

Chapter 5

Group Homes / Foster Homes

My case worker Rob asked me where I wanted to be placed on a more permanent basis. I had no father to run to. There was no one to help me.

Rob: Where is it that you want to go from here?

Me: I don't want to live in the same town as my family; it's uncomfortable.

Rob: Where do you want to go?

Me: What are my options?

Rob: Either a group home or another foster home.

Me: What's a group home?

Rob: It's a place where you would be living with girls around your own age.

Me: Outside of town, right?

Rob: Yes, it would be in Colorado Springs. I'll set up an appointment for us to see the home sometime next week.

And just as he promised, we visited Charity Home for girls. Within a month I was living there with 6 other girls around my own age. I lived there for more than a year, and it was the best time of my life. I was given a complete checkup right away. First was the doctor; everything checked out fine. Then came the dentist; he found 22 cavities.

The dentist explained that the enamel had been stripped from my teeth. The staff asked me how I got so many cavities, and I told them.

Me: It could be from all of the lemons I ate.

Staff: How many lemons did you eat.

Me: Many.

Staff: Are they your favorite food?

Me: No, I was just hungry.

Staff: Michelle, what are you saying? You didn't eat at home?

Me: Yes, but in the mornings, my mother always cooked me 0.cream of wheat, and I didn't like it. I would sit there for hours and not eat it. She would send me to school without breakfast on those days. I ate lemons instead, since we had a lemon tree in the back yard.

Staff: But there are no lemon trees in Colorado.

Me: I know, but I'm from California.

The staff member dropped the conversation until we got back to Charity House, I was then told to speak to the house counselor. I opened up a little about my family life.

Therapist: So, Michelle, do you miss your family?

Me: No. I only miss Steven.

Therapist: Who is Steven?

Me: My brother.

Therapist: Why don't you miss your dad?

Me: No he hits me and yells at me, and ...

Therapist: And what?

I paused for a moment.

Me: And he touches me.

Therapist: What do you mean by "touches" you?

Me: Nothing. Am I going to get in trouble?

Therapist: No. When you got into trouble at your home, how were you punished?

Me: I sat in a corner, or I was hit with a big wooden paddle.

Therapist: How long did you sit there in the corner?

Me: All day.

Therapist: How did that make you feel?

Me: My legs hurt a lot. They would fall asleep. (a long pause) I don't want to talk anymore, okay? Please?

The therapist then explained to me that I would never be hit again or have to sit in any corner. When I heard that, I became the biggest delinquent that place had ever seen. I got high and ran away every chance I got. It was so nice to be bad without fear.

I don't know if I was just blowing off steam after being suppressed all my life, or if I was just being a normal teenager for the first time. But of course, being a delinquent had its consequences.

I had a couple of my teachers try to befriend me. I wasn't sure if their kindness was to try to keep peace in their classroom, or because they really cared. The first kind teacher was Mrs. Brown my Math teacher. she was the first person in my life who ever challenged me to do good.

Mrs. Brown: Michelle, I know you're a smart kid, and you would do well if you would just apply yourself. I'll tell you what. If you try this week, I'll cook you your favorite dinner, okay?

Me: I don't know.

Even though I acted as though I didn't care, deep down I did. I wanted to show Mrs. Brown. that I was smart, so for that next week I stayed in my room every day after class and caught up on all of my work. Then I went on to complete the book.

I surprised her by turning in all of the work at once. She was so happy, not only did she cook me dinner at her home, but she then visited me at Charity Home for awhile. It was nice having company for the first time. As she was leaving she handed me a calculator and hugged me goodbye.

Mrs. Brown: I knew you could do it, Michelle. Never give up on yourself. Miss Hill was the second teacher who tried to help me, even though I was the class clown. She was so sweet. I at times did try, but I could never understand English class. I could barely read as it was. After class many days, she would try to tutor me, but nothing seemed to work. We became friends to a certain extent. She even invited me to her house, only a block from the group home.

I enjoyed her company, but I eventually frightened her away. One day she and I went to a grocery store together. She had to pick up some things for dinner that evening. While we were walking the aisles, I shoplifted some diet pills. And took a couple as we walked to her car. I had no idea I would have an allergic reaction

A friend of mine from the home said that if I were to take diet pills I would get high, but that wasn't true in my case. By the time we reached Miss Hill's house I had a terrible headache. I helped her carry the groceries inside when all of a sudden, I felt faint.

Me: I think I better go, I don't feel good.

Miss Hill: What's wrong, Michelle?

Me: I don't feel good. I have to go.

So she walked with me to the home, and as soon as I walked through the front door, I fainted. When I woke up, I was in the hospital with tubes and wires all over me.

Me: Where am I?!

A nurse ran into the room.

Nurse: You're in the hospital, and we almost lost you. I'll be right back. And as she was leaving, there in the doorway stood Naomi, the house mother.

Naomi: What were you thinking? You could have killed yourself. You're going to stay at my house for a few days to recuperate. See to it that this never happens again!

For some reason I was so tired, later I was told that I stopped breathing, but nothing seemed to faze me.