

Farsighted Clarity

Her name is Debbie, and she'll be my cashier for the next two minutes. The second "B" of her name sits slightly lower than the other letters on her name badge, which all hover just above the slogan, "Our People Make The... Difference." A yellow sticker placed in the top right corner must have been a star or balloon or something. The edges of the mystery sticker have peeled away, leaving a yellow chunk encircled in dirt colored adhesive. If the sticker was intended to encourage enthusiasm, daily wear and tear has revealed something other than that. What remains is stuck and will require a bit of effort to make a "difference."

Debbie looks up at me and slow blinks. She then looks to her left to coldly and silently point out that a line of customers is waiting. She reaches for the telephone next to her register.

"I need a price check," she says into the receiver, sounding doubtful and definitely annoyed.

I glance to my right without making any eye contact and register three customers waiting. They shift their weight while gazing at my transaction, desperate to go on about their day.

Debbie describes the item in question to her superior on the other end of the phone line, then examines her polished nails. My soft yet forced grin goes unacknowledged.

"What's the approval code?" She pecks at the register, hangs up the phone, and without looking at me says, "that'll be \$23.98."

I exhale because my price has been corrected and everyone here can now carry on. Taking my receipt, I think, *that yellow sticker was probably a smiley face, before it was worn down*. I walk past 11 rows of empty cashier stands surrounded by "impulse goods." That's what

my friend Tray used to call them when he was still here. I consider Debbie's ability to make me feel ridiculous side-by-side with her lack of ability to make the "difference" promised by the superior who designed her name badge. She is required to call for a price check and enter an approval code over \$2. I think about how she wanted the verdict to be not in my favor, but in the favor of...well, I am not sure who or what she favored. I think about the impatient stares of three customers who may or may not have pointed out a \$2 mistake in their own transaction.

Whenever something goes wrong, there is a taking of sides. We select a victim or, conversely, a defense. We armor up with people and opinions that will support our side. We assign blame, repeat our own account again and again, and often look to shame someone for being wrong, as if it will change anything.

Bzzz.

My phone buzzes. It's a Facebook message from a childhood acquaintance. Although we haven't directly spoken in at least two decades, I know he is a comedian, has put on some weight, loves the Denver Nuggets, and recently became engaged to his girlfriend. Thank you, Facebook.

Matt writes: *Hey...so, small world...do you know the guy that shot me? I see you guys are cool on FB*

My feet stop, as if taking another step would indict everyone I know, making me a snitch.

Bzzz.

Matt double texts: *He and I started an organization for youth, focused on forgiveness and resiliency.*

Safe to proceed, I walk through the exit and quickly type: *Who?!?*

Followed by: *Wow! I'm stunned, curious, and impressed all at the same time*

I place my bags in my trunk then settle into my car and wait to learn who shot Matt.

Two years ago, I entered the bright-white Lindsey-Flanigan Courthouse. The building was library-quiet and clean, but not welcoming. When I first walked through the big glass door, I was overcome with what felt like mandated seriousness. I shuffled forward, upright and wide eyed with other arrivals. No one was speaking, the only sound was the clank of keys placed in a dish beside the metal detector. There was an occasional beep from the machine as it scanned each of us for ill intentions. Ahead, TVs displayed that day's contests. After finding the name of the accused and the corresponding room number, we moved toward the elevator. The only sound was footsteps, determined-serious footsteps. At the elevator we faced forward, avoided eye contact and shifted our weight until we heard the ding as the doors opened. More shuffling. The elevator was taking each of us to learn the fate of those in our respective trial rooms. The elevator air was stiff with expectation, fear, and anxiety of people awaiting accountability and justice. I had an urge to break the trance, take a deep breath, and wish them all luck. Instead, I finally spoke my first words when I excused myself to get off on the 5th floor.

From the second to last wooden row, backed in the corner of courtroom 5A, I exhaled with the victim's family as the court clerk read the jury's verdict: "Guilty."

The relief on this side of the room was loud. I saw Tray's image in the huge smile on his older sister's face. She was diving in to hug a cousin who was shaking a fist in the air the way one does when their team gets a hard-fought first down. Tray's mom exhaled with an audible yelp. Her purse plunked down on the wooden bench as she dropped to her knees. Tears streamed

down her face. The prosecutors looked to each other, mouths turned up just short of a grin, giving a congratulatory head-nod before turning back to the judge.

