

ASHLEY RHODES-COURTER



Three  
Little Words

The heartbreaking true story of  
an abandoned little girl

**'A moving account of surviving in care'**  
*Cathy Glass*

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## *About the Book*

*'I am trapped centre stage in the spotlight. Do I have a choice? I stare straight ahead, shrug my shoulders and mumble, I guess so. In three words, it is done ... Some people can be trusted.'*

Ashley Rhodes was taken from her mother when she was just three years old. She was left angry and clinging to an unpredictable, dissolving relationship with her family. But the painful memories of being taken away from her home quickly became consumed by real-life horrors. Ashley was forced to endure manipulative, humiliating treatment from an abusive foster family and spent nine years of her young life moving from home to home. Then she met the loving Courter family.

In this inspiring and unforgettable memoir, Ashley finds the courage to accept her past and utter three words that will change her life forever.

## *About the Author*

Ashley Rhodes-Courter has been featured in *Glamour*, *The New York Times* and other publications as a role model for young women. Her memoir began as an essay which won a writing contest and was published in *New York Times Magazine*.

In 2010 she married her high-school sweetheart. Together they've fostered sixteen children under the age of five and are now the proud parents of their own biological son.

[www.rhodes-courter.com](http://www.rhodes-courter.com)

ASHLEY RHODES-COURTER

*Three  
Little Words*

The heartbreaking true story of  
an abandoned little girl



Dedicated to all children who are still waiting for safe,  
permanent homes.

May they find one much more quickly than I did.

May they also find as much love and happiness.

*I hear and I forget; I see and I remember;  
I write and I understand.*

*-Chinese proverb*

## *Preface*

I have had more than a dozen so-called mothers in my life. Lorraine Rhodes gave birth to me. Gay Courter adopted me. Then there are the fillers. Some were kind, a few were quirky, and one, Marjorie Moss, was as wicked as a fairytale witch. No matter where I lived, I waited impatiently to be reunited with my mother. Sometimes we had frequent visits, but other times—for some unexplained reason—I did not see her for years at a stretch.

I remember the rush of joy as I fell into her arms after one of those interminable separations.

“Sunshine, you’re my baby and I’m your only mother. You must listen to the one taking care of you, but she’s not your mama. Never forget, I’m the only mama who will love you forever and ever.” She pledged that we would be together soon. Soon! How often I heard that word. It was soft, soothing. “Soon, I’ll be back,” she promised. “I’ll bring more presents, soon. We’ll go home—soon.”

Soon, soon, soon ... I would croon the word to myself like a lullaby when I would try to sleep, a mantra when nobody would listen to me, a chant to block out doubts that surfaced when it seemed too long between visits. My mother loved me. I was her special Sunshine. She would be back soon. Soon! Yes, she would. Naïve and trusting, I always believed her, and in some very small way—even now—I still do.



## *The day they stole my mother from me*

Two days compete for the worst day in my life: The first is the day I was taken from my mother; the second is the day I arrived at the Mosses' foster home four years later. Three weeks before I lost my mother, I had left South Carolina bound for Florida with her, her husband, and my brother. I was three and a half years old and remember lying on the backseat watching slippery raindrops making patterns as they plopped down the car's windows.

My infant brother, Luke, was in a car seat, which nobody had bothered to belt in, so it squished me into the door when his father took a sharp turn. Luke had a heart monitor, but it must not have been on him all the time because I remember using it on my favorite toy: a Teddy Ruxpin bear.

Until Dustin Grover came along, we shared a trailer with my mother's twin sister, Leanne, who had dropped out of school to help support me. Even though the twins looked completely different, they were interchangeable to me since Aunt Leanne spent almost as much time with me as my mother, and I never minded when one left and the other took over. I loved to nestle by Aunt Leanne's side. She would rake my curls with her fingers while talking on the phone to her friends.

