The Grove

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THE GROVE

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate School of Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts English

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Home Insecurity in Literature

Homelessness is a rampant and pressing problem throughout America today, yet there appears to be an astounding lack of literature, fictional or nonfictional, that discusses the subject. Works of literature that do discuss homelessness or feature homeless characters also usually have them more in the background, with their home displacement being more of a side effect or a consequence of whatever the work’s main focus is. Additionally, works that do discuss or feature homelessness in some capacity are also usually not written by someone who has first hand knowledge or experience of what it’s like to be home insecure. In fact, through my research I have not yet come across any noteworthy work that was actually written by an author who had experienced homelessness themselves at some point or another. A trend that one can notice when surveying literature that features homeless characters is that home insecurity itself is typically not the root of the problem, but in fact there is usually some other deeper rooted issue such as psychological problems, substance abuse, parental abuse, or some other factor that makes said character feel displaced emotionally, and so this therefore leads to their actual displacement. Here, I have examined several works that feature main characters experiencing home displacement, as well as nonfiction works that focus on the topic. This will bring to light which aspects of home insecurity are highlighted in literature, give insight into the internal struggles that tend to lead individuals towards such a lifestyle, and what gaps writers still need to fill in terms of discussing home displacement in literature.

In stories that feature homeless characters, even as the protagonist, their struggle with home insecurity is usually in the background with other conflicts being the plot’s main focus. Take for instance two extremely well known pieces of literature that feature characters with
home insecurity: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger. In Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove, one of the main characters, is displaced from her home after her alcoholic father attempts to burn down the house that her family lives in. Despite this being a very traumatic event, Morrison instead chooses to focus on plot elements that mainly highlight racism, colorism, and sexism rather than home insecurity. In the case of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the narrator, Holden, is not necessarily homeless, but he *is* home insecure especially during this time that he is choosing to go on the run from his parents. Like Pecola, he has other reasons for being in this position besides financial need. Though he never goes in depth with it, Holden often alludes to his parents’ apparent emotional abuse, saying that he hates when people always call them “grand” because they are not. *The Catcher in the Rye* completely overlooks this aspect of Holden’s line of thinking, and in fact every time it seems that Holden is *about* to bring up something about his parents or something traumatic, he distracts himself on purpose, saying things like “I don’t feel like going into it” before moving on to some other topic. Similarly with *The Bluest Eye*, this novel focuses on Holden’s internal struggles such as his dislike of society and his desire to go off somewhere to just “catch a body in the rye” rather the factors that led up to or the difficulties that come with his home insecurity. Some stories are slightly more focused on the problem of home insecurity, but usually still have it featured as one of many main plot elements. Aside from this, stories that include home insecurity struggles in the forefront are usually not as well known or widely read. For example, I examined two novels *Also Known As Harper* by Ann Haywood Leal and *Ironweed* by William Kennedy whose scenes went into a lot more detail depicting actual homeless life. Neither of these titles, however, are nearly as widely known as *The Bluest Eye* or *The Catcher in the Rye*, both of which are seen frequently on both high school and college reading lists. By contrast, I had to find
Ironweed by doing preliminary searches at the start of this project for “books with homeless characters” or “novels about homelessness.” Also Known As Harper is a children’s chapter book that I read quite some time ago in elementary school after finding it randomly pulling out overs that I thought looked nice at the library. I then re-read it recently with the scope of this project in mind. In Also Known As Harper, Harper Lee Morgan and her family are evicted from their home and are forced to live in a hotel and at one point out of their car. Because of these living circumstances, there are some pretty graphic depictions of the conditions of homelessness within scenes, but the plot still primarily focuses on Harper and her social struggles in the fifth grade as well as her relationship with her mother. Ironweed also features a homeless protagonist, Francis, who drifts from place to place staying with different people and sometimes outside. Francis has his own internal struggles that occupy his mind similar to Pecola, Holden, and Harper, but Ironweed is the most graphic in terms of all the fictional stories I reviewed when it comes to depictions of homeless life. There is one scene in which Francis discovers his friend Sandra frozen, because she slept in the street outside. Still, the novel spends a lot more time expounding on Francis’ internal grief over the accidental death of his son, as well as the difficulties that come with his alcoholism in lieu of focusing specifically on home insecurity and how lack of housing may affect someone. Ironweed perhaps gave the best effort towards depicting a realistic homeless life of all the fictional books I read during my studies, but it is set during the thirties so problems that may have affected “bums” like Francis in the past may not be applicable to today’s homeless population. This is why it is important for writers to put out more contemporary looks at homelessness, addressing specific problems that may affect someone who is living like this in the modern age.
Despite including specific scenes that depict what homeless life is like in *Ironweed*, Kennedy is not speaking from experience. Growing up in Albany New York with Irish immigrant parents, Kennedy had a fairly normal childhood attending public school, private school, and then college. His family was working class, and they may have lived modestly but were never homeless, especially not to the extent that Francis the drifter is experiencing home insecurity. This disconnect between the author and the subjects that they are trying to comment on is also a commonality among nonfiction works that focus on homelessness or home insecurity. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich is one nonfiction book that significantly influenced and inspired this project. It details the journey of undercover journalist, Barbara Ehrenreich, as she conducts a social experiment in which she takes minimum wage or low-paying jobs and tries to live off of only the funds she earns from these jobs. Even though her experiment and her close encounters with coworkers who were homeless or home insecure gave a lot of insight into home insecurity and America’s housing problem, Ehrenreich is not speaking from genuine experience. *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond is another nonfiction work very similar to *Nickel and Dimed* that details the lives of several families in urban Milwaukee Wisconsin who are severely impoverished or are in the process of being evicted from their homes. All of the families featured in this book are home insecure, but their stories are told more from Desmond’s point of view than from their own perspective. Being an acclaimed sociologist and professor, Desmond’s background and life experience does not exactly match that of the subjects he is writing about. Another good example of a nonfiction story about homelessness written by someone who has never experienced it themselves is *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game* by Micheal Lewis. Even though the story focuses on once
homeless football star Micheal Oher, the book was written by Micheal Lewis, a renowned financial journalist and author who does not share a similar background with Oher at all.

In a similar way, Beautiful Boy by David Sheff is a story not about David Sheff himself but about his son, Nic, who struggles with addiction and then eventual homelessness due to complications with his addiction. Even though David Sheff may have lots of inside knowledge on Nic’s specific situation being his father, he has not experienced any sort of home insecurity himself and therefore the problem is still being addressed from an outsider’s perspective.

Another way that Beautiful Boy is very similar to The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game (as well as several of the fictional works I have studied for this project) is that it includes homelessness as part of a larger story or plot rather than making homelessness the focus of the story. Beautiful Boy mainly talks about Nic Sheff’s addiction and struggle with substance abuse than it does about his jumping from home to home, even though that element is clearly there in the background. In The Blind Side, Micheal Oher is a homeless high school student that is taken in by a wealthier family. However, his homelessness is really only a small piece in the beginning of the story while most of the book focuses on how the Tuohys, Micheal’s newfound family, helps him go on to succeed in both academics and athletics. Given these examples, it is clear that both fiction and nonfiction accounts of homelessness in literature seem to keep the issue of home insecurity more in the background, giving more focus to plot elements like addiction or a coming of age story about sports.

