

COUNTING DOWN

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A FOSTER FAMILY'S INITIATION

Zero to One Hundred

AFTER A long and contentious spring semester, I was cleaning up the chaos of my university office. Our creaky old asbestos-ridden Language and Literature building was due to be renovated, and in the interim we were all getting moved across campus to a still older, creakier building pervaded by an untraceable smell of mold. Rumor had it that once renovations were complete, some newer, trendier departments might actually snap up our original building and trap us for good in that crummy location; the hallways were full of sniping and suspicion, which my staticky office radio couldn't block out. Tired of the grumbling, most of all my own, I just wanted to pack up my file cabinets—back then in 2002 most of us still had massive, dog-eared files and sheaves of Xeroxes and brittle newspaper clippings—and get things ready for the moving crew. At least we didn't have to do that part ourselves. Outside my windows, the pear trees were in blossom. I couldn't wait to get out into the mountain sunshine. I was ready to forget everything and launch into summer freedom.

Finishing up a publicity archive for our department's film series, I still had several newspaper issues to go through before I felt I could quit for the afternoon. All the local papers did was reprint verbatim the press releases we sent them, but I felt obliged to keep a record to show to potential donors or at least the department chair during my upcoming annual review. But as bored as I was restless, I stopped to read the lead

article in the previous Sunday's *Sentinel*. As it was Foster Care Month and almost Mother's Day, the article profiled Laurie Marsh, a florist by day, who ran one of the county's longtime foster homes with her husband, an auto mechanic. Photographed holding her grandchild on her knee, she spoke of the dozens of children who had come through their home, staying anywhere from overnight to two years, and even returning as teen parents with their own infants; with Laurie's help they could learn to care for their babies before aging out of the system. Later I learned that Laurie framed a photograph of every foster kid who passed through their doors, eventually covering an entire living room wall. She spoke of offering a safe place to damaged children on the worst days of their lives. She didn't claim to save or fix or do anything more practical than offer a clean shirt, a dry diaper, or a hug, and she shrugged off the opportunity to condemn the parents whose actions had caused their children to be there.

At that time, fifteen years ago, I'd hazily imagined foster children as blank-eyed, abandoned waifs who were hopscotching between group and family homes while waiting for an adoption that might never come. Everything I knew I'd learned from TV, so it was no wonder I conjured up stereotypes: elfin boys hiding sullenly behind swept bangs, blonde girls with dirty cheeks clutching Band-Aided teddy bears, and of course the babies—the fabled stream of needy, crack-addicted babies so many of us yearn to have placed in our outstretched arms the moment the foster home license arrives in the mail. But where we lived, that's not what the need was.

I was surprised to read that many more children were removed because of neglect than because of abuse. But what did *neglect* even mean nowadays? I pictured a thin boy in an *Oliver Twist* tunic who was peeling lead paint off the walls and watching endless episodes of *Cops* on TV. That couldn't be right, I knew, but *abuse* sounded like the photographable, fixable stuff of TV movies, while *neglect* sounded more amorphous, lacking any concrete remedy.

I was intrigued by the article. Something clicked: maybe I could be a foster parent. I was all about fixing, as misguided as we've been told that is when it comes to spouses. As a university teacher, I fixed students' papers all day, didn't I? And found professionals to fix the students themselves when crises hit. I'd once saved a neighbor's horse from choking on a plastic bread bag by reaching down her throat, and I'd gotten certified in CPR every year since it was introduced, just in case I was ever

the only one in a crisis who knew it. Fixing was not something I thought I could do better than others, but I was not afraid to try. I couldn't do much worse than your average Good Samaritan, could I? Especially when the odds already seemed stacked against success, whether that was reviving someone in cardiac arrest or, as a future foster parent, helping a girl avoid motherhood at fourteen.

How badly could I screw up something that had started out already broken? "You don't have to be perfect to be a perfect parent," the foster/adopt ad campaign says, although in the naive dramas of my imagination, I privately suspected I might be. Plus, like every foster parent I came to know, I viewed myself as being fairly organized and didn't mind tracking down information and calling strangers on the phone—basic advocacy skills—fueled by a useful middle-class presumption that the person on the other end of the phone ought to listen to me. And although I mostly ignored my carbon footprint, there was something ecologically pleasing about the notion of repairing something—someone—already here on Earth. Not that I had much choice about that, since I'd recently learned, in my late thirties, that I couldn't have children of my own. As I read that newspaper article, I decided I was ready to start foster parenting that day.

Right that day, without the first thought of licensing, training, fire inspections, or what my new second husband might think. The temporary nature of foster placements even sounded like a good thing—like some clear-cut work project with deadlines and spreadsheets, a sense of accomplishment and finality. Fixed, submitted, filed—then time for a vacation break or instantly produced screenplay before the next thing. *No prob, Bob*, in the words I'd later learn from a big-eyed backhoe on TV.

