

INTRODUCTION

While working as an attorney in Flint, Michigan in 2009, I was contacted by John Eric Aslin, an inmate in the Michigan Correctional System. He sought my assistance in applying to have his prison sentence commuted by then Governor Jennifer Granholm. I have remained in contact with John since that time. The events of his life are both remarkable and devastating. What you are about to read is based on real events.

To adequately tell John's story, I had to include the story of his father and his father's siblings. I did as much research as I could on the previous generation of the Aslin family, but little information exists because the entire generation has no offspring to whom they could pass along their stories. The lack of personal sources required me to fill in some of details of their lives with my imaginings, but these details are based upon the following: research of Ojibwe culture and traditions; John Eric's knowledge of his family and cultural history; media coverage of John's uncle, Fred Aslin, who filed a law suit against the State of Michigan; investigations of John Harvey Kellogg, the Michigan Eugenics movement and the Home for the Feeble-Minded, an actual place that was located in Lapeer, Michigan. Many of the story elements that happen at the Home in my book originate from stories that I uncovered in my research. I simply placed Fred Aslin and his siblings in the midst of the anecdotes that I discovered.

John was not raised in his culture and only came to know it as an adult. I have done my best to research Ojibwe traditions and present culturally accurate depictions of the Aslin family, but I am sure that I have made errors. My desire was to illustrate the entirety of what they lost when they were essentially kidnapped by the State of Michigan, so I ask for grace; if I fell short, I had good intentions. I would like to note that I sometimes use the word "Indian" in this text because that is how John and his family members refer to themselves—I am aware that some might view that word as problematic, but I felt it important to retain John's voice when I tell his story.

That being said, the vast majority of the story you are about to read blossomed from the seeds of my discussions with John Eric himself; other details came from the record of his criminal case. The depiction of the trial and related events is taken verbatim from court

transcripts, so it is as accurate as the record allows. I have changed some of the names, but I have remained otherwise true to the record.

The stories from John's childhood are based on John's memories, with my creative additions to bring the outlines he has provided to life. I chose to relay John and Fred's experiences, for the most part, as a non-fiction novel, so I invite you to settle in for one of the most compelling life stories you might ever read. The movie, *White Boy Rick*, claims that Rick Wershe held the record as the longest-serving non-violent offender in Michigan after serving 30 years. Though John Aslin was sentenced for felony murder, his crime was non-violent; he has been imprisoned for 36 years so I believe that John is the longest non-violent offender in the Michigan system.

One more thing. John's spirit animal is a member of the cat family. The more I learned about his life journey—all of the things that he has survived—it became clear to me that John's ancestors chose a cat for him because he would need nine lives to survive his time on this earth. I use the "nine lives" concept metaphorically as a symbol of all of the challenges that John has survived, literally, emotionally and spiritually. He could have been destroyed by such a life, yet he has not been.

PROLOGUE

KINROSS CORRECTIONAL FACILITY
MICHIGAN'S UPPER PENINSULA
2009

If he squinted as he exited the sweat lodge, focusing on the trees on the horizon, John Aslin could almost forget the tall humming fence, the guns that might be pointed at his heart, and instead hear the call of his ancestors on the wind.

John had spent more time inside the dank concrete walls of the myriad penal institutions scattered across Michigan than outside, moving from prison to prison over the past 25 years and eventually ending up not far from where his pa, John Albert Aslin, was born in 1932. Pa started out about 25 miles away, in St. Ignace, a small coastal town that faced lower Michigan and overlooked the spot where Lake Huron and Lake Michigan kissed, a place now marked by the Mighty Mackinaw Bridge. John Eric wished he could walk those years back to that small town, before tragedy hit, a mile for each year, and undo all of the pain.

But John would have to be able to go back much further than 25 years to really fix things. He would have to fix himself out of existence—if his father had not been abducted by the state almost 75 years before, he would have never met John's mother and John Eric would not be here. In fact, according to the State of Michigan, John Eric shouldn't exist.