All of these works, though they feature homeless characters or discuss the topic of home insecurity, don’t actually focus on the problem in depth. This is because other things are at play like substance abuse, abusive parents, and psychological problems, which contribute to home insecurity and not feeling like one belongs in the place they currently stay. Additionally, none of
these works were written by an author who has inside knowledge or experience of homelessness, so their portrayal of homeless characters may be skewed or inaccurate based on preconceived notions they might have of people who are home insecure. If these authors did have first hand experience of homelessness or home insecurity, perhaps the problem would be addressed more directly and carefully. For this reason, it is important for writers who may have experienced homelessness or home insecurity to get their story out there, or at least a fictional one that can give a realistic depiction of the problems that come with this lifestyle. In-depth contemporary accounts of homelessness are few and far between, and even when they do come about home insecurity is typically not the central issue being addressed. America is experiencing such a housing crisis that many readers will be able to relate to these struggles. Additionally, if more people begin writing about home insecurity and the struggles that come with it, more awareness could be raised for helpful action or policy to follow. What I aim to do with my thesis by describing my own experience living out of my car is give an inside account of what it’s like to be homeless from someone who’s actually experienced it. Mine will be unique to most of these accounts (accepting Also Known As Harper) because it will be from the point of view of a younger person experiencing homelessness, someone still in college. I still plan to explore some of the same ideas about other problems being the real underlying issue, but I mainly want to keep the focus on the lack of housing and the unique struggles that come with living that way. I hope my work can add to the undersized library of first-hand accounts of home insecurity, and also inspire other young writers who may have been through similar struggles to share their story.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


I dated Noah for eight months, but it was only for the last three that we lived in my car together. We knew the lease in my old apartment was going to be up soon, and we tried to prepare accordingly, but most places were refusing to accept our renters’ applications without a cosigner. This was of course compounded by Noah’s severe dependency on marijuana. With so much of my single income going towards the weed man almost daily, we could only afford to apply to cheap, often seedy apartments that tended to be rented out to “more suitable applicants” quicker than we could even find the listing online. After searching and searching for a place for almost three months (April through mid-June of 2022), we had accepted the grim reality that if we were going to live together, it was going to have to be in my car, at least temporarily, or so we told ourselves.

At the time, I already had a steady job at Walmart. I was a personal shopper, which meant taking people’s online orders, shopping for their items in store, and then delivering said items to their car. It wasn’t very glamorous, and shifts were often early, sometimes five or five-thirty in the morning, but it was good money. It was because of this job (and all the extra and overtime hours I picked up) that I was able to support Noah and I, as well as his crippling habit, for as long as I did. Around this time in my life, I remember writing a poem that I titled “Strings,” in which I talked about how I held up both our lives by “strings” while Noah merely strummed the strings of his guitar. The sentiment couldn’t be more true.

It’d be inaccurate to claim that Noah never had a job for that entire eight months. At one point during our homeless stint, sometime in late June/early July, he was able to secure a position at the Domino’s that was located inside the same Walmart I worked at. He worked there for two weeks, took home copious amounts of food, probably more than was allowed,
then quit because he hated it. He’d rather spend most of his time sitting around playing music, and if someone wanted to give him money for it sometimes, then even better.

Luckily for Noah, the place that we made arrangements to park my car at was perfectly conducive for this lifestyle. Once we realized that living in the car for at least a short period was going to be inevitable, Noah contacted his close friend and previous benefactor, Andrew Brown. By the time we found ourselves in this sticky situation, I actually already knew Andrew. Businessman, entrepreneur, and Clemson alumnus, Andrew was a man of many hats. He was charismatic, wealthy, and well connected, and he also owned two bars, both of which Noah’s band had previously played paid gigs for. The Appalachian Ale House was our favorite, a party spot, but it was also in the middle of downtown Pendleton, and frequented by local law enforcement due to noise complaints. The Golden Grove Farm and Brew, however, in Piedmont, South Carolina, was more out of the way. The property was several acres, and served as Andrew’s family home, a bar, a brewery, a garden or “farm,” a disc golf course, and an outdoor festival venue, all rolled into one. The main building, the bar, was of course also perfect for partying, but the surrounding wooded area that made up the golf course and the outdoor festival space was perfect for hiding in plain sight. Even if someone were to notice Noah and I parked there (which I’m positive many people did), who’s to say we weren’t just another patron of the farm and brew? No one was ever the wiser, unless they knew us personally that is.

I’m unsure exactly what Noah said to Andrew to convince him into letting us park my car outside the Golden Grove for an unspecified amount of time—he wouldn’t allow me to be present for the conversation. All I know is that one Tuesday night, open jam night at the Ale House, Noah was taking a break from playing and he met up with me at the bar while I was
getting another drink. He looked suave and confident when he approached me, like he was about to tell me some good news.

“Guess what?” He leaned one arm against the bar and faced me, raising his eyebrows.

“You talked to Andrew?” My tone was hopeful, we’d been discussing the need to get Andrew’s permission to park at the Grove for several days by that point.

“Yes.” Noah looked with his eyes to see if anyone was tuning in, then lowered his voice. “He said it’d be alright if we parked there, but to not make a big deal about it. We can talk more about it later.”

“Did he--”

“I said, we’ll talk about it later.” He glared at me before turning to get the bartender’s attention.

I wanted to know more right then, but at least knowing it was a “yes” was more than satisfactory. I sipped my drink. I watched the bartender, our friend Karsen, pour Noah the darkest IPA on tap. Thinking about if I were to tell Karsen what Noah and I were going through right now, I wondered why everything always had to be so secretive with him. If we just told our friends, they would care, we would have more help, but I just sat there with my mouth shut, and waited until “later.”

The following morning, Noah finally finished informing me of the terms of the agreement. We could park my car there overnight, but we couldn’t go inside any of the buildings once they were locked. In the mornings, when the disc golfers were usually around, we couldn’t do anything that would attract a lot of attention, like showering with the hose or laying a ton of clothes out to dry. The occasional free drink was still welcome (Andrew had
always given Noah this privilege for as long as I’d known) but don’t go too crazy, since we were going to be hanging out there every day. We couldn’t interfere with any of the staff or the grounds workers who were there in the mornings, including to be asked to let inside to use the bathroom. We also couldn’t advertise to people that we were basically living there in the parking lot, or else other vagrants would probably have the same idea.

The thing with the Golden Grove (and the Appalachian Ale House besides) was that most of the clientele, or at least the regulars, were a lot like Noah and me. If they weren’t homeless or couch surfing now, they were at one point in their lives. If they weren’t strung out on drugs or stumbling drunk now, they used to be. The Grove was full of wanderers, people who had either completely lost their way, or who were still fighting to try and find it. Anyone who found themselves spending a lot of time at this establishment, you could almost bet that they were going through something heavy. Despite the tragedy that hung in the air there, it was always coupled with an overwhelming welcoming feeling and an outpouring of love. It was a place where you could feel free to be yourself, even if you were at your lowest. Collectively, I’d describe the regulars of the Grove as a bunch of hippies. Noah and I fit right in.

