

Foster Care: Photos of the Past

written by Guest Contributor | February 9, 2018



It began with a photo album. Simple looking, but full of memories of a time buried in the back of my mind—an old wound picked open as I stared at an innocent baby in one photo. She gazed at the camera with green eyes and a contagious smile, her arms stretched out towards whoever stood behind it. A picture of perfection.

The photo itself was a lie, the presence of a child who had once been me creating a false sense of happiness. In reality, the truth was much more sinister.

I was seven-years-old when I permanently moved in with my dad. My memories before that age instantly disappeared, shoved into a tiny box in the corner of my mind. The new friends I made within the first week of attending Basalt Elementary School in Basalt, Colorado preoccupied my thoughts. I didn't have time to think about Taygea, the sister I had left behind. The one who had been forced to move in with our grandmother shortly after I left and acted out until she was placed in a group home. I didn't want to think of the mother who had succumbed to methamphetamines and alcohol, leaving me with a childish confusion I would come to carry into my young adult years. I put these thoughts in the back of my mind.

What seven-year-old girl could understand them anyway?

As I grew older, I became fascinated by the memory of my mother, the mysterious woman who had existed in my life until one day she hadn't. My memories were clouded with confusion.

Why could I barely remember going to school? Why did my mom disappear for days on end? Why did we steal from my grandparents?

Why did I barely see my dad? Why did I feel guilty wanting to stay with him? How did I know my mother was doing drugs? Why were my grandparents so inconsiderate? Why did I cling to my mother's side while my sister tried to move as far away from her as possible?

Each question flowed from my mouth but my dad's responses were always the same. *You aren't old enough to understand. Or, leave the past in the past.*

A child's curiosity is an insatiable beast, but I let it rest for now.

I was ten when one new question arose in the silence of others, but I wasn't the one asking it. *Why didn't I call the woman who had become a mother to me, mom?*

Each of my childhood friends saw how I interacted with my dad's girlfriend, a woman I had grown close to in a shockingly short amount of time. I had always been a shy person, and as a child, I clung to my mother and father like no other. Yet, when it came to Betsy, our bond grew in the short time I spent with her. She filled the hole left by my biological mother and redefined what it meant to be a parent. Why didn't I call her mother? My response had always been out of embarrassment, I claimed I had tried but had gotten laughed at. In truth, though, we had both laughed at it. It was better than saying I had always thought that I would one day see my mother again. I had gone from home to home, my mother's to my father's, after the two had split up when I was four-years-old. The last time had felt no different.

Now, twelve years later, I haven't spoken to my mother since—no phone calls or birthday cards. It's as if I ceased to exist.

I never truly understood what had happened to my family until I was eighteen and started piecing things together. For the first time in years, I allowed the memories to overpower my senses. Chasing after the family dog. The crunch of leaves beneath my feet. My footsteps resounding in a quiet house. The harsh bite of a seatbelt against my chest. A dog cowering on the bed. My foot catching on a tree root. My hands shaking by my side. My mother lighting another cigarette. My body falling without purpose. Teeth digging into my lip. The silence of a dark staircase. My body lying on a broken fence. My mother staring at my back. My cries resonating up the stairs. A hand flying to my mouth. My black tights catching on a fence. Following my sister with a tear-stained face. A white scar. An upturned car yards away.

The first memory caused me to run a hand over the white scar on my lip, the teeth marks still visible if you looked closely. I had been a young child, running through the house of my grandparents, chasing after the family dog, a chow chow (to this day I can't bring myself to tolerate this specific dog breed). I followed her into my grandparents' bedroom, where my mother stood searching through their stuff. She made a habit of stealing from her parents (the habit rubbing off on me at one point). The chow chow leapt on the bed and curled into herself, presenting the perfect opportunity for my five-year-

old self to grab her tail. With lightning speed, the dog lunged at my face and dug her teeth into my lip as my hands tried to shove her away. The dog cowered on top of the bed as my screams filled the room and the image of my mother pulling me into her chest fills my mind, her wide eyes staring at my lip. Surprisingly, there was no pain in this memory. Only shock. It was one of the simpler memories, straight forward with no room for questions.