I think I'm relieved. I am definitely unsure what to do with my smile, body, or hands. *Celebrate, cheer, and then what? Congratulate? Who? We won, right?* I want out; I need a deep breath of free-flowing air. Something in me knows that this looks like winning but is performative, mechanical, and evades what is actually a great loss.

A year earlier, I stood in the sunshine and late fall chill, motionless during the procession. My childhood friends, now in their 30's, wore dark suits and sunglasses. Their freshly shaven faces were expressionless and resigned. They took sullen, coordinated steps with a simple casket resting on their shoulders. Even as I type this and think of my friends, I can only see their faces with youthful smiles, Tray's the biggest and most enduring. But on that surreal day a roar of pain robbed all joy. Tray had not survived the gunshot wounds.

In courtroom 5A, the judge clears his throat, bringing movement and sound to a halt. No one wants to miss the part where the judge confirms that we, on this side, are good people while we profanely seek validation that the bad people are over there. And now it's time for our prize: the punishment.

But there I was, judging myself, *whose side am I on if I don't rejoice in this moment? What would Tray make of my hesitation?* I regret having not escaped during the victorious stir.

I can't bring myself to feel enthusiastic, or any positive emotion. I am an anthropologist, sitting nearby on a wooden bench, observing, noting, and seeking to understand what meaning we assign to this tradition. If I look at the bright blue wristband on my left arm that says "TRAY – One Love, One Heart", I can easily become sad, reminiscent, or angry. But this moment seems

to have nothing to do with Tray. This moment is nothing like the celebrations we'd had with Tray. Like when we smiled and jostled him about getting a job at a high-end restaurant where he was going to charm the patrons out of a good tip. He smiled and winked with charming confidence, "Precisely!" My intake of this moment is pure observation.

Surrounded by "justice" I am utterly numb.

The judge declares, "Sentencing is set for May 1st at 11 o'clock. Please take the defendant into custody." The court worker begins stamping papers and shuffling files as if it's all in a day's work. The deputy, who was leaning against a nearby wall with arms and legs crossed, casually hikes up his pants and strolls toward the defendant.

The cousins, parents, and friends on the other side of the courtroom kind of look like us. Only, they are sitting in the heavy silence of losing. Their shoulders are slumped, movements subdued and regretful, almost like they are glued to the past trying to change what has happened. A woman with a little girl in her lap sniffles just audibly. The little girl, who is wearing yellow barrettes, squirms to look at her mom. She does not yet know her father murdered my friend. She does not yet know her father will live in prison.

He has maintained his innocence; his public defender says it was self-defense. I see the back of his head and the collar of his cheap grey suit. He is wearing glasses, which are supposed to help his vision as he is held accountable.

But has he been? Accountability is the ability to give a report or description of an event or experience. He has instead used his 5th Amendment right. The glasses are only a prop for his performance of innocence while they offer no near- or far-sighted clarity.

Bzzz.

Matt's response arrives: *Jonathan Nelson*

My head rocks back and then forward as if to help my eyes focus. But it is actually my mind orienting Matt to Johnathan, to me, right now in my parked car. I roll down the window and a very slight breeze comes in.

I glance up and see Debbie walking past with her name badge still attached. She is holding the bottom of her phone close to her mouth, talking into the receiver with the top pointed forward and away from her face. Her other hand is dancing up and down and around in rhythm with the story she is telling. She pauses only long enough to suck on a peach colored vape, never putting the earpiece to her ear, and then exhales a large cloud that we both hope holds all her battles as it dissipates.

According to Facebook, Jonathan was released from prison within the last year. We were close before he was caught for bank fraud and locked away for 15. I did not know he ever shot someone. I start to type a slew of questions like:

When?

Then what happened?

But I delete the prompts and leave the direction of the conversation to Matt.

