within ramming distance. They parked on the opposite side of the road, with a clear view into our car. The body of their cars was painted with a blue so dark we could hardly see it. The doors were painted white, and stamped with the state seal of Idaho.

Another Highway Patrol car, a Taurus, seemed to move without friction, like a UFO, towards us from the horizon ahead. This car parked directly in front of us, bathing us in even more light. Nephi and Mikey held their hands up to protect their eyes. In the backseat, Will and I looked at our knees.

As I stared at the creases in my jeans, a sharp, warm tingling sensation swept over me, as if I was being tattooed from head to toe. My breathing all but stopped, and the muscles in my legs grew unbearably tight.

I'd recently read Orwell's *1984* and Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*—I wanted to be seen as a thinking punk—and while we waited for movement, my literary diet gave crisp definition to waking nightmares that played out in my mind. Harsh light continued to barrage us from the outside, but behind my eyelids, I saw steel-tipped boots thundering toward my cell, beatings with batons, and a machine that delivered pure pain into my body until I told Them the Truth.

As the minutes dragged on, another Taurus arrived, then *another* joined the fleet. We were now surrounded by six Highway Patrol vehicles. Only another minute passed before the voice of God came booming over the loudspeaker again.

“Step out of the vehicle, slowly, with your hands over your head! I repeat: step out of the vehicle, slowly, with your hands over your head!”

We did as we were told, and found that we were surrounded by a veritable platoon of police officers, their nine-millimeters trained on us. It only took them a moment to sense that we weren't dangerous, just a band of idiots. The officers swarmed us, grabbing us by the arms with a nasty twist. They peeled us off in different directions.

Two of them, in dark blue uniforms with golden badges, led me over to a Taurus.

“Hands on the hood,” one barked at me.

The hood was groin-level, and warm from the engine.

“Lift up your feet, one at a time.”

I did that, wondering what the hell was going on. I looked around and saw that they were doing the same thing with the others. Then it hit me. Broken glass. Mikey and Will would have plenty stuck in their shoes. I probably did, too.

They patted me down while I leaned over the hood, turned me around, and cuffed me—my hands in front, but tight enough to make my wrists pale. One officer pointed his flashlight at my face while the other started asking questions. The guy holding the flashlight looked like he'd just turned twenty-one. His facial hair was even worse than mine.

At the sight of that green officer, my fears of the Ministry of Love dissipated, sooner than they should have. It didn't compute at the time, but my skin color also afforded me a measure of comfort. The older officer, who had a respectable beard but a considerable belly, pressed me about where I had been, why I had been there, what I had been doing, and so on. All I said was, "I wanna talk to a lawyer."

Later, I found out that both Mikey and Nephi were singing to the pigs, giving them a detailed play-by-play of our felonious blunders. But that night, I only knew that enough time to smoke several cigarettes passed, before they stuffed me into the back of that Taurus and drove me to Bingham County Jail, ten miles away.

We pulled into a garage, where they shut the door before letting me out. As I stepped through a doorway into the facility, I was handed over to a CO (correctional officer). His uniform was similar, but it was the color of cardboard. He stood me on a yellow line near a cinderblock wall, made me put my hands against the wall, then kicked my feet apart and gave me another pat down. At this point, I wasn't so much afraid as I felt like it was all a huge overreaction. I was just a good guy who couldn't catch a break.

After the pat down, the CO led me down a short, sterile hallway into booking.

Where booking an inmate is concerned, there are many ways to skin a cat, but when I got booked that night, upon exiting the hallway, I faced a control room. It was a panopticon of sorts, with panels of glass thicker than a car door, arranged in roughly a semicircle, so the COs behind them could see everything and everyone in booking.

Opposite the control room, to my left, as we exited the hallway, was a drunk tank. “Holding,” to be technical. This time, they didn’t throw me in there. And to my right was a desk of sorts, almost like a teller’s window at a bank, for processing.

“Sit down over there,” the CO said, pointing to a waiting area further to our right. He approached the control room with my wallet, keys, and Motorola RAZR, depositing them into a sliding metal drawer that shot out and retracted like a cat’s claw.

