

(An excerpt from a longer piece I wrote in February 2024 in my creative writing program, edited to share with church how God's grace showed up in my life, and His long-suffering towards me, a very obstinate and slow-to-learn sinner.

I became a Christian (eventually) in large part through my foster parents' example of obedience, love, and grace, despite their all-too-human imperfections, as they tried their best to live a pure religion and care for the orphan in their midst.

Content Warning: Minor Swearing, Mention of Physical and Psychological Abuse, Implications of Neglect, Mention of Suicide)

On July 20th, 2000, I am a 13-year-old girl in the back of a beige minivan on my way to Rockland, Ontario, a small town shaped by its railroads, my second move in as many weeks. I'm to take part in a youth-led Tall Ships Expedition, supposedly to instill leadership and a sense of empowerment within me, though the objective of this trip feels futile and I can't help but laugh bitterly.

I have had no rights to autonomy for some time now, recently having my yellow Sony Discman (one of the few cheerful things remaining in my life) stolen by my group-home housemate and bully, Malinda. I've been abandoned at the home—where the knives are out of reach and the staff will restrain those who just wish they were normal—by yet another biological family member two weeks prior.

Four years before this day my mother commits suicide a few hours after we fight and leaves me at her best friend Bernadette's house without saying goodbye, and two weeks after that my grandmother with bipolar disorder realizes that I will probably need glasses—expensive ones, bifocals, and *don't even think about no-line lenses*—and this will be too much of a financial burden on them. My meek grandfather will acquiesce to her wishes like he always has, so they have a social worker come pick me up at my new school one afternoon without saying goodbye.

Later, my aunts tell me it is time to leave their home because they have read my diary and know I want to commit suicide; the breaking point from having to bring my tabby cat Salem to the humane society by myself earlier that day because I have forgotten to give him food and water exactly at my aunts' designated times. This is the cataclysmic finale after a long period of being physically and psychologically abused in various ways, and particularly in this home: my aunt, an alcoholic and a nurse who works with leukemia patients, who parrots the expression *I've only had two beers* every night when folding her nursing scrubs with various animal prints; Sheryl Crow and Terri Clark sing about being independent women on 93.9 while Beevis and Butthead engage in dim-witted antics on MTV in the background. She'll stumble into the kitchen to give into her drunken cravings for cured dried salami after lovingly caring for her African violets, neglecting her own Abyssinian cat Chartreuse in the basement to shit and piss on everything, then crawl into bed with me, her dank, flushed skin intermingling with her signature Ciara musk. Sometimes she is scared by the insidious behaviour of her partner, and is also oblivious to my own hypervigilance and subtle-as-possible recoil into the farthest corner of my daybed.

Her partner is an overweight closeted obstetrician who is renowned for her osso bucco and also for the clever placement of the bruises she leaves on me, because they are not physical, who helps me with growing mold for a science experiment in fifth grade but also tells me that everyone including their friends and my doctor thinks there's something wrong with me, which justifies her decision to isolate me in my room or lock me out of the house. She is cheated on by my aunt one humid summer night when I am hovering in the shadows, a burden to them by now. I watch my aunt flirt with another woman, her partner's cousin, and kiss her while she's drunk.

I am now clutching the last of my clothes in a strained Glad garbage bag that I'd hastily managed to gather in the early morning before one of the other girls could sneak into my room and swipe the rest of my belongings. In the back of the van, I wonder, *does anyone really know how to help someone feel okay again with a life story like mine? Because I don't think anyone can. I've lost the will to live, and don't understand why I can't just die.*

I'd hoped that if I'd listened to the group-home girls, when they tell me that I look fairly decent with makeup on, and agree to allow them tart me up, applying sky-blue eyeliner and red lipstick beyond the thin boundaries of my upper lip, and also date the neighbour Colin who'd been eyeing me up since I first arrived, I'd gain their respect and be safe. When Colin gives me my first kiss, it's like being suffocated by a sour cheese rind, and I have to fight back the urge to vomit.