A majority of my worst memories happened when I was younger than seven, most of which seemed too unreal to have actually happened. The memory of lying on my stomach in a house, asking my mother if she was going to take me to the hospital, seemed simple yet terrifying. The sound of the soft rustle of leaves and an image of a fifteen-foot drop has haunted me from a young age. I could hear my childish voice begging my mother not to take me to the hospital before falling asleep and waking up in one. For years, I wondered about the long, white scar on the left side of my back. My memory of that day consisted of a single, strange picture—a fifteen-foot drop with each side covered in wire. I had always imagined tripping on a stick and tumbling head first into the ditch before blacking out. My father frequently said Taygea had pushed me, but I refused to believe that my own sister would deliberately harm me. I blamed my father for his biased opinion of my mother and those she was related to.

At nineteen, I finally heard the full story from my older sister. I pictured the forest we used to play in as children, running through the trees as we played tag, as I read her text message. Her foot catching on a tree root, her body falling forward and pushing me into the ditch. I could feel her fingers brush against my arm, her hand grasping my foot as the wire wrapped around one of the rocks sliced into my back. I could feel her guilt grate against my bones, the same guilt I've felt for my own three-year-old sister, Lily, who was born right before I turned sixteen. My father always made it sound as if Taygea had pushed me on purpose, to be spiteful and mean. The truth had been simple: accidents happen, especially to children.

The most prominent memory I have took place in a house my mother visited periodically. It revolved around the childhood friend always present, never straying to the darker purpose of our visits. The distinct sound of my feet echoing through the hall, carrying me to the staircase that led to my mother, echoed in my head. Twelve years later I would be told my mother had been in a dark room upstairs doing methamphetamines. The knowledge of what my mother did invoked a childish confusion in me, ushering in a new memory of my hands shaking by my side as I stared at a dark staircase. At first, I merely called out to her. No response. My voice rose, echoing through my head, and turned frantic as the silence wrapped itself around my tiny body. No response. My cries echoed up the stairs but no reply ever resounded down them. I was a mere child craving her mother's attention, growing tired of the endless afternoons we spent at her friend's house. Each memory represented a different type of fear, this one pulling at the fear of abandonment hidden deep inside myself.

The car accident was the most confusing and terrifying memory. The edges hazy from the years I had kept it buried in the back of my mind. If I closed my eyes I could imagine the small car we had been in, I could feel the frigid

air of the night, the sleepiness that threatened to take control. I could imagine my mother lighting another cigarette as she stared at the road, my eyes growing heavy with each puff of smoke. I could remember waking up on the side of the road, my mind still clouded from sleep. The image of an upturned car yards away flashes before my eyes as the back of my tights catch on the fence I lay on, my back pressed against the harsh edges of the wire. My mind goes dark. Had I fallen asleep? Had help already been called? Why do I only remember the loneliness of waking up on the road, my heart pounding in my chest as I tried to understand what had happened?

Each memory lay hidden in the corners of my mind, threatening to come forth at the sight of a shadow or the jerk of a wheel. They signify a secret I've kept subconsciously for as long as I can remember, never spoken out loud or acknowledged.

One of the things that seemed to be the clearest during the three years I solely lived with my mother until I was seven, was the absence of my dad. Even as a child, I understood that my mother was playing hide and seek with him, moving from place to place, each of his phone calls ignored. The day of the car accident was the first time I had seen him in what felt like years. His presence brief, gone before I could accept the fact that he was there. When the weekend visits began, it had been a year since I had last seen him. I didn't notice the lost time, though, only the time I gained.

The first visit was surprisingly full of weird looks (mostly from me) as I stared at the young woman standing next to my dad. The excitement that had rushed over me was suddenly replaced by confusion. I clung to my dad's side as the young woman smiled down at me, her face lighting up as she introduced herself as Betsy.

