

They Were All Different

They were all different. Calvin* came with a smile on his face and trusted us fully. Kallie* looked at me with her soulful brown eyes, whimpered, then started to shake. Ali* looked at my husband Ross, relaxed and went to sleep in his arms. Kobe didn't open his eyes at all; he breathed steadily in the rhythm of the ventilator as I gazed down at him, secure in my arms in the hospital rocker. Christopher just lay on our living room floor. At 2-1/2 yrs old, he still couldn't roll over or crawl.

These were just some of the foster children we welcomed to our home over the years. We were fortunate enough to adopt Kobe and Christopher.

Calvin had been beaten with an extension cord by his mother the night before he came to our home. The caseworker brought him directly from the emergency room. He was three years old, but streetwise beyond his years. He had been beaten many times, burned with cigarettes and an iron and had had both his arms placed on a windowsill, then the window was slammed down, breaking both his arms. It took me three baths to get him clean. He was so funny and no one could call him "Cal" . . . my name is "*Cal-VIN*", he'd proudly say. He hoarded food, a common behavior of children who had been abused and neglected. He thrived with us and went on to be adopted by another family.

Kallie had been burned, admittedly by her father. He had placed her in scalding hot water and she had 2nd and 3rd degree burns on her buttocks, genitalia and feet. Oh my . . . how she screamed when she wet or soiled her diaper. It was at least a two person job to change her diaper and this went on for eight weeks until the burns had healed enough that one person could do it alone. Each diaper change was a sterile dressing procedure. She was only eight months old; what could she have done to be disciplined in this horribly painful way? She had also been neglected. She was underweight, couldn't hold her own bottle, roll over or sit up. Kallie was with us for eighteen months before she was returned to her biological parents. She was walking, running, singing, dancing and called us "mom" and "dad". She cried when she left our home. We did, too.

Ali hadn't even been born yet. I had been called by a social worker from Bronson Hospital. The mother had been there for a few weeks; a high-risk pregnancy. The baby was anencephalic (without a brain). She wouldn't live more than a few hours after birth. Could I give some support to the mother?, the social worker asked. Of course I would and talked with the mom on the phone several times. Ali *did* live and came home to foster care. Mom had admitted she didn't think she could care for Ali with her special needs. Ross and I worked with Ali's mom and Ali was out of foster care and back home with her mom before she was two months old. We continued to care for Ali, giving her mom frequent respite for the next 5-1/2 years, until Ali died when her mom gave her too much Valium.

Another social worker from Bronson Hospital called. "We have a baby who has been shaken. He's on a ventilator and not expected to live, but we want foster parents to come to the hospital and hold him and love him. Will you and Ross do that?" Of course we would. Kobe was lying in that steel hospital crib, so tiny; he was just eight weeks old. He had such a pained look on his face. I asked Rob, Kobe's nurse, if I could hold him. Rob handed Kobe to me, along with his ventilator and feeding tubes and heart monitor wires. As tears streamed down my face, I looked into his face and fell in love. Ross did, too. We brought Kobe home with us three weeks later and he's been with us ever since. He's now seven years old. He's a handsome boy with blonde hair and blue eyes. He cannot move by himself and he doesn't talk, but when you look into his eyes, he speaks volumes. He remains on the ventilator and feeding tube. Our adoption of Kobe was final when he was fifteen months old. His biological father who shook him is in prison until 2028. Kobe's biological mother voluntarily relinquished her rights and grandparents didn't want him because he was no longer "perfect".

Christopher had been physically and sexually abused and severely neglected to the point of malnutrition. He was 2-1/2 years old when he came to us. He couldn't roll over or crawl. He didn't know how to play with a toy. He didn't talk or chew food. He was supposed to be with us for two weeks, in temporary care. His mother failed to pick up at the end of the two weeks. We adopted Christopher when he was four years old; he's now eight years old. He does walk now, but doesn't talk and isn't potty trained. He's been diagnosed with autism. Is it nature versus nurture? We don't know. He still doesn't chew food. He used to have night terrors and would wake up screaming. He still has trouble sleeping through the night. But he has the most wonderful smile and is always happy. He can occupy himself for hours, just swinging or watching videos.

There are many kinds of abuse and neglect. There is just one kind of child. The one who needs love, attention and protection.

*Not the child's real name