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Our Foster Son, Our Son

An innocent child was taken from his home in Goose Creek, South Carolina by his deranged mother and her military husband – kidnapped and presumed dead. The child became the scapegoat for her own father’s failure to wait before marrying again. Her mother died from cancer and “that woman” was raising her boy after she was deemed unfit. How dare she? An unstable woman, who lacked the protective instincts of a mother, put her only son in the crucifix position and forced screwdrivers through the palm of his hands – straight through his little boy’s flesh. She was attempting to crucify the memory of her father’s choice by abusing his grandson. After all, the boy called him “daddy.”

When the principal of my son’s elementary school called and said they had a little boy who needed emergency placement for foster care, I didn’t hesitate in my response. “Our door is always open.”

The truth is we closed our doors for a year because of my diagnosis with Stage 3 ovarian cancer and subsequent chemotherapy. My husband and I had three children of our own who ranged from seven to fifteen at the time. They were devastated by my diagnosis, especially when my hair started falling out and I almost died from anaphylactic shock because of my allergy to the very drug that was supposed to save my life. But, unlike some ovarian cancer victims, I survived my battle. Now that I had my life back, I wanted to share it with another child, a child who needed me.

Joshua was seven years old and in my son’s second grade class at Hiawatha Elementary School in Essex Junction, Vermont. When he walked into our home with our caseworker, I was shocked that he was African American. Vermont is not known for diversity. My heart melted when I looked into his eyes – eyes worn by the crushing blows of a mother who kidnapped him and a man who assisted in beating him mercilessly. The gash above his eyebrow and his broken nose tugged at my mother’s heart. Time would show that they were merely visible scars that held less truth than the scars from his battered soul.

The first night as I tucked the boys into bed, I told Joshua how glad I was that he came to live with us. I kissed him on the cheek and then I kissed Geoffrey good night. When I turned off the

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light, Joshua started screaming. “Turn on the light. Please. Please. Please. Turn it on now.” With the flip of the switch his crying stopped. I told him I could put a nightlight in the room.

“No. I need the light on.”

I looked at Geoffrey. How would he sleep with the light on? He shook his head that it was okay. Once again, I kissed them goodnight. “You are safe Josh, I promise. The doors are locked and we are right across the hall.”

“I am never safe. Never,” he said as he rolled over and faced the wall.

The next morning, he barely gave me a smile as he ate breakfast. I brought him upstairs and gave him a towel and washcloth and started the shower for him. When I walked into the hall, I heard the sobs coming through the door.

“Josh, what is it?”

“Please don’t leave me. I can’t be alone in here.”

“What if I sit outside the door? Will you feel safe?”

“Only if you leave the door open and talk to me.”

“I can do that Josh.”

Horrible visions of what could possibly have happened to him in the shower raced through my head. Being a victim of sexual abuse heightened my sensitivity to his fear. I knew what it was like to feel vulnerable. I knew what it was like to look to constantly look over your shoulder and what it was like to fear the dark. Even at fifteen, I hated sleeping upstairs alone while my parents slept downstairs because I was afraid of it happening again. I wanted to protect this little boy from the demons that plagued his mind. I had to.

We didn’t have busses in Essex Junction, so I drove the children to three different schools. I dropped off Geoffrey and Joshua last. When I pulled up at the parent drop off point, Joshua looked at me tentatively. Geoffrey opened the door and waited for Joshua. He didn’t move.

“We will walk together Josh. You will be safe.” My little Geoffrey, the protector, understood his role in making Joshua more at ease. Joshua got out of the car and grabbed Geoffrey’s hand

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and they walked up the sidewalk to the school. Every few steps, he looked over his shoulder. I waved and blew him kisses. A brotherhood formed that day between Geoffrey and Joshua.

One afternoon shortly after Joshua came to live with us, the children sat around the kitchen table while I prepared lunch. I made grilled tuna and cheese sandwiches and when Joshua saw me scraping the bowl to make the last sandwich, he sank into his chair and he stopped eating the sandwich in front of him. At first it was a hiccup, then a squeaking sound escaped through his lips, and after a few seconds a full blown wail filled the kitchen. My children looked on in horror and I couldn't imagine why he was crying.

