

Dream Child
By Lyn Michele Stevens

When Laura opens her apartment door she sees a tall rangy boy, taller than the case worker, taller than she, thinner than a lamp post. The boy is twelve. His skin is the color of mahogany, his wrist, garlanded with those embroidered bracelets her daughter Sophie used to wear. She smells a faint odor of something (urine?) on the boy.

“This is Joseph,” says Ms Difo, who earlier introduced herself on the phone.

Laura brushes cat hair off her slacks and extends her hand. “I’m Laura. I’d be pleased if you called me Aunt Laura,” she adds, remembering what she’s learned in MAPP training (Model Approach to Partnership and Parenting). “It’s great to meet you.” The boy glances down at her hand and then at his unlaced generic sneakers.

She’d expected Isiah, Dashaun, Jermaine, Kareem. Laura smiles. Her foster child doesn’t have a cliché name. “Joseph. Is that what I should call you? Do you have a nickname? Joey, perhaps? Please, come in.”

He eyes her suspiciously with slightly bulging eyes.

Ms Difo nudges the boy inside. His white t-shirt and jeans are sliding off his body; even his backpack sags. Later Laura will discover the only thing in it is a hoodie and a wrinkled bag of M&M’s.

“Would you like something to eat? I make a mean tuna fish. PB&J? I have a rotisserie chicken I was saving for dinner but if you’re hungry now?”

“Chicken,” he says. He sinks down onto a chair and tears at the chicken, wolfing down bites. How easy it will be to fix him if the problem is starvation. She will buy so much food the refrigerator will explode. She will buy him his own refrigerator.

Ms Difo asks if they can go into another room to talk. Laura leads her into the living room and offers her a seat on the sofa.

“We don’t have much of a history,” she says taking out manila folders from a cloth shoulder bag. “Joseph was removed from his home during a police raid. Crack cocaine and stash of guns and ammunition. Father is unknown. Mother has served time for prostitution. Joseph was found in the backyard hiding in a car.”

She hands Laura an emergency clothes check for \$100. “Do not throw out any clothes you buy. When he leaves, make sure they’re in a duffel bag or suitcase. Next time, if you get a child who’s already been in care, you won’t receive a check.”

Laura nods.

Ms Difo is a caseworker from the ACS Child Protective Services Department. She wears a navy skirt and jacket, which pulls across her gigantic bosom, shaped like a sloping shelf. How tough do you have to be to go into a home and tear a child from everything he has ever known, Laura wonders.

The kitchen chair screeches. "Is there anything else I should be aware of?" says Laura, looking over Ms Difo's shoulder into the kitchen.

"Joseph attends MS 325. The bus won't come to your neighborhood. Since there's only a month left of school, we don't want to transfer him. Do you have a means of getting him there?"

"Yes, of course, I'll drive him on my way to work," says Laura, already standing up and heading to the kitchen. "Shall we?"

The chicken is a pile of bones. Joseph stands in front of the refrigerator, his eyes drifting across photos of Laura's girls, grown now and out of the house. Jasmine, the oldest, is a geriatric nurse. Sophie, an art teacher.

"Bring your plate to the sink," says the caseworker.

"Oh no, I'll take care of that," says Laura. "Joseph, do you want to see your room? Would you like to watch TV or take a shower? Or we could play cards? Do you know how to play Go Fish?"

"Leave me alone," cries Joseph, and darts into Laura's bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

"Joseph, Joseph, that isn't your room. Please come out here. Let's talk and get to know each other," pleads Laura. "I'm not the enemy."

"I'll call you next week to see how everything is and someone from the agency will visit in a few weeks. Do you have any questions before I leave?" Ms Difo adds, handing Laura a business card.

Stupefied, Laura shakes her head.

These are Laura's rules: 1. You have to shower every day. 2. You have to go to school every day. 3. No friends allowed in the house unless you arrange it with me first. She's in her pajamas and robe at the kitchen sink giving the cat some fresh water. It's 10 pm and Joseph's on his second bowl of Frosted Mini-Wheats. She asks if he understands the rules.

"Yea," he says, slurping his cereal.

"Can you repeat them?"

"You think I'm stupid or something?"

"No, of course not."

"Then I ain't going to repeat your dumbass rules," he says.

"Fair enough," says Laura, restless for her nightly glass of wine but reluctant to drink in front of him. "Can you go brush your teeth for me? The toothbrush is brand new, still in its wrapper," she says.