Everyone who hung around there was into music, whether they played it, danced to it, traveled the country for festivals, or stayed right there in the upstate and attended local shows. Noah fell into the category of those who played music. For as long as I knew him (and maybe still now), he tried putting together this band that he dubbed “Crunch for Time.” The members were ever-rotating, but one thing stayed constant: Noah’s original songs, and the couple dozen covers that he used to play over and over again.
I even had my own stake in the “band” though I’m quite sure it was because Noah and I were dating rather than because I had any sort of musical talent whatsoever. I sang “backup vocals” on select parts of songs, chosen by Noah, and I played various supplementary percussion instruments including the tambourine, the spoons, and the hand drums. Mostly, I kind of danced and swayed around and looked pretty. I even remember Noah saying something to me at one point about how more people will want to come watch, because we have a hot girl up there with us now. He always was very concerned about his “public image” for someone who wasn’t ever that famous.

The Grove frequently held live music events featuring local artists, and the latest version of Crunch for Time played a number of nights during the time that Noah and I lived there. Andrew didn’t pay him of course, since we were living rent free on his property, but it was as much of a mutual exchange as we could muster. In addition to live music shows, the Grove also held an event every Monday night that summer called “Super Jam,” run by an old head named Charles. This was an open jam event, meaning that the Grove would provide various instruments (mostly Charles’) on the stage area, and whoever felt like playing or singing was allowed to come up and join. Interestingly enough, these nights fostered the most drama amongst this group of hippies.

On open jam nights I tended to just sit and watch, unless Noah played a specific song that we had discussed singing together beforehand. Noah dominated the guitar parts at most open jams, to the point where hardly anyone else was able to play if they wanted. He would stay up there playing for hours, yet would get angry if I walked off to do something else for a while instead of listening. Particularly, there was one night where I missed basically a whole
set of him playing because I was outside on the patio talking to our friend who I hadn’t seen in awhile, Dustin.

“Wait…so where have you been, you know, staying?” Dustin asked me after I finished (vaguely) explaining some of our struggles with finding another apartment.

With just my eyes, I glanced around to see if anyone was listening in. Relief washed over me when I saw Noah was still on the stage playing guitar. I knew he didn’t want me telling a soul but I had to get this situation off my chest to someone besides him. Slowly with no sudden movement, I leaned over a little bit and pointed to where my car was sitting in the parking lot, not far from where Dustin and I sat. He followed my gaze and raised an eyebrow.

“Noah too? For how long?” He sounded more surprised than I thought he’d be--Noah and I had been hanging around the Grove literally every night, and till late.

“Just since the middle of June,” I said, my voice lowered. “He doesn’t want me to tell anyone, but we’re close and I figured it’s better to have more people looking out for us than less.”

“Yeah, no, I feel you.” Dustin looked deep in thought, running a hand over his bald head. “I live with roommates, but y’all could definitely come over for a couple hours to use the shower or something.”

“I’ll remember that.” I trailed off and then made a “shh” motion towards Dustin as I saw Noah leaving the stage and approaching me.

“Hey!” I said excitedly and wrapped him in a hug when he walked up to us. He hugged me back, but not very enthusiastically.

“Where have you been?” No introduction. I could tell he was mad that I didn’t watch him play.
“Out here talking to Dustin.” I gestured towards Dustin, who smiled goofily and fixed
his glasses.
“You missed me playing ‘Climb to Safety.’ I was gonna tell you to come up and sing on that
one.” He glanced at Dustin and nodded hello.
“You play like every night, babe. I’m gonna come in and watch in just a minute.”
“Look! Pryzmo and Brooklyn are about to go play something!” Dustin pointed to the
stage, probably trying to break the awkward tension. Sure enough, the iconic guitarist-
drummer couple were taking the stage to give Charles and the rest of Noah’s usual jam
buddies a break. They all rushed to the bar to get drinks.
Noah sighed a little. Dustin probably didn’t notice, but I did. He’d wanted to keep
playing.
“I’m gonna go smoke.” Noah pulled a gar pack out of his pocket and wiggled it at us
before disappearing around the side of the building.
“I better go follow him.” I gave Dustin a small smile.
“Sure, see you later. Just let me know if y’all ever wanna come use the shower,
seriously.” I nodded and smiled as I turned to follow Noah. Just like most exchanges at
the Grove, it’d been a tense environment punctuated by a random act of extreme kindness.

The characters I met during my time at the Grove were at the very least unique. There
was Dustin, a forty-year-old bachelor who still lived life like he was in a college frat. There
was Pryzmo and Brooklyn, a rock and roll power couple who championed homeschooling
their children and eating magic mushrooms to expand the mind. There was Ally, the peppy
bartender always strung out on something or another, and Tara, the jewelry maker who
peddled her small business while teaching passersby how to hula hoop and other festival tricks, and then of course there was smooth talking Andrew.

Though mostly harmless, the substance infused environment of the Grove still fostered some horror stories amongst its regulars. There was a man named Sean who lived in his van with his dog, who sometimes spent the night there at the Grove like Noah and me. We would occasionally see him in the morning, but we would see him most nights, always trying to get on his feet but never seeming to be able to. I always noticed that he seemed to be using quite a lot of drugs for someone who was trying so hard. Sean and I got pretty close, and he even helped me work on my car at one point. We’ve stayed up late into the night, talking about life and solving the problems of the world. A few months after the whole living in my car debacle was finally over, and I was all settled here in my new apartment, I heard by word of mouth that Sean had climbed onto the billboard one night, the one right next to the Grove that can be seen from the highway. He was super wasted, and was threatening to jump, but some other regulars were able to coax him down. When I heard about it, I wondered how many days that I actually saw Sean in person and was able to talk to him, did he think about doing that. When we talked, he was always happy, joyful, committing random acts of kindness, like giving me his last cigarette even when I knew it was all he had to his name. I’ve learned there’s usually a darkness that lurks behind even the kindest people, and that is the essence of how the Grove felt. Kind, welcoming, but there was something dark there.

A different incident or “horror story” that I was actually present to witness involves a woman who went by Sunshine. It was Monday, another open jam night, and so like usual anyone who wanted to come up and join was allowed to. That night I spontaneously joined in on “Ride Me High” by Widespread Panic, which Noah gave me an angry glare about, but
when Ally came up and joined me, he let it go because she was drunk and sang much worse than I did.

Later on in the night, Noah was still playing, and another man who I didn’t know had the mic. During their set, Sunshine came stomping in through the garage door of the main building. Instead of going towards the bar or going to sit down and watch, she came right up to the band and started touching their instruments and them, saying things about how they’re doing such a great job and she can “feel” the music so good. Eventually, she tried grabbing the mic from the singer (singing a completely different song) at which point her on-again off-again boyfriend, Johnny, pulled her away, towards the bathrooms.

Later, I got an entire rant about the whole thing.

“Ally just needs to sit down sometimes,” Noah said as we sat down on a bench outside to have a cigarette.

“I mean, yeah, but everybody’s having lots of fun in there.” I smiled at him, hoping he would say something nice about my singing.

“I guess”--Noah took a long drag--“it’s just like, don’t join if you’re going to just throw everyone else who’s actually playing off, you know? And Sunshine, oh my god…”

I couldn’t relate, it was amateur night and no one felt the pressure to make perfect music except Noah apparently. “Well, at least you know you’re the best one up there.” I placed a hand on his thigh and pulled him a little closer to me on the bench. He turned to me to respond, but we heard a crashing noise over in the corner of the patio.