I walked past the processing desk toward the waiting area, which was simply a set of three long wooden planks meant to serve as benches, their legs bolted to the ground, not thirty feet away from the control room. I sat down on the third bench, next to a plump guy with cracked bifocals. After sitting down, I realized the bench was just far enough away from the wall that I couldn’t rest my back against it.

That damn bench says most everything you need to know about jail. Yes, there are times when the guards beat someone senseless or ensnare them in a degrading hold. But usually, from what I’ve seen, sucker punching an inmate takes too much energy. It’s better to punish someone without leaving your seat.

The booking process took hours. Not because it had to, but because they were moving slowly, like it was the DMV. Unlike the DMV, my mind was racing with needling uncertainty—

about how my parents would react, what my sentence would be, and if I could even survive jail, much less prison. All the while, my hands were clenched in a vise-grip, it was past midnight, and I had nothing to rest against.

I watched a parade of others get processed. Then it was my turn to lumber over to the desk. They asked me if I'd used any aliases. They took my fingerprints and recorded my tattoos. Once I was a known quantity, they told me I could have my phone call. I stepped to the left of the desk, where a trio of phones hung from the wall.

The phones were black, made with thick plastic. To the touch, they felt like a bowling ball. The cord was sheathed in bright, segmented steel, like a metallic serpent.

I picked up the phone and dialed home. The clock on the wall read 3:17 AM.

It rang. And rang. And rang, until my mother picked up. "Hello?" she wheezed.

"Mom?"

There was a long pause. I heard shuffling in the background, but it was muffled.

"Jack," I heard my father's voice and my heart sank, "Why are you in jail?"

"How did you—"

"It's a collect call, Son. Why are you in jail?"

"Listen, Dad, I messed up, alright? I messed up. But I was just hanging out with Mikey and some other guys...and I didn't know what they were getting into. But by the time I saw what was going on it was too late and—"

"What did you do?"

"Well they tried to break into this place and I was just in the car and—"

"Where? What place?" My mind scrambled for a good story. "What place, Son?"

“A store, Dad. Just a store. They wanted to take some things and—”

“Take what things?”

Again, I paused.

“Fine, I’ll tell you the truth. You know Mikey’s mom, Sandra? Well she’s hooked pretty bad on some stuff, Dad. She’s hooked pretty bad. The doctors won’t refill her prescription, and she started to ache and vomit. So Mikey—”

“Did you rob a fucking pharmacy?”

Burglarize. We *burglarized* a pharmacy. Or tried to.

“Dad, it was all a big mistake and I didn’t even mean to get involved. But it all started so fast, and by the time I knew what was happening it was too late.”

Silence.

“Dad, will you bail me out? Please?”

Click.

“Fuck,” I sighed.

I was too tired to realize I’d incriminated myself on the jail’s recorded phone line.

After spending more time on my beloved bench, I was summoned to shower. Mercifully, the shower could only be used by one person at a time. A CO handed me a plastic bag to put my own clothes in, some shampoo, and an orange uniform that looked like scrubs, with “Bingham County Jail” on the back.

I stood in front of the door to the shower and jumped when it unlocked with a *clang*. I entered, and some faceless CO in the control room shut the door again. I put my hands through a slot in the door to get uncuffed.

The shower room, like everything else in jail, was made entirely of concrete. The shower head had an odd, roundly triangular shape. If you had, for example, some shoelaces hidden in your pocket, you wouldn't be able to hang yourself very easily.

I turned on the water, and while that frigid, lacerating spray shocked my body, I had a moment of wretched awareness. This wasn't an overreaction. This was what happened when you burglarize a pharmacy. A world opens up, one where sleep is forbidden and showers are used for suicide, and that world swallows you whole.

I lingered in this epiphany—wondering if something was seriously wrong with me, and if so, what it was—but my thoughts were interrupted when the shower switched off.

I took my cue and changed. Then, a new, tinny voice of God sounded over an unseen speaker. “Sutherland. Approach the door.”

Another CO, much taller and with shoulders much broader, led me to my cell.

The next morning, Wednesday, I was brought before the honorable Mark Hall. Actually, they hauled about a dozen of us, all chained together, in front of the honorable Mark Hall, for the honorable Mark Hall to decide what to do with our sorry asses.

