

Entering the System

by

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I had always been used to making my own decisions and being given the luxury of options to choose from. Unfortunately, everything changed when I became a ward of the state and entered the foster care system. It was June 21, 2004, when an officer and a woman knocked on our door and told us to each pack a bag of clothes. Our mother had left that morning to buy my sister a present for her thirteenth birthday, and she still wasn't home. We knew something was wrong. Our mother had been changing throughout that year. Her behavior had become erratic and offbeat. She would hardly ever eat or sleep. She was addicted to methamphetamine, and we children knew we could do nothing to change her habits. I didn't understand it at the time, but I soon came to realize how complicated things really were and that the changes to come were inevitable.

My twin brother, younger sister, and I left in a police car with our bags, leaving our oldest brother behind because he was eighteen and legally an adult. The woman with the police officer had been assigned as our official caseworker. She was going to try to place us with family members as soon as possible and told us we would possibly be split up into different homes. Our father had never been part of our lives, so we barely knew him. With a history of violence and alcoholism, our father was deemed unfit as a placement option. My sister and I were placed with other girls, and my twin brother was placed with other boys. Some of the girls at the home had suffered addictions and abuse, committed crimes, or run away from home. I began to learn more about the system of displaced children. According to the girls I met at the home, families were separated and children were placed in multiple homes, suffering even more abuse because of the system. After a week, we were taken out of the homes. My sister and I were placed with our maternal grandmother, and my twin brother was placed with our maternal aunt.

My sixteenth birthday came in July, but no one noticed. Everyone tried adjusting to the situation by acting as if everything was normal and nothing had happened. I still lived in the same town and attended the same school, which became a bigger obstacle that I had predicted. I felt like a stranger to my friends and classmates. Our town wasn't used to such heinous cases. As soon as I turned sixteen, I decided to start working at a mini-mart deli. I worked every other day, from after school to ten at night. My grandmother was very unhappy about my being out after curfew, which was seven at night. Communication was impossible with my family and friends, so problems were never solved. Everybody talked about what had happened, but no one attempted to discuss the issue with my siblings or me. We endured silent sympathy from everyone, but no empathy. Our caseworker decided to place my sister, brother, and me in counseling to help deal with the changes

Our sixty-seven-year-old grandmother was growing incredibly senile and unhealthy. Most of my money from work went towards supporting my sister and me. There was barely any food in the house, so my sister and I would eat out every night. I didn't like to think of my grandmother as an unfit parent. After all, she had already raised nine children, but it

seemed to have left her bitter. On my sister's fourteenth birthday, our grandmother didn't come home. By the next morning, we were confused and worried because we knew something had happened. My twin brother came over, and we were making dinner when the phone rang. It was our caseworker telling us our grandmother had been arrested on a felony charge of shoplifting, so we had to pack our bags again. Instead of being taken to a group home, our caseworker took us to our father's house. As I said before, our father had been deemed unfit to care for us, so our caseworker had to find new placements. This was the time when our family would really be split up. My sister went to my aunt in another town, my brother stayed in his current placement, and I was placed in a completely different foster home.

My new foster family lived in the same town as my grandmother and mother. The family was very nice and welcomed me immediately. I wasn't eager to join a new family and was put-off by their excessive eagerness. My senior year was beginning, and I was excited to graduate. As with any family, this one had its own tribulations to endure. My foster parents were going through a rough patch in their marriage, which resulted in drinking and fighting. I told my caseworker, and tried to be placed with my aunt and my twin brother. I could live with my aunt and brother if my foster parents said it was okay, but they didn't. I was miserable. It seemed as if my foster parents wanted me around mainly because the state paid them to care for me.

After graduation, I was discharged as a ward of the state. I worked all summer and then moved to Omaha to begin attending college. I had come to terms with the turn my life took, thanks in part to a year of counseling. In fact, I began to see it as a blessing. The opportunities that opened up for me, such as financial advisors to help me receive scholarships, would probably have been impossible if I had stayed with my mother. My siblings and I were also spared the abuse of our mother's addiction, and our relationship together has been renewed since being separated. I came to terms with the role I had been given and led myself to a new level of self-realization. Since becoming a ward of the state, I have become stronger, more determined, and more self-sufficient.