I sat again in that large, gray, windowless room with about thirty other people waiting to see their fathers, husbands, sons, boyfriends, and friends. The air in the room was heavy and cold, the chairs hard. There was a vending machine with only a few sad items dangling inside. Small lockers lined the gray walls. We were told to place whatever we carried with us inside them. Nothing unaccounted for could go in—or out of—the secured room that would be our next stop. Out of the thirty people in the room, I was one of only two men. The rest were women and children.

One by one, the guards called out numbers. After about an hour of waiting, I finally heard mine. I quickly rose and walked over to a desk where bulletproof glass separated me from a corrections officer. The officer threw out the same barrage of questions they always ask. “What is your relation to the inmate? Do you have any electronic equipment or sharp items? Do you have any items you plan on passing on to the inmate?” Eventually they let me into the visitors’ room, where I waited for Wes to be escorted in.

“I wasn’t even there that day.”

I looked at Wes, speechless. He still didn’t admit to the armed robbery that had led to his final imprisonment. There were days when our unexpected relationship started to seem absurd. What was I doing here, anyway? More than three years earlier, I’d written a letter to a stranger whose story had sat with me for years. We shared a name, but the truth was that I didn’t know this man. He was simply an address, a P.O. box, and a personal identification number. A man convicted of murder. And, inevitably, as in every convic cliché I’d ever heard, he claimed innocence.

But I started to think more about his repeated defense, offered again and again in earnest: “I wasn’t even there that day.” Did he think that through repetition it would become true? That if he just incanted the phrase enough the prison walls would collapse and he’d be able to walk back home? Did he think it could reverse time? How far back would he have to go to be innocent again?

Wes folded his hands together; his broad shoulders leaned in. We were nearing the end of our get-together. Silence now overrode the conversation. He smiled.

I decided not to respond directly to this latest protest of his innocence. Instead, I asked a question: “Do you think we’re all just products of our environments?” His smile dissolved into a smirk, with the left side of his face resting at ease. “I think so, or maybe products of our expectations.” “Others’ expectations of us or our expectations for ourselves?” “I mean others’ expectations that you take on as your own.” I realized then how difficult it is to separate the two. The expectations that others place on us help us form our expectations of ourselves.

“We will do what others expect of us,” Wes said. “If they expect us to graduate, we will graduate. If they expect us to get a job, we will get a job. If they expect us to go to jail, then that’s where we will end up too. At some point you lose control.” I sympathized with him, but I recoiled from his ability to shed responsibility seamlessly and drape it at the feet of others. “True, but it’s easy to lose control when you were never looking for it in the first place.”

An hour later, our time was up, and he was escorted out as quickly as he entered. I sat in the room alone, collecting my thoughts. I had more questions than I came in with.