

I shook my head and swallowed hungrily, staring at the fridge filled with delicious foods. It was despicable, gross even, that the average American owned this much food at a time. I snatched a bag of grapes, some cheese, a small portion of meat. *Not too greedy!* I chided myself. *You probably don't have much time.* I closed the fridge gently, edging my way over to the window I had let myself in. I slid carefully out of the window, closing it behind me. The chilly fall air greeted me; I pulled the sleeves of my 3-year-old sweatshirt over as much of my arms as it could stretch. *This is a new low, Nick.*

I dove down and pressed my back against the brick bottom wall of the manicured house and peered out from behind a trimmed hedge as a black Dodge approached it. Nervously adjusting the food under the crook of my arm, I shut my eyes tight, praying that the car wouldn't turn into the suburban driveway. Of course, with my luck, my chances were annoyingly low. I opened one eye less than a millimeter to check the position of the car, sure enough, the car had turned into the driveway of the house I had robbed.

Just my luck.

*Remember,* I reminded myself, *you're fast. You can get away safely.* My chances were worse than usual, though. I had used a window near the front door, it had been the only one I could reach. I edged closer to the side of the yard farthest from the driveway, moving less than an inch to avoid making any loud noise. I shifted my position on the dying, graying grass to see the owner of the car, a woman, who looked to be about 30. A cold gust of wind blew a strand of brunette hair into her face. "I don't know Marcus!" the woman practically shouted into her phone as she climbed out of her car. "We can't sue him!" I rolled my eyes at the ridiculousness that was the average American. My options were limited, I couldn't wait for her to go into the house, I was way too close to the door. That left only one more option.

Run and don't look back.

I sprinted away from the bush in terror. "THIEF!" I heard the woman cry behind me. "THIEF! THIEF!" I felt my legs fly behind me, my bare feet pumping and scraping harshly on the chilly pavement. *Don't look back, Nick,* I warned myself. I heard a bark behind me, and terror flooded my body. Sure, I could probably outrun the woman, but a dog? I jerked my head back to see my tailgater.

“Mother of—” I swore under my breath. A dog my size, maybe even bigger was 20 feet away, gaining quickly. *Nice job, Nick. Next time let's pick a house with a pet tiger.* I had to keep running. This dog was my death penalty.

After what felt like a millisecond, I heard another bark, one that couldn't have been more than a foot away. I staggered as my tailgater chomped the back of my sweatshirt, barely missing my back. I looked back at the dog with wide eyes. The black greyhound clung to my back fiercely, and barked loudly. “Let go, you stupid dog,” I growled, pulling myself forward as much as I could. But the dog sat and refused to move. To my horror, a man in a suit was sprinting towards my capturer and me. *No, no, no, no. I can't get caught.* I pulled myself forward again. “Just. Let. Go!” I cried. I lunged forward one more time and felt the dog lose its grip. I sprinted forward but it was too late, an iron grip fastened around my shoulder.

“You're coming with me,” a deep voice growled. I turned my head to look at my captor. The man with the suit stood before me, his hand locked on my shoulder. He had a young face, and close cut short hair. He eyed the food under the crook my arm and yanked me forward. I casually looked at his stomach, calculating if I could get away after elbowing him. “Don't even think about it,” he warned as if he could read my mind, “This dog can do much more than pull.” I glared down at the dog who now trotted proudly by his owner's side. I stayed silent, *this couldn't be happening.*

I was stopped at the front door. The man put his hand out angrily and gestured to the food under the crook of my arm. I stared at the ground and slowly put the contents of food I had taken into his hands. “What else?” I looked up and shook my head. “What. Else?” He ran a hand through messy brown hair and his face softened. He looked me in the eye. “Did you take anything else?” he asked quietly. I cast my eyes to the ground. I didn't talk much. *No duh.*

“No,” I murmured. He frowned.

“What?”

“No,” I said a little louder. He studied the contents in his hands and raised an eyebrow.

“So all you took was food?” he asked slowly. I nodded. “Where do you live? I'll call your folks.” I didn't say anything. “Where are your parents?” he asked again sternly.

I shook my head slightly. He looked down at the food again. "You don't have...?" the man turned slowly. "Stay here," he murmured quietly and ran into the house.

