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MARK

When Mark left Sorenson's Ranch just a few weeks shy of his eighteenth birthday, freedom entered him like a shot of adrenaline. He bolted straight into the open world with no particular goal or destination.

"I'm thinking, great, life's good," he said. "No one's watching me."

He bounced between Boston, California, and Florida, hitchhiking or crashing with friends and selling weed as he went, along the way landing for a spell in Montana with Wilson, the friend he had made while at Cross Creek. With his mother's blessing, Mark moved into a house with Wilson and several of Wilson's relatives: his cousin, his cousin's girlfriend, and his brother.

Friendships formed in the programs were almost never beneficial to long-term success. Living with Wilson, his entire world was composed of young adults who had fallen into the darkest maws of adolescence. Their world was small and their days of little substance: sitting around on the couch, watching television, and doing drugs. Their time in recovery was a distant memory.

Wilson's father owned a telemarketing company, and Wilson and Mark both began working there to earn some money to feed themselves and their continued drug addictions. Their only other responsibility was

the care of the family dogs, three pure-bred and hearty pit bulls, when he went out of town on business.

While Wilson was away on a business trip with his father, Mark asked the cousin to drive him out of state to meet a young blonde girl in Arizona, who he had been calling and promising that he might come visit. Wilson's cousin was also looking to get away, and quickly agreed. The cousin, his girlfriend, and Mark piled into their SUV. In the back were the dogs, a collection of family jewelry, a stack of money, an ounce of pot, and a handgun.

After several hours on the road, they pulled off the interstate somewhere in the Idaho panhandle. They spent the night in a hotel and continued their drive south in the morning, careening and smoking as they traversed the interstate. When they reached Ogden, Utah, several hundred miles from Montana, they pulled off into a gas station and moseyed through an attached convenience store. When they emerged, a police cruiser had pulled into the parking lot. Suspicious, the cruiser followed them back onto the highway and eventually witnessed a petty infraction that gave the officers cause to pull them over.

When the police searched the car, they discovered the stash and marijuana scattered throughout the center console and the floorboards. The police took Mark to a youth detention facility, where he called his parents to ask for help. They refused.

"You will be eighteen in a couple of weeks. That's it, we're done with you." He wilted for two weeks in lockup, until he found out that he would not be charged since he was only a minor. Eventually, his parents caved and bought him a one-way bus ticket to return home via Newark.

"I think they were just, like, "This is our son, we let him feel the pain, tough love, whatever," Mark told me.

Mark returned to New Jersey. His paranoia had given rise to future addiction. Now eighteen years old, he found navigating social circles outside of programs and institutions increasingly difficult. He misplaced his trust, believing that relationships were mutually beneficial,

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like at Cross Creek where Wilson became a fast friend merely by proxy. This errant trust led him one day to Asbury Park, a beach town on the Jersey shoreline. Beneath the heavy sodium lights of an outdoor park, a friend handed him a pipe.

“What is it?” Mark asked.

“It’s just coke,” said the friend, someone Mark had recently met and hardly knew. “Same stuff, just that you smoke it.”

“That’s crack, man.”

“Nah, it’s just coke.”

Mark shrugged, grabbed the pipe, and inhaled, forming an addiction he would maintain for years. Over the next several years, the cocaine, crack, and later heroin followed him. In the haze of addiction, a blur to him and his family, he would be charged with the possession of a deadly weapon (a butter knife, he says) and drug possession, which led him into days cascading into nearly a decade spent siphoned into and out of various treatment centers and prison cells. He had become a habitual offender before the age of twenty. He “shot dope and coke every day [alone].” In no particular order, and without haste, he became everything his parents had paid to prevent.