PUTTING OFF cleaning my office, I read the article from start to finish and was full of spring possibility and that end-of-semester rush of energy that made it feel like anything would be possible in the next twelve weeks—writing an entire novel, losing thirty-two pounds by running a marathon, and, most of all, enjoying the ecstasy of sleeping like a normal person instead of writing sure-to-be-ignored margin comments in tiny crabbed letters until 2 a.m.

At the end of the article was a phone number and the name of a social worker to call for information about becoming foster parents; dissemination of that information was the true purpose of this profile. So the next day, after my husband's equivocal *maybe*, I found myself

sitting in my university office, dirty beige phone receiver in my clammy hand, heart pounding sickly—as it would so many times, for different reasons, in future calls to the Department of Social Services (DSS). I took a shaky breath and dialed, but the person I needed, like any good social worker, was out. (And I don't mean out getting her nails done, although somehow they all manage to have glossy, chipless manicures, but out in people's homes, interviewing kids at school, picking up a child for a visit or supervising one, appearing in court, or attending staff meetings. Frustrating, but what would it mean if social workers were always in their offices, waiting for a call?)

The next day and a hundred happy fantasies later, I reached Geraldine Taylor, the licensing and training coordinator. And all my excitement, my visions of cruising music festivals and craft shows with a backpacked toddler, came to an abrupt halt. All stopped by one question from Geraldine: "Can you tell me about your water source?"

CHUTES AND LADDERS

That was May 2002. Michael, the child around whom I would shape my entire future, did not yet exist. When eventually he was born, three weeks premature, the doctors watched and waited through the first hours of his life until the bubble—the hole in his lung—finally closed. At it happened, his first home lay just a few miles from our own, down the steep slope of a back road that I hadn't known existed. I would not see their trailer for several years, until it had been abandoned, condemned for meth contamination, and then mysteriously burned.

A year and a half into Michael's life, his chest rattled by asthma, we would meet him.

I'VE ALWAYS admired my husband, Will, for having kid charisma in spades, with the patience to spend summer mornings teaching his friends' kids to dig up plants or wade around our muddy pond and fish. Unlike me, he is a biological parent and a natural—my ambassador to the world of children. Still, I'd worked four years at a historic farm park and had spent a year as a live-in nanny, tightly bonded to a newborn, so I could stay in the Bay Area. *This can't be the only time you do this*, I remember instructing myself, amazed that even off duty and living two floors below, I'd waken at 3 a.m., seconds before the baby cried from the crib beside her parents' room. I'd hoped to mold her into an adventurer

and so hauled her in the baby backpack up through the fragrant, urban hillside eucalyptus groves and pushed her stroller through the endless avenues, past the Asian fruit stores, and along the perpetually cold and foggy beach. I heard her first word, *leaf*, spent \$25 for her to ride a pony around a ring, and watched her learn to toddle-run through the Jurassic carrot-top palms in the arboretum. Whatever my future held, I resolved I'd have this kind of experience again.

Years later, I had it to some degree when my stepson, Vince, would come to visit—although more often Will would drive a day and night to see him—but he and Will were so fiercely enfolded in their tent of time together that the best I could do was trail along on their outings and bite my tongue at their daily trips to Walmart to buy more worthless plastic, as even they called it. (To his lasting delight, Michael would inherit a whole closet full of those Lego pieces, Hot Wheels, nether-worlds, and minigarages in the years to come.)

So a decade later and a continent away from my nanny days, with a home and barn filled with rescue pets, I was excited to move back to the human dimension—at least so long as no one brought us a teen as stubborn and secretive as I had been. (That karmic wheel spun around much later.) The thing I didn't realize then is that it's not just hardened teens or older children that people fear—by the time a baby is born, the damage can already have been done. For every baby who hears the poetry of Robert Frost or *Goodnight Moon* read to her *in utero*, dozens hear shrieked curses instead, dozens have synapses permanently frayed by alcohol. They don't just "move on." Whatever chain of misfortunes has landed them in foster care has already marked them and sent them careening down the very first game board chute, while everyone else their age is scrambling up the ladder.

BEFORE WILL and I could even start the training required for prospective foster parents, we ran into obstacles. First, the emotional kind—Will was basically on board, but obtaining the agreement of his then preteen son, who lived halfway across the country with his mother, was painful. Vince had sobbed over the phone, unable to bear the idea of another boy's getting so much time with his dad—time that Vince himself had missed. Impatient as I was to get a foster child in our home, I felt awful for provoking this.

But the physical obstacles were what made me gnaw my knuckles with frustration. We lived in the mountains, where pure springwater is

bottled and sold region-wide, yet the environmental bureaucrats in the polluted, chlorinated state capital had deemed this very same mountain springwater unsafe for foster homes. Period. Our only alternative was to spend thousands drilling a well. So much for the supposed abuse, neglect, hunger, and epidemic meth and opioid use in infamous Appalachia. The problem was the premium mountain springwater. Miraculously, a state senator spent months pushing a bill through the legislature that relaxed the water restrictions, freeing us and scores of other families in the mountain counties to pursue foster care licensing.

