

## The Picture

First, I would like to apologize for the picture that I am about to show you, because of what that picture has done to me and what it is likely to do to you.

I wanted to find a picture that could illustrate to you unmistakably the loss that comes from violence, a picture that would so move you as to remove the entire concept of violence as viable from your minds. But I could not find such a picture. So I decided to paint one for you, a picture painted with words.

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Long before I stepped into an AVP workshop, I knew what violence could take away. Most of you think you know too, but I want you to take another look. I want you to be as intimate with the loss that comes from violence as I am.

Violence is the voice of my little brother at the age of five saying, "Are you still in jail? What did you break?" Violence is my nephew at eight years old telling his Nana that if he eats his vegetables his muscles will turn to rocks, because all he remembers of his uncle is squeezing his arm in a prison visiting room. Violence is my little sister, who received the brunt of my teasing and taunting, crying as she blew out her candles because her only wish was for her big brother to home. Violence is a sixteen-year-old boy trying desperately to prove to the world how tough he is by jamming a knife into the stomach of another sixteen-year-old boy.

Violence are the last thoughts of Jason Robinson as he bled to death in a school hallway. Violence is a death certificate that says, "Parents too distraught to sign." Violence is an empty place at the table, a missing face in family photos. Violence is the emptiness that's left behind.

Violence is the guttural sound that escaped my mother's lips when the judge sentenced me to life. Violence is the lie that I told her when I said, "I'm okay. It's going to be all right."

Violence are the seventeen years that I've spent trying to atone for something for which there's no atonement. Violence are the tears that have streaked my face and stained this page. Violence is the picture that I've painted, a picture of horror and despair, loneliness, suffering and heartache. A picture I hope you never have to paint for yourself.