*That's cute.*

I inched towards the edge of the yard, like I had just five minutes ago. I heard another bark. Right, the dog, there was no way I was going to escape again with that thing on my tail. I put myself back in the position the man had left me in, so he didn't consider the fact that I had tried to leave. The man opened the door and gestured for me to come inside. *That is NOT happening.* I backed away slowly. "Ruff!" Jeez! Stupid dog. I made my way up to the house, casting my eyes to the ground. I tightened my muscles the second I stepped through the door. Not only did I have trust problems with people in general, but I had just ROBBED these people. The man pointed to a dining room table and I sat down in a chair slowly. The woman, the owner of the black Dodge sat down across from me.

"How old are you?" she asked softly. I eyed the window, could I escape?

"Erm. 10." I said quietly. I knew I looked older than I was, probably because of the dirt and grime on my face. I still eyed the window. It would take too long to open it, could I jump through it, like in the movies?

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Nick," I practically whispered. Of course I realized right AFTER, that I should have lied. I should have said my name was Jason, or Michael. That's what spies in movies did, right? The woman shot a glance to the man who had caught me, then returned her attention to me.

"Hi Nick, I'm Jennifer," she reached across the table to shake my hand, but I stayed stiffly in my seat. She recoiled awkwardly, then cleared her throat. "Do you have a place to live?"

I shook my head "no." Again, I realized I could have lied and gotten out of there. Wow, I was good at this. She nodded stiffly and looked deep into my eyes. "Would you like to stay here for the night?"

My eyes widened. *Whaaaaat?* Before I could shout "NO", or before I could explain that I couldn't stay, Jennifer rushed in again, probably noticing the concern, and utter terror on my face.

"It's supposed to go down to 10 degrees," Jennifer said slowly. *Oh*. I hadn't spent a winter in the cold before, and I hadn't expected it to be easy. *Though, they'll probably kill you in your sleep*. I reminded myself cautiously.

Just one night, I finally decided. I wasn't even sure I could survive the night in 10 degree weather, and a heated house sounded so, so, SO good. "Yes, please," I muttered under my breath.

Jennifer stood up, "Okay, I have a bed upstairs you can use, I'll take you up. It's getting late anyway." I got up and slowly followed her up the lavender carpeted stairs, feeling the man's gaze on my back. The house was comforting though, the smell of cinnamon wafted through the house.

"Why don't you take a shower?" Jennifer suggested at the top of the stairs, gesturing to the bathroom on the right. I nodded and let myself in.

What looked like a 13-year-old boy stared back at me through the mirror. He had dirty blonde hair, literally, and a grimy face from living on the streets for far too long. I stripped off my clothes and led myself into the shower, letting the hot water stream down my chest. I hadn't taken a shower for a month or two now, I reminded myself.

The boy in the mirror had changed once I had stepped out. He looked younger, cleaner, and a little more sane.

Jennifer grinned at me when I came out; Jennifer had insisted I use one of her clean shirts. "You look like a different person!" I didn't smile back, I didn't trust her, the "kill-him-in-his-sleep-idea" still rang loudly like an alarm in my head. Jennifer led me down the pink hallway, decorated with picture frames and fake plants.

My room was blue and simple. A window looked out to the dark neighborhood of identical houses, and modern hardwood floor covered the bottom. I walked out to look out the window. *What the heck are you doing, Nick? You're trapping yourself.*

I ignored my gut though, and listened to my head, which gave reason too. I would probably freeze to death if I went outside. Reluctantly, I climbed into my blue bed and stared at the ceiling, scared out of my skin. I replayed the day in my head, and kept reminding myself how dangerous it was. But they had given me a place to stay, and Jennifer seemed nice enough. Maybe she could be like a mom to me, and the man could be my dad. I could go to school like other normal kids, and have friends, and we

would play together. But I knew this was a reality I couldn't live; this wasn't where I was going to live, I wasn't going to abandon the reason I had left home in the first place.

I waited until midnight, stared at the ceiling, and waited for the lights in the hall to die, and then eventually Jennifer and the man's voices to fade, then disappear completely. My mother had been abusive, and my father was a drunk. Their hatred for my brother had been so intense he hadn't been able to take it, and I hadn't been able to either. He would lay in bed with me at night, after my parents fighting had died, and tell me stories. Stories about a land where everyone was happy, and no one fought, we would lay there for hours, wishing we were there.

And then my brother had disappeared.

I crept down the stairs quietly and unlocked the door and peered out quietly. The cold air greeted me painfully, and I studied the stars sadly, the way I had seen my older brother do thousands of times. I mentally made a plan in my head and went with my gut. I knew what I had to do, to find my brother, and find the land where everyone was happy.

Run and don't look back.