

Vet Colbert's story, written spring 2017

I will never forget the night my 21-year-old life changed forever. It was September 10, 2004, and I felt so alive to be back in Small Town, Oklahoma. I had that very day moved back to Hugo after a brief and failed attempt at city life. I couldn't stomach it; too loud, too obnoxious, and too congested—the complete opposite of my cultural upbringing. I was raised on quiet dirt roads, fishing ponds, smiling neighbors, and supplemental government assistance, the perfect blend of hospitable simplicity and rural poverty. This was the life I called “home” and I was glad to be back.

I decided that I should celebrate my homecoming with as much Budweiser, Seagram's Gin, and marijuana as I could afford. A few buddies pitched in and there was plenty enough poison to go around. The gathering took place at my cousin's little, white, box-built, two-bedroom rent house. It seemed that every old friend and family member, and even some strangers, within a 20-mile radius had succeeded at finding themselves packed together under that same tiny roof. Now, I would love to tell you that I myself was the main attraction, but I can honestly say that I wasn't. Most of the crowd were there only for the free booze and narcotics. And there we were, all in this smoke-filled dwelling, feeling the buzz and holding loud conversations over loud rap music. We never reached our points but that didn't matter. We just wanted to get our points across (even if we didn't have one). Over time, inhibition became non-existent. The bravest of the bunch broke away from the most crowded spaces in the house and found less crowded corners and kitchen tables to engage in everything our parents warned us not to do. We were young and promiscuous and couldn't care less about condoms or self-respect. As early 20-somethings typically do, we just did what “felt good.”

As the night progressed and the intoxicants dissipated, so did the crowd until finally only a few of us close friends remained. We nursed the last of our beverages, swaying heavily under its influence and the hypnotic thump of gangster rap emanating from the floor speakers. Then, suddenly, “Hey, bro, did you leave your car lights on?” One of my friends asked me, jolting me out of my trance. He was

standing at the living room window, peering outside through a crack in the blinds.

How was it possible that my car light was on? I wasn't that drunk and forgetful when I parked, or was I? Startled, I stumbled across the short space of the living room to the window to take a peek for myself. And, sure enough, the dome light of my car was on, driver's side door open.

Through my squinted eyes, a closer look revealed a shadowy figure rummaging through my highly-coveted Cadillac. Instinctively, I reached for my waist, expecting to find a handgun that wasn't there this time. That's when I realized I had left it in my car, under the driver's seat. I'm not sure if it was the alcohol and drugs, stupidity, or a mixture of both that willed my mind, then my body, to go confront this shadow man, but in a matter of seconds I found myself face to face with some kid who was just as young and black and wasted as me. He was holding a CD player which he had ripped from the dashboard of my car. The red and yellow wires dangled loosely. In that very instant, I went from "confused and drunk" to "rage." It was a kind of mad that I had never felt before. I felt red-hot all over. Had I been a cartoon character, there would have been billows of steam shooting from both ears. But I'm not a cartoon character, and, unfortunately, this wasn't Saturday morning make-believe.

I still don't fully understand how seeing this kid holding that cheap piece of wire and metal could make me that angry. Maybe it was the apparent, latent disrespect of me and my hard-earned possessions. Or perhaps it was how my young ego was damaged to the point of disrepair at the thought of another man simply taking what belonged to me. Tupac, 50 Cent, or any of the rest of my high-esteemed heroes wouldn't allow that. So neither would I! My thoughts returned to the loaded pistol nestled under the driver's seat.

Memories of a darker day trail me like train smoke
Blank, lifeless eyes stare intensely at nothing
A hot river of crimson flows from an exit wound.
Head shot.
A predestined order of fear and blood
The mind was a terrible thing to waste,
A tool of untapped potential

Turned statistic.
His very last breath, peaceful and light like a butterfly
As it rose and vanished in the September sky.
I re-live this moment over and over again,
Like the coming and going of yet another
New Year.