My mother was only seventeen when she gave birth to me. If she and my aunt were anything like most teenagers, they probably were more interested in hanging out with friends than changing diapers. Nevertheless, they worked

different shifts and took turns caring for me. Their trailer became the local hangout because there was no adult supervision.

“Turn that down,” my mother yelled one afternoon. I was watching cartoons, trying to drown out the teen voices by raising the volume higher and higher. “I said, turn that down!”

“Well, if you would shut the hell up, I could hear the damn TV,” I said. My mother and her friends burst out laughing.

I was an intuitive two-year-old soaking up language and behaviors from a crew of rowdy adolescents who were trying on adult attitudes and habits. I got attention by acting grown up, and my mother bragged about how early I was toilet trained and how clearly I spoke.

My mother had a carefree attitude. She was too self-absorbed to fuss about my safety. Although she always strapped me in my car seat, her battered truck did not have seat belts. Driving down a bumpy South Carolina road, the unlocked door popped open. I tumbled out, rolling a few times before landing on the shoulder. My mother turned the truck around and found me waving at her. I was still buckled into the seat.

When my mother began living with Dustin—whom everyone called “Dusty”—the whole mood in the house shifted and Aunt Leanne wasn’t around as much. Dusty was like an ocean that changed unexpectedly with the weather. One moment he could be placid, the next he turned into choppy waves that broke hard and stung. I cowered when he yelled. Since my mother was busy with me, she did not always have the perfect hot meal her boyfriend expected ready the moment he walked in the door.

“Can’t you even bake a damn biscuit right?” he yelled after he saw the burnt bottom on one, sending the pie tin flying like a Frisbee.

I hid under my blanket as I always did when the fighting started, hoping it would protect me from their nasty words or physical brawls. I peered through a hole at a single object—like a shoe—and tried to make everything else disappear.

I remember when my pregnant mother awoke from a nap and found my aunt and Dusty sitting close together watching television. She caught them tickling and laughing. My mother screamed at my aunt, “How could you? He’s the father of my baby!”

“You sure of that?” my aunt screeched back before she slammed the screen door behind her.

After that, she was gone for weeks, and I missed her so much that I would curl my hair around my own fingers and pretend it was her doing it.

Not long after that, there was a new baby: Tommy. My mother brought him home in a yellow blanket and let me kiss his tiny fingers. I don’t remember much else because he came and went in less than two months. Sometimes I thought that I had dreamed him or that he was merely a doll I was not supposed to touch. The last time I saw him, he had suddenly stopped moving and turned from pink to gray. We all sat in a room and everyone passed him around. He was lying in a box that was padded with a pillow.

My mother got pregnant again shortly after Tommy disappeared. A few months later she married Dusty, and for a short time we seemed like a happy little family. But only nine months after Tommy was born, Luke arrived premature. Before my mother was even twenty, she had managed to have three children in less than three years.

At least Luke—unlike me—came into the world with a father. At birth my new brother weighed only two pounds. My mother had to come home from the hospital without him.

“Did you really have a baby?” I asked my mother.

“He has to stay with the nurses until he gets bigger,” she explained.

A few days later I awoke to her sobbing. Dusty was trying to comfort her, but she pushed him away. “It’s all your fault because you hit me!” she yelled.

I tried to understand how Dusty’s hitting her could harm the unborn baby. I rested my head on her belly. It felt like a balloon that had some of the air let out. “When can I see my brother?” I asked.

“They had to take him from the hospital in Spartanburg to the one in Greenville where they can care for him better,” my mother explained. “We’ll drive up there as soon as we can.”

In the meantime, my mother went back to work. Dusty was supposed to watch me while my mother worked the late shift. One night neighbors found me wandering through the trailer park alone and kept me until my mother returned home.

The next day she packed a bag and we moved into a Ronald McDonald House near the hospital.

We went to see Luke every day. Most of the time I had to wait outside in a room where there were little tables, coloring books, and crayons. Sometimes they would let me put on a mask and come into the room where the babies were kept in boxes—not like the wooden one that had held Tommy, but a plastic one that I could peek through when my mother lifted me up.