From around the side of the building, Sunshine came stumbling, holding onto all the picnic tables as she made her way. Johnny was right behind her, but I couldn’t really tell if he was trying to help her or just yell at her. The words that they were saying to one another were
nonsense, and I couldn’t catch most of it anyway, before Sunshine came crashing to the
ground, and ate the concrete. There seemed to be no attempt to catch herself. Quiet gasps and
a general hushing was heard from inside, as Tara and a couple of the bartenders on shift came
rushing out of the big garage door to help her up. I was just starting to feel uncomfortable
watching this scene when Noah aptly suggested, “Hey, let’s go smoke.”

“The stuff’s in the car,” I reminded him.

“We should probably head there anyway,” he said as he side-eyed the pit crew who
was dusting off Sunshine and separating her from Johnny.

The way the property was laid out, “heading to the car” would be essentially
removing ourselves from the situation entirely. The bar, the main building where we spent
most of our time, was where the public hung around. It was a big green building, and the
front door was like a garage that Andrew lifted up every night when the bar opened. The
garage door opened out onto a paved patio, where there was an outdoor stage as well as an
old school bus that was used for “decoration” but really it was used as a hookup spot. There
was an old couch inside, and everyone knew the door was unlocked. Behind the bar was the
brewery, where workers came in the morning to craft Andrew’s signature brews which he
sold by the six pack (not to mention they were always on tap).

Directly to the left of the bar, there was a wooded area, but if you were brave enough to
walk straight through it in the dark, you’d come to a clearing where there was a disc golf hole.
Beyond this, if you kept walking in a straight line, you’d come to another clearing: the outdoor
festival area. Here, there was another outdoor stage, a water spigot with a hose, and places for
campers to park. Unless there was a festival going on, no regular patrons usually made their
way over to this area. This is where Noah and I parked my car.
For three months, my home (and Noah’s) was a white 1996 Volvo V70 station wagon. It was low and long, as if you squished a van down into a pancake. There were four doors and three rows of seats, though only the front row was actually used for its intended purpose. The bucket seats and the back seats we kept flattened down and on top of them I laid my two inch memory foam mattress topper. We made this up like a bed, with sheets, blankets, pillows, and all. Any other belongings that we didn’t want cluttering up the sleeping area, we’d store on the outdoor stage for the night. Anyone who might happen to pass by could probably guess that someone was living there in that car, with bedding piled to almost the ceiling and clothes draped over the outdoor stage nearby drying. Luckily, through the darkness and the woods, we were hardly noticed. As long as we spent the night there at the grove, we were never having to look over our shoulder.
Getting Jumped

There were a lot of things wrong with that Volvo, but one of the issues that gave us grief the most consistently was the battery. Sometimes, that thing just didn’t wanna turn on. It used to make this clicking sound, and the lights would flash on and off, but the motor wouldn’t ever turn over. Frequently, we needed to ask people for jumps. The twenty-foot cables that I constantly kept behind my driver's seat ended up coming in handy more times than I care to remember.

With any normal car, you just open up your hood, then open up the hood of the car that’s giving you power. You attach red to red, and black to black, then boom: your car starts right up, easy peasy. The Volvo however, being a European car, had its battery located in the back underneath the trunk. So, it was always quite the process to move our “bed” and all our belongings enough to where we could reach the terminals. The setup was like this: the back seats and the bucket seats were laid completely flat, making enough space for my mattress topper. This was covered with a sheet, a comforter, a couple blankets, several pillows, and also a circular seat cushion that I would sometimes pull out if we were ever sitting somewhere on the ground or on the floor. Shoes, computer, musical equipment, and any other belongings that we didn’t want to sleep on or want in our bed were squeezed into the miniscule space on the car’s floor between the two front seats and the flattened bucket seats.

Whenever the car needed a jump, all of this stuff including the entire full sized mattress topper had to be squeezed to the front half of the car, and usually held there by somebody, while another person opened the little compartment in the floor where the battery terminal was. We learned quickly to get this part of the process out of the way before we asked
someone for their help, rather than when they were already heading over to our car. Even good Samaritans don’t like being held up for longer than they have to.

Jumping the car was such a common occurrence that I ended up learning how to do it without Noah’s help. Unfortunately, this didn’t alleviate the difficulty of actually finding someone who was willing to come give us a jump. Unless we were somewhere that there were already friends around like the Grove, we were reduced to asking strangers for help. This is never really a good look, going up to a random person in a parking lot asking for a jump, but especially not when you look the way we looked. Unbrushed hair, unwashed clothes, often not having showered in a couple days, and all our belongings packing my car to the brim definitely didn’t make us appear like the most savory people. Many times we were rejected by people who seemed scared of us or at least uncomfortable when we approached them.

There was one day that I was getting off work, and there was some event that night at the Grove that Noah really wanted to attend. When I headed out of Walmart towards the back of the parking lot where we usually kept our car, Noah was opening the trunk and starting to move things around. He looked extremely pissed off, so I braced myself for getting barked at to do this, move that, come over here.

“Is it the battery again?” I slipped off my work vest as I approached.

“Yep.” He didn’t look up at me, just kept throwing everything to the side to get to the battery terminals. “Go find someone who’ll jump us.”

I snuck a quick glance at my reflection in the car’s window. My hair was messy and unkempt, I had dark circles under my eyes, and was wearing the same jeans that I’d been wearing for the past three days, with a ragged tie dye shirt to top it all off. I sighed, thinking to
myself that I wouldn’t give someone who looked like me a jump, especially not if they just spontaneously approached me in a Walmart parking lot. You expect to see dirty hippies at places like the Grove, or at music festivals, not out here in the real world.

The first people I tried were a couple. A husband and wife loading up a whole car full of groceries. I usually tried to approach people who looked like they had a family or kids as they were more apt to offer help.

“Excuse me!” They didn’t look over because I was keeping a healthy distance so as not to seem too creepy. Louder, I tried again, “Excuse me!”

The wife looked up, but the husband kept loading groceries into their car.

“Hi,” I continued, “I work here, I just got off of work, and my boyfriend is right over there.” I pointed to Noah towards the back of the parking lot. “He's here to pick me up but our car won’t start, it’s been having battery issues.” The husband finished with the groceries and now they were just both staring at me blankly while I talked. “Think you could give us a jump?”

“Uh,” the wife looked over at her husband, who seemed irritated, or maybe just skeptical at my story, “we would but we really need to be getting home. We don’t have a lot of time, sorry.”

“No worries!” I said as they both got into their car. The husband never ended up saying anything to me. “Ya’ll have a nice day!”

They drove away.
The next person I tried was a woman who had two older children with her, they were maybe around age ten or so. She was about to step into her car, and one of the kids was going to put the shopping cart back.

“Excuse me!” I called and sort of jogged over, so that she didn’t drive away before I could ask. “Hi, my boyfriend and I, he’s right over there.” I pointed. “We really need a jump, our car won’t start. Think you could help us out?” She looked slowly over at Noah, who was still fiddling with things in the back of the car, then back to me.

“Um, I would, but it’s just that I have the kids with me…” she trailed off as the kid who put the cart away returned and hopped back into their car. “They just really need to get home, I’m sorry.” Before I could say no worries or anything like that, the woman finished stepping up into her car and shut the door before driving away. The kids didn’t seem fussy or anything, they were too old, and it just sounded like an excuse. I put my hands to my forehead, probably looking quite stressed, as I scanned the parking lot for someone else I could potentially ask.

Starting to panic a little (I was afraid of Noah’s wrath if we were late getting back to the Grove), I ended up just asking the very next woman I saw. She was well dressed and wearing sunglasses, speed walking out of the Walmart and towards her car.