Would that have been better—to never exist? There was so much sorrow packed into his bloodline that some days he thought maybe it would have been better to have been erased by a twist of events; then other days he had hope that he still might be able to take all that had happened, all that he had learned, and live a meaningful life beyond prison walls. Make a difference. He had something more than such a

small, sad existence to offer the universe.

John saw beauty in the smallest things. He noticed intricacies in the wings of a fly, the blue-black sheen in the pair of ravens that regularly visited his windowsill and the varied shades contained in a patch of grass. At his core, his was a gentle soul. He could take beauty in and push it back out into exquisite works of art. He yearned for more of a life than the one that he had been dealt. Was he really going to rot away inside the walls of his cell until he ceased to exist?

Some days the walls squeezed the breath out of him, leaving him panicked and panting on his bunk, each shallow breath an inhale of the rot that permeated his surroundings. Twenty-five years—over half of his life—had done nothing to erode his concrete cell, but he lost a tiny piece of hope each time the sun set. Hope used to fill him up almost halfway, but now his dreams had shrunken down to a walnut—a hard, protective shell with a soft inside that could only be harvested with a bit of effort.

He was responsible for a death. He had not stabbed, struck, shot, poisoned or even intentionally touched Ella Stephens, but he brought her to her end, nonetheless. He had lived with this knowledge for more than 9,000 waking ups and 9,000 going to beds and 9,000 spaces between. It broke his heart and chipped away at his spirit bit by bit. But responsibility didn't mean intention and he had served enough time—he had learned his lesson more than 9,000 times. Science told him that his life expectancy might only allow him 25,000 days on this earth, and he had already spent over a third of them in a cage.

He never claimed to be innocent. He was a thief—that was certain—but he wasn't a killer. It took more than the combination of a proclivity to take things that didn't belong to him and terrible, terrible luck to make him that. Things had reached a point where justice required that he be set free. Would justice ever prevail?

LIFE FIVE: WHERE JOHN ERIC LOSES A LIFE BY TAKING A LIFE

THE CRIME
FLINT, MICHIGAN
MAY 21, 1984

The black jacket had zippers and silver accents. John unconsciously lifted his arm near his nose regularly just to smell it. Every time he thought he saw a speck on a sleeve, he startled and inspected it to make sure the leather stayed pristine. The red converse shoes were still clean as was the red bandana he'd rolled up and tied around his head. His long, waving hair flowed below it. Life was pretty shitty, but at least he looked cool.

John walked on the edge of a two-lane road, trying to look like he had somewhere to go. Roy, an old friend from the neighborhood, rolled up beside him in his slick Trans Am. Roy had bought it used, but it was amazing what a bit of Bondo and some paint could do. It was now cherry-red with a yellow racing stripe down the hood.

"Hey, dumbass, you want a ride?" Roy was grinning when John turned.

John got into the car. "Damn, Roy. Did you spill a bottle of Drakkar Noire in here?"

"Got a hot date. Chick I met at the mall."

"Did she get a good look at you or just your car?"

Roy reached out and playfully smacked John on the back of the head, telling him to shut up.

"Poor thing. She doesn't know what a boring night she has ahead of her. Maybe you should do the right thing and introduce her to me."

Roy laughed. "Where you want me to drop you?"

"I was headed to the market. Can I grab some of this change?" The console of the Trans Am was full to the top with coins.

"Sure."

John grabbed a large handful. Roy glanced down but did not react. John's friends knew he was struggling after getting out of lock up. Roy had a good job at GM, living the life that John might have had if he had stopped his criminal activities, if he had buckled down to finish his GED and gotten a legitimate job.

Roy pulled into the nearby market parking lot and reached for his wallet. “Hey Johnny, here’s the five bucks I borrowed from you a while ago.”

John was confused for a split second, then realized that Roy was being kind, trying to help him out without embarrassing him. He razed them through the awkward moment. “Thanks, man. I never thought a deadbeat like you was going to pay that back. Where’s the interest?”

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Generally speaking, Ella Stephens lived alone. She had experienced a few health issues over the past year. Her grandson, Glenn, lived with her to take care of her while she was recuperating, but she didn’t want to be a burden on anyone and encouraged him to go live his life once she didn’t need him.