He gazes down at Prudence, an aging black and white cat, for a full minute, stands and drifts from the kitchen, nearly ghostlike.

At 10:30 she pads into his room with a quick tightening in her stomach. "Is there anything you need?" she says.

"Nah."

"OK, then, well, sleep tight."

In the morning his bed is wet. Laura wipes down the plastic mattress cover she's been told to buy and changes his sheets while he's in the shower.

Three weeks later she's expecting the honeymoon to be over and for Joseph to start throwing tantrums or stealing or lying. None of that happens, though he remains sullen and answers her questions with a shrug or monosyllable. Joseph reads on 3rd grade level. She doesn't need the teacher's weekly phone call, which she has insisted upon, to know he cuts classes. She's taken to making him read juice containers, cereal boxes, frozen vegetable packages. They read together and then he eats. Joseph's newest vocabulary word is riboflavin. His long face has become more familiar, the way he hovers over his plate, and concentrates his bulging eyes on his food. He still doesn't like to be touched, although once after she gave him her nephew's old PSP (Playstation Portable), he let her stroke his bushy hair which he rubs down with Vaseline.

Months earlier, Helen, the friend she often takes walks with, met her on a humid summer day. Ribbons of clouds snuck in and out of trees as they strolled along the service road of a highway. On one side there was the swish of cars speeding by; on the other, houses and apartment buildings were tucked behind hundred year old trees.

"Mmm, smell that," said Laura.

"It's sycamore," said Helen, who knew everything about nature having been raised upstate in the country. A city bus stopped and five people got off. They passed a man with a yarmulke, a white couple wheeling a stroller with an Asian baby. A Muslim family.

"I'm thinking of becoming a foster parent," said Laura.

Helen turned towards Laura and her dangly earrings fluttered. "That's very magnanimous but don't you have enough stress with our job and with your children?"

"My children are grown."

"But you still do so much for them."

"I'm proud of spoiling them."

"Why don't you start out slowly, become a big sister."

"I'm not interested in part time."

"Is it because you're lonely?"

Laura tore a leaf off a bush and shredded it into tiny pieces.

"You could get a dog, you know."

"I have a cat. I would never do that to Prudence."

"Look, I don't mean to dissuade you but you have to give some serious thought to why you want to do this and who you're doing it for."

"What can I tell you? I need someone to yell at," Laura said, letting out a hearty laugh.

Alone for the last block back to her apartment, Laura pictured walking hand in hand with a small child, teaching her about sycamores and buying her a chocolate milkshake at Yo Burger. Her own girls only like vanilla like their father who had plain vanilla tastes and a wild temper. She was certain her foster child would be a chocolate lover.

During her lunch hour Laura goes to TJ Max and buys Joseph clothes for the fall: a Mark Eco black and white hoodie, jeans in sizes 24, 26 and 28, men's medium and small belts, boxers,

briefs, socks, gloves and a scarf, hair products, deodorant and cologne in a blue box she remembers her nephew likes. That night she knocks on his bedroom door. The sheer white curtains have faded to gray. The blanket is flowered, the bed covered with abandoned stuffed animals, the wall plastered with photos of smiling girls in short tight dresses. The photo frames are all made by Jasmine's sorority sisters with sayings like Best Friend Forever, Love Bug and Special Memories. Laura spills out two huge shopping bags of clothes and products.

"Leave 'em," says Joseph. "I'll try them later," and goes back to jabbing the Playstation.

"I wasn't sure of your size. You've put on weight and you're getting so handsome." Joseph turns to the wall, visibly backing away from the compliment.

She sits on the stiff mattress. "Wow, I hadn't realized how hard this bed is. We could buy you something softer if you like. Joseph, look at me." She locks her hand over the PSP. Joseph withdraws his long slim fingers out from under her hand. His nails need to be cut.

"We have to get you out of the city, away from your friends. There's a whole world out there. You see those photos of my daughter? They were taken in Venice. In middle school when she was your age, she visited Europe. Did you know that Venice has canals running right through the city instead of streets? Have you ever seen a canal, in a book, maybe?"

"My mother once put a gun in my mouth to shut me up," says Joseph."

Laura jerks her hand away from the PSP.

Joseph shrugs. "Maybe I was 5."

She wonders if this could be true.

"It wasn't hers."

"Whose was it?"

"Don't know. There was always a gun in the house. No big deal."

