

It wasn't until I requested my social services files as an adult that I was able to put together the fractured pieces of my childhood to try and understand where it all went wrong.

My mother, it turns out, was herself a product of the care system. She had had a childhood fraught with difficulty and this had manifested itself in the decisions she made as she got older. She most definitely had mental health issues and in my view seemed to have learning difficulties too but once she was 16, she was kicked out of care to make her own way in life without the solid foundations for doing so. Toward her late teens, my mother and father began dating but it would have been obvious to everyone (if not to themselves) that they were clearly not right for one another and their volatile relationship soon turned sour. In December of 1981, my older sister had been born and just under two years later in November of 1983, along I came.

I was a premature baby weighing just 2.1lb. As a result of this, I developed complications such as hyperthermia and jaundice. Alarm bells were already ringing as the nurses at the hospital noted that my mother did not seem interested in the reasons for which I was being cared for in the Special Care Baby Unit and she did not visit even once after she was discharged despite being there for almost one month. It was obvious that there had been no bonding between us. This was the start of my relationship with social services who monitored the situation over the coming months.

It all seemed to go a bit quiet and we disappeared a little bit from social services' radar, until a neighbour reported to them when I was around two years of age that I was running around the local area without many clothes on which exposed what looked like cigarette burns on my back. Social Services made a home visit to my family home but my dad had told them where to go! I believe that the matter was eventually closed.

Whilst I don't remember any of this, I am under the impression it was at this point my parents separated and my mother went from bad to worse. She began to drink to deal with this and as such, was not caring for us in an appropriate manner. Our clothes were ripped and filthy, we were caked in dirt. I had issues with wetting the bed but was left to sleep on a soiled mattress with no blankets or adequate bedding. This resulted in my clothes smelling. My sister and I were left to run around the vicinity until all hours and would never be looked for if we stayed out very late. We were not being fed enough and so I always looked very gaunt and ill... I always looked massively smaller and younger than my neighbour's kids who were of similar age. Our bedrooms lacked any wallpaper and curtains. My medical records reveal at about age four I suffered from a fractured skull, but there was no explanation for this.

Upon starting school, the teachers immediately became concerned with our unkempt appearances and the fact that we were always so hungry. The teachers would often provide breakfast to us, or clothes to replace my soiled or ripped ones. I was sick frequently and always had head lice. Throughout, I was a likeable but very naughty little boy – just seeking attention and approval from anyone willing to provide it. I stole from other children or shops to try and eat! I even stole a cucumber and some pear drops once as I was so hungry! Over the next few years, the situation remained pretty much the same with regular interventions from social services and from the school. We would be monitored from afar but nothing ever changed. My mother had sunk into deep depression and despite all efforts, she had no interest in her children or her

home. Moving away from alcohol, the doctor prescribed an anti-anxiety medication which she soon began to abuse. Her monthly prescription would be taken within two or three days. Her poor parenting skills were now non-existent. The drugs came first. We were always last. Social services and the school were becoming increasingly frustrated with my mothers' lack of parental skills and poor choices. By now, my mother was never home, preferring to spend time with her sister and we could never gain access to the house. We would have to walk around in all weathers as her sister preferred us not to be there at her home. Sometimes, we'd have to walk around for up to two nights in the pouring rain and no food. The neighbours often took pity on us and took us in. My sister and I were placed on the Child Protection Register several times with the reason being that we were suffering from significant neglect and abuse.

It all came to a head when I was about eight years old. Unsupervised, two friends and I were mucking around in a dairy. We were throwing the milk bottles to each other when I tripped and fell onto a smashed bottle cutting all the tendons in my right hand. The blood loss was pretty serious. Screaming and sobbing we knocked on the door of the nearest house. The married couple who lived there offered to take me home to my mother. When we arrived, there was no one there and we could not find her for a long while forcing us to search around the housing estate for her. I told them that she'd be in the pub. Eventually, she was indeed found drunk in the pub with her sister. She told the strangers to take me to hospital and that she couldn't accompany me as she hated the sight of blood. Upon arriving at the hospital, they could not administer treatment without her consent and this proved difficult. The police became involved and the emergency social services duty team decided that I would be safe to go home with the strangers for the evening until they could decide what to do the next day. From reading my social services files, I discovered that my aunt had told the couple looking after me to just take me as I would be 'better off'.

