

**M**y cellmate, Mark King, was missing an arm. He asked a lot of questions. And despite being away on a three-year bid, he was notorious on the tier for being upbeat, positive, always cracking jokes. On my second night, we lay in the dark, fantasizing about being out, about eating comfort food and choosing our own clothes. The silence spread and filled the cell, and then he whisked it away.

“Hey man, whatchu do on the outside?”

“Me? Oh, I’m a cook, bro.”

The answer was simple, rolled off of my tongue and was accurate. But something about the way he’d asked made me think.

*What do I do? Is this the kind of person I’m going to be from now on?*

My lawyer stared at me from across the table in the sad downstairs cafeteria. It was full of pumped-in cold AC air, but not nearly as cold as jail was. I knew from all the times before.

He assured me when I came back to him for my third DUI, he’d try and secure me the best felony deal he could. Get me as little jail time as possible.

I hadn’t even served my time for the second yet.

What he said scared me, and that was his goal. He wanted me to wake up. To take stock of all the good things in my life, and realize I was drowning it all in the bottom of a bottle of cheap vodka.

I had a beautiful, whip-smart, funny girlfriend. I had a good job in an industry in which I’d already spent 8 years. I could have my freedom, if I wanted it and worked for it.

And so, from inside that Prince William County cell, laying on a flattened foam mattress that still held the shape of the last inmate, I decided to take control of my life. I stopped making excuses. I took personal responsibility.

I got out on a rainy day. Some people would look at that as a bad sign, but rainy days are my favorite kind. I'd never seen my girlfriend look as beautiful as she did then, until our wedding day. When her father walked her out on grass I'd cut myself, down the aisle past our families and friends, when I told her daughter I'd always be there for her, I'd be her dad if she wanted it, when I put a hundred-year-old ring on her finger.

She had on my favorite pair of shitkicker boots. She had her hair down, fine and auburn and radiating the joy that split her mouth into a beatific smile. I stepped outside and wrapped her up like a boa waiting for an exhale. I knew I could never put her through it again.

I told her I loved her for the first time that night. Laying in a bed that didn't smell like disinfectant. Holding her close and laughing and whispering. We still lay close in our bed, laughing, whispering. I hold our daughter and son in that bed. I am content in that bed.

I chose to get sober, and remain so to this day. I put in the time and the effort. I don't shirk my responsibilities, and I own up to my mistakes. I take each day as a challenge. To be the best version of myself as a grown man as I can. I relish the opportunities afforded me that Mark King couldn't grasp.

He's probably getting out about now. He's stepping out of the jail, onto the wide, slick concrete steps at the front of intake. Maybe his wife is there. Maybe one of the several girls he corresponded with while inside are there. Maybe no one's there, and he's got a bag over his shoulder, headed for a bar or a bus station or a friend's house to surprise them. No one has to help him, of course. King was always proud, and capable, even though he was missing an arm. He was the best basketball player in the cell-block. He ran the myriad trade schemes that took place during meals better than anyone. He was making his choices and doing the best he could, with what he had.

And now, on the outside of a jail cell, no third DUI, no more troubles or hiding from what I'd done, I was making my own choices too.

I have my freedom. I wanted it, and I work for it every day. 