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My Safe Place

Gary A. Marez

In 1987 I was in the fifth grade at Lockwood Elementary School. Every Friday, the school would hold sales for the kids, selling things like bags of popcorn, sour pickles, cupcakes, and other items of that nature. Though they were cheap, only a quarter or fifty cents, I never had the money, either because my parents wouldn't give me it or because we just did not have it. My parents were very abusive, and I feel as if it was because they had a drinking problem. Anyway, they handed out beatings before they handed out money, even change. This Friday, as the recess bell rang signaling that it was the sale time for all the goodies, I had to stay in my seat for five more minutes of recess because I had talked during a class lesson. Little did I know that those five minutes would change my view on life forever. I was sitting in front of the class, in a time-out seat that was next to the teacher's desk, facing the chalkboard. The teacher told me to stay in my seat until she came back from the restroom. As she walked out of the classroom, I started to look around. There were two other kids who had also stayed behind.

As I sat there, swinging my legs back and forth, I leaned forward and saw my teacher's open purse and a folded five-dollar bill right there, just inches from my feet. Not even thinking about it, I reached down and grabbed the money. To my surprise, inside the five were more bills—two more fives to be exact. Jackpot. I would be able to buy from the

Friday sale—that was my only thought.

As I sat back up, my teacher walked back in and dismissed us to recess. I was gone before she said the whole sentence. Two seconds later I was standing at the front of the snack line buying one of everything. For a moment, I was a cool kid. I was sharing with the other kids and sitting on the big swings that were reserved for the cool kids. Little did I know that I had stolen from my teacher lunch, gas, and cigarette money all in one shot.

In 1987, \$15 was a good amount of money. I also didn't realize that it was pretty easy for her to figure out who had taken it, given that I had been the only one next to her desk the only time she had been away from her purse. It didn't help much that as she found me outside, I was eating her lunch money away right along with everyone else.

I was called into the principal's office, where I admitted everything and gave her the \$13 that was in my pocket. In my school in the 1980s, if your parents signed the permission slip for the school to give you swats, you got them. Of course my parents had signed it, and I was awarded three swats from the principal's paddle. Mrs. Cox was a big lady, but she only paddled me—I was used to punches from my dad and mom, so three swats was a good day. But unfortunately that was not the end of it. When my mom came to pick me up from school, she was told what I had done, and I remember that as my name was called over the intercom, I knew I

was in more trouble.

As I went to the office, I saw our school DARE officer talking to my teacher and mom. My mom felt that it would be a good idea to scare me straight and allow me to be put in juvenile detention to show me what happened to boys who were bad and stole. I was scared as the officer put his handcuffs on me in front of all the kids who were staring. My wrists were so tiny that the cuffs kept falling off. I will never forget the feeling of seeing my mom smiling and laughing with the other grown-ups as I was walked to the car and placed in the back. It felt as if I were going to die inside; I just wanted to scream, "Please don't let them take me!" All I had wanted was a pickle and popcorn, but I knew that if I cried or screamed, I would get punished even worse, because that was what happened at home. So I just watched as my mom turned and walked to the car and asked the cop if I could stay the weekend.

The ride to jail was quick and silent. As the officer walked me into the basement of the courthouse, where the juvenile facility was, I was shaking in fear. They put me through the whole process: fingerprints, strip search, my own cell. But as I sat on my bunk, something happened in my head, something amazing. I realized that for the first time in my whole life, I had a real bed all to myself, and I didn't have to take a bath in dirty bath-water. But the coolest thing was that as the older kids looked into my cell, they all smiled

and talked to me. The thing that stood out the most was that as I woke up to pancakes and cable TV, for the first time in my life I ate three times in one day and didn't get beaten once. I got to go outside and bounce the ball around. I was safe, and because I was only seven, no one picked on me, and all the CO's and older kids protected me. Jail was great; I never wanted to leave. But as always happens, Monday came, and I was released to my mom, who beat me because I had embarrassed her. My dad got his punches in when I got home because he was drunk and mad, too. So that Friday in 1987 changed my life forever. I knew that if I wanted to feel safe and protected, all I had to do was get in trouble and I would be fed and have my own room with all the good things I never got at home.

I was seven years old then; now I am 42 going on 43 and this has become a way of living for me. I come to prison, and then I get released. But as soon as the outside world becomes too hard or I feel unsure or unsafe, I find my way back in here. I always hear people say, "We have a chance" or "We make our own choices in life, and we have no one to blame but ourselves," and I both agree and disagree. I had a choice not to take that money, but I did, and that was wrong. Yet I was never given a chance in life, and the moment I walked through that cell door, I knew and felt that this was where I wanted to stay, my safe place.

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