Its a very deep experience to see a life drain from a human body. But what's even more emotionally tragic is knowing you're the cause of it. I could not believe I had just ended someone's life! That was not my aim. I had only intended to "pistol whip" him and as I struck him across the side of his head, the gun fired. The explosion was deafening. We both froze. Me, in fear and panic. Him, in death. Soon, rocked back to my senses by the reality of murder I dropped the smoking gun to the pavement, right there by the body and cheap CD player. I was in my car and speeding away before I could even get my door shut good. The sound of screeching tires pierced the night's stillness, just as the gun blast had moments earlier. The car's engine hummed heavily as I sped through my small, sleepy town, ignoring red lights and stop signs, in search of the nearest highway. "Highway" meant exit routes and distance, and I needed to put as much distance as possible between me and what had just happened. I wanted to drive across the nearby border, through Texas, down to Mexico and, somehow, across South America until I would arrive at the edge of the earth and then I could tip off into the blackness of space.

But 10 minutes later and 10 miles outside of Hugo, I was shift-footing on my mother's porch, pounding frantically on the front door. She answered the door and immediately knew something was wrong. She held her pink cotton gown closed with one hand, and hurriedly ushered me into the small mobile home with her free one. She quickly slammed the door and locked it behind us. Everyone has, or has had, that one person in life that they run to when they find themselves under the pressing weight of life's many circumstances. For me, that one person was my mother.

"Baby, what's wrong?" she asked with noticeable concern. Her tone was hushed, so as not to awaken

my step-dad. "I think I killed somebody." I replied in that same sort of whisper. "What? Who??" she just stood there, staring, shaking her head "no" in disbelief. This was something terribly different than what she had been used to throughout my adolescent years: the occasional burglary, theft, and other petty crimes. Tears started to roll down her chocolate face when she realized she wouldn't be able to save her "baby" this time.

I took a step toward her and pulled her into my chest and held her. I wondered when I would see her again. After the brief embrace, I darted back out the door sure that the sheriff's department would be swarming soon. After all, there were "friends" back at the scene of the tragedy who had witnessed everything. On the run, with nowhere to run to, I thought about Amanda. Amanda was a fiery and spirited red-headed white woman, who had a thing for spirited, nappy-headed black men. We shared a short history and a tumultuous type of love. Besides my mother, she was the only other person in this world who I felt truly loved me for me.

I arrived at Amanda's early that morning, before the break of day. She, too, immediately knew that something was wrong. I saw that look of hopelessness in her eyes that came with knowing that one's life has just changed for the worse and it would never be the same again. She must have sensed the same in my own eyes. After sitting and sharing what had just happened, we held each other and cried. Then, somewhere between Newports and dead silence, we made love for what we both were sure was to be the last time. Afterward, I ate two Xanax and passed out in a large, partially empty walk-in closet which now served as a temporary hide-out for me. I don't know how long I'd been asleep when I was awakened by someone calling my name and tugging at my pants pocket. When I opened my eyes, I was staring down the barrel of the biggest, blackest handgun I'd ever seen. It belonged to a bulky, ruddy-faced OSBI (Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation) agent. He and three more agents led me through the house and out the front door. There were more law enforcement on the porch, surrounding Amanda as she sat sobbing quietly. She wouldn't even look up to say goodbye. Right then I suspected

she was the one who turned me in, but to this day, she insists that it was her mother who was in a neighboring town at the time, but had seen the wanted pictures of me on the evening news and reported her suspicion that I was hiding out with her daughter in their home. Regardless of who told, I was now in cuffs.

I was hauled off to McCurtain County Jail, the county I was captured in. I was placed in a cold, brightly lit, almost office-like room. With me were two detectives. They read me my "rights." After about an hour of crying, pleading, and insisting I didn't mean to kill anyone, I was once again placed in the back of a cop car and transported back across county lines to Hugo, Choctaw County, Oklahoma, the site of the tragedy. I was exhausted. It was a little past midnight and the normally one hour drive from one county seat to the next seemed to drag on forever. It was as if I was being hauled off into the end of my existence. In time, that would come to prove true in more ways than one.

When we pulled up at the county jail in Hugo, there were two male deputies standing around out front, waiting on big, bad, murderous me, I supposed. Their wrinkled, desert-sand-colored uniforms matched the tan-tinned building where they housed their inmates. I specifically remember looking up into a black sky with no stars as I shuffled the few paces from the car to the glass double doors. At the age of 21, I was booked into the Choctaw County Jail on a first degree murder charge.

