

In Care
By Lyn Michele Stevens

You're a fool I texted my sister.

It doesn't matter what you say, Derrick. I'm doing it, Edie texted me back.

A stubborn old fool I wrote.

Old?!? You're 11 years older than me!

I immediately picked up the phone, "it's a colloquialism, an idiom," I told her.

"Sounds idiotic to me," said Edie.

Frankly I worried about my sister, half-sister if we're speaking technically, having no life to speak of with the exception of working the cash register at the Christmas store. I'd told her in no uncertain terms, having a foster kid was insane. Children are a gift, but also a colossal responsibility. And I couldn't keep tending to Edie's needs with my hectic life, as a branch manager of Avidia Community Bank, keeping the lawn trimmed, and fixing every damn thing that breaks in my ex's apartment.

Edie never listened. Once the matter was settled in her mind there was no changing it. In order to verify she didn't skip pre-service training classes I signed up to go with her. To simplify things, I decided we should go as husband and wife. I'm kind of a schemer in that way.

After 5 months of waiting for a little 3-year-old girl to play dolls with, Edie grew impatient and agreed to foster a teenager.

She told me Krystal walked in carrying three shopping bags full of clothes, an iPod, a stuffed bear, and a Hello Kitty backpack. “You should have seen her asking if I was rich, walking around, inspecting the house and the backyard, as if she was considering making an offer,” Edie said to me. I had to laugh when she described the scene. Maybe taking care of someone that thought Edie, with her Walmart coffee table, braided rug and Costco art collection, was rich, might be an improvement all around for both of them.

We learned that Krystal had been in care since before she was born, placed in a foster home with her pregnant teenage mother. She had been moved six times in 16 years. Even with the classes and the certification, Edie was a sitting duck. There were mornings Edie was so rattled by Krystal’s insolence, she’d crawl back into bed; nights when Edie let her go out without knowing whether she was smoking heroin or studying, and in Krystal’s opinion, worst of all, days when Edie forgot to go food shopping. That girl was always hungry.

Growing up, Edie and I were never hungry. I never let food go to waste. The story is that after my father divorced mom, he made an egregious mistake and married Edie’s mother, a young damsel in distress.

By the time Edie was a toddler, her mother was trapped like a fly in a web of opioid addiction. For all intents and purposes, I raised Edie. I'm a born leader. I've been to Europe. I read the Globe every day, cover to cover. Jessica, my ex, says I come off sounding superior. That's the last thing I ever intend. I like everyone, especially regular people. If I didn't, I wouldn't be good at my job. The tellers get my humor. I don't understand why Jessica and Edie don't.

There was one thing Edie did right with Krystal. She took the girl for walks in the woods just like I did with Edie long ago.

Behind her house, the narrow foot-worn trail led to a sparkling brook and a strange wooden bench that wrapped around a tree trunk, which was as far as me and Edie ever made it. Edie loved to run around that bench and have me chase her or play follow the leader. In my memory, it's dusk and the sky is red blue, the air smells of wet wood and earth. Little Edie was like an explorer, taking the lead whenever the path narrowed, slowing or stopping to examine a rock or pluck a leaf from a tree. We'd both be silent and I would imagine her mind expanding. I'd follow with my hands in the sleeves of my coat, feeling like I was giving her childhood back to her.

One day about four months into Krystal's stay, Edie and Krystal, flat out on the couch watching crap TV when Krystal perked up and suggested a walk. It was too cold to be out. The ground was partially frozen, naked branches twitched in the wind, and the navy sky was already moving

towards black. I could picture it. Edie in her pea coat and those ridiculous gloves with the finger holes which make no sense, following Krystal's puffy ski jacket, crunching little ice puddles with her rubber boots, Krystal breathless telling Edie to sit on the bench while she circled around the tree to sit on the opposite side to relay her news.

I was at Jessica's apartment when I received the call. Jessica is a conundrum, extremely conventional and simultaneously adventurous in a naive way. She had moved out of our house last spring. I couldn't afford to have that leg of the chair ripped out from under me, so I would go over occasionally when something broke. I can fix anything. Jessica was in the kitchen making coffee with her fancy French press. I'd just finished installing her AC unit in the dining room. The screw that was clamped between my teeth dropped out. Krystal was pregnant.

You should have slapped her I thought but I bit my tongue. "You're not keeping her after the baby is born," I said to Edie.

"I don't know," said Edie tearfully.

"You need to call the agency. Do you know if parental rights were terminated? Does she have a relationship with her family? Is her mother a pill popper?"

"Not funny," said Edie.

"When she turns 18, she'll age out of the system. No healthcare. Nada. You've got to make plans for getting her into a group home or find a family member to take her."

“Jesus, Derrick, shut it, will you. She just told me ten minutes ago.”