I had resigned. I had earned my father's response. It was the first time I'd called home since moving out—and I had called asking for help to get out of jail.

I almost felt calm as I was marched with the other inmates up the stairs to the courtroom. Cities like Blackfoot might be larger than little turds of civilization like Firth, but they're still small. So while I couldn't tell during the night what was happening, the jail where I'd been booked was in the basement of the courthouse.

One by one, the COs made us file into a courtroom upstairs. We were made to sit on a long, wooden bench, directly across from the judge's stand. As we took our seats, a CO chained us together, at the wrists and ankles. Once we were seated, a voice rang out.

"All rise for the honorable Mark Hall."

We all tried to rise, but it wasn't pretty. Some stood up faster than others.

The honorable Mark Hall didn't seem to notice or care. Adorned in a somber, black robe, he strode towards his chair and sat down. He proceeded to don his glasses and shift around a few documents. After many uncomfortable seconds passed, he finally glanced up at us and said, "You may be seated."

The judge took another few moments to look over his papers, then he looked back up at us—a hawk glaring at field mice.

"Gentlemen, you are here today for felony arraignment."

He proceeded to explain that he was going to read the indictments brought against us, then ask us to submit a plea. We could plead guilty, not guilty, or 'no plea.' No plea meant we could have two more weeks to think about it, before getting arraigned again. And if we plead not guilty, they'd arrange a trial date.

He looked at us. We squirmed in our seats.

"You are all entitled to legal counsel for this process. If you cannot afford counsel of your own, we will provide counsel to you..."

The judge stopped and looked around. He leaned over to the recorder, who'd been quietly typing away in her own little box. The judge asked, "Beth, where's Jim?"

"Not sure, your honor. Would you like me to call him?"

The judge furrowed his brow and pursed his lips. He was about to make a decision when the doors at the back opened up, and Jim shuffled into the courtroom. Jim's suit made him look like a child trying on his daddy's work clothes.

"Apologies, your honor. Got held up in Judge McCallaster's courtroom."

Jim came down the aisle and started whispering with the man on the left end of the bench. I lowered my head into my hands. Tears formed at the corners of my eyes.

Jim and the judge started going down the bench, collecting pleas from us. The judge would read the indictment, while Jim listened as if it were a tidbit from *All Things Considered*. Then he'd confer with his next victim, before that guy would give his plea.

I was closer to the left end of the bench, and when the judge started reading the plea for the guy in the middle of our bench, a miracle happened.

The doors opened one more time, and in walked my parents, following a skinny stranger in a decent suit. My parents took a seat near the back. Mom gave me a little wave, but Dad avoided eye contact. The skinny stranger approached our bench.

"I'm sorry, your honor. My name is Frank Farnsworth, and I represent one of the accused here. May I please speak with my client?"

The honorable Mark Hall had been watching the commotion, begrudgingly. But arraignment isn't conducted by a hot-shot judge, it's done by a "magistrate." In a small town like Blackfoot, a magistrate's ego fortunately does not bruise easily. Besides, that assembly-line-style arraignment was barely legal to begin with.

The judge nodded, then returned to reading the other man's indictment.

Later in the hearing, the judge gave me a special chance for release. He said it was “only because your parents are here,” and they had to put up their house as collateral in order for me to make bail. But my freedom, for now, was guaranteed.

After the hearing, I could practically taste the outside air. And I was aching from opiate withdrawal. But they kept me cuffed for six hours, sitting on the same bench in booking, while I waited for the twenty minutes of actual activity required to set me free. Still, later that day, I left Blackfoot in the back of my parents’ F150.

The car ride home was about as comfortable as you’d expect. My parents didn’t say a word, which made it worse. But what do you say to your son after he breaks into a pharmacy to steal drugs? Where do you even start?

In my head, we had 1000 conversations during that intolerable silence. “Why did you do it? What were you thinking? Can’t you just be a better son?”

I wordlessly gave pained answers. Each time, it was never good enough. But each time, a bump in the road or a swerve to avoid roadkill roused me from the daydreams, reminding me that my parents weren’t even willing to ask these questions.

When we got home, Dad finally said something.

“Frank said he’s going to call later today to go over the case with you.”

He and Mom went inside. I lingered outside, sitting on the porch. Eventually, I crept inside and up the stairs to my room.