When all the formalities and booking procedures were completed, I was given an over-sized orange jumpsuit to wear, my bedding, and toiletries. This consisted of a gray wool blanket, a thin green mat and one roll of toilet paper. A pale, chubby detention officer directed me through a series of dimly-lit corridors. He squeaked when he walked, or at least his shoes did against the freshly waxed and buffed floor. I was placed in a tiny cell, usually reserved for the occasional town drunk or inmates who are on suicide watch. Hearing the rusty iron door slam and lock behind me was almost as scary as the sound of the gun blast, the night before.

After arranging my mat on the bottom bunk, I took a seat there and very consciously soaked in my new surroundings. The buzzing overhead light illuminated the windowless, barely bathroom-sized cell. Chipped, gray paint peeled from ancient walls, and the floor was cold, rough concrete. There was a stainless steel sink-toilet at the end of the short steel bunk where a man is expected to lay his head. All four corners of the cell were rusted out, probably from the many man-made floods or leaks from ancient pipes. In the corner above the sink-toilet was a security camera encased in Plexiglas. Its small red dot flashed on and off by the second, indicating it was recording. Unlike my homecoming celebration, this time I was, in fact, the "main attraction." I was surely being watched on monitors somewhere up front in Central Control. Suddenly, I felt like some spectacle, an exotic animal in this zoo for human beasts. Strange eyes all over me, dissecting my pain and studying my every dysfunction for their own sick curiosity. The thought of this troubled me to the point of anger. I remembered the toilet paper. I rolled off layer after layer and began to wet it at the sink-toilet. I then climbed up on the toilet and carefully pasted thick globs of white over the Plexiglas, blackening the camera's view of the cell and me. I made a "pillow" with my blanket and stretched out on the very thin mat. It barely cushioned the hard steel. I closed my eyes and replayed the last 48 hours of my life like scenes from a horror movie until a fitful sleep overcame me.

The jailer's keys rattled and clanked around in the keyhole until the door swung open. I sprung upright, still half asleep. On the other side of the threshold was my squeaky escort from the night before, along with another fella I didn't remember seeing during booking. He watched me cautiously, his right hand tightly gripping the black can of pepper spray on his right hip. Squeaky Shoes brushed past me without saying a word. He climbed the sink/toilet and angrily tore the dried toilet paper from the Plexiglas, freeing the camera's eye. His companion never took his green laser-like eyes off me, almost begging me to make a move. I didn't. I was too drained to protest. I laid back down as they left and locked my cell. I was unsure of the exact hour but gauged that it was breakfast time. The scent of fried

pork flowed in through the tiny space under the cell door and the faint sound of jumbled voices and low-playing country music from nearby cell blocks hung in the air like thick morning fog.

I declined breakfast that morning and willed myself back to sleep, wishing I would somehow wake up free. Didn't work! At lunch hour I was awakened by an older white lady with shoulder length graying blond hair. I would later learn that her name was Ms. Wanda. She held a bologna sandwich and a small bag of plain Lays potato chips. Her inmate trustee poured me a cup of ice cold grape Kool-Aid which I quickly gulped down my parched throat. I couldn't remember when I had last taken in any liquid. I asked about my "free phone call." The one everyone who has ever been to jail asks about as soon as they arrive. She didn't make any promises, but said that she would try to get me up front to make my call before her shift was over. "So much for that phone call," I thought. I accepted the chips and sandwich. The sandwich immediately went down the toilet and the Lays I saved for later.

Much to my surprise, Ms. Wanda did return. She opened my cage and I was met with a kind, grandmotherly smile that lacked any trace of judgment or disdain. She was simply there to help me make my call. She nodded gently, leading me out of the cell.

My mother answered after the first ring. Hearing her weary voice again brought on a sense of relief. She asked me if I was okay; I lied to reassure her that I was. I stared at the barely visible blood splatters on my lace-less white Nikes. I wasn't "okay." Through silent tears she expressed her love and spoke about the "Good Lord" and then something else about an attorney before the five minute call ended. I caught a glimpse of a sunny day through the familiar glass double doors before being taken back to the suicide box.