“Excuse me! Ma’am! Do you think…” I just let my voice trail off as I realized she had just started walking faster, almost running now. She didn’t even turn her head in my direction.

Sighing, I shot a quick text to Noah, letting him know that everyone keeps saying no but that I’m still trying. I glanced over to where he was across the parking lot, but he did not
look up or wave at me or anything. He just sat on top of the Volvo, waiting, not even trying to help me ask people.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man about to get into his car. He had only a few groceries, and didn’t seem like he had any sort of family with him, but he was a little older, with white hair and kind eyes. Something in my gut, my intuition, told me this was going to be the one to say yes.

“Excuse me, sir?” I approached him, but stayed about ten feet away or so as per my usual routine. He didn’t say anything, but he looked up, so I continued. “Hi, sorry, my boyfriend and I, our car won’t start. Do you think maybe you could give us a jump? I’m just getting off work here at Walmart and he was here to pick me up.”

“Hmm, where is he?” The old man raised an eyebrow.

“Over there.” I pointed once more to Noah, still sitting on the car’s roof. “That white Volvo wagon over there is ours. It’s been having all kinds of battery problems lately.”

The man glanced over then back at me. “Well, sure, I guess I’ve got a minute.”

“Oh, thank you so much! I really appreciate that.” He got in his car and started it, and I motioned for him to roll down the window before he started driving.

“Just one more thing, whenever you pull up to it, just put the front of your car facing the back of ours, our battery is in the back,” I said.

“Ok, do y’all have jumper cables?” he asked.
“Oh, yes, we keep them on hand for situations like this.” I let out a nervous laugh. “I’ll meet ya over there.” I motioned towards my car as I started walking and the old man started following me slowly in his car.

“That took forever,” Noah said from his perch atop the car when I finally got back over there.

“Yeah, everyone was saying no, I shot you a text,” I replied. He merely jumped down and went to connect the other end of the jumper cables to the battery under the man’s hood. Meanwhile, the man put his car in park and stepped out. I could hear him and Noah exchanging pleasantries with one another while I pulled out a cigarette, also part of my usual routine whenever we needed a jump. I stayed out of Noah’s way, and tried to calm my fried nerves while the men took care of the actual jumping. As I leaned against my car, I felt it rumble as it started.

“Thank you so much!” Noah said when he stepped out to collect the cables again.

“It was no problem.” The old man shook Noah’s hand. “Y’all get to wherever you’re goin’ safely now.”

“Yessir, we will,” Noah replied. He really did know how to smooth-talk old people and cops like nobody else. The whole process of getting a jump would probably go a lot quicker if he would just do the soliciting help from strangers part.

I put my cigarette out and was already making my way to the passenger side of the Volvo when Noah barked, “Saby! Let’s go, we’re gonna be late.”

“I know,” I said, and shut the passenger door. Folding my arms, I turned and stared out the window for the whole drive back to the Grove. I always knew it was better just to not talk
to him whenever he got in moods like this. Whenever we finally arrive and his fear of missing out dissipates, I thought to myself, everything will be fine. We’ll all have a beer together, and it’ll be just fine.
We may have called the Golden Grove our “home,” parked there most nights, and spent all of our idle time there, but some nights when I had work early the next morning, we would go ahead and drive to Walmart and just sleep in the parking lot. Being a personal shopper and filling online orders, I sometimes had to go in as early as five thirty in the morning so that I could collect all the items for people who were picking up morning orders. With as late as we stayed out partying and playing music some nights, I’m not sure how I was even able to manage. Those early shifts during that time were like a fever dream, I felt like nothing but a corporate zombie.

There was one specific parking spot that we frequented, it was in the employee parking section in the corner, up next to some thick trees. It was out of the way enough that any passerby wouldn’t be able to notice Noah sleeping or smoking in the back unless they were really looking for him. If this spot wasn’t open, we’d just head to the very back of the parking lot, away from all the other cars, and just pray that no one did pass by before my shift was over. The Volvo had no window tint, and it was easy to see looking in the windows that we had a makeshift bed and what looked like all of our belongings in the back. If you took even more than ten seconds to glance our direction and assess the situation with us and the car, it was quite obvious we were homeless, a fact that neither of us really wanted to advertise.

One of the very first nights, it was during the first week that we were living like this, I was scheduled for a five thirty shift the next morning. We made the decision to sleep in the Walmart parking lot, so that I wasn’t late, and I remember being terribly nervous about it.
“You don’t think anyone’s gonna notice us just sleeping in the parking lot? In the back of the car?” I fretted to Noah.

“You’re being too paranoid about this. As long as we don’t make a scene or anything, there’s gonna be no reason for anyone coming to look in our windows,” he said as we drove there.

“But what if on the off chance someone does look,” I persisted. “Can’t they like call the cops on us for that? We can’t have that.”

“Look”—Noah made an overly sharp turn—“we’re gonna park like in that employee section that you always park at, right next to the woods. It’s gonna be in the corner, nobody can sneak up behind us, and we can see out over the whole parking lot, plus”—he braked too hard and I felt my body press against my seatbelt—“if someone does bother us, I’m gonna be right there with you. Just don’t worry about it and get some sleep before work.”

I didn’t say anything. Glancing over, I noticed Noah was not wearing his seatbelt.

We finally got to the Walmart, and thankfully the parking spot he was talking about was open. There were hardly any other cars there, and none of the ones that were there seemed to have people in them. It’s a very eerie feeling, being the only ones around in a giant sprawling parking lot. I’m usually scared of the dark, but I’d prefer sleeping in the pitch black any day compared to the uncanny glow of those streetlamps.

“Want to put on our show?” Noah asks. Family Guy had been “our show” as of late. I tend to be obsessed with adult cartoons and Noah dealt with it.
“Sure.” I looked around uneasily as I crawled into the back. The “bed” felt comfy when you first lay down, but I already knew it was only a matter of time before the hard floor of the Volvo started making my hip bones and shoulder bones ache. I sleep on my side.

Noah put Family Guy on his phone while I set my alarms for the morning. It was around ten o’clock and would have been pitch dark if it weren’t for those damn street lamps. I closed my eyes, and I got as comfortable as I could, silently thanking God that tonight was not one of those nights where Noah chose to take offense to the fact that I didn’t want to cuddle with him and be all over each other. I think he knew I really needed sleep on this particular night, and I’m not much of a cuddler.

No matter how much I might’ve needed sleep, it never came, or at least, it seemed like it didn’t. I was drifting in and out at the very best. My lullabies were Noah’s deep snores and Peter Griffin’s squeaky voice, and my nightlights were the Walmart street lamps, glaring in through the windshield with no mercy. It was hell. I contemplated calling out of work the next morning.

I laid there awake for what felt like all night. I didn’t have to check the time to know it was morning, because the sun started coming up. Everything outside was glowing orange and pink as it peeked over the horizon. I sat up.