“Is he ever getting out of there?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” my mother promised. “He’s strong like his daddy.”

When Luke came home seven months later, he was not much bigger than one of my dolls. He sometimes wore a doctor’s face mask instead of a diaper.

Aunt Leanne came by to help and called often. “Where’s your mama?” she asked when I answered the phone.

“In the kitchen cookin’ dope,” I replied.

“I’m coming right over,” she said, but when she did, Dusty refused to let her in.

Dusty worked as a framing subcontractor. After an argument over money, his partner stormed over to our trailer. Dusty locked him out, but he busted down the door and then started tearing up the house. A chair hit the wall and a table flew in my direction. I ducked, but my mother started screaming, “You almost hurt Ashley!”

“I’m okay, Mama,” I said as I crouched in a corner.

“We need to move,” my mother announced to Dusty while they cleaned up the mess. “There are too many bad influences on you around here.”

“And you’re an angel?” he shot back. “Besides, all my work is here.”

“There’s plenty of work in Florida.” She kicked the broken chair into a corner. “I wish I had never left there after Mama died.”

Her mother—my maternal grandmother, Jenny—had her first child when she was fourteen, but she put that baby up for adoption. Over the next six years she had Perry; followed by the twins, Leanne and Lorraine; and finally, Sammie. Then, at twenty-one, Grandma Jenny was diagnosed with cervical cancer and had a hysterectomy. Sick, poor, and battered by her alcoholic husband, she decided she could not raise her kids any longer and turned them over to a Baptist children’s home. My mother did not have much to do with either parent for many years, but when Jenny was about to die in Florida, my mother went to see her for the last time. Jenny was thirty-three.

Using her small inheritance, my mother enrolled in cosmetology school. Before they would allow her to train with the hair treatment chemicals, she had to have a physical checkup. This is how she found out she was pregnant with me. My mother thinks she conceived me when she partied the night of her mother’s funeral. In any case, I was born thirty-nine weeks later. While she was in

labor, she was watching *The Young and the Restless*, and so she named me Ashley after one of the soap opera characters.

When Dusty agreed to move to Tampa, my mother cheered up. As she packed, she hummed "You Are My Sunshine" and explained to me, "We're moving to the Sunshine State to live happily ever after."

I do not remember much about the long car trip except singing along with Joan Jett on the radio. When we first arrived in Florida, we stayed at a motel, then a trailer that smelled like low tide. I have memories of walking around that trailer park carrying Luke's bottle and begging for milk.

Our car always smelled of pickles and mustard from all the fast food we ate in it. I was enjoying my usual kids' meal in the backseat when my mother shouted, "Shit, shit!" A flashing red light made the car's windows glow rosy, and I liked the way my hands looked, as though they were on fire.

A siren blared. Dusty banged the steering wheel. "Ashley, you keep saying you gotta go potty, okay?" my mother ordered.

A police officer asked where our license plate was.

"Mommy, gotta go potty!" I called loudly.

"Where're you headed?" the officer asked.

"To my stepfather's house," my mother said in her most genial voice.

"We're just in from South Carolina. We're moving here," Dusty continued rapidly, "so I'll get a new Florida plate tomorrow."

"Welcome to Florida," he said, glancing at me and Luke before arresting Dusty for not having a license plate on the car or a valid driver's license.

My mother alternately cussed and cried while we waited for Dusty to be released. It was several hours before we could go home to our apartment. The shoebox-style

building was on tree-lined Sewaha Street. “We’re living in a duplex now,” my mother explained, and I sensed that we had come up in the world. Three days later I encountered more police officers—the ones who broke up our family forever.

I was sitting on the stoop dressed only in shorts when the police cars pulled up. “He’s not here,” my mother said when they asked for Dusty. One of the men kept coming toward her. My mother, who was holding Luke, screamed, “I didn’t do anything!”

