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A week at a homeless shelter

By Brandon Iam Smith

Poignant is the memory of the cereal: Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves. It was little chunks of yellow sugar formed into shapes supposedly like the characters on the box. But it was fantastic.

After one of my parents' bouts, Mom took us kids to the nearest homeless shelter she knew of, in Springfield. I guess Grandma and Grandpa were away that week. At five or six years, I was the oldest of four children.

See this: Mom pregnant and up on a chair doing something. In the heat of the moment, Dad kicks the chair. Hear this: The unexpected crack of the chair leg twain, then stumbling noises. Mom had been rendered to the floor; yelling morphed to weeping; she herded us to the car.

Dad only caused accidental injuries like these. But the fear of abuse was always there. Almost-abuse was always there. A routine, really. Thus, at the shelter, the siblings were plagued worst by their surroundings. The sole chance for play, a swing and jungle gym out back, hosted a bees nest. They had never seen a standalone bathtub with feet; it lent itself to protests despite dirty knees, dirty faces, dirty fingernails. And the headmaster at the house said none of the residents — especially kids — could have sugar. That gross plain oatmeal plopped at the bottom of the garbage can.

So you're my mom. Twice, sometimes three times a day, you sneak your four kids out to the station wagon parked on the street. Everyone piles in. Are the doors shut? You reach to the floor and pull back a coat. Underneath, a colorful box featuring Kevin Costner dressed to the hilt.

You dole out, to each set of tiny cupped hands, a fist of crunchy yellow bits. For yourself you take two bits, because this box will likely have to last until Friday. Someday, you think, the first will be last and the last will be first.

And some days, you're just sure the rich will be robbed from and the poor will be given to.

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