I'm not one of those people who believe that everything happens for a reason, much as I wish I could. But if we'd been able to jump into fostering with no obstacles and delays, we'd likely have had a different child or two in our home already by the time Michael was removed, and then what would have become of him? Would my now beloved Michael have gone instead to one of our new friends? Would we ever even have met him? Sensed a cosmic missed connection? The whole thought of such a miserable parallel universe made me dizzy.

Will and I went through the standard foster parent training with an unusually small group—two single-mom best friends—led by the awesome social worker we now called Gerri, with her cynical optimism and equally awesome wardrobe of gypsy skirts. In addition to leading training for new and renewing foster parents, she was the one designated to assess and license homes, to find and make the best possible placement for a child coming into foster care, and to serve as foster families' liaison to the agency, offering ongoing support and addressing foster parents' questions or concerns. (A birth family involved with the agency was assigned a separate worker to serve as the family's advocate and guide.) With Gerri, we worked through six booklets; learned to inventory needs and strengths and to recast one as the other, like sides of an algebra equation; heard the words *love* and *logic* linked for the first time; went through background checks, for which we held our breath over Will's teen years and I thanked God for all I had gotten away with during my pre-midlife crisis in my twenties. Last stop was the sheriff's department, where we rolled our fingerprints over the new touch screen. Will's usual jokes went unreciprocated, while I studied the list of criminal charges posted on the wall, amazed at all the gradations.

As we finished the training, we grew ever more energized at the prospect of seeing the composite children in our workbooks, their strengths, needs, and behaviors neatly charted, come to life in three

dimensions. We were ready, we thought, for bedwetting, fire starting, tears, crayoned walls, and tentative hugs. We were ready to dump massive quantities of abstract, unconditional love on a kid, despite having been warned that this was not the universal fix.

We were ready to respect the bioparents, as Gerri called them, as wounded grown children still dealing with their own unmet needs but always doing their best to cope. We were ready to accept that, no matter what, they were the parents “our” children would always love and need the most. Good students that we were, we believed such understanding could override our instincts.

AFTER CONQUERING the water situation, we did not expect trouble from the fire inspector. We’d thought we were ready for him as well—our ingenious, custom-built 1980s house had previously housed a family with disabled children and seemed perfectly safe; our smoke alarms worked only too well and could detect a bag of slightly singed popcorn before you’d even opened the microwave. We had our fire extinguishers, upstairs and down—okay, no problem to get bigger ones and fix them on mounting brackets. The door to the hot water heater had to be vented. The closet next to it had to be permanently emptied (and was every time we got a relicensing inspection). Thank goodness they did not measure the length of the dryer hose, which snakes its way through the basement before venting outdoors. But an upstairs bedroom window was a few inches short of standard width.

Who knew that becoming a foster parent would involve recutting a window so it would be wide enough for a fire ladder to fit through its frame? (Never mind the bigger question: Would that ladder truck, stationed in the center of town, actually get here in time?) In an endeavor driven by heart, soul, compassion, and angst, who would think so much comes down to measurements?

I understand, of course, why foster homes have to be physically safe in every aspect. And I understand why the inspections have to be picky. I understand why smoke detectors have to be placed seven feet high and not five, since smoke rises to the ceiling and then drops down. I just wish that the regulations went both ways, so that when foster children return to birth homes—where everyone smokes, does their own wiring, and produces heat by opening the oven doors, lighting unvented kerosene heaters, and stoking woodstoves illegally installed in trailers—those birth homes would have to have at least one working smoke detector with an

unexpired nine-volt battery that hasn't been filched for use elsewhere. But there's no such requirement.

Eight hundred dollars and five months later, the fire marshal okayed our beautifully vented water heater door and a new window in a bedroom we hadn't even planned to use.

THAT WAS summer 2004, more than two years after I'd first read the newspaper story about Laurie Marsh and her husband. We were ready.

Ready to begin waiting.

All those websites and billboards about "waiting children"—with their dark-ringed eyes, dropped teddy bears, and reproving stares? Well, that waiting went both ways, we learned, especially as we were licensed by a county's social services agency. Thankfully, our local social workers were conscious of the need to make a good match, especially as we were just starting out, but we understood they couldn't predict when birth parents would mess up so badly that a judge would approve intervention. Even then, we knew from our licensing classes that social workers were required first to search for family members who could handle a kinship placement.

So we were waiting for a midnight phone call. Waiting for a placement. And waiting some more. Waiting until we'd forgotten we were waiting at all.

CHILDPROOF

I thought I had no illusions. I thought I might be the first person who'd bought into the official DSS line. After many years of pleasing teachers, I could parrot the workbooks right back: the actual goal of foster care is that children will go back home again. *Reunification*. A mouthful of a term I found oddly impersonal from the start. I learned that food cabinets could be filled and support services found to fit a family's needs; I believed that drug addictions and abusive relationships were problems weak parents sweated out, talked through, and moved on from. Not problems that some just got better at hiding. Ever the compliant student, I had the notion that foster kids were like library books taken briefly out of circulation, improved with new binding and taped-up pages, then returned to a rebuilt, sturdier shelf. At that point, I assumed, my real life would resume with its movie dates, trail rides, and the spontaneous girlfriend weekends I'd read about in *Oprah*.

