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The truth about the surrender of my foster child



By Kelly A. Dorgan

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In my 46th year, I lost my son.

My labor to bring Austin into my life was not a physical one; it was a bureaucratic one. It seems fitting that my loss of him was also bureaucratic.

This essay is not a defense of my parenting. Rather, it is a declaration of an uncovered truth—while I saw myself as his mom, I don't think Austin ever saw himself as my son, not fully.

In her best seller *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamont asserts that “Good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are.”

I seek to do just that as I write about the surrender of my son.

*

It had taken much time and effort to complete the paperwork, training, and home study. Still, the call had caught me off guard. My foster-to-adopt application had been selected by a faceless committee. I had been matched with a young boy. His background was both troubling and promising, but I was determined to provide him with a home.

Visitations with Austin started almost immediately, and, soon after, came: “Can I call you Mom?”

Though I could count on one hand the number of days I had actually known him, I was filled at that moment with a delicious warmth, his query injecting me with unspoken possibilities and private illusions. Those five words, ending with a raised inflection, also muffled my niggling concerns.

My thinking is that Austin and I had both been tantalized by a dominant cultural narrative. That a mother’s love will overcome everything, including trauma, neglect, abandonment, and abuse. In his first decade of life, this young boy had already been bounced around multiple foster families after his birth parents’ rights had been terminated. Perhaps by calling me “Mom,” he sought to cast a sort of spell, by speaking a magical word of healing and transformation. After all, a mother singlehandedly eases pain, mends heartbreak, and banishes fear. Right?

*

Austin moved in during springtime, an appropriate nod to rebirth.

Together, we designed his room (blue and orange, his favorite colors). We held movie marathons and indoor picnics. We read books to one another quietly, and side-by-side. We explored the world too, hiking trails, some tame and short, some wild and precipitous.

Then I took my new son on his first beach trip.

Not unlike what happened to Austin’s ocean-side sandcastle, my excitement vanished under the waves of confusion and annoyance. He dashed after other families as if searching for something, or someone. He inserted himself between sets of bewildered fathers and sons, like an intrusive seagull. Each time, I vowed to be patient, reassuring myself that his need to inject himself into other families would fade, over time.

But that never happened.

“I want a new family!”

From the start, he'd said these words to me, especially when enraged or frustrated. But he would always back down. Next came the threats to run away—normal, everyday opposition, at least that's what I reasoned.

Here, I find myself compelled to list my mothering approaches, including attempted interventions. I want to detail his behavioral escalations, each one a larger detonation, rendering the territory of our family increasingly unsafe. Admittedly, though, my compulsion to explain is really about distraction, keeping me from facing the agonizing truth: My best efforts at parenting weren't enough to make Austin want to stay.

My son no longer wanted to call me "Mom."

*

"You know the truth. You've always known," I said to him toward the end of our time together, more fully acknowledging that from the beginning he had been conflicted about being my son.

I could offer explanations for why he rejected me as "Mom," pointing to his lifelong struggles to form and maintain attachments or to antisocial behaviors that had perpetually distanced him from others. But to do so would be to steer away from a truth I spent years avoiding: He had never really wanted to be my son.

I said this to him during our last family counseling session.

Nine years together, eight counselors, and three court-ordered residential care programs, this is what it had taken to stitch us together as Mother-Son, yet we kept falling apart. Once we had shared movies and books, but in our final years as parent and child, we shared courtroom appearances and the chaotic aftermath of legal charges filed against him by his school. And after the judge had sentenced him to residential care, instead of weekends spent hiking a sun-dappled trail, we were confined to some florescent-lit counseling room in yet another faraway treatment facility—where we exchanged old words and worn-out promises that yielded nothing new.

In residential care, he had been passed from counselor to counselor and facility to facility, all pledging to reunite him with me, someone he seemed more determined to destroy than to love. As a teenager, though, he discovered a way out, one that devastated me while liberating himself. He spoke these words as if undoing his original spell cast nearly a decade earlier:

"I don't want Mom to be my mom anymore."

He repeated his wish until everyone listened, me included.

In the end, I surrendered the fight to hold onto him.

I surrendered him.

*

I wish I could better describe my relinquishment court hearing, but the words won't come, no matter how I rewrite this passage.

In jagged bits and ragged pieces, I have held onto some of that day's happenings. Austin walking across the parking lot, waving at me as he headed into the building. The waiting area with its glass walls, allowing a physical transparency that seemed to showcase my vulnerabilities and inadequacies.

Once inside, I found an awkward gathering of social workers and lawyers stuffed into the tight space. In the mix was my son, simultaneously looking like the young boy I had adopted and the young man who was seeking to leave me. The waiting room itself was ringed by chairs: black, almost skeletal, reminding me of vultures encircling the dying.

With a manufactured steadiness, I approached Austin and stood above him while he remained seated. I reached for his cheek, my stubby fingers splaying across his nearly translucent skin—this would be the last time I touched him.

“I love you. I always will.” Even now, I recognize the deficiency of my parting words.

Eventually, I was ushered into a conference room and pelted with questions. I sobbed. My questioners scowled. Maybe I imagined this part, but I doubt it—I had learned to expect overtly harsh judgment from others, especially women, who didn't know me or my struggles to unite the territory of my family. Minutes later, I walked into the wood-accented courtroom and faced the judge—my son and I had faced her multiple times over a two-year period. To this day, I regard her as a kind and just arbiter during an excruciating secession.

For more than 3,000 days, I had been a mother to a son. In less than 60 minutes, all that was un-done, at least legally. The heart and soul would take a while to catch up, if they ever could.

*

Again, I'm thinking of Anne Lamont's advice to writers:

“Your job is to present clearly your viewpoint, your line of vision. Your job is to see people as they really are, and to do this, you have to know who you are in the most compassionate possible sense. Then you can recognize others.”

Through writing about relinquishing Austin, I have developed a better, more compassionate knowing about who I am, especially in the space of my failed caregiving of my (former) son. Also, I better see parents who honestly try—they don't bruise the flesh or spirit, they don't terrorize or traumatize—but they don't break through either or fully heal what has been broken by others.

And, finally, I believe I better recognize us both, Mom and Son, beyond the roles, beyond the dreams, beyond the promises.

Now that I have surrendered.

Kelly A. Dorgan is a writer, researcher, and professor living in southern Appalachia along with her spouse, kids, and too many pets. Connect with her on Twitter and her website.

Austin is a pseudonym.

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