“Mama,” I cried, reaching both hands up for her to lift me as well. A uniformed man pushed me away and snatched Luke out of her arms. I tried to rush toward my mother, who was already being put in the backseat of a police car. The door slammed so hard, it shook my legs. Through the closed window, I could hear my mother shouting, “Ashley!” Someone held me back as the car pulled away. I struggled and kicked trying to chase after her.

“It’s okay! Settle down!” the man with the shiny buttons said.

I sobbed for my Teddy Ruxpin. “Winky!”

“Who’s that?” The officer let me run inside. I pulled Winky out from under a blanket on my bed. “Oh, it’s your teddy. He can come too.” He grabbed two of my T-shirts and told me to put one on and to wear my flip-flops. My Strawberry Shortcake T-shirt ended up on Luke, although it was way too big for him.

At the police station a man in uniform handed Luke to a woman in uniform. Luke tugged on Winky’s ears as I sat beside him and the female officer. In the background I could hear my mother yelling for us, but I could not see her. Two women wearing regular clothes arrived. One lifted Luke; the other’s rough hand pulled me in her direction. The woman who held Luke also took Winky.

“No!” I cried, reaching for Winky.

“It’s just for a little while,” the first woman told me.

“Winky!”

My mother came into view for a few seconds. “Ashley! I’ll get you soon!” Then a door slammed and she was gone. I turned and Luke was no longer there. I was pushed outside and loaded into a car.

“Mommy! Luke!” I cried. “Winky!”

“You’ll see them later,” the woman said as our car drove off.

Thinking about that moment is like peeling a scab off an almost-healed wound. I still believed everything would return to normal. Little did I know, I would never live with my mother—or see Winky—again.



*They're nice to you ... until you're  
naughty*

When they ripped me from my family, nobody told me anything. I completely expected that I was going to end up wherever my mother and Luke were. I might have been too young for an explanation, but years would pass without anyone answering any of my questions. I went to live with complete strangers. I was shuffled like a hand-me-down toy for the next nine years. The first anguished hours away from my mother are clearer than the next few years.

Speed bumps slowed the car. I glimpsed a tree with blue blossoms as big as teacups. "Here we are!" the driver said, as though I should be delighted with the destination.

The front door opened, and a woman bent over and patted my head. "Hello there. I'm Mrs. O'Connor and I'm going to take care of you."

"Mama?"

"She can't come tonight," Mrs. O'Connor said. Two toddlers clung to her legs.

She put me to bed in a room where other small children were sleeping in a crib, playpen, and bunk beds. It was crowded, but I felt utterly alone. I sobbed for my mother. When nobody soothed me, I started to whimper "You Are My Sunshine" until I fell asleep.

In the morning I asked, "Is my mama here yet?"

"No, but you're going to be with your brother," Mrs. O'Connor replied.

That afternoon another worker moved me to the home of Benedict and Annabelle Hines in Seffner. Luke was there, which made me happy, but they kept him downstairs with another baby while I had to sleep upstairs in a room with a slanted ceiling that frightened me.

If I couldn't be in the same room with my brother, like in the South Carolina trailer, I wanted to be with my mother and Dusty. I did not care that this was the nicest house I had ever seen. There was a tire swing, a mini-trampoline, and a wading pool. But instead of waiting my turn to use any of these toys, I took my frustrations out on a younger girl who was also named Ashlee.

"You're my little pumpkin," Mr. Hines said to make me feel special, but I knew they preferred the younger children. They especially fussed over Luke, who was so tiny, they could not believe he was almost a year old. Mrs. Hines cooked special food for him and claimed he was growing so fast because of her pureed beets.

I kept asking for my mother, but nobody ever explained why she did not come for me. Once, I handed Mrs. Hines the phone. "Call my mama and tell her to pick me up!" I demanded.

"I don't have her number." She sighed. "But I'll see what I can do."

A few days later they dressed Luke and me in our best clothes and Mr. Hines took us to the Department of Children and Families building.

My mother hugged me, then examined my arms and legs. "How did you get all those red spots?" she asked with an accusing tone.