"Yes, Joseph, that is a big deal. It's a huge deal! You must have been scared to death."

Joseph smiles slyly. His teeth are large and naturally straight. "I'm smart." Then he tells her how he started picking up and delivering drugs for his mom so he wouldn't get a beating.

She asks if he still runs drugs.

"Nah," he says. "Can I go to sleep now?"

"Of course. How about a kiss on the forehead?" He shrugs. She holds the sides of his face and kisses his forehead.

Laura awakens from a nightmare though she has no memory of it. She wanders into her kitchen with Prudence trailing behind her. Her t-shirt is practically see-through and Joseph could probably see her boobs if he were awake. What does it matter? He's already seen so much. She takes a long swallow of wine. She cracks open his bedroom door. He's curled up in a tight fetal ball, in a nest of clothes, his hands clutched around a stuffed monkey. She wants to take him in her arms and stroke his back but she won't risk waking and embarrassing him. Instead she covers him with a blanket. She stands just outside his door in the lighted hallway, sipping her wine, wishing him a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

Medical and TB forms, fire and safety form, bicycle helmet form, budget form, state clearance form, the narrative, the letter from employer and the three personal reference forms. Finger printing and having to gather her social security card, marriage license, her husband's

death certificate, rent stub, electric, phone and cable bill. She's a middle class woman, who's raised two girls on her own. She has a college degree, the only white woman in her 30 hour MAPP class. It astounds her that everyone has managed to collect all that information, despite having little or no education. She laughs when she thinks about herself and these adults, having to do homework and raise their hands to answer questions, in order to be given a sticker, and how at the end of training during the graduation ceremony, she got a prize for the most stickers (a bag of plastic pens and a picture frame). Her favorite classmate, Wayne, the maintenance worker, who looked about 40 and was easily 15 years younger than she, couldn't get over the fact that she was half Jewish, that she wasn't a teacher, that she didn't cook. When she volunteered to bring soda and store-bought dessert to the end of year potluck and awards ceremony, Wayne poked her with his elbow and said "Oh c'mon now, Ms. Laura, you can bring those potatoes patties and kosher hot dogs."

The basement of the agency has dingy light blue walls with children's crayon drawings tacked on bulletin boards. A few folding chairs are propped against the wall, the rest in a sloppy circle in the center of the grimy linoleum floor. Laura's mind flickers with images of the role play used in MAPP class to illustrate meetings with the birth parent: a Nigerian man in his vivid shirt cajoled by his Puerto Rican wife to participate in the game, a Baptist preacher's wife, desperate for a child of her own and a Jamaican grandmother step in and out of a cotton rope. Birth parent and child, foster parent and child. Then all three step inside the sagging rope.

Joseph hasn't seen his birth mother since he was removed from his home. He's slouched in one of the chairs against the wall in his new black and white hoodie, below a photo of Martin Luther King. Two women walk in, one holding a toddler, maybe a year old. Joseph jumps up. He flashes Laura a proud, desperate look. Laura stands and brushes her hand down her skirt. The lady with the red hair and red lipstick, from ACS, makes introductions.

"Look, I got Bobby back for today," says Joseph's mother. She pets the toddler's thick copper hair, which is plaited in ruler-straight cornrows.

"Why you got him and not me?" asks Joseph.

"Why you think? He's a baby."

"You still with T?"

"He comes 'round now and again. You ain't making trouble, are you? I got enough of my own crap to handle."

The ACS Case Planner makes funny faces at the toddler.

Aren't you going to ask your son how he is, thinks Laura. She feels something hot and heavy solidifying below her heart. It surges up her body and she gulps to swallow it back down.

"Your mother has enrolled in a rehab program," says the Case Planner with fake cheeriness.

Laura frantically searches her memory for useful phrases: working in partnership, parent reunification, supplementing and supporting birth parents, but she can't draw any meaning or comfort from what she remembers. She can't concentrate enough to recall the dialogue in the role play.

No one is speaking. Nothing is happening. Joseph's mother switches the baby onto her other hip. About 10 minutes crawl by and still no one says anything. The mother keeps petting the fidgety boy in her hands, never meeting Joseph's eye. *This is your child*, Laura wants to yell. *Kiss him or touch him. Don't you care?*

She breaks the heavy silence and asks permission to cut Joseph's nails and get him a haircut.

"He likes braids," says his mother. The baby has started whimpering.

"She can cut my hair," says Joseph.

