

Shaking With Fear

By Katelyn Birkeland

This had been going on for a while. I can remember the fights, the police, and all of the other terrible things that happened during that terrible time. It's not fun having your parents divorce, but what I went through is very rare. To me, as an 11 year old just starting middle school, it was literally the worst of the worst possible scenarios that could have ever happened. I don't want to bore you with the whole story so I'll tell you about one place that I will never forget. The place where I finally realized what was really happening to me. A terrifying place that I know I never want to end up in ever again. A place that I know I will remember forever.

Our van pulled up to a place I had never been, and as I stepped out of the van I caught a whiff of the smell of illegal substances that were being smoked outside. I gagged because it smelt worse than skunk spray and cigarettes combined. I had to hold my breath because I felt as if I couldn't breathe. I felt like barfing. I felt sick. I chewed on my nails and then shoved my hands into my sweatshirt pockets. I walked towards the building with my head hung low.

"Hey there little girl, do you want to try some?" a strange voice called.

"Yeah, try some," a group of about ten people cheered. They yelled so loud that they made me want to plug my ears and run away. This place was never going to be my home. *These people are terrifying, and there is no way I am letting any of them near my sisters,* I decided as my family and I walked inside.

"Ah, you ladies must be new. My name is Katie and I'm the receptionist. How can I help you?"

"Yes, we are new. this is our first night here," my mom responded.

"Oh how wonderful! And how long have you been homeless for?"

Homeless?! I wasn't homeless. Yeah, I had been living at other peoples' houses since the first day of school but there was no way I was homeless. I was not a kid without a home. I was *not* homeless. I couldn't believe she would say something like that. I looked at my younger sisters who were trying to count the number of squares on the grey carpet. They didn't seem as

frustrated as I was when the receptionist called us homeless. *Did the lady actually think that we were homeless? Did my mom and sisters actually believe that we were homeless?* I was so confused.

“Yes we have been homeless for about a month and a half,” my mom answered.

“But mom...”

“Not now Katelyn.”

“Mom, what about...”

“I said not now, I’m so sorry about that. She always has something to say.”

I have a home, I finished in my head. I had a home and a bed and toys and clothes. I had a place where I could be myself and feel safe. I had a home, but I wasn't allowed to go there and I didn't know why. I wished that I was able to tell the lady that but if I did I knew my mom would yell at me so I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“Oh, no worries. I bet she’s just excited for the homework group on Thursdays,” Katie assumed as she was pointing to a sign next to the desk that read Thursday homework group in the community room.

“Homework group?” *That sounds so exciting* I thought. I bet that I would’ve been the smartest kid there since I was a wizard at math and I loved to read and write. I was pretty much a genius for my age or at least that’s what my parents always told me. And since I wasn’t able to go home, I should’ve joined that group because I could’ve beat them all at multiplication cards.

“Here’s the lock for your locker. You will put all of your valuables in it to keep them safe.”

“Okay thank you so much. Come on girls, let's go upstairs and see our new home!

When we walked into the stairwell I felt hot tears of fear rushing down my face. It felt nice compared to the freezing cold stairwell that I had just walked into. There were no lights which made the place seem to go up forever. Three of the walls were made of concrete, the stairs were also concrete, and one wall of the stairwell was just a huge metal gate. Like the kind that went around peoples yards. It was just there to keep people from breaking into the building. I let out a breath of air and I saw the misty puff that came from it. Because of the gate wall thingy, I was able to smell the weed that was being smoked outside. I felt like barfing again. The creeks of the stairs were so loud that it echoed off the peeling white concrete walls. That place was terrifying and my sisters and I were shaking with fear. My heart was beating so fast I felt as if it would jump out of my chest. I wished I could go back to the nice lady’s desk and keep

talking about the homework group and tell her how smart I was. So far that was the only thing that I liked about that place.

“Here’s our locker room and look, it even has a washer and dryer,” my mom said, rousing me from my thoughts.

“Mom, this locker is tiny. Can you even fit your purse in there?”

“We’ll make it work honey, just thank God that we found a place to stay. And look, this is our room!”

“Mom, there isn’t a lock on the door,” I cried out in shock.

“What!? Well that’s strange.. But look! Look over there girls, they're bunk beds for us! I know you girls love bunk beds!”

I really did love bunk beds, but I wasn’t so sure about the place. It smelt like cigarettes and alcohol. Breathing in the room felt like something sharp was going down my throat. The single light in the center of the room flickered on and off and it hurt my eyes. *This place was almost as bad as the stairwell* I thought as I continued examining the room. It looked similar to a rundown college dorm with its dusty, creaky, old brown bunk beds. The muted blue sheets had splotchy brown stains all over them and the pillows were hard as a rock. There were cobwebs everywhere and paint was chipping off the yellowish-white walls. It was smaller than my room at home and I knew there was no way that our family of four would fit. The thought of even attempting to live there made me anxious and I shuddered with fear. At least it had a microwave. When I saw it, all I could think about was eating hot pockets and ramen all day just like a college kid. Oh, how I longed to go to college to get away from all of my family problems.

“Mom, I don't want to stay here,” I finally said.

“Well let's go back to the van and we can discuss what we think once we get there.”

I couldn’t wait until the van to tell her how I was feeling and I guess my sisters couldn’t either. We all started crying to mom.

“Mom, we don't wanna live here, we can’t live here. It’s creepy, there are some creepy people and it smells bad. We don’t feel safe.”

“Okay, okay if you girls don’t feel safe then I’ll call grandma and ask if we can stay there for a while.”

I couldn’t wait to go to my grandmas. I knew that if I didn’t go I would have to accept the fact that I was homeless even though I knew that I wasn’t. After all of the fear and anxiety I

had experienced at the homeless shelter, all I wanted was to get as far away as I possibly could from that place and never look back. Looking back, I can still feel the fear that I felt as I walked into the stairwell or when I realized that there wasn't a lock on the door.

Processing and coping with the fact that this happened to me isn't easy, but I have found ways to not let it have a negative impact on me or my life. I believe that instead of letting moments like this negatively impact my life, I should use them as a learning experience. So when I'm making a tough choice I can look back on it and figure out what I actually want or don't want to happen. I also believe that I shouldn't let bad moments in my life define who I am as a person because in the end it's just that. A moment in time. I'm not a horrible person and I didn't do anything to make my mom bring me and my siblings to the homeless shelter. And I didn't deserve to think that it was all my fault that my parents divorced. But I did think that, so instead of dwelling on the past, I decided that I'll continue moving forward living my life by creating better memories with the lessons I have learned from my past.