"Bug bites."

"What do they do, leave you out in the woods?" My mother directed her question to the worker who was standing in the doorway.

"I don't like it there! Take me home with you."

"Sunshine, not today, but soon."

“When, Mama, when?”

She looked to the waiting worker and back to me. “As soon as I have a better apartment and a job.”

When we went for the next visit, we waited for a long time; but my mother never arrived.

“Where is she?” I asked every few minutes, getting whinier each time.

“Doesn’t look like the M-O-M is going to show,” the worker said.

“How can she do this to her children?” Mr. Hines fumed. Switching to a cheerful voice, he said, “Time to go.”

“But Mama—”

“We can’t wait any longer. Mrs. Hines will wonder what happened to us.”

“Please!” I begged. “She’s coming! She’s coming!”

He pushed Luke and me into the corridor. “I’m not putting these children through this again,” Mr. Hines said to the worker.

I wanted to tell them that they were making a mistake, that they had the time wrong, because my mother would never miss a chance to see us. I pulled away from Mr. Hines and rushed back into the visitation room.

“Let’s go,” Mr. Hines said in exasperation.

I ducked under a worker’s desk to stall the departure. My mother could be running late—she sometimes had problems with her car or not finding her way. Mr. Hines let go of Luke and lunged toward me. “Ashley! Enough of this nonsense. We aren’t waiting any longer.” He reached under the desk, but I kicked his arm away. *They* had the time wrong; *they* weren’t patient enough; *they* weren’t giving her a chance. Eventually, they dragged me out flailing and crying and took me back to what they called “home.”

They couldn’t keep me from thinking about my mother all the time—her smiles, her songs in the shower, the way she painted her eyes and lips with colors. I would say, “Mama, you look so beautiful,” and then she would kiss my cheek to

blot her lipstick. I loved the mark it left. I was jealous that she had so many hugs and kisses for Dusty, and I often spied on them when I was supposed to be asleep in a motel room or the small space of one of our trailers.

I was playing with two teddy bears from the Hineses' toy chest. "Want to see all the ways my mommy and daddy have fun?" I asked the other girls. I pressed the bears' fronts together. They squealed with laughter. "And they can do it this way, too." I had one hump the other's back. Their giggles encouraged me, so I put one's head between the other's legs. I added the grunting noises I had heard in the dark.

"What's going on here?" Mrs. Hines chided when she checked on us.

The other children dispersed, but I gave Mrs. Hines the same demonstration. "Why don't you put the bears back and go out to play?" she said in a voice that left no room to disagree.

I stormed outside, slamming the screen door behind me. "It's my turn!" I shouted to Ashlee, who ignored me and pedaled off on the tricycle. Enraged, I caught up, reached around her neck, and choked her. Luke came over to join the fray. He grasped my leg and tried to pull me down. To shake him off, I kicked him. When he screeched, Mrs. Hines came running. She gripped my arm, steered me in the house, and gave me a stern time-out on a stool.

A while later I heard her complaining about me on the phone. "I do believe this child is hyper. She breaks all her toys, is really mean to the little ones—even her brother—and isn't still for a minute." Her voice changed to a whisper as she recounted how I had played with the bears. When she mentioned that I had started wetting the bed, I went to where the others were watching TV and started to mimic what was on the screen.

One of the older children shooed me away, but I did not listen. "Hey, Ashley, we can't see through you," he said.

If my mother had been there, she would have applauded my antics; but here, I was nobody's special Sunshine.

Then, after only four months, Mrs. Hines announced that Luke and I were going to live with my grandfather. "Won't that be nice?" she said as she packed my clothes.

I went around the house piling up Luke's toys and bottles, but they kept ending up back in their original places. I was oblivious to the fact that Mrs. Hines was packing only my possessions.

When the worker arrived, Luke was napping. I was bundled into the car. "What about my brother?"

"He has to take his nap," the worker said. "You'll see him later."