I didn't want to adopt. I'd said that up front once we started the licensing process—a conviction that would change the instant a real child was in our home. Until that point, I saw foster kids as theoretical beings in transit—souls in purgatory—whose wait might be made more pleasant by a stopover in our home. But what would make the next decade so wrenching—seeing children going back to seemingly unchanged situations, again, again, again—was largely absent from my early fantasies.

For Will the thorny issue about foster parenting was rules: he's a true product of the sixties, who endears himself as a teacher by never doing anything the way he's supposed to. He was not about to change that approach for this foster parenting venture driven by state regulations, court orders, and restrictions, which include not being allowed to introduce foster children *as* foster children (“our friend who's staying with us right now” was the trainer's suggestion). I knew that Will would be fantastic with actual kids, but his resentful reluctance to accede to requirements like getting twelve hours of training per year even while we were waiting to get our first placement, or taking the deadbolt off the front door as the fire marshal required, was already causing tension between us. Entirely predictable tension, but I constantly feared he might back out of the whole endeavor.

MIDWAY THROUGH that winter of 2005, we finally got a call from Gerri, the social worker who'd licensed us. She knew I'd be terrified to start with an older child, no matter how she'd tried to dispel my wrong belief that the youngest children were blank slates psychologically. Today I understand that even a fetus can experience stress, connecting shouting voices with surging cortisol, even if Mom is not punched in the stomach or pushed down stairs. Before these babies are even born, their reflexes are set.

But, okay, it was our first time out, and there was a sixteen-month-old, Michael, who had two older siblings—all were with a relative for the moment, but when she went back to work in a few weeks, Michael would come to us, Gerri said. No county foster home was available that could take all three children, plus Michael had to-be-expected developmental delays and might benefit from individual attention. (It was almost funny that I'd expected those delays to be emotional: *He needs to learn to bond, to love, to trust*. Instead I was shocked at the prosaic nature of his preschool services worker's goals for him: “We want him to learn how to hold a spoon. To drink from a cup.”)

WERE WE ready for this?

Between grading midterms, Will got caught up on his HBO and snow shoveling, while I calculated how to rework my teaching schedule, plugged up the electrical outlets, and figured out the puzzles of child locks and stair gates—all good preparation for working the mystery latches and Möbius straps of a car seat. Two days later, though, Gerri called back and said stop, don't buy anything yet—at the first hearing, the judge sent the kids back.

That was the first big “huh?” of our lives as foster parents. One day parents are unfit and the next day they aren't? A different judge can turn things around just like that?

Judges seemed to be the wild card in every birth and foster family's outcome. And this was months before another foster mother told me about an infant who had recently left her care: the three-month-old had arrived with twenty-eight broken bones and a terror of bathwater; the detectives were still trying to pin this abuse on the birth father when a judge sent the baby back to the grandmother's home, next door to the father's place, on one hour's notice.

ONE HUNDRED

I didn't expect to hear anything more about Michael or his family—I assumed we'd just go back on the roster of families open for a placement. Then the night before the end of our spring university semester, a new, young social worker called. “Mom isn't doing what she's supposed to” was the worker's only tight-lipped remark. Something had happened; I never found out what. (It's the first thing everyone wants to know, however obliquely they ask . . . and you can't tell anyone anyway. Later, the question changes to “So, is *she* doing better now?” *She* always means “Mom,” while people rarely ask about the dad. Like our opinions would make any difference. Like we could be the judge.)

Michael, now a full-fledged toddler, would be brought to our house from day care the next day, while his brother and sister would be taken on to be placed with two other families. Zero to one hundred: nine months in one night. My head was reeling. We went directly to Walmart and got diapers, two baby bottles, a sippy cup (a term I couldn't believe I'd hear so many adults say with a straight face), and a crib, which Will spent most of that night piecing together. He would wait at home to greet Michael while I was teaching my last class.

I got through that class in a fog, pinching my forearms with excitement. *Would I think back on this, like a movie character, as a true before-and-after moment? One of the few in life you could distinctly recognize? This was the day my life would change—maybe.* I thought this in actual words, yet words were all they seemed to be.

The next day DSS called after the family's social worker had raced from court to pick up the siblings from school and day care before Mom could zoom up and confront her. But Michael was coming with just the clothes on his back, as is commonly the case. I might want to head back to Walmart, I was warned, and pick up a couple of outfits for him to start with. In training we'd learned we could spend \$160 every six months on clothes and shoes for a foster child. Walmart wasn't required, but shopping there and at consignment stores was the only way to make that budget work, no matter how you felt about the store's sweatshop supply chain.