I was back on my bunk with my face in my palms. I thought about my mother's words and the pain in her voice. I thought about the red sprinkles of blood on my shoe and the eye above in the corner that would watch me without blinking from now until whenever. The rusted walls seemed to be closing in

and I could feel my throat restricting. I screamed out to the top of my lungs, vibrating myself to the very core. It was all I could do to fight the pressure.

The next day I was taken from my cell and led to a small conference room in another part of the jail, where a tall, middle-aged white man with short salt and pepper curls waited. He wore wire rimmed glasses and was clean shaven. He extended an open palm and forced smile. I was reluctant to exchange such pleasantries. He ignored my rudeness, tugged and straightened his gray suit coat, and went into what sounded like a routine sales pitch. "Vet, I'm defense attorney Hack Welch. Your family has hired me to get this mess untangled." His accent was thick and Southern. He sat at the small round brown table in the middle of the room and gestured for me to do the same. He unsnapped a black leather briefcase and removed the bound folder. I could hear him mumbling under his breath while he thumbed through papers. I noticed his glistening gold Rolex and wondered what kind of debt my mother had gotten herself into for me this time. My mother has seven children. I've cost her the most. Later I would find out that she had put up some land that my grandfather left her in a will as a retainer and down payment on the twenty-grand lawyer fee. The rest of the bill would be paid in modest monthly installments.

The attorney pulled a small black recorder from his coat pocket and placed it on the table between us. He pressed "Record" and asked me to take him through the details of the night in question, step by step. After about an hour of questioning, answering, and strategizing, my lawyer was thoroughly convinced that he could "beat" the first degree murder rap because the tragedy lacked "malice, intent, and premeditation," all of which are key factors in garnering a murder conviction. I listened attentively as he explained how district attorneys ALWAYS charge suspected criminals with the most serious charge first, even if there is not enough evidence or mitigating factors to prove that charge. It's a very savvy scare tactic that almost always results in a suspect accepting a plea bargain for a lesser charge rather than risk going to trial and being found guilty and getting a maximum prison term. Either way its

a conviction for the state. Made perfect sense to me.

Before leaving, he asked if there was anything immediate he could help me with, and, of course, I pounced on that offer. One more lonely night in that suicide cell and I could, in fact, possibly turn suicidal. I needed to be around other people. I asked him to get me out of isolation and into the general population. He promised to do his best as we shook hands and I departed on a hopeful note.

The GP section of the jail only housed 32 inmates, 16 to each block. The cells were the early 20th century bars and gates that you see in western movies. They were locked and unlocked manually, none of that fancy, electronic, sliding door stuff!

When I entered Cell Block South, all eyes were on the “killer” they recognized from the local news they had watched a few nights before. I mirrored every stare with matching intensity as I carried my mat and other “county issue” through the small crowd of orange, en route to my assigned cell. It would have been considered a sign of weakness to smile or speak or show any other form of friendliness to these men I didn't know. The layman's term for this antisocial behavior is “prison mentality,” where apathy runs rampant in the minds of men. But a closer examination would reveal that we were all just hurting humans, wearing masks to hide our pain and fear of the fate we dreaded most.

When I got to my cell, there was an older black man and a young white kid already there, smoking smuggled tobacco in paper torn from a Bible. Johnny and Chris, respectively, were my new cellmates in this four-man cell. Johnny offered me a drag and I waved it off dismissively. I didn't smoke cigarettes and, even if I did, it wouldn't be rolled out of Bible paper. It wasn't because I was a very religious man, but there seemed to be something self-cursing about smoking a Holy Book and I wasn't willing to chance it. Chris would joke that smoking and inhaling the Word was the best way to get it “in” you. I'm still not convinced.

From 7pm to 6:30am, Monday through Sunday, we were locked down inside of these cells. Our

out of cell time and recreation was spent in a narrow concrete strip that ran the length of the cell block where inmates paced back and forth, played cards, and drank coffee all day long. On one end of the hall was a pay phone mounted securely on the wall. On the other end was a cramped, molded shower.