It took several days before I realized Luke was not coming to my new foster home, which was nowhere near my grandfather's house. I wondered what was so horrible about me and why I had been rejected again. Then there was my perpetual question: What had I done that was so terrible that I had to be taken from my mother? I had no idea why she hadn't been able to get me back. You would think someone would have explained it in words a child could understand. Yet nobody did. I believed they were keeping secrets from me—but supposedly, they thought they were protecting me.

Now I know that—in the beginning at least—my mother never did anything seriously wrong. She never hurt us. She loved us and I adored her. Originally, the police had arrested my mother for writing a bad check; but Dusty admitted he had stolen the checks, and she was released six days later. When my mother returned home, she found our duplex padlocked. Three weeks after Dusty was let out of jail, they arrested him again for attempting to steal cigarettes from a food store. My mother moved to a new apartment but had lost most of our possessions. Although she submitted applications for food stamps and aid for dependent children, the welfare officials told her that she

was ineligible because her children were no longer living with her. When she tried to get us back, the caseworker said she had to be able to provide food for us.

Two months after we were placed in temporary shelter care, Judge Vincent E. Giglio officially ordered us into foster care. We were now state property. Our legal guardian was the executive branch of the Florida government, an entity that would rather pay strangers to care for us than offer any economic help to my mother to care for her own children.

My fourth mother was Yolanda Schott. Other than running around in some orange groves, I have no memory of my time with her. I would still like to know why the Schotts took me in—and why they let me go after such a short time. Maybe it was a temporary placement until the state could find something better; or maybe the Schotts did not like me either. The blankness bothers me, as does the fact that there is not a single person who can fill in that part of my story.

Next, I moved to the home of Julio and Rosa Ortiz and stayed with them for thirteen months. They lived in a Tampa neighborhood where the houses were only a few feet apart. Their small backyard included an aboveground pool as well as a chicken coop. The Ortizes had three teenage birth daughters and four adopted children, plus a constant stream of foster children. Some were there for only a few days; some came before me and stayed longer. At least twenty children cycled in and out of the home while I was with them. There were so many of us that we ate in shifts. It was hard to feel alone, but still I missed Luke.

“Can you go get my brother?” I asked Mrs. Ortiz, who looked like a Hispanic Mrs. Claus, one day during dinner.

“Okay,” she said to hush me.

“When?” I demanded, and kicked the table leg.

“Ashley, go to your room until you can calm down,” she said.

I turned my back to her and stormed down the hallway to the bedrooms. As I got closer to the babies’ room, I smelled something putrid. Peering in, I could see that a toddler had smeared poop all over the wall. I slammed the door to the room, which caused the baby to wail.

Hearing the baby’s piercing screams, Mrs. Ortiz came rushing. “Ashley, what did you do to the baby?”

“I shut the door because he stinks.”

Mrs. Ortiz opened it and rushed to comfort the child. Her shoe slipped on something soft, and she wheeled around and gave me an accusing look. “Ashley, how could you do something so disgusting?”

“I didn’t do anything!” I screamed, which only got me a longer time-out in my room.

Since I had been blamed for the mess, a few of the other children came to check on me as if I were a sideshow. I stuck my middle finger up—the way Dusty did when he was mad at someone. Some of the others copied me and went around the house showing everyone what I had just taught them.

Mrs. Ortiz barreled into my room. “Why are you teaching the little ones to shoot birds?”

“I did not!” I retorted.

“Ashley, you are going to have to stop your lying,” she said, and marched off. I had never seen her so furious and did not understand why I was blamed for hurting birds when there had not been any in the house.

I soon realized that if Mrs. Ortiz yelled at me, I could stare just above her head and she would still think that I was looking directly at her, hanging on her every word. I would purposely let my mind wander to take me far away from the current confrontation.

“Chicken pox!” I overheard Mrs. Ortiz on the phone. “Yeah, three of them—two of them foster.” I wished I could

tell my mother that I had a chicken disease that made me itch all over.