I zombie-walked into Walmart for the second time in twenty-four hours, hardly able to grasp that Will was having our life-changing experience, while I was out buying a Cookie-Monster-plays-soccer outfit in stretchy gray and pajamas adorned with a red-haired Rugrat in a pith helmet. This was the dawning of yet another realization—that you have to pay a lot more for toddler clothes that don't advertise something. And even the expensive clothes—Old Navy or OshKosh—either have a brand logo front and center or they're advertising fake brands of surfboards or safari lodges. If you want an outfit with a plain picture of your basic steamroller—one that doesn't have eyes and a name and well-known catchphrase—you pay a premium.

It was evening by that point. Will called to say that Michael had arrived, eaten a cut-up hot dog and some scrambled egg, and was settling with a bottle while they waited for me. I knew Michael would have had a bewildering day, and that he'd have to go to sleep soon so he'd be ready to go to his required educational day care in the morning. Yet I walked through Walmart stunned, unable to focus. I hadn't even realized toddlers' clothes were sized by years, months, and the letter *T*. Or that diapers were sized by weight—a weight I couldn't begin to estimate. I felt like an imposter in the children's department, and I sensed the eyes of other new parents on me as I scrutinized clothing tags and held combo outfits up to gauge the fit for a child I hadn't ever seen. Would they peg me as a kidnapper? Or what if his mom was actually there and saw me? All the experienced foster parents had horror stories of running into angry birth parents, invariably at Walmart.

I got home at 7 p.m., turned the doorknob, and eased over the threshold, hoping to get close enough to see Michael before he saw me. I found him and Will in our bedroom, where Will was lying on our bed, flying Michael over him in the classic airplane maneuver. A half-full milk bottle stood on the nightstand. Will set the boy on his chest so that Michael was on hands and knees. I didn't want to startle Michael because I knew he'd be wary. So I said hello, and we were silent for minutes, as he turned his blond head slowly to the left and stared at me.

Who does he think I am? I wondered. *And what is he seeing? Shouldn't I be feeling something?* But ballooning stillness itself became a feeling, and my lungs filled with an immensely tranquil emptiness I've never found in meditation. It was the space love would rush into as soon as I let go and let the next breath in.

BY THE second morning I wanted to adopt. Could we? Was it even remotely possible? But of course we were *foster* parents—that's what we'd signed up for. His mom was complying with the plan Social Services had drawn up, and Dad was temporarily "out of the picture," in the shorthand expression that everyone I met seemed to like to use.

At first we had no idea how long Michael would stay with us, and little understanding of the stages of the court process. Terms like *adjudication* and *stipulation* were as alien to us as they probably were to the "bios"; I know of one determined foster mom who attended every hearing and always tried to find a way to slip the judge photos of the kids who were thriving in her care, hoping the judge would grasp the stakes. Other foster parents I met felt it was their duty to be present and, for the sake of the kids in their care, attended and squelched whatever discomfort they felt. Coward that I was—and completely shaken the first time I encountered Michael's mom in an agency hallway—the notion of attending court (which is apparently more commonplace now, a decade later, as is education about the process) seemed incredibly confrontational to me. Foster parents were rarely, if ever, invited to testify, and we were pledged to support the agency's decisions about the case anyway. Simply sitting in court, I felt, would have seemed to spell out the us-versus-them divide that we tried so hard to erase from our hearts and minds. Worst of all, to me, it seemed invasive of the bioparents' privacy. Curious as I was, I didn't think any bioparents would see us as their allies. If I showed up at court, I didn't think they would ever forgive me.

For Michael and his siblings, sometimes I heard when court dates were coming up, while other times they were mentioned after the fact, in passing—a reminder of our irrelevance, was how I took this. Like everything the children’s first social worker, Kayla, said, I constantly found myself wanting to say, “Please, wait, slow down, explain.” I didn’t know if I was snooping or stupid or if it seemed like I was overstepping and second-guessing her plan. But pushy was not how I wanted to seem with a social worker, and I knew it would not get results. In hindsight, I think this worker was almost as new as I was in my very different role; still, I was relieved when another Child Protective Services director took over the office after Michael’s case closed. It was too late for all my questions, but from that point on, it seemed to me that transparency increased for the foster parents.

All I really cared about was knowing our sentence—how soon we’d have to give up our toddler. When I first heard that Michael would be with us for three months, I was baffled—what kind of change could happen in that time? The parents had split before the children were removed, his mom had a new boyfriend who planned to come to several visits, and Dad would soon end up in jail for unrelated reasons. I didn’t want to get into the family’s business, but weren’t we supposed to be some kind of partners in this? Was some kind of change not the point? Three months—twelve weeks—barely a season—seemed like nothing. I was confused, and if I didn’t know why we had Michael in the first place, how could I know what progress they were seeking? Or was it none of my business?

“You didn’t know why they were removed?” an agency staff member asks me now, aghast. “The children’s social worker never told you?” My usual assertiveness had failed me, I’m chagrined to say, the second I thought I might displease an authority or seem a pest. And back then I’d had no comparable experience to go by.)