My weekends with my dad and Betsy felt like mini-vacations, a life I could only dream of. They were simple and sparing. The fact that I would have to return to my mother loomed over our heads, and my contempt flowed freely from my mouth at the thought of leaving the two of them. I didn't want to face the rejection of a mother that would rather sleep the day away than spend time with her daughter. I had grown attached to my mother, but grew even more attached to my dad and this new woman. The idea of a life with them seemed so close yet so far away.

In my memory, the weekend visits had felt like they had occurred over the course of a year, but in reality, they took place over a course of a couple months. The fight for custody hardly seemed like a fight at all, my mother almost making it too easy. I was nineteen when my dad finally told me the whole story, not just bits and pieces like he had in the past. I was able to look through the psyche evaluations on both my mother and my father, and read the short journal my dad had written. The psyche evaluation that had been mandated by the court revealed what I already knew. My father was far more prepared and mentally stable to raise a child than my mother would ever be. As an adult, I look back at what could've been my life if the court had granted my mother full custody. Reading the opinion of the court brought to light how undependable my mother truly was. During the evaluation process, she lied about her drug use, abandoned her child, and failed two urine tests.

When I had merely cried at the thought of not going home with my dad, my mother left without so much of a glance back at the child she was leaving behind once again. An action seemingly so simple proved that if my mother had been given full custody, the small things I have in my life, the things that seem and feel insignificant, would have vanished as soon as the gavel connected with the dark wood of the bench.

Despite my mother's faults, I couldn't help but love her like any child loves a parent. The last time I saw her we had driven to Leadville to meet my dad like usual. My excitement for a weekend of adventure quickly took over the minute I saw my dad, I never thought to glance at the woman left waiting in the car behind me. When we returned after the weekend was over, her car was nowhere to be found. The situation didn't surprise me, I had grown used to being left behind. As the sun set in the sky and disappeared behind the mountains, I realized this time was different. She wouldn't be coming back.

The sudden disappearance of my mother in my life led to a stable environment and a life that every child would want. I never faced the loneliness my mother caused on a daily basis or the rejection her simplistic actions invoked. Instead, my life was suddenly filled with sports, school, and summer visits to Mississippi. The transition between the two lives was abrupt, and as a child, I never realized that I would never see my mother again. She had been a constant in my life up until that point, no matter how many times she left.

I never allowed the impact of my mother's absence show in the years following, instead focusing on new things in my life. I grew used to the summer trips I took to Mississippi to visit my extended family and the camping trips we took every year. I clung to books even as a child, seeking comfort in words. My life had somehow sown itself together.

When I grew older I began to notice all the things that have impacted me over the years. The car accident had created a fear present in the back of my mind every time I got in a car, my heart racing at every curve and turn. My fear of the dark as a child, the memory of the dark abyss staring back at me as I called for my mom, still raised its ugly head as an adult. As a young teenager, the photo albums my dad had found opened the gate to memory lane. To see myself as a toddler on the cover, dressed as a fairy, created a flood of questions that wouldn't be answered until I was nineteen. The photo albums were a constant reminder of a past I had buried deep inside myself. I continued to flip through the pictures though, each one coaxing a memory from the depths of my mind.



Kaia Brose is a freshman at the University of South Dakota with an addiction to books and coffee. Her short story, “Photos of the Past,” is the first creative nonfiction piece she has written, and one of the few stories she has finished.

Abandonment and neglect. Substance abuse. Alcoholism. Suicide ideation. These are subjects which are prominent in child welfare and foster care; on average, foster children remain wards of the state for two years. I asked: Why are these stories uncommon despite its longstanding presence? Why is the adage “education out of the system” the emergent path to adulthood? Why have I not found a safe space for these stories from educators, administrators, foster parents, biological parents, kinship placements, adoptees, and the fostered and unfostered?

There has to be a way to make that happen. That is what I’m looking at for this foster care series. The writings I aim to publish will take a variety of forms, including creative nonfiction, hybrid writing, poetry, fiction, visual and text-based. More importantly, they will come from voices which are undeniably unafraid to speak. If language can do that, I think we can get closer to reinventing our experiences; we’re not so different or alone at the end of the day. Send your writings on foster care to sylvia@entropymag.org. And keep speaking.