More silence.

"Why don't we give Joseph and his mother some time alone," says the caseworker.

"Let me hold him. You ain't doing it right," she hears Joseph say.

"Hey, you show me some respect or I'll fucking slap your face."

Laura whips back around, stomach churning. Kindness is not weakness, she tells herself as she grabs Joseph's hand. "It's time to go. Say goodbye to your mother, Joseph." The baby is crying, arching, flailing in his young mother's arms.

"This is extremely inappropriate, Ms. Stuart," says the red-haired lady from ACS.

"Who the fuck are you, taking my boy away."

"We haven't finished our session," says the red-haired lady.

"I'm not going to stand here and listen to you abuse him. Not while he's in my care. Say goodbye now," she barks over the baby's howls.

"Bye," mumbles Joseph obediently.

Gripping his hand she stalks away and doesn't let go until they are out the back entrance into the parking lot. She leans against the tan concrete building to steady herself and drops her head.

"I'm sorry, honey. I don't know what happened. I'm so sorry."

"Whatever," says Joseph and meanders toward the car, the wind billowing his hoodie.

She follows after him. "Do you want to go back inside?"

Joseph shrugs. His eyes are brimming. "Do you?"

She goes around to her side of the car, retrieves the car keys from her purse and clicks open the locks. Joseph hunches in and presses his face to the window.

"Look, there's a McDonald's up ahead. Let's get something to eat," she says.

"Ain't hungry," he mutters.

"I am," says Laura, steering the car into the drive-through. She orders large fries and two chocolate shakes. "Eat something, sweetie. It'll help you feel better," she says. Joseph grabs a fistful of fries. He slurps the shake and the tears stream down his cheeks.

On weekends they eat Chinese take-out for lunch. Joseph loves lo-mein and eggrolls. After lunch they drive to TJ Maxx to return some clothes. It's the Saturday before Christmas and the store is teeming with people. She's promised him a flat brimmed Yankees baseball cap if he behaves, though she's heard they are quite expensive.

"So what. You rich," says Joseph, lagging behind her.

"You could be as rich as me if you finish school and go to college." Joseph rolls his eyes. She keeps turning back to check if he's there and he waves her away with his hand.

The line at the cash register is eight or ten deep. Joseph ambles over to a round display of sneakers a few yards away, picks one up and studies them.

"Would you like a pair?" asks Laura.

"Yo, if I get sneakers, they're going to be Air Jordans, not trainers."

"Why don't you try them on and we can buy them so you'll have something to wear until you find what you're looking for."

Joseph grudgingly kneels down and puts on the sneakers. "How my supposed to walk?" he says shuffling over to her, one sneaker tethered by a tab, flopping along the floor.

"Here, give them to me." Without a thought, she takes out her nail clipper from her purse and snips through the plastic until it snaps apart.

"Walk around and make sure they're comfortable. But stay where I can see you."

It's her turn to pay. She shakes out the bag of clothes, spreads them on the counter and when she turns to the display, Joseph is nowhere in sight.

"Joseph? Joseph. Excuse me, go ahead take my place," she tells the lady behind her.

She circles the display three times, rushes over to Boys Clothing and back to the display, calling his name.

The security office is on the other side of the store by ladies lingerie.

"I lost my boy. He was wearing sneakers" she says to the heavy-set, balding security officer. "The ones on the sale rack. I hadn't even paid for them. Can you make an announcement over the PA? His name is Joseph, Joseph Dowdy."

"You're his mother?"

"Yes, no, aunt," she stammers.

"Do you have a photo?" Laura's mouth drops open. "He looks a lot older than 12. He was wearing a white t-shirt and jeans. He's black," she shouts and claps her hand over her mouth.

"Calm down m'am. I'm sure we'll find him. Please have a seat."

She can either fall apart or pull herself up and out of this nightmare. "Lock down the store," she demands.

"I'm afraid we can't do that. We're not at that point yet."

"What do you mean you can't do that? They do it on TV and in movies all the time."

The security guard shakes his head at her. "This isn't a movie, m'am."

She's traipsed through the entire store three times, to the food court and Footlocker and Hat City. At 6 pm she forces herself to call the agency's emergency number 1-800-HUG-A-BIT to admit Joseph is gone, a call she was supposed to have made three hours earlier.