Mrs. Ortiz put me in a bathtub with her daughter Trina and a blond foster girl. The spots bloomed on each of us.

“Don’t scratch,” Mrs. Ortiz said. “This special soap will help you feel better.”

She pushed my hand away from a cluster of pox. “If you don’t stop, you’ll have ugly marks forever.”

I sulked. “I don’t want ugly marks!”

“Of course not—you’re too pretty for that,” Mrs. Ortiz said kindly.

Her older daughters took turns picking out outfits for me that looked good with my red hair. I loved my aqua shorts and matching socks with lace trim and a yellow dress with a flounced skirt. I came out and twirled around to show it off.

“Here comes my prissy girl,” Mrs. Ortiz complimented.

Every day when the older children went off to school, I asked to go as well.

“You have to be five,” Mr. Ortiz said in his slight Cuban accent.

“I *am* five!” I insisted, although I was just about to turn four.

Mrs. Ortiz tilted her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Ask my *real* mother!”

“Ashley is smart enough to go to kindergarten,” Mr. Ortiz admitted.

“It would do her good to be in school,” Mrs. Ortiz agreed. “She’s the brainiest kid I ever had.”

DeSoto, the neighborhood primary school, had a pre-K program, so they enrolled me. I was so overjoyed to leave the house with the older kids that I raced to beat the others to the school on the edge of the bay.

My teacher called Mrs. Ortiz and asked her to come in because she had concerns about my adjustment. She said,



“Ashley is a good student, but she does five times as many papers as the others.”

“What’s the problem?” Mrs. Ortiz threw up her hands and shrugged. “Give her more papers.”

While I liked school, I thought church was boring. They liked to dress Trina and me in matching frilly dresses and hats—hers were usually white and mine were pink. As Mrs. Ortiz dropped us off at Sunday school, she would say, “Ashley, if you don’t mind the teacher, you can’t watch *Alice in Wonderland* or any of your other movies later.”

Mrs. Ortiz often fostered infants, so she spent many hours bottle-feeding them. This was a good time to snuggle against her; and as long as the baby was sucking, she did not mind. When I was comfy, I would ask, “When can I see my mama?”

Mrs. Ortiz dodged the question as best she could because she probably knew that a few weeks after I came to live with her, my mother had been charged with possession of cocaine and drug paraphernalia as well as offering to commit prostitution.

When Mr. Ortiz took me to a family visit, I asked, “Will Mama be there?”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “You’ll see your daddy and your brother. Won’t that be nice?”

“Are you sure my mother isn’t coming?” My birthday had been the previous week and I had been certain she would come with my gifts.

“Well, you never know,” he said to appease me.

Luke arrived with Mr. Hines, who called me “Pumpkin” and ruffled my hair. “His father is coming from South Carolina ... out on bail ...” were words I caught, but they did not mean much to me. When nobody else appeared, our worker took us back to our respective foster homes.

There was at least one time while I lived with the Ortizes that my mother did show up. The moment I saw her, I felt my heart would leap out of my chest. She wrapped her

arms around me and told me everything would be all right—and I believed every word. Luke had not made it to this visit, so I asked, “Is Luke at your house now?”

“No, not yet,” she replied.

“Oh.” I thought about my other brother. “What about Tommy?”

My mother startled. “Who?”

“The one in the box.”

“You can’t ever tell anyone about him.”

“Why?”

“Because—” She checked to make sure we were alone. “He’s our secret. If anyone knew, they might not let you come to live with me again.”

“Why?”

“They might put me in jail.”

“Why?”

“Honey, you are too young to understand, but someday I’ll tell you all about it.” She gave me her sweetest smile. “Now, what shall I bring you on my next visit?”

All too soon, we separated, both of us in tears.

When I returned to the foster home, I started spinning to make myself dizzy. “My, aren’t you all wound up!” Mrs. Ortiz remarked. “Did you have a good visit with your mother?”

I stopped twirling and said, “My mommy told me that I have to keep our secret or she’ll go to jail and I’ll never see her again.”

