

## WHAT IT FEELS LIKE...

# ...TO BE A FOSTER CARER

FOR YEARS *PETRINA BROWN*  
HAS BEEN LOOKING AFTER  
CHILDREN WITH NOWHERE  
ELSE TO GO

**O**ut of my f\*\*\*\*\* way, Danny. I want the cornflakes first," says three-year-old Frankic as he pushes past his toddler half-brother, Danny.

Frankic still feels anxious that there may be a hungry day ahead and regularly attempts to fill up on whatever he can lay his hands on, even if it's not widely regarded as food.

My new charges arrived teary and bleary-eyed as an emergency placement three nights ago, although it feels like we've been together for months. The separation from their mother was confrontational and violent, and since the police officers delivered the boys straight to me, they regard me pretty much as a kidnapper.

From years of fostering, I know this may take several weeks to overcome. Their behaviour is what social services would describe as "challenging".

I have wanted to foster for as long as I can remember. My father grew up in a Barnardo's children's home, and I think that sparked my interest. He was an identical twin and went into care before he was two. When he and his brother were five they were separated. They didn't meet again until they both joined the army (coincidentally ending up in the same posting), and I thought it was sad that they had to grow up apart.

I was 37, and my own children, Hannah and Daniel, were 7 and 11, when I attended the Skills to Foster course. As a divorced mother of two, working for Surrey police, I thought I knew a bit about life. The course itself turned out to be about as useful as a cardboard nappy. I attended the introductory classes, over three weekends. One of my fellow applicants introduced himself with a joke: "Hello, I'm Kevin and I can't stand kids." We all cringed when the dour tutor gave him a look of concern rather than amusement. It was our introduction to the mind of the social worker. We were counselled on the stress of dealing with children from abusive backgrounds, how to cope with attachment disorders and warned about the contact sessions between our charges and their possibly disturbed parents.

Once I'd passed, I had to wait a couple of weeks for a placement. My own children couldn't wait. They thought it would be like a giant sleepover. I tried to manage their expectations and explain that the children would probably be distressed at first and may not behave in the same way as their friends.

When our first placement arrived — three siblings aged 2, 3 and 4 — all of them were howling. I felt guilty that I was exposing my children to something so upsetting, but they handled the situation brilliantly. Daniel got his old box of cars down for the boys and Hannah rummaged around for her Sylvania Families dolls' house. They were kind and comforting, and the foster children gradually calmed down. After a day or two they settled into a routine and seemed to adore my own children, who in turn revelled in the noise and commotion. I was pleased that I'd found a career that fitted perfectly around

family life, so I gave up my police job.

I remember getting some strange looks at the local shops. All of the children (even the boys) wore earrings, and I wasn't allowed to remove them. One well-to-do lady stopped us while we were shopping and bent down to speak to the three-year-old. "Hello, what's a big boy like you doing wearing an earring?" "F\*\*\* off," he said in his loudest voice. She looked at me as if I was the worst mother on earth. That first week was daunting: the weight of responsibility of having three extra little people to keep safe took some getting used to.

For that first placement, contact between the children and their mother took place in my own home, and it was very unsettling. She would arrive and empty bags of sugary doughnuts onto the carpet for the children to pounce on. She gave them a bath and put them to bed wrapped in wet towels. She lit up a cigarette in my living room, put her dirty trainers up on the sofa and asked me to make her a cup of tea. When I politely asked her to smoke in the garden, the look she gave me was intimidating, to say the least.

One of the hardest aspects of fostering is when the children move on. There have been times when I have breathed a sigh of relief, but usually it is sad. One placement with two siblings was particularly hard to end. They arrived as babies and stayed for two years. I'll never forget driving them to their new home to live with their "forever" parents. Although I knew it was my duty to allow them to move on, my heart was breaking. I forced a smile as I passed them to the excited adopting couple and gently eased them away when they clung to my legs. Walking down the path, and being unable to comfort them as they cried for me, was the single hardest moment of my life.

That's one of the downsides of fostering; you have no control over what happens to the children in your care, even though you know them better than anyone. I hope those two siblings know they are never far from my thoughts.

After six years of fostering, I found the recent decision to remove children from their carers because of their political affiliation baffling. To unsettle children once they have already made so many adjustments is almost cruel. When children are taken into care, they often feel responsible, as if they are to blame. I wonder how those children feel, being separated and moved from somewhere they were happy.

For my part, as I follow my new young charges into the kitchen and persuade a ravenous Frankie to remove the cereal packet from his head, I know the day ahead will be filled with a whole new set of challenges, but there's no other job I'd rather do. ●

*Lessons in the Dark* by Melissa Hudson, Petrina Brown's pen name, is available from Amazon, £7.19

I FORCED A SMILE AS I PASSED

THEM TO THE ADOPTING

COUPLE AND GENTLY EASED

THEM AWAY WHEN THEY

CLUNG TO MY LEGS