I quickly learn that I will have to do a lot of other things I'm not quite prepared for to gain the respect of those who run the home, which is certainly not the group home workers, and in a way, I suppose I did, because I wasn't put on Malinda's stabbing list, though my clothes and meager belongings were still fair game.

Now in the back of the van watching rural farming landscapes with tall pine trees whizz by, I reflect on the changes in my life in the past few weeks, coming from a neighbourhood of mansions lining Britannia Beach to this bleak yet stalwart countryside with humble homes and French-Canadian sympathies. The familiar sensation of dread and shame in being moved to yet another home has returned, and I channel this nervous energy into rocking side to side and lifting my trembling hands occasionally to drink water, most of it spilling into my lap. I am told that this placement will only be temporary, as it's closer to the

docking point for the sailing adventure, and that I'll be gone for two weeks max, but I no longer believe what anyone tells me anymore, assuming I've just done another thing wrong.

Eventually we arrive in Rockland, a small town where I blink twice to pass but in the future it's about three or four times. I press repeat on my TLC tape, having been given another music player in the interim, humming No Scrubs as an anthem to artificially hype me up for whatever's to come. We stop in front of a semi-detached house, with blue trim and a small rose garden.

"We've arrived!" the social workers cheerily announce, one of them grabbing the only bag of belongings I own because I'd carelessly placed it beside me, leaving me in the backseat to try to grasp onto some semblance of dignity. As if on an escalator that I cannot run backward on because there's no one to run back to who cares, I experience forward momentum, open the car door, venture outside.

My foster mother Linda, along with the rest of the family, wait at the front porch and warmly embrace me. I cannot pinpoint why this introduction feels so different, but it's like I'm finally home and safe. They usher me inside, ask me about myself, ladle second and third and fourth helpings of goulash onto my plate, with bottomless parmesan. It turns out they feel the same connection, and one month later, at Linda's request, I am sent to live with them permanently.

Safe in my new bedroom, I open the simple wooden jewelry box given to me as a welcome gift, with a prayer card inside. I've been rescued and am more than ready to live my happily-ever-after in this small, unassuming town.

“Help yourself, girl. The kettle’s on, and I’ve got a stash of tea in that drawer. Sandwich and salad’s been made for you.”

I open the drawer and can’t help but laugh. “You’re the only one I know who actually drinks Red Rose, Linda. Maybe I’ll have coffee instead—are there any more of those French Vanilla K-cups?”

“In the bedroom, the bottom drawer of my dresser. Go ahead and get one.”

I walk into her room, root through belongings, and find hidden treasure. “Found them—can you show me how to use the Keurig machine?”

I’m about to head back to Toronto after my first visit with my foster parents post-pandemic, and Linda has been preparing a care package for me to take on the train. Though this time is now foggy in my mind, Linda blurts out something during the visit that I will never forget:

"Your depression is ruining your life."

Linda has always had compassion, but doesn’t necessarily understand empathy. She often wonders why “people are so taken-aback these days when you tell it like it is,” and when I try to explain that acts of emotional invalidation can be hurtful, she bursts into tears, because she doesn’t understand.

Her straightforward nature hearkens back to her own working-class Newfoundland upbringing, where her family still owns a house near the old Battery Hotel on Signal Hill in St. John’s. This is her giving me “tough love,” and while I acknowledge its merits, and after many years have grown to appreciate her tell-it-like-it-is attitude, it’s nevertheless jarring in today’s world. Linda hasn’t evolved with the times, having dropped out of school to take care of her five

brothers. Sometimes it's refreshing, but dismissing feelings to provide her perspective, however rational or reasonable, is not the antidote for prolonged mental anguish.

I've never been one to retaliate, but rather internalize things and suffer later. I try in the moment to help her understand my experience of the pandemic, then to assuage her sorrow as she dries her tears.

I gently tell her that the 2-and-a-half years of isolation forced me to deal with my unresolved trauma, because as she knows, I'm an orphan that came from poverty, and didn't want to live. Despite experiencing an extraordinary amount of growth during the pandemic, along with the unfathomable grace that is my husband's unwavering support and understanding, I often feel very alone, because I now straddle two very different worlds.