"What is it Josh? I asked.

"I'm still hungry," he cried.

"I can make more Joshua. Look. I am pulling out another can of tuna out of the cupboard."

Later that afternoon, I took him to his follow-up appointment with the doctor who treated him after his last severe beating. I understood why he was crying after the doctor took me aside after Joshua's blood test results came in. He was spilling ketones into his urine. His body didn't have carbohydrates to burn, so it was beginning to burn fat. When someone is dieting, this is normal. Joshua wasn't dieting; his mother nearly starved him to death. I knew what it felt like to starve. After my first chemotherapy treatment, I lost twelve pounds in one week because I was unable to eat and I could barely drink water. It sucks the life out of you when you can't eat. I couldn't eat, but he wanted to eat. He was crying out for food, but they locked him in a closet and starved him instead. When his frequent cries came flooding through the closet door, they beat him. When his mother grew tired, his stepfather would take over. It was a tag team match against a child who couldn't fight back. According to the doctor, the beating was so severe they lacerated his liver. I grabbed the chair next to me and the doctor eased me into it. I felt faint. How could someone do such heinous things to a little boy? I determined that day I would become not a foster mother, but a real mother to Joshua.

Over the course of the next few months, my husband and I talked long into the night about adopting Joshua. He became our little boy so quickly. Once he overcame his fears, he settled in our home like it was his home. In the evenings, Geoffrey sat on one side of me and Joshua would sit on the other side Joshua snuggled me and gently stroked my hair. He loved the silky

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texture, but he didn't know that it was new growth because I lost my hair during my chemotherapy treatments. He needed to know I was okay, so I didn't tell him. More often than not, he would fall asleep after playing with my hair and my husband would carry him to bed. The only light on by that time was the light in the bathroom. He felt safe.

The happiest I saw Joshua was when we planned a small birthday party for him. The look on his face said it all. He was secure. He knew he was loved. He could have fun again, but within a few days everything changed.

When I received the phone call, I wanted to take Joshua and run. They located his grandparents, the very grandparents he was stolen from, the very people he called mom and dad. It should have been joyful news, but it wasn't. I didn't want him to leave. He just began to bond with us. We were his family now. Besides, they didn't protect him from his psychotic mother. When they came to the door, they cried when they saw Joshua. Their first words were "He is so skinny." I wanted to tell them that he had gained weight since coming to live with us, but I knew that would further their pain about his kidnapping. Joshua hugged them, but then he settled back on the couch next to me stroking my hair. I took deep breaths to hold back the tears. I had to be strong.

His grandparents were delightful people. They showed their gratefulness by showering my children with gifts and taking us to dinner. Their indebtedness could not ease the tension in my shoulders or the pain in my heart. I didn't want to let Joshua go. They couldn't take my little boy even if they had every right to do so. Everyone in our household felt the emptiness when Joshua walked out the door for the last time, an emptiness that lasted for years, and an emptiness that also grew inside of Joshua.

Three months after Joshua left, my husband was laid off from his job, our house was sold, and we moved to Rochester, New York. We didn't have an address or phone number for Joshua, so we couldn't let him know we moved. He tried calling us right after we left only to find our phone was disconnected. He called the school and the only information they were allowed to give him was we moved to New York. The memory of our love for him and his for us never died.

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Thirteen years later, we were sitting in my oldest daughter's living room and we started talking about Joshua.

"Maybe we can find him on Facebook," my youngest daughter suggested.

We did a search and we found him. He was a football player at a Division 1 school in North Carolina, but his home was still living in South Carolina. We sent him a message and he replied that it was him. We kept in touch for the next few years and when my youngest daughter, Bethany, was married she invited him to the wedding.

As I stood waiting for him at the airport gate, my heart fluttered with the expectation a mother feels waiting for her son to come home. Tears flowed freely with every step he took toward my waiting arms. Joshua referred to us as mom and dad and my parents as his grandparents, and our siblings his aunts and uncles. He interacted with everyone like he knew them for a lifetime, like they were his family too.

When the wedding was over and we were all exhausted, he sat on the couch next to me and stroked my hair. He snuggled in and fell asleep on my shoulder. My little Joshua, who was now a grown man, was home at last.