



Tri-State Youth Academy

“He has a future now.”

The water ran too quick to see his reflection in it.

Yet from the edge of the old iron bridge, Billy kept looking, trying to see himself. He had climbed over the rusty railing. He held on to nothing, and his thoughts raced. I can't go back there, he told himself. I can't go home. I can't go anywhere.

Ever since his father had died, his mother had medicated herself with drinking and drugs. She was there, but she wasn't there. Since then it had been one foster home after another. He had bounced around like a pinball, never staying anywhere long, always seeming such a burden.

He knew he shouldn't have run away from his last foster placement, but really it wasn't any better than home. People lie to me, he thought. Mom said she'd stop, but she didn't. People say they care, but they don't.

It began to snow. Billy hugged his bare arms. He had no coat, and his exposed limbs trembled down to his fingertips. He watched the flakes fall down to the ice-cold water. He could fall, too.

But he didn't. Billy climbed back over the railing, and he waited for another stranger to pick him up, to take him somewhere else. The people that arrived the next day, though, were different. Two boys his age accompanied an adult, and in the car they talked to him about where he was going, Tri-State Youth Academy. Frankly, anywhere new scared him. Yet these boys made the place sound unlike any he had been to before.

“It's not a jail,” one boy said. “It's more like a home.”

Billy didn't like jail, but he didn't like home either. The boys kept telling him about the program, saying there was a lake on campus and that they had been fishing and gone to movies and played on softball and basketball teams.

“We earned those things,” one boy said. “We worked and we earned them, and it's better that way.”

“I hope you're ready to change,” the other added. “They expect a lot out of you here. You're going to go to school and work on your problems, but you'll be better for it. The staff care. You may not believe that for a while, but you'll see.”

Billy didn't believe it. Why would he? He was sixteen years old and had been on his own most of his life. He had made a lot of mistakes. Maybe that was why no one cared about him. Why would he get to do these things the boys were talking about? What right did he have to go cave exploring or canoeing?

He made up his mind. He'd go through the motions to get by, but nobody was going to boss him around. He had made it this far without anyone's help.

At Tri-State Youth Academy, however, the staff helped Billy anyway. They didn't just tell him what to do--they talked to him. Even more importantly, they listened to him. Still, he had a hard time accepting their help. He was certain the TSYA staff would wilt when he acted out, and that's why he tested them: to see if they'd quit on him like everyone else had. He cursed the staff and threatened them and even tried to run away one night. When his counselor walked him back to the Academy, though, Billy was shocked. Everyone was waiting on him. They were disappointed, but they were there.

“I tried to run away once,” another boy told him. “I was just like you. I wanted to leave people before they left me. But no one here is going to leave you.”

As time went on and through his discussions with other boys, Billy realized he wasn't the only one who had found himself alone in the world. His life had been full of turmoil and heartache, but so had the lives of other boys at TSYA and they were righting their paths. Billy had a hard time feeling sorry for himself anymore. At TSYA, for the first time in his life, he knew what the next day would bring. When he went to sleep at night and when he woke in the morning, the staff would be there. He'd have food to eat. He'd have work to do. And if it was cold and he went outside, he'd have a coat to wear.

Billy hadn't known how much consistency would mean for his life. He hadn't known how important it would be to have adults and other boys around him that genuinely cared. In this environment, he began to want to change. He learned how to talk about his problems and discuss his anger rather than act out. He realized that sometimes people say no because they care about him.

Now Billy has been at TSYA for nine months, and he's about to graduate. Sometimes he still gets angry and believes the world is against him, but these days he knows how to handle those feelings. He plays first base on the TSYA softball team. He's not the best athlete, but at school he has discovered a creativity for arts and crafts that he didn't know he had. He'll also complete his GED soon. But for now, this evening, he's content to sit back with the other boys and watch a movie. Before TSYA, rarely was the time when he could simply sit down with friends and laugh. He cares about the people around him as much as they care about him. That's been one of the most fascinating things about TSYA: he's helped other boys.

He sees them walk in their first days with the same stares on their faces that he must have worn. Looks that say they're alone, that they've given up on the world because it's given up on them. Just today a boy named Alfred came in. He looked scared. In his short sleeves, he also looked cold.

Billy thought back to the bridge, when the snow was falling and he had no coat and he was trying to see himself in the water. He's glad he didn't jump. He has a future now.