The parking lot was still mostly empty, but I could see a few fellow employees starting to roll in for work. I made a mental note to not let anyone I knew see me stepping out of this car that someone was very obviously living in. On the floor behind the driver's seat, I scrounged around to find my blue work vest, which I put on right over the clothes I just slept in. Changing into anything besides leggings and a tie dye wasn’t going to make me look any less tired or any less dirty, there was no hope.
Noah started to stir next to me, but my eyes were still locked on the sky. It was brighter now, so less orange, but colors still swirled amongst the clouds. I’d seen posts before, memes, that say sunsets and sunrises are always the most beautiful in the least beautiful places, like the grocery store parking lot. As I watched the sun come up that first morning that we slept at Walmart, I thought about those posts and how they’re so wrong. I would’ve given anything to be watching the sun come up from the beach access near my childhood home instead of in that Walmart parking lot. The same sight would’ve been much prettier literally anywhere else.
Eaten Alive

Nights in the Walmart parking lot were rough, but nights at the Golden Grove were arguably rougher. Over near our little spot by the outdoor stage, Noah and I would park the car and sleep essentially in the middle of the woods, just a little off the dirt road that leads towards the stage. Every night, there were two options: leave all the windows up and suffocate in the heat of the vacuum sealed Volvo, or roll the windows down for air, and offer your flesh to the mosquitos as a snack. Noah was hot natured, and so he tended to go with the latter. There usually was never any arguing with him.

Mosquitos were the main enemy, but there were also stink bugs, spiders, wasps, bees, ants, almost any creepy crawly you can conceive. I was always covered head to toe in bites, and so was Noah. The itching was unbearable. The only time it alleviated even temporarily was on the few occasions where friends let me take a hot shower at their house, the hot water soothing any urge I might’ve had to scratch for a blissful few minutes.

Noah never appreciated the showers quite as much for some reason. I learned after the first time we argued over it to not push the issue if he wasn’t feeling it.

“You gonna come with me to shower at Dustin’s this afternoon? He said we can come over,” I reminded Noah one day, as if I didn’t already try to “remind” him about twenty times that today was shower day.

“I don’t know.” He didn't look up at me when he spoke, busy tuning his guitar.

“Babe, you know if you shower it’ll like make you feel better, like, about yourself,” I leaned up against the side of the stage while he sat there on the steps.
“I just don’t know about using somebody else’s shower like that.” He strummed the guitar one more time. Perfect tune.

“He literally offered, it wasn’t like it was my idea or something.” I was beginning to get frustrated.

“Yeah, that’s another thing.” He stood up, finally looking at me. “You keep telling everyone about the situation that we’re in, people don’t need to know. It’s literally none of their business.”

“I’m not telling ‘everyone’ Noah, Dustin is one of our closest friends and he cares, so I felt like he should know. Plus, he’s trying to help us out, and you’re just refusing.” I quit leaning against the stage and stood upright, looking him in the eye.

“I don’t need to shower every day, you know,” he went on, “it’s really not natural.” I did a sharp inhale. “Yes. Correct. But you haven't been showering every day you’ve been out here in the woods with me, and you’ve got to do it at least sometimes.”

“I wash off in the bathrooms.” He bent down and picked up the guitar, I guess not wanting to look at me any longer.

“A real shower, babe. You can’t just never shower.” My voice was almost pleading with him now.

“I’ve got the hose.” He gestured to the water spigot that we sometimes used to take “showers” out there by the outdoor stage. He was strumming softly, something bluegrass-y.

“It’ll make you feel better, babe, please.” I reached to touch him on the arm but stopped abruptly whenever he snapped his head up to look at me again. He stopped playing.
“Showering makes you feel better, Saby.” He was raising his voice a little now. “It doesn’t do shit for me. Go take your shower, go by yourself, and quit trying to control me and leave me alone.”

He turned and walked towards the bar, starting to play again as he got further away. I sighed with frustration, knowing I was going to have to share close quarters with him in the car again tonight. At that point there was almost no point in me showering either, if I was just going to get dirty again in a few hours against my will.

Dustin’s shower was hot, and I didn’t have to save the water for anyone. I stayed in there for an eternity, relishing in the feeling of not having my bug bites itch constantly. I washed my hair, for the first time since we’d been living in the car. It must’ve taken close to an hour to work through all the tangles. I remember feeling like I never wanted to leave, never go back to what had become my real life.

Noah was nice to me when I came back to the Grove, but we didn’t discuss anything that was said to each other either, as usual. If there’s one good thing that man was able to teach me, it was how to move on. Let things go. He does it to a fault, and refuses to talk about even things that need to be talked about, but me, I’m just better at it than I used to be. After experiencing Noah and his tantrums that I was supposed to just forget, I think I could let anything go and still come out emotionally unscathed.

That night, we laid in the car with the windows down. The mosquitos were definitely biting. There was more than one occasion where I could literally feel them feeding on me, only to look down and find that indeed, there was a mosquito larger than I thought possible
right there, lethargic and fat with my blood. I killed them, but they’d already bitten me.
Unable to get comfortable and plagued with itchiness, I tossed and turned and scratched.

“Can you lay still? Oh my god.” Noah angrily turned away from me and shoved his head underneath a pillow.

I sat up and cried, just letting the mosquitos bite me until the sun rose.
Fastest Hands in the East

Food was obviously scarce. The Golden Grove occasionally had events or parties with free food, and our friends there always made sure Noah and I got extra plates. Sometimes there were leftovers or mistakes from the kitchen, those were given to us for free. Most of our calories were coming from beer (always free) and bags of chips kept behind the bar that no one ever really bought. You have to eat real food sometimes though, especially if you’re smoking as much pot as we were. The hunger pains can get intense.

Working at Walmart came in handy. It’s a giant store, and personal shoppers like me take care of their own lists of items, so at almost any given point you can be sure that you’re not being watched closely by anyone when you’re on the sales floor. If you wear bulky clothes, sweatshirts and cargo pants and other things with pockets, it’s easy to slip one or two items at a time without anyone noticing there’s something in your pocket, which was exactly what I did most shifts. My guaranteed thirty minute lunch break came in handy too, because it meant I could make two trips in a day. Stocking up on nonperishable things like cookies, chips, and other singular snacks that come in bags was the easiest. Refrigerated things were trickier, but still possible, and we were allowed to use the fridge in the bar where they stored the six packs of their home brews. We just needed to make sure we ate whatever we got before they locked the place up for the night.

The reason I first started honing my shoplifting skills was, of course, because of Noah. Even before we lived in the car together, there was always his thing about the lighter. We’ve always been a fan of hotboxing, smoking in the car with all the windows rolled up. You’re basically getting twice as high with all the secondhand smoke accumulating. Well, if we were
planning to go hotbox the car, and there wasn’t a lighter right there on the driver’s side or in the console ready for Noah to use, it would be a huge problem. As in, we had literally screamed at each other before over him not being able to find a lighter as quick as he wanted to.

One day, I finally reached my breaking point with it and thought to myself, *ok this problem has got to be fixed.* I started by gathering up all the lighters I could find in my apartment and in my car at the time, and threw them all into the console. It was maybe only a dozen or so. Staring at them in there, I knew it’d work for awhile, but that Noah would lose them quickly, especially if we were smoking three to four times a day. It wasn’t enough.

The next time I had a shift at work after that, I examined the price of a pack of Bic lighters. I remember a pack of five (with a bonus sixth!) being around ten dollars, which was too much. There was no room in the budget for me to go blowing twenty plus dollars on lighters.

Glancing around, I noticed there was no one nearby me. Glancing down, I noticed that the pack of lighters was almost the exact size to fit into my vest pocket. Without thinking about it too hard, I slipped them into my pocket and went on my way, storing them in the car when I went to lunch.

