

ASHLEY'S STORY

The following narrative was e-mailed to the Donaldson Adoption Institute by a young woman who did not experience a legal dissolution of her adoption but, rather, suffered a complete emotional severing of the parent-child relationship when she reached the age of 21. With Ashley's permission, it is included to illustrate that legal permanency also needs to be accompanied by relational permanency.

My name is Ashley and I am a 25 year old adoptee. My biological brother and I were adopted at the ages of 4 and myself 8 years old. We were adopted after spending years in and out of foster care because our birth family struggled with addiction. My brother was blessed with being young enough that our adoption was a clean slate for him. I had seen too much, been through too much in my first eight years. I had an abusive birth father and a mother who was so involved with her addiction that we were frequently pulled in the middle of the night to be put into various foster homes.

We met our adoptive parents in the fall. ... I can't recall exactly what I was feeling, other than I was excited at the thought of living in a lovely home with these "nice" people. They took my brother and I on fun weekend outings before we were able to actually live with them and we were able to meet the people that would be our family members. Eventually we were placed in their care. I left the horrible foster home behind and settled into my new life. We had problems right from the start. I had not had adults in my life showing me consistent love and care, and I did not know how to handle a new "mom" and "dad". I was acting out in many ways, in desperate need of attention, even if it was negative. I remember one of our first issues was my constantly feeling sick. I would spend most of my days at school with the school nurse. I did not know how to properly socialize with children my age.

About a year later I had my last visit with my birth mother before we were to be legally adopted. I again don't remember what I was feeling. I don't think I understood what this meant. I was 9 years old. My birth family gave me a huge photo album that would remain on my shelf for years at my new home. The following years brought out repressed feelings from me. I was still acting out. I was either mad and argumentative or in wild need of love. I started to lie to my adoptive parents about things that were just not necessary. It seemed that I had taken on bad traits that I had seen from my birth family without even knowing it. My adoptive mother was a teacher and schoolwork became a big issue. I was either 100% into school or not at all, depending on how I felt and how things were at home.

During this time I overheard my adoptive mother discussing whether or not she could send me back. Needless to say, I had a problem taking to her after this. She assumed I should be happy. At this point my adoptive parents had no idea what to do to motivate me. Their form of punishment was for the most part shutting me off from everyone and anything for years. I was allowed to go to school and be in my bedroom. ... This backfired and made me more distant. I didn't know how

to voice the pain I was in. I was never put in therapy. The 8 years prior to them knowing me were a big mystery they never asked about.

As I got older I became curious about my birth family and I went searching for any paperwork that maybe related around my house. They were not having this. They established a rule that I was not allowed around the house unless they were home. When I got home from school I had to stay in our basement until someone else came home. They were helpless and I was helpless. In high school things remained the same. It was a constant battle between us – one that was only dealt with by punishing me. I was so lost and hurt all the time. My grades were either straight A's or F's. There was no happy in between with anything in our household.

When my high school graduation was nearing, I was so detached from our relationship that I chose to move out right away. An incredibly silly move on my part, but at the time I needed to be away from them – far, far away. We emailed every so often. The older I got and looked for a healing process the more angry I got with them for not seeing clear signs of how badly I needed help. I read countless books on the signs of child abuse and what to expect from a child of addicts. I was the poster child. The more I tried to talk it out with them the further away they went.

Four years ago when I had turned 21 I received an unprompted email from them. They told me that they considered this a failed adoption and did not wish to have me a part of their life anymore. They said they hadn't connected with me as a child and that it had become impossible to try to have one with me as an adult. They said that my brother would have to decide what to do with a blood relative. Wished me the best and that was it.

There are so many variables here. Present day I have no family but have a huge open heart that is aching for someone to love me. I think I still don't quite understand what it would mean to have a family, but I'm aware of its absence. I have not been able to see my dear brother in over 8 years because they would not allow it. The irony is that I have transitioned into a very mature, loving, smart, kind young woman. At least I would like to think so. I find it hard to give myself any kind of credit, as I was not wanted by not just my birth parents, but my adoptive parents as well. I have a great job I work hard at; a stunning apartment in a beautiful neighborhood; and most of all, I have a healthy lifestyle. I thank my lucky stars I was never tempted as my birth family was by drugs or alcohol.

Four years later, I still struggle with their decision. ... For some reason, unknown to me, I have kept a sane mind. I strive to be a good person. I see a bright future ahead of me. I have had many years to think about their decision, and while it is hard for me to wrap my head around, I have thought about their point of view. I find it so unfortunate that they were so ill informed and/or prepared for the adoption of an older child. I have a certain amount of compassion and sympathy for my adoptive mother who was not able to have children. I have never met anyone in my position and want to voice my story in hopes of helping someone else.

Adapted from: Smith, S.L. (2014). *Keeping the promise: The case for adoption support and preservation*, Appendix I: Ashley's Story. New York: Donaldson Adoption Institute. Access at: <http://adoptioninstitute.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Keeping-the-Promise-Case-for-ASAP1.pdf>