South Cell Block buzzed with nervous excitement on visiting days as men from ages 18 to 81 milled around, anxiously waiting to hear their names called for a visit. Faithful family and friends from all over the county made this weekly trek for the 15 minute non-contact visit with men and women they loved. I picked up the receiver and heard a soft "Hey!" It was the first time I had seen Amanda since the night of the tragedy. I tried to put on a strong front, maintaining eye contact through the thick, scratched glass between us, but she detected my uncertainty and how much I needed her. I sensed the same from her. Her soft red locks rested comfortably on her shoulders and the hint of tears were noticeable around her deep brown eyes. I felt a smidgen of guilt when I thought back to how I first suspected she had betrayed me to the Law. We talked fast, trying to exchange as much information as possible in the 15 minute time slot. She declared her love and loyalty to me and her watery eyes confirmed it. I told her about my attorney visit and tried to speak encouragingly to keep hope alive. Hers and mine. This process was repeated like a weekly ritual for the duration of my county stay. My mother rarely visited. It pained her to see me behind bars and glass and yet not be able to touch me. But she would accept every collect call and send my stepdad or the occasional uncle to relay back biweekly reports on my condition. I feigned that I was okay and faked a strong front.

Every evening, between dinner and lock-down, some men gathered in a small circle for prayer call. It was headed by a round-bellied biker-type that I never felt the notion to get to know. Usually he would wait until the end of Ms. Wanda's shift. She would make her way back to the cell blocks, stand quietly outside of the bars, head bowed, and the jailhouse preacher led in prayer. And then just as quietly as she came, she would leave. I found it fascinating that Ms. Wanda, a jailer and key holder, would stand in solidarity with society's rejects and pray to the same God. On one particular evening I found myself

joining hands with the other men in the prayer circle. I had a second bond hearing date approaching and I petitioned help from a Higher Power, or, as my mother would say, the "Good Lord." After the circle dispersed, Ms. Wanda lingered around, talking with a few of the inmates. She was chirpy as a baby bird and her smile was brighter and wider than usual. I decided to inquire about the reason for all of her shine. She openly shared that this day marked her 30th wedding anniversary. I remember being blown away at the fact that two people could remain together for that length of a time and still be that happy about it. I asked her what was the secret to keeping a love alive for that long? I waited for her to reveal some profound ancient secret to love, but her answer was simple enough. "We never quit talking!" Her voice was soft and thoughtful. "We haven't always had the best relationship, but we've always been the best of friends. And no matter what, we kept communicating our feelings to each other. We've talked our way through a many a storm." That lesson has never left me. The following day I was denied bond.

Just like any other lock-up facility in America, this one fostered its fair share of conflict. One morning I was rudely awakened by loud voices arguing a few cells down. I laid on my bunk, eyes still closed and heavy. The louder the voices, the higher my frustration rose at the blatant disrespect and disregard of my nap time. I hopped off the top bunk and stumbled to the sink. I filled my cupped hands with cold water and splashed my angry face. And then a second time I splashed water on my face. I stretched before dropping to the concrete to do a quick set of 50 push-ups. The loud voices continued, echoing all throughout the small cell-block. After my last push-up, I jumped up, feeling loose enough to initiate an early morning fist fight. With clinched teeth and fists, I sought out the source of disrespect and, without warning, unleashed fists of fury on the man nearest to me. The other guy backedpeddled out the cell, shocked at what was happening to his verbal opponent. I pounded fists into his eyes, nose, and teeth until my arms tired. I just wanted the loudness to stop even if it meant causing more of it.

On the morning of April 5, 2005, I awakened to a different kind of voice. "Haaappyy Biirrrthdayy tooo youuu." My mother sang to me over the jail phone like I was still seven years old. It was my 22nd birthday. And I was in jail. I pressed the phone right against my right ear and smiled as I thought about a happier time back in the small mobile home where I spent most of my childhood. Jail Administrators allowed inmates to receive cake and ice cream on their birthdays; however, the small gesture of humanity came with an unwritten policy. It stated that your family had to be selfless enough to provide cake and ice cream for the entire jail population. Only then could you enjoy the delicacies yourself! For my 22nd birthday, Amanda and my mother split the cost and provided chocolate cake and Oreo cookie ice cream for myself and 31 more inmates. I understood and appreciated their intent to ease my burden if just for one day. Six days later, I was scheduled for jury trial.

Attorney Hack Welch and I went over all of our defensive strategies and made last minute preparations for the day of all days. It was time to go present our "self-defense" defense and win our "not guilty" verdict. I was so overly optimistic in my naive understanding of the world around me back then.

