



BROKEN HOMES

BY ZANIYAH (YAE LIN) SOLIS

I went into care when I was 11. I was bounced around from foster home to foster home to a therapeutic boarding home to psych hospitals to residential treatment facilities to group homes. I didn't feel accepted in any of my placements. So I ran away from nearly every foster home and group home.

I would have liked to have been adopted, but my being gay turned a lot of people off, so I kept moving around, signed myself out of care, became homeless, signed myself back in. I didn't graduate high school. I got closer and closer to aging out and didn't know where I'd live.

I got pregnant a year before my 21st birthday. Once I was pregnant, I AWOLed from foster care because I feared that Child Protective Services (CPS) would try to take my daughter as soon as she was born. But after I left foster care, life was hard. I had to move three times, and in one of the places I lived, I got beat up.

Through my old foster care agency, I had a caseworker named Simone. She helped me sign back into foster care. She helped me get admitted to Bethany II, a home for mothers and children in foster care in Queens.

At first, I didn't want to go to Bethany because I wanted my own apartment for me, my baby, and whatever woman I got together with next. But I am glad I went to Bethany. I learned a lot there. I needed them to help me prepare for my daughter because deep inside I was scared about her arrival. My life had been chaotic for years, and I was used to fighting authority figures and running away. I had trouble imagining myself giving a baby a stable home.

Family-Like Support

At Bethany, I learned different ways to cope with a baby such as taking time outs, putting yourself in the baby's shoes, and learning that a baby has different cries. Bethany gave me the structure that I needed and taught me to ask for help. Once I got used to the routine and the staff, I started to love Bethany.

Bethany didn't look like a group home. It had a foyer, a big dining room, two refrigerators, and a living room on the second floor. It was actually one of the best homes I had ever been in.

The Bethany staff were more of a family than I thought I would get in foster care. I became more compliant in my seventh month. I didn't do it for me; I did it for Aasyiah. (I'd picked out the name even before I was pregnant, in a book of Arabic names for girls.)

As my 21st birthday and Aasyiah's birth day approached, I knew I'd need to get housing. You can only stay at Bethany till you turn 21, though they give extensions to women who are waiting for housing. I waddled to my interview for public housing at about eight and a half months pregnant. The lady asked which borough I wanted to live in, and I said Manhattan. Now it was just a waiting game.

I had my daughter on March 19, 2015, via C-section, three months before my 21st birthday. The first time I looked eyes with my baby I felt the need to let go of my anger and all the things that had happened to me that caused that anger—abuse, rape, foster care. As the snow fell outside, I held her and felt some peace and closure.

The Rules Tighten

Though we had a group home to call “home,” we still didn't have a home of our own.

While I waited for our public housing to come through, I was grateful to be at Bethany and get help with my new baby. A staff named Jonelle greeted Aasyiah and me when we arrived from the hospital. Jonelle was like a mother figure to me so Aasyiah was like her grandchild. She gave me tips on how to nurse and made sure that I was putting Aasyiah in her crib properly, nursing her on time, and eating enough. She and another staff, Maria, helped me by watching Aasyiah when I was going through postpartum depression.

I went to court on my 21st birthday and got my stay in care extended three months. At Bethany, the rules tightened after that birthday: If I AWOLed or was even late, I'd be discharged. That made me feel un-free, and I wanted to bust out of foster care forever. The help was nice and I am forever grateful for them, but I was ready to be on my own. I also started dating my current girlfriend, Haze, around my birthday, so I knew I wouldn't be alone in an apartment with my baby.

Aasyiah was about 3 months old when I got the call to view my apartment. I walked in and saw a spacious one-bedroom apartment with big windows. I immediately saw myself and Aasyiah—and Haze—living there.

I said to the woman showing it, “Yes, I will take it. What do you want to secure the apartment?” She smiled and told me she needed the security deposit in a week. I got about \$1,700 in furniture money from ACS when I left Bethany. That covered the security deposit, my couch, my bed, and my dresser and a dresser for Aasyiah. The Bethany staff surprised me with gifts like dishes and silverware. They gave me food when I moved in and helped me set up Aasyiah's crib.

Cracked Walls, But a Whole Family

By the time we moved in, Aasyiah was about six months old and Haze and I were about three months into our relationship and falling hard. Even though we hadn't moved the furniture in yet, I was happy because I finally had a place to call home. I walked around the spacious apartment and started thinking about where I could put things and where I would spend my time. I had my own keys, and I had the acceptance of my daughter and my girlfriend.

NYCHA, New York City's public housing, is a good deal: I pay 30% of my SSI payments for rent. But sometimes you get what you pay for. Only three months after I moved in, a crack in the corner of my kitchen ceiling expanded, and a huge chunk of plaster crashed onto the floor. I complained to NYCHA, and they took pictures, but never came back to fix it. My kitchen sink has a crack now, and same thing: They looked at it and said, "We will be back." They never came back. My bathroom has a leak that NYCHA won't fix either.

I get tired of looking at all the things that need to be fixed. I've tried to make it more homey for the three of us by creating a word wall and an abstract mural in my bedroom, but it's frustrating not to have any control over the place I live in.

And yet, I've also learned that home isn't just a place to stay. I've always longed for love and acceptance, and someone to share a home with. And now I have that. My daughter and Haze are what I need to feel at home. Sharing a space with them, despite its flaws, is what makes my home home.

This story was excerpted from ["Broken Homes,"](#) a story written for [Represent](#).