His company had been nice, especially in the evenings. It was pleasant to have someone listen to her comments on the news or someone to try to beat to the answer of a gameshow question. Having a break from cooking and dishwashing was a bonus, though it was hard for her to sit back and let someone else take care of her. Usually she was the one taking care of others.

Glenn wasn’t staying with her the evening of May 21, 1984. That night she was alone. The temperature was in the mid-60s. There was a light rain falling when Ella checked to make sure that her house was locked up; then she headed to bed.

The dishes had been washed and Ella had neatened up the kitchen, but her home was lived in. She had jars and knickknacks covering surfaces all over the house. Small piles of cash were tucked here and there, poking out from under lamps and other objects, in open view. Dozens of small jars filled with coins and bills served as at-home “savings plans” for things that she wanted to buy or needed to pay for, but most of her money was in her purse.

She took her handbag into the bedroom each night, tucking it under a pillow. It held the remaining cash from her pension check and social security allotment. Once her purse was hidden, she changed into a blue nightgown and made sure the flashlight she kept on her nightstand was in place. Then she pulled the string that led from the overhead light to her headboard, closed her eyes and fell asleep.

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John had a plan for the five-dollar bill he'd gotten from Roy. It opened up a window in his evening. A pint of Jack Daniels would soften the edges, push the anxiety down to a comfortable level.

He slapped the bill down on the counter. Once he got to the parking lot, he twisted off the cap and took a swig. Then another and another. Soon he began to feel warm and tingly; lately he had to drink more and more just to reach a point of equilibrium.

Bobby, a neighborhood kid who sometimes mowed the lawn for John's mother, Norma, called to John, who was always nice to him even though he was just thirteen years old and still in junior high. It probably helped John's attitude that Bobby admired him.

"That's a cool leather jacket," the kid said. He reached out to touch the sleeve and John proudly held it out. "It's the nicest thing I own." John started to walk away and looked back over his shoulder. "I need to go see a girl named Sue. And I gotta get some money that someone owes me. You can come along if you want."

John flagged down a ride from an acquaintance. He and Bobby were dropped off in the parking lot of the Northgate Bar soon after. When John dropped the empty whiskey bottle as he headed to the back of the parking lot, it shattered. Bobby heard him say, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Ella was startled by a loud crash coming from the kitchen. She sat up and fumbled for her flashlight and purse, holding them both tightly as she shuffled down the hall. "Who's there?"

A second later, she was standing in the kitchen doorway. She flipped the light on. She was stooped, stumbling a bit in surprise and then righting herself as she indignantly asked, "What are you doing in my house?"

The brightness caused John to freeze for a moment. John was not a tall man, so the elderly woman and he were almost eye-to-eye. He was uncomfortable meeting her piercing gaze. When he looked down, he saw the purse that she clutched tightly to her chest. "This is a robbery. Give me your money!"

Ella turned toward the front room. "I'm calling the police. Get out of my home!"

John should have left, but when she turned toward the phone in the front room, he rushed past her to make sure the phone was inoperable. On his way, he accidentally brushed against her. She fell

back, landing in a sitting position on the couch.

The phone was sturdy and old-fashioned, with a thick coiled cord that wired the hand piece directly into the phone itself; it proved more difficult to pull apart than he expected. When it finally gave way, the side table that the cord had been wrapped around fell over and a lamp crashed to the floor, breaking into several pieces.

John was out of breath when he turned to see the old woman standing at the kitchen table, pulling a bank enveloped from her purse. She removed the cash inside and extended it over the table to him. "Take it. Take it. It's all I have."

She handed him a pile of small bills. He pushed them into the pocket of his jeans. Then she yelled an order. "You get out of here. Now!"

John ran faster than he had ever run in his life, terrified by his first encounter with one of his theft victims. Facing an actual person made everything real. He had never before thought about the emotional impact of his actions on the people he stole from. As scared as he felt in that moment after staring the woman down, he knew that she, and all of the others, felt worse.

As he turned the corner of the house, he tripped on some chicken wire and fell, hitting his head on the bumper of the woman's car. The impact stunned him; he almost passed out, but he got up and did something he knew how to do very well—run away.