Funny how time changes things! Trial was scheduled for 9am. My attorney arrived at the jail early to talk it over with me as attorneys often do. It appeared that he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep the night before. Neither had I.

On the day of jury trials, inmates are allowed to peel off the county oranges and wear "regular" clothes if they choose to. Most of us choose to do that and I was no exception to that norm. My mother had brought up black slacks, a black tie, and a green buttoned-down, long-sleeved shirt. I thought I looked good enough, but my attorney thought different. He had me ditch the green shirt and tie and fetched one of his own personal Polo dress shirts from his vehicle. It was blue and starched crisp and at least one size too big. He said the blue shirt would lighten moods and gain more favor for us in the eyes of the jurors as opposed to the dark green shirt. I listened to the expert's advice and changed shirts.

When I entered the court room I could have been mistaken for any other law-abiding spectator had it not been for the shiny metal bracelets locked around my wrists and my two deputy escorts. The fluorescent lit room was filled with relatives, a few friends, and other people that I didn't recognize. The victim's family I guessed. You could hear a pin drop on cotton when the deputies allowed me a brief moment with my mother and Amanda, who were sitting nervously in the front row. They embraced me almost simultaneously. I didn't even attempt to hug them back, arms down at my side, cuffs locked on extra tight. On the other side of the aisle was a woman who had buried her middle child just seven months earlier. I couldn't bring my eyes to meet hers. Her pain was too deep, more than I could ever bear.

I was seated at my attorney's table. He was nowhere to be seen nor was the prosecuting attorney. I sat facing the bench, which was also empty. My back was to the rest of the court room. Their eyes were like one thousand hot needles pricking my spine. I silently prayed to the "Good Lord."

Finally, my attorney appeared. He was smiling as big as the lottery. This had to be the answer to my prayer, I thought. He informed the deputies that he would be speaking with me privately back in the judge's chambers. He motioned for Amanda and my mother to follow us. "Okay, they made us an offer!" he spoke excitedly. "They are willing to drop the murder to manslaughter if we plea for 20!" "TWENTY???" I asked incredulously. "Hell no, I'm not signing for no fucking 20 years!" It was the first time I'd ever used that type of language in the presence of my mother. She seemed not to notice. My choice words were the least of her concerns. "You go tell him to take 20 years!" I couldn't see myself willingly signing away twenty years of my life. The lawyer quickly left the room to renegotiate and Amanda was clinging to my right arm, her head on my shoulder. Her grip was tight and protective as if she would fight the whole world to keep me.

Minutes later, Hack Welch returned and he wasn't nearly as excited as before. His voice was solemn

and it delivered the same message in different wording. I asked about our self-defense clause that we had so thoroughly prepared for. His response was negative and it lacked the usual confidence that had proven so instrumental in sustaining my faith for the past seven months. "We gotta bite the bullet on this one," he said. At that precise moment I knew I had been betrayed by the same man who had been hired to "untangle this mess." By this point my mother was visibly shaken and crying. Amanda, clinging even tighter now, was shedding tears, also. I menacingly stared down my sell-out lawyer. "I wanna go to trial," I bluffed as best I could, but I knew I had no real chance of winning with my attorney now sleeping with the enemy.

"God-dammit, Vet, we can't win!!! And when you get found guilty, they'll give your ass a hundred years!!" He was loud and emotional, a totally different man. He was bright red from the collar up. There was no escaping this prenegotiated fate!

I reluctantly took the plea and was sentenced to twenty years in the Oklahoma Department of Corrections. I was 22 years young and had just been sentenced to almost as much time in prison as I had been alive. I was numb. I don't remember being brought back over to the jail, don't remember the details of the rest of that day. From the minute I signed away my life, everything became one big unbelievable blur. Day turned to night. I laid on the concrete floor of my cell and stared up at nothing. I couldn't think of anything else but the next 20 years of prison living and the women's tears that flooded my conscience. It felt like the end of life. In reality, it was just the beginning.

Black sons never
Burn to their full potential;
Eclipsed by clips that darken dreams,
It ends way too fast.
We were both in a death race
To see who would lose first
And it was cemeteries and maximum security mortuaries
When we crossed the line...