She immediately retorts that she "has always felt alone."

I sit with her silently, knowing that to bring up the countless examples of times I tried to comfort her despite our growing divide in how to manage the pandemic response, on top of reliving my own trauma because of the forced isolation, would be pointless.

Linda has always been one of my heroes, because she gave me hope again. I was never pushed to become a Christian when I lived with them; instead, being one to learn life lessons the hard way, I was convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit. I would continue to be humbled many times over, and to see how foolish some of my choices were years later, when I was living with pride and arrogance and far away from the example of my foster parents.

Linda and Pete remained a light in my life when everything felt dark, and when I continued to make many mistakes, their grace and patience helped lead me away from some of the bad decisions I was making. I also believed God intervened when I was young, just as I

had completely lost the will to live, and that I experienced a miracle by this placement into a good albeit imperfect family.

To this day, I don't know why I had to suffer through these trials, and will likely always wrestle with God about this, but I try not to turn to sinful behaviour as the balm for my pain. I understand all too well the brokenness inherent within humanity, including in myself, and I'm trying to follow the same path of Jesus, taking my daily bread as it comes. I know that God is good, that He's been patient with me, and that He sees my distress.

My foster parents have also never moved beyond the lower-middle class, still taking in abandoned strays in their seventies. They've lived a relatively invisible life, and extravagance is the antithesis of everything they stand for—they have humbly dedicated their life to serve others, but also carry deeply-ingrained scars from their sacrifices.

Linda spent years driving us kids to our endless appointments, and when her own mother, with whom she had a strained relationship with, came to live with us in her last days, Linda took on this extra mouth to feed on top of everyone else she was caring for. We mourned her loss together years later, in a budget-friendly hotel room in Kingston that we'd rented for a mini-getaway. With an old eighties movie playing in the background, she gave release to years of bottled-up emotions, shoulders heaving, that she'd had no choice but to suppress, because there'd been no time for her to process—who else was going to organize the funeral? But in this moment, she gave herself space to feel that life could be so hard, despite having a resolute faith in something better.

She continues to this day to feed, clothe, and care for everyone in her life in many ways, and does not look for acknowledgement for her good deeds. But as mentioned, she also dismisses her own pain and my own, while simultaneously engaging in one-sided

conversations on her more melancholy days. I don't always feel fully heard or understood by her, but for so long I was just so grateful to be in a safe and loving home that I wouldn't bring up any topic of contention. I know the empathy gap is not intentional, but I also know that my unacknowledged feelings constantly churn even years later, wreaking havoc within my psyche. But I also see that she's had to find coping mechanisms to carry on despite suffering, having never received proper support from the people around her.

To save the post-pandemic reunion, I'd reverted to active listening for the rest of the weekend with Linda. On a sunny afternoon drive to the mall, she confesses to being intimidated to see me in-person after three years, because she'd never had an opportunity to pursue her own education. "I didn't know what you'd be like," she says.

I stay silent because I understand her perspective all too well, having felt like I'm also grieving the loss of my communities, despite the urgent need to grow and pursue something new and important within me. Thanks to Linda and many others who saved me from myself, I'm now considered a "success," having transitioned from a bleak past to an excellent credit score and a much more normal middle-class life.

But back in the van with Linda, I don't tell any of what I'm thinking about, and instead tell her that caring for children is what she does exceptionally well, and she has the biggest heart of anyone I know. With her limited budget, she has always given above and beyond to each foster child she takes in, providing a broad spectrum of support—a warm bed, endless tubs of Nutella, a vast selection of economically-priced and unremarkably-labeled cereals and snacks, a Saturday morning tradition during the Golden Era of cartoons.

She tells me she's not sure what she'll do about the current boarder in her home, a former youth in their care, having recently driven to Nova Scotia to bring back to live with them in Ottawa. I ask her what the long-term effects of this decision will be, knowing it's getting harder for them to be mobile. "I guess I didn't think of that," she says. "I just saw an emergency, and tried my best to help."