The next day, I was questioned by police, social workers and child protection officers who were trying to piece together what had happened. Despite it being late into the next day my mother had made no contact. Eventually, a car arrived with my older sister in the back and I wouldn't see my mother again for some time. We were to be fostered.

In foster care, I thrived. I gained weight, looked clean and tidy, my school attendance was near excellent and my overall health was improving. I was making friends and enjoying being a child for the first time in my troubled young life. Behind the scenes, social workers were hurrying to rush through a care order. This meant that my local authority would be considered my legal guardian until the care order was removed or I reached sixteen years of age – whichever came first. The order was granted. My sister and I had to undergo extensive counselling and psychotherapy, which I didn't find particularly helpful as I didn't understand it at the time. It has benefited and helped me many times since though in my later life.

But soon enough, each foster placement began to deteriorate for a number of different reasons. The placements were often mismatched. Many found it hard to 'like' a boy like me – boisterous, a little unruly and cheeky. I guess old habits die hard. I was desperate for love and attention. I always aimed to make people laugh and do silly things. Sometimes, this manifested itself by naughty behaviour which people just didn't seem to understand or even want to understand. Some of the foster placements had family problems of their own. Others were just simply unsuitable. I was moved from

school to school, town to town, family to family. I never felt I had a home of my own. It almost felt like I was living out of bin bags. I felt like I had no proper belongings or no one to fight for me. Eventually, when I was about twelve years old, it was decided that I would move back home to live with my mother who had had another child in our absence. This was the worst decision. Unbeknownst to Social Services, my mother was worse than ever. Now, she was so heavily addicted to sleeping medication that she was buying them from drug dealers on the street. I would be expected to carry out deals and associate with people children should not be around. I once saw someone under the influence of heroin with a needle sticking out of his arm. Another time I was led from my bed at 2am to carry out such a deal, but they just robbed my mothers' money and dumped me miles from home without the pills. I was 12. For the next two years, I lost weight and all my confidence. Social Services were once again fearing I was suffering from long term neglect and emotional and physical abuse. But that was just scratching the surface. The worst was being unfed or watching my mother so high that she couldn't string a sentence together. Worst still was when my mother had no tablets and she would convince herself that I had hidden them for her for times like that (which I never would). She would completely freak out and smash the house to bits. I pleaded and begged her to stop but it was no use. Because of her extreme use of these pills, my mother developed severe epilepsy. During her fits, she almost bit off her own tongue and fractured her own skull. She lost her sense of smell and taste. I think this just made everything all the worse for her. About 18 months after returning to her care, I was once again removed and went to a children's home. I went off the rails a bit, getting excluded from two high schools, breaking the law and getting petty convictions. I would often abscond and at 14, I started to drink quite heavily into oblivion.

I now lived with so many strangers. But I was close to none. And none really loved or cared about me. I was allocated yet another new social worker and she was everything I had needed. She fought for me, she tried and did everything she could to ensure my happy, secure future. I was able to leave school passing all my GCSE's.

Upon my 16th birthday – and possibly as a result of an assault conviction – my time in care was over. I was forced to live in a YMCA hostel. I was a very naïve, immature and gullible sixteen-year-old and I was massively taken advantage of. My social worker managed to get me a flat but if I thought care homes were lonely, it was lonelier still being by myself. I never had before. The first time I sat in my flat on my own I sobbed uncontrollably as I just felt so alone and unsupported. I did not know what bills I had to pay, or how I even would be able to. I didn't know how to cook and feed myself. I was offered support but it was an hour a week or so. I managed to sort out a college placement by myself and eventually I left with A-Levels and went on to university. I didn't complete it at that time but I would revisit it many years later (I am about six months away from graduation!).

Being in care is hard, being turned out afterwards without any safety net is worse. There's nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Alcohol has been a big issue in my life which has caused me many health implications. It has often been a crutch to me to deal with situations I have found tough. I have a lot of underlying heartache that I try and keep a lid on daily. I am fortunate to have met someone who appreciate and loved me for being me and all my flaws.

I think, the main thing to remember for anyone in care is that whilst it may be the hardest thing you're going through right now, it can and it does improve if you really want it to... When you feel like giving up, keep going. You can be whatever you want to be and you can do whatever you want. When you do, you'll have only yourself to thank. No matter how cruel our childhoods and no matter what issues we carry as a result, we are strong, we are worthy. We have survived the care system and we should all be so immensely proud of that!

Afterwards, I will think of many different things I wish I had have included here. But, if just one person gains encouragement or peace of mind from this little write up, I will be very happy.