“Oh, really?” Mrs. Ortiz arched her bushy eyebrows.

A baby cried and she went to tend to her. When she was giving her a bottle, I cuddled against Mrs. Ortiz and laid my head on her bosom. “Do you want to know my secret?” I asked.

“Only if you want to tell me.”

“My mommy put my baby brother in a box, and if I tell anyone, she’ll get in trouble and go to jail and I’ll never see her again.”

Mrs. Ortiz dropped the baby's bottle. "Your little brother is in another foster home and he's fine."

"No, another baby," I tried to explain.

She handed her husband the bottle to wash off the nipple. He brought it back and said, "I'll call the worker and arrange a sibling visit," he said.

"And check whether they know about another one," Mrs. Ortiz added.



That summer I splashed in the pool and waited for more family visits—but none came. I was happier when I returned to the pre-K classroom with the fenced play yard and tubular slide.

Mrs. Ortiz asked, "Do you remember your grandpa in South Carolina?"

"Yep," I said, even though I mostly remembered Aunt Leanne and Dusty.

"Wouldn't it be nice if you and your brother could visit him?"

"Yep," I agreed, and went back to coloring my school papers.

A few days later Luke and I met at the Department of Children and Families, supposedly to see our mother and Dusty, but Dusty arrived alone. He whirled Luke in the air, and then he got down on the floor and played with us both.

Our caseworker, Dennis Benson, asked, "How do you feel about them going to their grandfather's?" he asked.

"You know my mother has put in for them too," he said.

"She also withdrew the papers once before," the worker replied, "and she is only related to your son."

"If they're with my wife's father, my family can still visit them, can't they?"

"I don't see why not," Mr. Benson said. "They live close by, right?"

“Yeah, but there’s been some bad blood, if you know what I mean.”

“We can arrange regular visitations for you and them at the county offices,” the worker replied. He checked his watch. “Is their mother coming?”

“Don’t you know?” Dusty asked with a lopsided grin. He pantomimed a key turning in a lock, which meant she was back in jail.

A few days later Mrs. Ortiz gave me a bath and dressed me in clean school clothes instead of pajamas. “Aren’t I going to bed?” I asked.

“Yes, but you’re getting up very early to go visit your grandfather.”

Before dawn Mrs. Ortiz awakened me from a deep sleep, hugged me against her pillow-soft chest that had a lavender scent, and whispered, “Don’t forget us!” Dennis Benson carried me to the car and placed a plastic bag with all my belongings beside me. Luke was in a car seat sound asleep. The next thing I remember is a uniformed woman lifting me into an airline seat and cinching a belt over my lap. Someone handed me a little white pillow. As the plane whooshed up and away, I fell asleep trying to memorize Mrs. Ortiz’s face because I had already forgotten my first foster parents, and I feared I would not remember my grandfather, my aunt Leanne, or worse, my mother.

*Papa fall down*

Daylight and strangers greeted us when I stumbled sleepily into the South Carolina airport terminal. A woman lifted Luke and a man took me by the hand, but I pulled it away. "Don't you recognize your grandpa?" the woman asked. I shook my head. "I guess it's been too long a time." She bent close and explained that she was Adele and the man was my mama's daddy.

Mr. Benson passed over some papers and our plastic bags. Grandpa did not say much, but Adele cooed over Luke, who clung to her neck.

As we drove off, I started with my questions. "Where are we going?"

"To our house," Adele responded.

"Is Luke going to stay with us?"

"Of course, darlin'." Adele laughed.

"When do I go to school?"

"Not till you're five."

"I'll be five soon."

"I know that, hon, and next year you'll ride the big yellow bus."

"Wheels on the bus go round and round!" Luke clapped.

I cupped my hand over my brother's mouth. "Will I have a birthday cake?"

"Sure, hon. Do you prefer chocolate or vanilla?"

"Vanilla!" Luke chimed in.

"No, chocolate." I shoved him to be quiet. "Where's Mrs. Ortiz?"