Later, we would hear the estimate of a three-month time frame miraculously grow to six, due to some time-consuming practical issues. Anything that meant Michael would be with us longer was manna to me. But his mother had rights, and her social worker was determined that Mom would have a successful reunification with her children, no matter what obstacles might arise. Or, as a more diplomatic staff member eventually told us, “Mom’s done everything we’ve asked her, and she deserves the right to fail. Or to succeed on her own terms, even if it’s not the future you’d most like to see.” If I’d read that in a training manual, I know I would have agreed wholeheartedly.

FROM OUR first moments face to face with Michael, we had every bit of the staggering love-and-wonder rush that I imagine every new parent experiences, and more. We always knew there was an expiration date ahead—the snapshots of memory weren't going to be wistful nostalgia to laugh over with a teen. More like a Snapchat photo, for once that child was gone, those memories would surely vaporize: the sweet, clean, pointed face; the little sailor suit I crammed him into for a Walmart portrait; a love of chicken nuggets so great that he brought his stuffed toy rooster into the kitchen and begged me to cook it; the laughter at a bubble in the stream; his mania for cars, motors, and real, dangerous tools (this was a kid not fooled by their colorful plastic fac-similes); the “God bless” litanies I helped him recite with names of people I didn't know; the untraceable, lingering smell of his room and hair. Every gain was a loss as well, in the moment it occurred.

SWEET HOME

During one of the hearings leading up to the reunification, the lawyer representing Luke, the children's dad (who was in jail), told the judge that the children's still-married mother should not be allowed to take them to live with another man—and the judge agreed. It was his lawyer's idea, not Dad's, as it turned out: he despised Benny, the new boyfriend, but Luke hated DSS more and wanted the kids taken out of foster care and returned to one parent, that is, to their mom.

At first this ruling had meant an unexpected gift of time—instead of having the children returned to her after just three months, Jessica first would have to get a home of her own, apart from her boyfriend. This meant a long process of qualifying for a federally subsidized housing voucher, then finding one of the scarce rentals that would accept the government payments, then furnishing it using Goodwill coupons and somebody's borrowed pickup truck, and so on. Even with the constant hurried help of her social worker, it would take months. It was a huge reprieve for Will and me. Not only would we have more days with Michael and further opportunity for him to grow and learn but, less charitably—as many foster parents know—such a delay also would mean time for the birth parent to screw up—or more time for old screwups to come to light.

JESSICA WAS always sweet and complimentary to me when she carried Michael down the stairs and buckled him into my car after the weekly

supervised visits at DSS. His siblings would be rocketing around, and Jessica would talk to them sternly, calling the kids ma'am and sir as the social worker looked on approvingly. Jessica's hair was often a completely different color from visit to visit, but she always looked like she'd made an effort to think about how she'd be seen, as I did myself.

I glimpsed small lapses, though, once the family progressed to unsupervised visits. To me, this new stage of the case plan was awkward and unwelcome, as no social workers were even in the vicinity; the agency was short-staffed that summer and I was asked to meet Jessica and Benny alone for the weekly rendezvous to drop off and pick up Michael and his siblings for full Saturday visits. Suddenly Jessica was wearing tiny halters or tube tops instead of Coke-branded sweatshirts, with her hair pulled up in a streaky knot instead of clean and brushed. She and Benny would drive off with the children to a vaguely located lake—and come back with balled-up wet clothes turned inside out, half belonging to kids unknown and half of Michael's missing. Brother Ryan would be talking in fragmented riddles and sister Isabelle would be in a speechless huff. The swimming diapers Michael had been wearing that morning would be gone, of course, and so would all the extras; when Jessica returned him to us, he'd be shirtless and in a wet swimsuit. By the time we'd get back to our home, the padding of his car seat would be soaked in urine.

I PICKED up all three kids from these daylong unsupervised visits, because Isabelle's foster mom ran her florist business out of her house and was minding a baby, while Ryan's had four or five other kids to juggle. But much more unnerving than the extra driving and messy car was being all alone to hear Benny's recountings of jet-skiing and of how toddler Michael had gone underwater, but—no problem—Benny had scooped him out of the water and held him aloft overhead in triumph, like a football at the goal line. No mention of life jackets for any of the kids; clearly no use of sunscreen, even though I'd put it in the diaper bag and tried to coat Michael with it before leaving. Ryan, always, would come back exhausted, with a shirtless red blaze that often covered his torso.

Jessica and Benny must have thought my mania about sun exposure was a middle-class phobia and a predictable failure to realize that sunburns, spankings, and all-day soda were just part of growing up. Of toughening up. I said something about the jet skis and seeming lack of life jackets to the kids' by-then third social worker, who was just out

of college and substituting in to cover staff vacation time. Basically I got the message that this was Mom's time, not mine, and it was up to Jessica to determine what was safe. But thanks for "transporting" them.