And then I did it again the next shift after that. And again, and again. I began the “two trips” system, where I’d take some lighters before lunch, some after. Eventually, my car’s console was filled to the brim with lighters. It’s not the healthiest habit, but it did in fact prevent Noah and I from ever having another argument about a lighter, and that’s really all I was after at the time.
After some time, I began to realize that I was actually good at this. Noah, I noticed, would often suggest that I should go steal something for him, some snack or whatever that he wanted, but he would never do it himself. I asked him why one day.

“Because you’re better at it,” was his simple response.

“I thought you’re king of the goons or whatever, you’re telling me you can’t handle a little bit of shoplifting? What about that story you told me where you and your friends licked a whole case of beer from a gas station?”

“You already know I’m like getting out of doing stuff like that.” He looked away.

“Shit that I did when I was younger was not the smartest, I’m lucky I’m not already in jail.”

“Wait, so it’s smart that I should do it though?” I wasn’t gonna let it go so easily.

“I’m telling you Saby, you’re better at it than me. You’ve probably taken thousands of dollars worth of things from that Walmart by now and you work there and still nobody’s noticed. If I did it as often as you, I’d be caught already.”

“But-”

“Can you just let it go? If you seriously don’t wanna take something that I ask for, just tell me no or something.” He started walking away, going to find his guitar. I guess I ended up letting it go pretty easily after all.

Ironically, Noah was completely right in this instance, I am much more skilled at stealing than he will ever be. After all, it’s him who eventually got banned from the Golden Grove for stealing from their cash register, not me. I never took cash from them, but I took many a six pack out of that fridge, and nobody ever noticed a thing.
Just Dashing

Noah had a crippling addiction to smoking pot. He may very well still have one, who knows. Everyone who has ever done any drug, even most people who haven’t, will tell you that this isn’t possible, but I know first hand that it is. Even if it isn’t something to do with the brain, even if it isn’t a chemical addiction, something was compelling Noah to hit up our plug every day, and that’s not an exaggeration. I forced him to calm down a little bit once we began living in my car, but while we were still at my old apartment it was every single day. At one point, Noah along with our other friend Will, convinced me it would be a good idea if Noah and I also started selling, in order to better afford our habit.

“I don’t have that many friends at school you know,” I said to the two guys as we sat around passing a blunt in the living room of my own apartment.

“You’ll make more friends though,” said Noah.

“Yeah, especially if you’re the weed man,” Will chimed in. He adjusted where he was sitting and his goliath frame shook the whole couch.

I rolled my eyes and took a long drag. The blunt wrap was a Game Green cigar, still my favorite kind of wrap to this day.

“Look, let’s just get one zip. You’ll see how fast I can get rid of this stuff in a college town, we’ll be able to smoke for free all the time,” Noah continued on his quest to convince me. A “zip” is one ounce, or twenty-eight and a half grams. About enough to fill a sandwich baggie full to the brim.
“He’s right, the students around here will buy this up quick, and at full price too. If I sell you this zip for a hundred, all you’d need to do is sell like three eighths or-” Will paused and counted on his massive fingers “like, ten and a half grams and you’d make your money back plus a little profit, smoke the rest for free.”

“And what if we don’t sell that much in the time that you want and we end up in debt to you? What then?” I asked.

“I mean…we’ll cross that bridge when we get there, but I highly doubt y’all are gonna have all that much trouble,” Will nodded with conviction and took a very large hit of the blunt, that was quickly becoming a roach. He didn’t even cough once.

I looked directly at Noah and said, “we can get one ounce and see how it goes, but you know it’s not like I need to have pounds and pounds sitting around this apartment anyways.” I thought briefly of Will’s apartment, with plastic storage bins stacked to the ceiling, containing dozens, maybe hundreds, of vacuum sealed bags full of green.

“Alright great, pleasure doin’ business with y’all.” Will tossed a baggie on the coffee table, our zip, before dapping up both Noah and I. My stomach turned a little when my child-sized hand collided with his giant one. I didn’t have a bad gut feeling, but I didn’t have a great one either.

During the next couple of weeks or so, my gut feeling was greatly proven wrong. We sold the first two ounces we bought from Will quickly, and for more than profit. Like both of them promised me, there was always some leftover to smoke for free. Just as I was starting to get comfortable with the whole thing, Noah had another idea.
“We should get two ounces when we see Will this week.” Noah mentioned casually one day as he rolled for us.

“Why? We’re already making money with the one at a time.” I said.

“Yeah, but we’re getting rid of like way more than half of that amount. With two we could still make profit and then have even more to smoke for ourselves.” He was looking down at the rolling tray, not at me.

“It’s not like we’ve met a ton of new customers or anything though…”

“We can upsell to our current customers. Offer them more, better deals, ask if they have friends and stuff.” Noah persisted. I glanced at the blunt he was rolling and noticed he was using a ton of flower at once, more than I would’ve used. I sighed.

“We can try it, but if it starts making us lose money, we’re going back to just one.” I tried to sound assertive.

“Alright.” Noah dried the seam of the blunt with a lighter. “Now let’s go to the car and smoke this.”

Two ounces ended up doing alright, but over the course of the next two months Noah and Will bargained and begged with me until we were re-upping with a pound, and then two pounds. When we were carrying around two pounds, I began having a lot of car trouble and had to drop some money on taking it to a shop. This meant we weren’t mobile, and any profit we already made was going into the car. Barely anyone wanted to pull up to my old apartment to be served, they all wanted it delivered. So, we ended up losing money, and having a lot of leftover weed.
Noah was content with this, if not happy, but I was pretty pissed. This was the end of our little plug operation, thankfully I shut the whole thing down before we had to begin living in my car. I don’t like to think of the possible trouble we could’ve gotten ourselves into if I hadn’t.

Even though I refused to let it be a daily thing, Noah still wanted to buy weed as often as possible while we lived in my car. If we didn’t have the money for it, he would want to make money for it. If I wasn’t gonna let him sell anymore, doordashing was the next best thing.

DoorDash is another perfect way to give yourself a toxic relationship with your own money. Like with selling drugs, it’s extremely easy to trick yourself into thinking you have more money to work with than you actually do. This is mainly because DoorDash forces you to get one of their debit cards, and so your money that you earn through dashing is kept in a separate account on that card. Another reason it’s easy to trick yourself is by making plans to go dashing but never actually doing it, or maybe doing it for not as long as you planned. For instance, you may say to yourself *huh, I have enough money in the DoorDash account to buy an eighth right now, I could easily make that up by dashing for a couple hours later. So, you spend the money on weed, but then get caught up and never go dashing that afternoon. Unless you find the time to make it up another day before the month ends, that’s thirty five dollars coming out of your rent or bills and other expenses.*

Noah exploited the confusion that came with DoorDash to no end. The “we’ll make it back up later” mindset, he knew the best times to plant that seed in my head, the times where he could say it and I would agree with no contest. There was one afternoon where I had come back to the Grove after a long shift at Walmart, and I was essentially *told* that we were re-upping rather than asked.
“Hey, Trilly said he’d come down this way for us, no extra.” One of the first things Noah says to me as I step out of the car, still wearing my work vest.

“What?”

“Trilly, the plug in Greenville.” Noah’s voice took on an innocent-sounding lilt.

“Well yeah but where are you getting money to get bud from, and how much are you getting?” I rolled my eyes and started digging through the car for my comfy clothes so I could go change.