I type: *I do know him.*

Then: *I was very close with his family...*

Jonathan was an adolescent caretaker as the oldest of 13 in a poverty-stricken, 3-bedroom home. The front door didn't lock and didn't even fully close. There were no clean dishes, and food was only abundant the first week of every month. There was no security other than that

offered by Jonathan, who laughed equally as much as he wore a straight face. His expressions were fit for someone serious about protecting the people he took responsibility for. He was disciplined, living under his own set of laws. The youngest sisters always ate first. Every morning started with music before anyone could talk. No one was allowed in or near the home until he deemed them “family.” And, whenever a family member asked where he got money or other supplies he brought home, he responded the same way, “It has made its way to you, it’s yours now, use it well.” Jonathan woke, moved, and slept, though barely, in a constant state of survival. Jonathan was kind and Jonathan caused harm.

I knew Matt before I met Jonathan. During our summers, Matt could be found playing basketball every morning in the gym at YMCA summer day camp. He was the one cracking up while talking smack. He was in the older group, funny, and too popular to acknowledge me. Our summers were filled with swimming, roller skating, arts and crafts, structure, consistent meals, and adults responsible for our wellbeing.

Bzzz. A long message pops up on my screen.

Matt recounts: I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. There was a fight, and me being the funny guy, thought I could tell a few jokes. Ended up in the hospital for 30 days LOL. I almost got my lick back too. My friends told me who shot me, where he lived, and gave me a heater...my drunk ass sat there listening to Hit’Em Up...me and Tupac were gonna take his ass out LOL...

Hearing Tupac’s lyrics in my mind, I look away from the message.

At the repast following Tray’s burial we cried and laughed, sharing memories. Tray made the best hot wings, so we agreed to get together annually for a wing cook off. Then the

conversation shifted to rage. One of us declared, “This muthafucka knows what time it is. He best keep his ass snugged tight in that jail or he’s bout to feel the wrath of a menace.” We agreed to that too.

Matt’s message went on: *my mom insisted I read a victim’s statement and this fool sat there expressionless...*

I picture Jonathan’s straight face from years of not caring about anyone outside of his family.

Matt explains: *working with justice involved youth I was able to keep an eye on him once he got locked up. Maaaannn replayed that night in my mind a million times. 20 years later a guy I know connected us. We agreed to meet with our wives. It was the conversation I have been wanting for almost half of my life...*

My eyes well up.

Matt’s conclusion: *now we are telling our story!*

Bzzz.

Matt adds: *haven’t talked to you in years LOL! Ur prolly wondering why I’m in your inbox now. I don’t know, small world I guess LOL. Check us out www.frp303.com*

Bzzz.

Matt: *And please share, LOL*

I click the link. Jonathan's image shows him firm, still a straight face, but one that wants to protect others now. Matt is leaning on Jonathan, suggesting they are ready to move forward with anyone who will join them.

Something in me fully understands why Matt is in my inbox. Holding on to the hope that the past can be any different is painful. Tying our healing to the punishment of the person who harmed us is a trap. Matt sounds free. He gets to tell his story. He gets to hear the story from the person who harmed him. In a world where victims and perpetrators are treated as opposites, Matt and Jonathan's story suggests there is more to it. They are challenging our societal habit of meeting pain with vengeance.

I message back: *Thanks for sharing this with me, today. Seriously.*

Matt hearts my message.

The clock reads 11:27. I am supposed to be meeting up with Tray's sister. The defendant filed an appeal right after sentencing. The contest, the harm, the pain seems never-ending.

Just then I hear Debbie still giving an account into the receiver. She is walking back towards the store, nearing my car. I overhear, "Humph, watch them ask me to stay, watch! Even though I already told them I had my nieces' performance today. They don't care."

As I observe Debbie, I realize her day mirrors my own – a struggle between the mundane and profound where even a simple transaction sends us into an us vs. them battle stance.

I lean out my window, catch her eye, and smile. "Always, always ask for what you want. They might get mad, but you won't. Nieces are important!" Asking for what you want may be

the only version of accountability that works in a system that sets us up for never-ending competition.

She smiles, winks, and makes a click with her mouth as if to say, “that’s it, that’s the thing!” as she continues back to the store with her name badge still attached.

Accountableness is not outward, it’s not a way to exude power over others or heal. Accountableness is inward, sacred, self-empowering.

I start my car and send a message to Tray’s sister: *OMW...*

Then: *hey...would you mind telling me some stories about growing up as Tray’s big sister? I don’t have it in me to talk about the trial today.*