WHEN I was consumed with the imperfect details, the big picture was elusive, but even at the time I realized there was no greater blessing for us than the motion made by Luke's lawyer and the judge's requiring Jessica to secure housing separate from Benny's. The extra months we gained with Michael as a result were an irreplaceable gift, giving our hearts more time to knit, allowing Michael more time to live free of cigarette smoke and learn to take asthma meds through a tube, and permitting us to go to the beach with Michael and his sister. Ryan too was able to go on the first vacation of his life with his foster family, traveling to the World of Coca-Cola and Stone Mountain, Georgia; the colored lasers that illuminated the cliff carvings at night impressed him more than anything he'd yet seen.

Then, in late summer, we heard that Jessica indeed had found a trailer that qualified for a rent subsidy. Like Benny's place, it was also in the next county—not only remote but out of the jurisdiction of our DSS, which gave Jessica and the kids a clean slate and, if a crisis should come, different foster homes. And as slow to react as we thought our DSS was, this neighboring one was rumored to be slower. But at least our own DSS would have to monitor Jessica's family for what we hoped and believed would be six months after reunification—in fact, it turned out to be two months, barely—before their case was closed.

Early on, Jessica had wrinkled her nose and mentioned that the rental was in a pretty crummy small trailer court, but that was it. (*Well, at least there'll be people around*, I remember thinking.) Yet once the kids started going for weekend visits, the penultimate step of the whole reunification process, we heard nothing, oddly, about the new trailer. Jessica and Benny now brought the children all the way back to us, which cost them significant gas money but was no doubt worth it to keep us out of their lives and their business. The kids said little—even the older two, who could speak. What these visits were like was perplexing to piece together, and surely they'd been told not to say anything for fear of never getting their family back—but I remember sitting with their paternal grandmother, Irene, and looking at the patterned walls of her trailer, while she tried to find out what they'd eaten that day, and if they'd had lunch, because she said they'd never

had lunch in the past. (Yes, we learned, they'd had box macaroni and lettuce, which I hated myself for thinking sounded suspiciously balanced to impress DSS.) I was also trying to decipher what Ryan, who always spoke cryptically, even when he wasn't covering for adults, meant by "the new Hardee's, you know, the *new* one," in an unnameable county or town.

Ryan's more experienced foster mom, Mona, was equally disgusted at the vagueness and confusion of the whole transition, even though she had pressed for a plan for Ryan to leave as her twin nieces had just moved in to stay while both of their parents were deployed overseas. Since he had started spending weekends with Benny, Ryan had come back to her house saying things like "I don't eat with brown people," and he was refusing to sit at the dinner table with Mona's nieces. So Mona was well ready for him to be gone, but not like this.

As for Michael, he would walk around the day care on Monday mornings, saying, "Belt, belt, spank, spank," while the director and I looked at each other with big eyes and pressed lips.

Somehow, we learned that the kids had been in the new trailer once and found a nail to hang a backpack on but that it had no furniture. ("Sweet Home in a Trailer," the boys always loved to screech—the 8 Mile version of the classic—oblivious to Eminem's bitterness.) I think perhaps the new trailer became their storage space, because I remember some commotion when the year's lease was up, their vehicle was down, and the landlord wanted their stuff the hell out of it.

We never understood how this arrangement could go undetected—and by *we*, I mean the children's Grandma Irene, Ryan's foster mom, and me. Clearly the kids were spending all their visiting time at Benny's place, cruising around bareheaded on dirt bikes and four-wheelers with Benny's grandson. Yes, I shuddered to think that Jessica's boyfriend had *grandchildren* who were older than Michael. This was pre-reunification, so surely all we had to do was to somehow get DSS to see this, to *realize* that the judge's order was being violated and that Jessica and the kids were not staying in that new place at all! Mom was still married, albeit to an inmate, yet she wanted the kids to spend their nights with a man they vividly remembered watching fight with their dad? Just a quick, pointed disclosure and DSS would realize that the whole housing situation was a scam, and then surely the reunification would dissolve and we'd have the children and be home free! They could even send Isabelle to our home, I thought, beneficent in abstraction.

The one big *but*? Somehow, this exposure of the children's new living arrangements had to happen without appearing to come from us, because once the kids were back with their mom for good, she could cut all of us, even Grandma Irene, off completely. So how to move forward?

Isabelle's foster mom had her business to run and a baby to consume her time; brisk and efficient, after caring for many dozen foster kids, she had seen it all and had a caring but more logical perspective than the rest of us did. Nothing that a judge or social worker did surprised her, and the process was just the process, in her view. So Ryan's foster mom, Mona, would be the one to speak up, we decided. She was the one with nothing to lose, as she was in a hurry for Ryan to leave in the first place so she could settle her nieces, so she started to wonder aloud to the social worker if the kids actually were getting fed during these weekend days, because Ryan came back so hungry. Shouldn't DSS be monitoring those weekend visits? Dropping in unannounced?

