

She's Right Here

Alyssa

As I arrive to the house, my palms are sweaty against the steering wheel. My heart is racing and I keep replaying one question in my mind.

“Why am I so nervous?” I’m just here to talk. Just here to tell my story. But the truth is, I’m terrified.

When I walk through the door, I try to look calm, composed even, but I’ve always been shy, and today it feels like I’m wearing it like a name tag.

There are five girls scattered across the main floor right when I walk in. Some on couches, others at the dining table, having a snack, doing each other’s hair, chatting, just... living in their own little worlds.

I look around them and it all comes back to me. The sisterhood, the drama, the laughter and the pain we all carried... I can hear us all laughing hysterically watching “Martin”, or screaming and cursing when one of us was upset because it made us feel grown and some type of power. I can even smell the Haitian spaghetti which was my favorite meal my favorite staff member would make us. I take a deep breath and I just say to myself, “wow, I can’t believe I’m here.”

So as I look around at all of them, they barely glance at me. If they were told I was coming, they clearly didn’t care.

That’s what made it harder. What if they don’t connect with me? What if they judge me? What if my story... doesn’t even matter? So I

choose the safest way I know how to speak my truth. I tell it in the third person.

I say I'm here to share a story about a friend. A girl who was placed in the system, and sent to many different group homes. A girl who wasn't protected from a young age. Who was trafficked and went missing at 14. Who was stolen long before anyone noticed she was gone.

I speak softly, slowly, my voice shaking like my hands. I feel Jill and Fedi on each side of me, my anchors, probably the only reason I haven't turned around and ran out the front door.

So I tell them about my... friend... and how she met a girl who she clicked with right away, from day 1. They did everything together. Got ready for school, went to horse therapy, went on home passes, laughed, and cried together. Within a week they convinced the staff to let them change roommates so they can share a room. They became like sisters, such a strong connection so fast. Two peas in a pod, literally inseparable. Everybody supported it and loved watching their innocent relationship grow. And it really was so innocent, that is until it wasn't.

My friend wasn't a follower at all but her roommate was a little older than her, and definitely more experienced.

The girl knew how the system worked. She'd been to the group homes, knew what she could and couldn't get away with and knew her way around in the streets, but my friend was still very new to all of this. One day she convinced my friend to go to a hotel party where

some of her friends were and without much convincing at all my friend agreed.

Even though she knew the staff couldn't touch her if she walked out, she was anxious, probably her intuition trying to warn her but she was too brave and willing to take the risk and find out.

My friend always felt like she had everything under control, like she knew what she was doing, even when it was wrong somehow.

All of a sudden they are running out the front door, as if someone was going to chase them, even though they knew nobody could, or would.

She had the whole thing lined up, a car waiting down the block. It felt exciting, dangerous... powerful, even. Like they were finally in control of something. But control is a funny thing. You think you have it, until it slips.

About ten minutes later they arrive to a sketchy motel. My friend's heart is pounding so hard she can hear it as she's walking to the motel room door with her roommate and now comes the introductions. Not so much to people... she gets introduced to a new level of partying... drugs, a lot of drugs, and alcohol... and it lasts for days and days. She was getting tired of it after day 3, but to her, anything was better than going back to the system and being told what to do all day every day.

Her body ached. Her mind was foggy. She hadn't eaten a real meal in what felt like forever, and her throat burned from the alcohol she kept forcing down just to keep going. She watched people come and

go like shadows. Names didn't matter. Faces blurred. She stopped asking what time it was and stopped caring what day it might be.

Every time her eyes closed, she dreamed of silence. Of stillness. Of safety. Of being home. But the moment she opened them, it was back to chaos.

Back to pretending she was having fun.

Back to acting like this was freedom.

But really, she was just exhausted. Not just in her body, but in her soul.

A few days later, the roommate asks my friend to go see a guy with her so they can make some money, and they definitely needed money. She said he was corny but he would give them money, alcohol, rides, pretty much do whatever they asked, and she reminded her it was either that or back to the group home... "and next time they send you upstate" she said to my friend... so my friend agreed without asking any questions... she says "ok so let's do it."

As my story goes on, something unexpected happens. The girls start leaning in, eyes focused, and I can tell, They feel it. They feel her.

So when I finish the story, I ask if they have any questions. They shouted, "Where is she now?", "I wish I could meet her", "is she okay now?", "I just wanna hug her". Then Jill turns to them with a soft smile, looks back at me, and says, "Well... she's right here. You can ask her yourself."

There's a very quick moment of silence. Their eyes shift to mine. Then, they all rush me. Arms around my neck, tears on their cheeks and mine. I'm not "a guest speaker" anymore. I'm her. And I'm them too.

