

It's been three-and-a-half years since my Mom abandoned me. She left me as a ward of the court; a foster child moved to a city that I didn't know. My dad simply left when I was one. My mom divorced him and received full custody, but when I was seven she met a man named "Mark". Mark would come over constantly, and soon he was given the task of disciplining my sister and me. His methods of discipline were extremely severe, and as the years progressed, his methods crossed the border into abusive. He believed the world was literally coming to an end and didn't care about what happened to us. This caused my sister to run away halfway through her freshman year in high school. Although her primary motivation was to see a friend, once the police found her, she told them about Mark. Two weeks later they took me from my school and put me in an orphanage in a different city.

This was an enormous change for me; in less than fourteen hours I went from everything I knew to everything I didn't. Life during my freshman year was extremely difficult. I went from being a family member to a client of an orphanage in less than a day. One of the hardest difficulties I had to overcome during my freshman year was getting used to living in an orphanage. For my entire life I had lived with my Mom, someone who had always been there for me whenever I needed help. Now she was replaced with twenty staff members who each worked an eight - hour shift five days a week.

The first orphanage was called the Runaway's Alternative Placement, commonly known as the RAP House, a short - term shelter for runaways and other kids until a more permanent placement could be found. Two weeks later on February 9th of 2005 I began to finish my eighth grade year at a different middle school. On March 10th I moved to Harbinger House, where I stayed until May 27th of 2006. Harbinger House was a long-term orphanage. Most of the clients in Harbinger House had stayed there for well over a year. When August came I started

high school in a new city. In eighth and ninth grade I knew almost no one; only one or two other clients from the two orphanages were my only friends.

My sister, my lifelong roommate whom I could tell anything to, was living on the other side of the county. I didn't even have her phone number, not to mention that phone calls were rationed out like water in a desert. Soon after arriving the counselor who worked at the Harbinger House quit. The other clients were too involved with their own problems to care about anyone else's, and the staff were too busy breaking up fights, filling out incident reports, and making the clients do their chores and obey the rules to worry about their clients problems. This prevented me from being involved in normal, everyday activities, let alone extra - curricular pursuits. In short, I was alone and had nowhere to turn.

This isn't to say that I would like to go back to my mother's apartment. I absolutely detested living there, mostly because of the way Mark would discipline my sister and me. I hated the way we were treated, but I was only thirteen so I didn't see a way out. My sister, however, understood more of what was going on. She subsequently ran away in January of 2005. Even though I was removed from Mom's apartment it took me well over a year until I finally realized that Mark really did abuse me. It is said that when you're in a situation, you won't realize how bad it is until you get out of it. I've come to realize that when a parent hits a child it is abuse. Wanting a family to live with, I later took an enormous risk and moved up to Virginia to live with my uncle. I didn't know if I would be accepted into his family, but as they say the key to life is to take a risk - and this one paid off with enormous dividends.

One impact of all this on me is that I have to accept the fact that I won't see my Mom again for a long time - if I ever do. My mother, the one who is supposed to love me and protect me, has instead abandoned me. My sister lives seven hundred miles away, three states separating

her from me. She isn't even quite my sister anymore - she was adopted by her foster parents back in 2006. She has her own life in a city far away from me, her own parents, and her own two little adopted sisters. I sometimes can't believe we are not still living together. Aren't we supposed to be sharing a room, every day coming home to the welcoming arms of Mom?

What happened that could possibly make everything go so wrong? As I said before, my Mom and Mark were deeply religious, and they believed the world was literally coming to an end at any moment. They believed this to the point that they didn't care about the future. The world is going to end any moment, so why care about what classes I'm taking, what grades I'm getting? They didn't believe in sending my sister or me to college; they never even talked about college and they probably left my sister and me in high school because they were required to by law.

Since leaving their apartment, I've been told in no uncertain terms that if I want to go to college, I can. I have every intention of going. I realize how important it is to get a good education because it will be the foundation on which I will base my professional life. This education that my Mom and Mark don't believe in will serve me for the rest of my life. It will be the stepping stone on which I'll make my contribution to society. I plan to earn a degree in Engineering and pursue the field of Aeronautics. I am fascinated by the maneuverability and speed of modern aircraft. I want to be on the cutting edge of their development, designing the next generation of aircraft which will fly more than six times the speed of sound yet turn on a dime.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned was to take a risk. Before 2008 I would never have told anyone my story because I feared what they would do with this information. But as I

grew and matured I realized that none of this was my fault, and I subsequently accepted it for what it was and moved on with my life.

During my first day at school in Virginia I knew literally no one. Not one single person. In fact, I spent my lunch period in the counselor's office because I was too afraid to go to the cafeteria. On the second day, though, I took a giant risk and went up to a girl I had never seen before and introduced myself to her. She later on became the best friend that anyone could ever hope to have. What I'm trying to get at is that nothing new, just old bits of wisdom with a modern twist. All I'm saying is that, even though the beginning is rough to say the least, it gets better with time. In the end, all of the friends from wherever you moved from that are true friends will continue to call you and email you and text you, and you get to meet amazing people you have never know before and explore places you never knew existed.

Of course, your state of mind will determine how well you deal with your new situation. If you go into your new home completely determined never to like anything or anybody, then you won't. Frankly, that's the easy way out - shutting yourself down so you don't have to worry about anything. If you're reading this essay, then I hope you do better than that; I hope you accept your situation for what it is and become determined to make the best of it.

In conclusion, I want to leave with you a bit of wisdom that my tenth grade English teacher bestowed upon me, something that I have always kept and remembered during the worst of times. She told us, simply, what "the key" was. Not the key to happiness or the key to wealth, but rather the key to life. And that key is: to take a risk.