

Finding the Right Parents Amira Abedallah

A week after my fourteenth birthday, my younger brother and I moved to a new city. We said goodbye to hot summer days riding rollercoasters in Gothenburg, Sweden – the wind whooshing past our faces as we screamed with excitement. We said goodbye to what felt like the center of the world for a place where you can walk from one end of town to the other in 30 minutes. We had to change homes, schools, friends and parents.

My mom struggled with anxiety and schizophrenia for most of her life and she was getting worse. She was constantly in and out of psychiatric care. With no dad in the picture, social services ruled that foster care was the better option for us. I didn't know much about foster care, but I knew enough to be scared.

At first, everything seemed perfect. Our foster parents were your average middle-aged Swedish couple with a white picket fence, friendly neighbors and a garden with the prettiest roses I had ever seen. After our first night in their house, I remember waking up to the smell of pancakes and a kitchen table overflowing with every brunch food I could imagine.

But after this honeymoon phase, the smell of pancakes and my foster family's generosity faded away. Within the first two weeks there was a new car in the driveway and the front-yard piled with bricks ready to build a new patio. But my foster mom was unemployed. So where was the money coming from? I realized my brother and I were that income. I never thought I would know the feeling of being just a job to somebody. My brother and I needed more than just room and board – we needed parents. But our foster parents were unwilling to fill that role, quickly becoming emotionally cold and absent. My brother and I felt unwanted – like strangers in what was supposed to be our home. The comfort we had experienced and taken for granted with our mom was gone. We started worrying about things that we never worried about before. If it's snowing heavily and I call them to pick me up from school – will they come? If I'm hungry, can I open the fridge and grab whatever I want?

My brother and I, like many others, were taken away from our family because social services believed that they had found a better home for us somewhere else. But they were wrong. The fundamental problem, I realized, is recruiting people with the right intentions. How do you distinguish people who want to help from people who want money? Financial compensation may itself warp people's motivations. This needs to be fixed. Can it even be fixed? I didn't think so. My experience made me cynical and bitter.

After graduating high school, I officially aged out of foster care. I moved back to Gothenburg, leaving my underage brother behind. Living together, at least we had each other, but in my absence, he had enough and opened up to social services about

our situation. Soon after, he was moved to a new family. I was scared because this time I couldn't be there with him. I met his new foster mom a few times and thought she was ok, but I was still skeptical of her intentions. She didn't have a full-time job and was a single mother of two so I wondered whether she became a foster parent because she needed more money. The past is going to repeat itself.

When I was accepted to Harvard, she asked to take me out for celebratory meal. I found this odd - I had just met her and I was not hers to celebrate. But I agreed. When we finished, she handed me an envelope. I opened it and found 500 dollars. "Why?" I asked. "Well, I have all this extra money now that I don't really need. And maybe one day you will pay it forward," she said. Pay... it forward. She actually did and, it really stuck. For the longest time I thought foster parents only wanted to get paid. Instead, she chose generosity without hope for personal gain. It was a simple gesture, but it was enough to convince me that, maybe, I was wrong. Instead of seeing money as motivation, she saw it as an investment in my future. And I wasn't even hers to invest in.

That money did more than pay for my flight to Harvard - it helped repair my faith in the system. A system with a two-sided struggle: the people who want to get paid and the people who want to pay it forward. Though the system still needs a reform, my brother's foster mom, through her sincerity and selflessness, reminded me that there are good parents out there. We just need to find them.

Thank you.