Mona raised enough doubt that the agency promised someone would drop in on the family—and, in fact, the head of our Child Protective Services unit at the time lived closer, so she would do it, rather than Kayla, the young social worker who had first worked so hard to get the children into custody and now seemed so determined to push them back out again.

And so the supervisor did stop by, on a Sunday morning, we were informed. And all was fine. Food in the cabinets. "No concerns." Full speed ahead.

"Benny's place is much more appropriate for kids," Kayla quickly told me later that week while not meeting my eye. I was stunned; Mona and Grandma Irene were stunned. So Kayla had known—and her supervisor had known—that the family was at Benny's place? Yet, in their view, apparently, Jessica had met the letter of the law—and maybe they just gambled that the law wouldn't look. After all, I guessed, if Mom and the kids could live where she didn't have to work to support herself, and could slide off their caseload and budget . . . "More appropriate than a trailer park—and, honestly," Kayla shrugged, "Mom's going to need the help."

Also irrelevant was that neither Jessica nor Benny could drive legally, although they always had a vehicle. "We don't get into law enforcement issues," Kayla said.

(The only one who did care about licenses, it turned out, was the secretary of the new day care to which Jessica was slated to send Michael.

She later confronted Jessica once or twice about dropping him off but having no driver's license. And so the developmentally delayed Michael stopped going there and just stayed home or with Benny's grown daughter instead.)

Unreal. Everyone knew—they'd just agreed to leave us out of the loop. And now, even worse, Jessica and Benny, who hated scrutiny more than anything, would know why DSS had come that weekend to check. Someone had put them up to it. Jessica, Benny, and the family social worker were all on one side, and we—Irene, Mona, and I—were on the other. Leaving the kids in the middle, obediently keeping the secret.

DO A quick search of internet comments about social worker interventions, and suddenly every commenter, left wing to right, is a Tea Party libertarian, so certain everything social workers do is government interference and overreach—"Getting in our business" is the all-purpose description. Whether it's free-range kids, homesteading megafamilies living in tents, poverty rates of investigated families—the latest media outrage seems to bring liberals and libertarians together in judgment of social work. But at the time, when we were facing Michael's imminent return to a new home with a sudden near stepdad, I wanted to demand: *Where does all this "interference" happen? Because it sure isn't here.* Everything our social workers did, they ascribed to state codes and mandates that protect the primacy of parents' rights, so was it really just our little agency that seemed so conscientiously cautious? So careful in their prescribed responses? So full of belief in the parental potential of people most of the rest of us would have written off? At the time I didn't know what to believe or whom. I simply knew that my own beliefs, complaints, and hopes were entirely beside the point.

MY FEARS took deeper root when the children began to leave us—first brother Ryan, five, and sister Isabelle, almost seven, went back together to Jessica; then, two weeks later, at just over two years of age, Michael left foster care with us and joined his siblings and mother in her boyfriend's remote, phoneless trailer, more than seventy minutes from our home. How could this be called reunification, I bitterly asked Mona, when the children were moving—I certainly couldn't say *returning*—to a family configuration that had never existed, to a home in a county where they had never officially lived, to a home that was not leased in their mother's name, and to a situation in which a judge had ordered the

children should not live? At the same time, to fulfill the court's decree the family was renting a crummier and more expensive town trailer in which they had never spent a night, paid for by government housing funds; the unused trailer was the essence of government waste, which perfectly suited the landlord.

I STILL don't understand how this situation could have happened, but neither that supervisor nor the social worker stayed at the agency much longer. Yet, if we'd made any kind of a protest, well . . . we'd signed the foster parent agreement that we would actively support the agency's reunification goals and never interfere.

"You're not going to stop this," the social worker told the director of our day care who had called to report Michael's "belt, belt" warnings after the weekend visits. They would all go to live with the boyfriend with the ice-blue eyes and endless suitcases of Busch beer in the trunk of his car. "Nothing's going to stop this."

And nothing did.

NIGHT OR DAY

Our experience as foster parents was unusual. Unusually unusual, given how different each child and family's experience can be. Michael had indeed stayed with us six months before being returned to this new incarnation of his family (Dad newly out of jail and Mom living in the next county with a much older boyfriend—hardly an uncommon relationship dynamic, I was to discover). Amazingly, we were able to remain involved after reunification, thanks to Michael's paternal grandmother and his still-young mother, Jessica. At first I was filled with cold doubt and despair when Jessica hesitated to let me plan a visit during Michael's first weeks back home; I didn't know whether to blame the social worker, who might well have advised a break from us to let Michael settle, or Jessica's boyfriend, who seemed eager to fence his new family off from any more prying eyes or interference, or my own voracious need to cling to Michael and nail down some assurance of a future with him. Most likely, it was a combination of the three that initially scared Jessica away. But after a couple of false starts, she stayed true to her word: Michael had lost enough people already, she'd often said, and didn't have to lose Will and me. Jessica had lost plenty of special people herself, she would tell me, from her only protective and nurturing