At home, Laura pours herself a glass of wine, takes it into her bedroom and removes the lockbox from her dresser drawer. Outside her bedroom window Christmas lights wink on and off. Her life has turned to a Hallmark Made-for-TV movie. When she sets the glass on the night table she notices the forgotten yellow booklet sticking out from under her books on the bottom shelf, the One and Only Me booklet foster parents are given to help a child remind him who he is and where he came from since memories often get lost when kids are moved around. Still in her clothes, she huddles under a blanket and flips through the booklet of Xeroxed pages sprinkled with drawings of hearts and animals with big eyes and bigger smiles. She swallows a sleeping

pill with the wine. Tomorrow she will get rid of the lockbox and return the pill bottles to the medicine cabinet. She takes her pen and fills in all the blanks she can skimming through chapters called “Map of My Journey, My Birth Family, All About Me Today.” When she reaches “Getting Adopted,” she hurls the pen across the room and starts weeping with helplessness and humiliation but also guilty relief that it’s over.

Laura falls into a meandering adventure dream, wandering from place to place, doggedly searching for Joseph. When she finally finds him he’s sitting in a child’s wading pool surrounded by sleek black handguns. His face is placid, his back erect. From the waist down, his body is buried under the guns. She begs him to come to her but he’s too enchanted by the weapons. As she reaches her arms to lift him out, he picks up a pistol and points it at his forehead. Laura jerks up. She gropes for the light switch. Her heart is beating so hard, it sounds as if it’s coming from outside her body. It’s just a dream, she keeps telling herself again and again. It’s just a dream.

A Homefinder from a private agency calls her almost daily. There are siblings, a boy and girl 8 and 11 who need a home. Another day she tells Laura about a 15 year old pregnant girl who’s been in care since before she was born. A Hispanic boy, 16, on Zoloft and in therapy at Harlem Hospital. During these phone calls the Homefinder assures Laura it’s not unusual for foster children to run away.

“You can’t blame yourself, you have been an ideal foster parent” she says.
 “It’s too soon,” replies Laura.

Then one morning while she’s making a grilled cheese in the toaster oven a supervisor from ACS calls to say they found Joseph and he has asked to see her. They have sent him to a residential treatment center in Queens Village.

“He’s made you a necklace with a clay heart in arts & crafts,” says the supervisor. “Will you visit?”
 “I’m afraid I can’t,” says Laura.

A year tumbles by. Laura’s girls fly into her apartment with bags full of holiday presents. She hugs and kisses each of them and tells them to make themselves at home while she gets ready. When her mother arrives, they will travel in one car to Laura’s brother’s house in New Rochelle. Every year it is the same. The strong, safe net of her family: her girls, her mother, her older brother and younger sister, their children. Her sister-in-law will serve a continuous stream of appetizers: shrimp cocktail, humus and pita chips, guacamole, spinach dip in a bread bowl in the living room. Stuffed, they will parade into the dining room. Her niece and nephew will design menus on the computer and tent them in front of every setting. Le Chicken, Le Baked Salmon, Le Ham, Le Mashed Potatoes, Le Legumes. Before eating they will acknowledge all the people who are no longer with them - Laura’s oldest sister, her father, her husband, among others.

This Christmas it’s as if she’s watching it all through a veil. Laura replays the moment Joseph disappeared wondering if he was running toward or away from something. The adults drink a little too much wine and brag about their children’s accomplishments. The distance

between these parents and Joseph's mother twists a knot in her stomach. Everyone happily moans when cakes, bakery cookies, and ice cream are set down. They descend into the living room, ogle at the Christmas tree, flop on the couch and into chairs to open presents and play charades. It feels to Laura as if there's something not quite real about the day, something silly and showoff.-y. Suddenly, her family's joy feels limited.

All week she's jumpy and scatterbrained. And then it happens. Her landline rings. It may as well be an explosion the way she jumps, startling Prudence, who scampers away. She runs to the kitchen and grabs it on the third ring.

"We're here," says Ms Difo. "The buzzer seems to be broken."

"I'll be right down," says Laura, breathlessly, tugging on her coat. She takes the steps two at a time, walks outside.

Ms Difo is wearing a sparkly red Santa pin on her coat. Her cheeks are crimson, her smile, warm and full of light. Standing next to her is a chubby 13 year old girl with a shy, anxious look in her eyes.

"This is Tiara," says the caseworker.

Laura touches her hand to her throat, clasping an invisible necklace with a clay heart. Wet snowflakes fall over the three of them, disappearing the moment they land.

THE END