I was telling Edie I didn’t know why she’d ever agreed to take a teenager when mid-sentence she said “bye” and hung up.

“It’s none of your business, Derrick. Stay out of it,” said Jessica, handing me a cup of coffee and a couple of sweeteners.

“I don’t think you have the right to tell me my business,” I said to Jessica. We argued. Same old, same old. The coffee was too strong. LaVazza had been on sale. I reminded Jessica that once you’re a gourmet nothing is ever good enough.

I decided to take the long route home, skirting both the town and the issue at hand. Walking recharges me. When I arrived at our little house I stood there, frozen, looking at Jessica’s potted plants, wondering if they’d survive the winter, listening to her wind chimes as the night air seeped into my bones; my cheeks and ears on fire. If Jessica wanted an open-marriage then fine, I would handle it, like I do everything. I’d been outvoted again 1 to 1. I laughed at my own joke.

Edie told me Krystal had begged her for a phone after their visit to the clinic to check her pregnancy. Krystal said she needed it to get in touch with her mom. I absolutely understood this so I dug an ancient flip phone out of the closet and gave it to Edie to give to Krystal. It didn’t text or send photos but according to Edie, Krystal never let it out of her sight.

A few weeks later, I swung by Edie's house on my way to the bank to see if I could talk sense into the girl. Edie would never be able to handle a pregnant teenager on her own. Dad used to tease me by calling me BroMo, a combination of brother and mother and for a while it caught on. I didn't mind. Once again, I needed to step in and change the channel.

When I arrived, they were both in the kitchen. Rap music was blasting from somewhere unbeknownst to me. Krystal whipped around.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Krystal was a hefty girl. She wore an armful of cheap gold bracelets, and a black tube top which only covered her breasts. She had a smooth round face so it was a surprise seeing her stretch marks and scars. She already had what they call a baby bump! On her feet were 6-inch platform sneakers.

"Turn that music off please. I can't hear myself think."

"Nice to see you too," said Krystal turning to the microwave to retrieve her plate of food.

She sat down next to a stuffed bear and gobbled up a runny peanut butter and jelly sandwich in 3 bites.

I looked at Edie who was still in her checked pajama bottom and a grey t-shirt. "That's the way another foster mother used to make it," Edie said, pouring us both a cup of coffee.

I sat down opposite Krystal. Her fox-colored hair was nicely done up.

“I understand you’re pregnant. Have you thought about an alternative? You could finish school, get a career. Get married. You don’t have to have it,” I said loudly over the blare of music.

“You mean, like kill it? No fucking way,” said Krystal evenly.

I decided to ease into the conversation “Do you know what you’re having?”

“Girl,” replied Krystal, eyes glued to her phone, which she’d set on the table when she sat down.

“Krystal has a name already picked out,” said Edie with a roguish smile.

“Wait. Let me guess - Zendaya? Kesha? Cardi B? I like to keep up with popular culture,” I added but my remark went unnoticed.

“I’m naming her Love,” said Krystal.

Edie let out a snort of laughter and quickly covered her mouth with her napkin.

“That’s certainly a name to snag your mental sweater on,” I said. Is that spelled L U V or L O V E?”

“Very funny. How about you just shut the fuck up,” muttered Krystal.

I snapped the 3 packets of sweetener, ripped off the paper and poured it all in. “Pass the cream,” I hissed. The girl needed to be sent to her room without dinner for a week.

“Have you thought about where you’ll live after Love is born?”

She shrugged. “New York. Times Square, I think.”

“That’s enough with the tough love, Mr. busybody,” said Edie.

There was one more thing I needed to find out. “Does your mother know you’re pregnant? So what’s with your mother?”

“Nothing!” Krystal said, blinking at the word mother. “What’s with yours and hers?”

“My mother is dead,” said Edie flatly.

“God rest,” murmured Krystal.

Edie grabbed the Hello Kitty backpack off the floor and handed it to Krystal. “You better go. you’ll be late for the bus.”

Krystal took it by one of the straps. “Sorry for the swear word, Derrick,” she said, picking up her stuffed bear. Then she left out the back door.

I recognized this child. She could go from tough to scared, feral to sweet with the flick of a light switch.

The night the fight broke out Krystal was high. She’d found Edie’s wallet and when she wouldn’t give it back, things turned vicious. They were two cats fighting over a bird. After the police arrived and pacified Krystal by threatening a night in a cell, she apparently called her mother.

Before the Krystal vs. Edie incident, I’d been heavily researching and felt it was safe to say an open marriage was the worst possible plan for me and Jessica. We needed to discuss it in a rational way. But now, the

only thing I could think about, was the last time we saw Krystal at the hearing. I wonder if I'd been more vigilant, if I'd been able to calm them both down, things might have turned out differently. But a person with as many irons in the fire as me can't be everywhere at once.