It was untouched. Everything was there, as it had been before. A black and white Misfits poster still hung from the wall next to a window, the unenthused skull surveying my room. Books from high school, most of which I had actually read, lined the shelves next to my dresser.

I even checked under my bed and found the box of emergency rations. And my bed was made, just as I'd left it.

My computer was still atop the plain, wooden desk. I didn't dare use the phone downstairs. Besides, my friends could still be in jail. But I had Internet access, so I signed into MySpace (yes, haha, Myspace) and tried messaging Mikey.

Doesn't Will's dad get a refill today?

The phone rang downstairs. It made me jump.

"Jack?" Mom hollered from the bottom of the stairs.

A terrible, prickling sensation ran up and down my spine. I opened the door and shouted back, "Yeah?"

"Phone's for you. It's Frank."

I started to breathe again, came downstairs, and took the phone.

"Thanks, Mom."

She nodded and walked away. I raised the phone to my ear.

"Jack? It's Frank calling. Do you have time to talk about your case right now?"

"Yeah. Absolutely."

The state of Idaho was charging me with felony burglary, which carries a two to five year prison sentence. But he was sure I could get a plea deal. I'd probably have to be on probation for the same amount of time I would've served, including regular drug tests. I'd have to do around 100 hours of community service. He said I should expect to pay a hell of a lot in restitution. And it was already illegal for me to hang out with the friends I'd done the burglary with. But I would essentially have a clean record.

If I stayed sober, all I'd get was a stern slap on the wrist.

"Yeah, Frank, I understand. Thank you," I said at the end of the call.

Later that evening, we all sat down for dinner. Mom had made one of my favorites—
parmesan chicken in a Ritz cracker breading, with garlic mashed potatoes.

"Thanks, Mom. It's super good," I said, after my first bite.

She smiled back at me. We ate dinner without talking.

Between dinner and dessert, I saw headlights and listened as tires crawled past my
parents' house, parking a few yards further up the street. A minute passed, while someone we
couldn't hear deposited a package in the bushes that separated my parents' property from their
neighbors'. Then, we all heard the car start again, and drive away.

"Wonder who that was," Mom sighed in the kitchen. Dad grunted in agreement.

It took fucking everything in me to sit at that table and wait. But that's what I did. Mom
brought out fat, round bowls with three scoops of ice cream—strawberry, chocolate, and vanilla.
The bowls rang like bells when our spoons scraped the sides.

As I lifted the last scoop of melting chocolate to my lips, it struck me that my sister had
been entirely absent from the whole debacle. "Where's Ruth?"

"Away," Dad said.

"With friends," Mom added.

Had they sent her away, while they dealt with me? Why hadn't I thought of her earlier?
"I guess this is a good night to miss." They didn't laugh. I got up and cleared the bowls
from the table. I started to wash them, along with the plates, in the kitchen sink.

"Thank you, son."

“Sure thing, Mom.”

Eventually, my parents made their way to the couch in our front room and turned on the TV. I dumped all of our scraps into the trash, but it was still only half-full. I took it out anyway. The bin was on the east side of the house, same as the bushes.

I put the trash bag into the bin and snatched a brown paper bag from the prickly bushes. The bag had almost nothing but air in it, so I collapsed it into my pocket before going back inside. I reached the foot of the stairs. I was about to leap up the staircase, when Mom called out from the other room.

“Jack?”

My heart sank and my shoulders tightened.

“Yeah?”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mom. Thanks for dinner!”

The volume on the TV increased. I dashed to my room.

I ripped the bag out of my pocket and spilled the contents onto the table. It was a single, plastic baggie with just a few pills. But they had the color of soft sunlight. “OC” was stamped on one side, and “40” on the other. Forty milligrams wasn’t great, but it would have to do. I took out my driver’s license and crushed a pill, using my thumb for pressure. With the plastic edge, I arranged the powder into neat lines. Then I took out a dirty dollar bill, and rolled it up.

With a one-sided pinch, I closed my left nostril and sucked a line into my right.

Peace. Serenity. Heaven. Everything you ever wanted but never knew how to ask for, fulfilled in an instant. A warm, loving embrace. A wave of pure, tranquil joy.