“It’s my money from the show, Andrew finally handed it to me.” Noah held up several twenties. “And I’m just getting four g like we normally do.”

My eyes glared back and forth between Noah’s face and the money he held up. It was the end of June, and earlier that same week, Noah’s band Crunch for Time had performed a paid gig at the Gove. I was allowed to go up and sing backup on one song with them. This was the only money Noah had brought in all summer, and he was about to spend it on weed.

“How much did you get paid in total for the show?” I asked. If I was in the band like he always wanted to tell me, some of it was mine.

“Two hundred, but I still have to give the other guys their shares too.” He smiled, pushing a joyful attitude. If I combatted him, I would be “starting an argument,” “bringing the vibe down.”

“So you’re spending forty of that on bud, are none of the shares mine?” I asked.

Noah’s face dropped. “Well, you only did the one song, plus I figured you also wanna have plenty to smoke.” When I didn’t say anything, he added “We can make it up with DoorDash tomorrow, or later tonight maybe.”
Sighing, I just said “Ok Noah.” Then I went inside with my change of clothes. I was too tired to argue.

Whenever the days scheduled to go dashing would roll around, there was always something conveniently going on at the Grove or Noah wasn’t feeling good, or some other reason would pop up as to why we couldn’t go right then. I could go do it by myself, I was told many times. One evening, we had just showered outside with the water jugs, and Noah had been promising me all week that we’d go dashing since it was supposed to be a quiet night.

“You ready to go dashing in a bit?” I looked for confirmation after we were done with our “shower.” Noah turned to me with an annoyed glare.

“I’ve been helping Andrew move all the furniture out of the Ale House and over here while you’ve been at work all day, I’m really tired.”

I wondered if he was getting paid for this supposed all day labor, but out loud I said “Babe, you’ve said all week we could go today.”

“We’ve still got the rest of this weekend.” He argued and began walking towards the bar instead of towards the car.

“Yeah but you’re gonna say you don’t wanna go just because you don’t wanna miss anything going on at the Grove. Just please-”

“You can go by yourself. I’m going to play music, stop always trying to control what I do and when I do it.” He cut me off and continued walking.
I didn’t end up going dashing by myself, instead I stayed back at our campsite and cried by myself for a long while. It was in this way that we never once made as much money as we planned to with DoorDash.
Light Spots

The man emerges through the trees into the clearing. The morning light shines down, illuminating the spot where he walks to lay a cheetah print yoga mat on the grass. Behind him, the woman comes scurrying, bumbling awkwardly over to the yoga mat where she sits and scatters the rest of their items that filled her hands. Two jugs of water. Two towels. A bottle of soap. Cigarettes, a phone with about two bars of signal, and two leftover IPAs from the night before. It’s about nine AM, shower time.

“Do you want me to turn on a show?” The woman asks meekly, pulling a cigarette out of the half empty pack and lighting it. The man never sits down with her.

Running his fingers through his long brown hair, he looks all around, but not at her, as he answers her question. “Nah.” A moment more of silence. “I am gonna go ahead over there and shower though.” He suddenly snatches up one of the water jugs and the soap, walking briskly over to a darker, more hidden (though less beautiful) spot that is more covered by the trees.

The woman sighed. They planned to shower together.

Taking a long drag, the woman turns the opposite direction. Give him his privacy, she supposes, let him do his own thing. On the phone (which, surprise, only has sixteen-percent battery left), she opens Hulu and turns on *Family Guy*.

After a minute or so, the woman glances behind her. The man also faces the opposite direction as he pours some of the water jug on himself, soaking his curly hair that hangs almost to his waist when it’s all straightened out. Unclothed, he looks so beautiful standing there, some of the sunlight still managing to peek through the trees just to touch him. The
woman does a quick scan of the entire clearing, looking to see if there was anyone around or anyone coming. She knows there isn’t, but she also knows it’s something he would want her to do.

Back to Family Guy. Stewie and Brian have accidently locked themselves inside a bank vault. Together, they have to survive until someone comes to open it. At first, they were doing alright, but by this point in the episode they are going a little insane and are also a little too drunk on Brian’s scotch. Stewie and Brian, they’re always together, always a team. Best friends and partners in crime to any outsider. Whenever the viewer gets to hear their dialogue, they’re also usually arguing, and sometimes trying to kill each other. To the woman, the whole thing seems all too familiar.

Turning around again, the woman sees that the man is on his way back to the spot they chose together, without a word. He sets down the empty water jug and the soap and picks up his shorts, pulling them on unceremoniously. He still stands. “You gonna shower now?” He asks when he finally chooses to notice the woman looking.

“In a minute. You wanna finish this episode and smoke with me?” Says the woman. She pats the spot beside her on the mat, a hopeful smile on her face. A cheerful tone, always.

A moment of silence. “Nah, I’m gonna go see if the bar is unlocked yet, maybe play some music.” He began walking away from her, back the way they came. Music. Electric guitar at ten in the morning. And probably more IPAs if they’re around. When you live in your car, parked on the property of a “farm & brew,” you have to find the light spots in life anywhere you can. The woman supposes that’s what the man is trying to do as he calls “you can come whenever” over his shoulder.
“Ok!” The woman calls after him as he disappears around the corner of the clearing’s entrance. A bird chirps. “I like to shower at night anyway,” she says quietly to herself.

Inside the bar, not showered and wanting another cigarette, the woman sits down to watch the man play. He plays songs she knows, but not songs she loves. He only plays songs that go with his “image,” ones that “other people will know.” She understands, it’s part of making it as a musician. And he will make it one day.

The notes (chords? She doesn’t really know) of Sublime’s “Smoke Two Joints” rings out through the empty bar. Only the brewer is there in the back, but he’s not really listening like the woman. She wonders if anyone ever really listens like her. She remembers how, on so many blurry nights, she has watched the man get wavy, squiggly, and float up to the ceiling whenever he gets to this guitar solo part. It’s her favorite part of the song, and to her it’s just as good as any song she might really love, as long as he’s the one playing.

A few more Sublime songs, some Grateful Dead, some bluegrass. When the man finally tires of playing, he performs his usual ritual of putting all the music equipment back in its place. So respectful, so careful, when it comes to music. Then, without a word, he grabs the pack of cigarettes off the table, takes one and goes outside with it. Ignoring his abruptness once again, the woman picks up the pack that he tossed back on the table in front of her and follows him.

“Smoke Two Joints was really good,” the woman says. The man just nods and takes a drag.

“Don’t you have schoolwork or somethin’ to do on the computer today?” he asks her after a moment.
She had completely forgotten.

“Uh, yeah, I’ll have to go get the computer and all my stuff out of the car—“ the man gets up and begins walking away. Into the bar, probably to grab a beer. The woman had brought the two this morning for showers, but she knows he probably wants a cold one.

Understandable, right?

Head down, the woman walks slowly over to where they park their car. On the other side of the property, much more into the woods than the shower clearing. It’s kind of a long walk from the bar to there.

As she walks, the woman thinks. You have to find the light spots in life anywhere you can. She knows she has to be strong enough to deal with her emotions on her own, in her own head. Make her own happiness. But sometimes, just sometimes, could she just find some light spots with the one she loves? If all they have is each other, can’t they just do it together?

Why won’t he sit in the light with her? Why would he rather hide, facing away, in a darker, less beautiful corner?