In the basement of the Department of Children and Family Services Agency (DCF), six long tables had been shoved together. People filed in the room like zombies on *The Walking Dead*. Edie had hollows under her eyes, her face pale and glazed like the outside of a honeydew, blouse buttoned too tight on her neck. The holes in her ears, nose and brow, devoid of jewels. "Nothing to worry about," I whispered. "It's all performative."

Krystal sat opposite me and Edie at the far end of the table holding her stuffed bear, her head in the crook of her mother's shoulder. Except for her pregnant belly they resembled twins, both in clothes too small for their big bodies.

I heard three introductions before my mind started drifting. Krystal's natural father (same bowed lips as Krystal), her stepfather (tattoo sleeves) and her mother's new boyfriend (soul patch and sideburns). Additionally, there were about 15 people present: a couple of older brothers, a baby sister also in care, aunts, former foster parents, therapists, social workers.

When it was my turn to introduce myself, I cleared my throat and stood. “Derrick Michael Davis, brother to Edith Lynette Davis, who’s foster mother to that girl,” Then I sat back down.

The caseworker’s questions poured out like water from an overturned pitcher. How were Krystal’s grades? Did she see a doctor regularly? What was her typical breakfast? How did she sleep?

Krystal was in another world gazing up at her mother, caught in a net of love and hate, her mother controlling her with her own childish helplessness and need.

“How often did you take her to the center for counseling?”

“I took very good care of Krystal,” said Edie in a small voice.

Tiffany Harris leaned across the table and shouted. “You molested my girl, did you not?”

“What?” said Edie.

“Ms. Harris, we understand you *also* called the police Tuesday night March 25th,” another social worker said, looking up from her notes.

“Yes, my daughter was being abused.”

“No! That’s a lie,” Edie cried. “She’s lying! Did I ever abuse you? Did I ever so much as lay a finger on you?”

Krystal shrank back and pulled her stuffed bear in tighter. “Yea, well you kicked me,” she said tentatively.

“After you ripped my sleeve. You were trying to steal my wallet.”

“I only wanted to borrow some money and you go call the cops on me.”

“I was scared out of my mind! There was blood on my lip, you stupid little shi...” I pulled Edie down by the arm and she slumped back onto her chair.

People started mumbling. Social workers furiously scribbled in their notebooks. “Let’s start from the beginning, shall we?” said Krystal’s caseworker.

I tightened my tie. “Excuse me,” I shouted, scraping back my chair to stand. “During the time my sister was in care of that girl, she was an exemplary foster....”

Suddenly Krystal let out a high pitched cry. “What is it, Baby?” said her mother.

She screamed and her scream lit up my ears. “It’s Love! Something’s happening to Love!”

The place broke into pandemonium. People pulled out their phones. One of the men whisked Krystal out of the room. There was pushing and shoving, as if a fire had started.

We were the last to make it out of the room.

Edie was shaking.

“It’s either Mercy or Lawrence,” Edie said. “Let’s go.”

“No, we’ve had enough. You’ll be able to find out everything tomorrow morning. I’m taking you home.”

I was relieved Krystal was out of Edie's life. I mean, how many people could I possibly take care of? Edie, however, was a mental case. It took her three days to get in touch with an actual person at the agency, only to find out Krystal's case worker had been removed from her case. I was finally able to reach the foster care supervisor but she could barely find the paperwork, no less give me any solid information. No one was at liberty to say anything except that the care had ended. No one told us a goddam thing which was, without reservation, cruel and uncaring.

A week later Edie called with a flat tire while I was driving Route 5 on my way to a city 35 miles away for a coffee with a young lady I'd met online. The lady I was meeting was a millennial. Millennials started this whole open marriage concept. Jessica likes to think she's young and hip but she belongs to Gen-X, like me.

It was a muggy day, the sun blasting through grey clouds throwing heat onto the two-lane highway. I spotted Edie's Kia about a mile down the road. She'd managed to pull it onto the shoulder and was leaning against the car with her solitaire games. I pulled my Exposition behind her.

"So, what have we here, Missus," I said in my deepest voice.

The heat and hard work felt good. So did the dirt and grease on my hands. Just the two of us together again, dragging the tire out of the trunk, me trying to get the jack in the right position under the car, jacking up the car, and struggling to loosen the lug nuts on the wheel.

“Hold these,” I said to Edie. I finally pulled the flat off the axle and rotated the spare around, jiggling it to get it onto the studs, tightened up the lug nuts and let the car down on the spare. Then we carried the busted tire back into the trunk together, me giving careful specific directions to Edie so neither of us would get hurt.

THE END