

My Life As A Foster Child
February 28, 1993

In January of 1952, at the age of eight and one half, I went to live with a foster family. Why this happened and why my mother let it happen are issues that, to this day, I don't fully understand. These decisions were made at a much higher plane of authority and I was not consulted. I, like most children, accepted the situation with a positive trusting attitude, and without making any conscious decision, resolved to make the best of it.

I do believe that my mother was receiving some sort of assistance from the City of New York on my behalf. I am sure that my residence for the previous year and one half at the Saint Christopher's School in Dobbs Ferry was part of the package. I had heard, by listening to the conversations of the adults around me, that one could only stay at St. Chris for three years. After that, "other arrangements" had to be found for kids who could not live their families. I believe that one of these arrangements was foster care.

Saint Christopher had a formal infrastructure for social assistance. One of the trappings was that each child has a "social worker". We kids didn't know what that was, but it seemed to pose an opportunity to get out of school and to play with some above average toys. It was a badge of some privilege to be scheduled to go see one's social worker. I remember a succession of nice men and women who spent time with me asking probing questions in soothing voices. The trick was, I soon learned, was to respond to all questions with the right answer. But mostly I concentrated on my trucks or tinker toy building projects and was benignly uncooperative. This paid extra dividends when, in exasperation, I was offered an unusual deal: I would get two appointments per week if I promised to answer questions in at least one session while in the second session, I would be permitted unrestricted play. I don't remember if the deal worked out but I did get out of school with some frequency.

In 1951 just before Christmas, my social worker, a woman composed of grey tones from head to toe, said we were going to visit some nice people. We drove for some time and pulled up in front of a small house and went inside. There I met a man, a woman and their daughter, a girl of about twelve, who regarded me with some curiosity. We talked briefly, and they gave me a fascinating hand held toy where, at the push of a button, a swordsman appeared to pass his blade through the solid neck of his opponent without any apparent injury. I remember some discussion among the adults about "an eight year old is just what we wanted" and "the schools are excellent". I paid little attention since I was far more interested in the swordsman.

On the way back to the school, my social worker asked what I thought of the people we had visited. Thinking mostly of the toy, I responded that they seemed very nice. She then asked me, "How would I like going to live with them"? I realized the right answer was some sort of affirmative and duly responded.

Slowly, and without alarm, I came to realize that soon I would be going to live with the

"nice people". Sure enough, after the Christmas holidays, which I spent with my mother in New York, instead of returning to Saint Christopher's, I was taken by the social worker to the home of the people we had visited before. There was a formal reintroduction and awkward hugs all around. I learned that the nice people were Mr. and Mrs. Nesslege and that their daughter was named Ann. Since my own older sister, whose memory I clung to as a point of stability in my life, was named Anne, I felt that this was a splendid beginning.

I was instructed to call Mr. and Mrs. Nesslege "Mother" and "Father". I accepted this first of many rules. But inwardly I was uncomfortable since I had a perfectly good mother, and although I rarely saw my father, I was very satisfied with his memory as well. It seemed, somehow, unfaithful to give somebody else parental titles. I rationalized, that "Mother" was not the same as "Mommy" and so on.

I am not sure what the social strategy was for my stay at in the Nesslege foster home. But I remained there for eight months. During that time, I remember talking to my mother on the phone only once. I have no recollection of going home, but I believe she must have visited me once since, to my horror, I accidentally called her "Mother". As a result, she asked me what I called the Nesslege's. I ruefully admitted what I called them and felt guilty for a long time thereafter. I have a suspicion that the New York social agencies were pushing for some sort of long term arrangement, perhaps adoption. My mother had found herself in the position of being unable to care for me (for a variety of financial and social reasons) but was unwilling to relinquish me to the system.

I settled into a routine in the Nesslege household. I soon learned that Mrs. Nesslege had absolute authority in the house. I never did learn her first name, or at least don't remember it today. The husband's name was Kent and he was a commercial artist at some "agency" in New York. The two were probably about forty years of age but they seemed like real old people from my perspective. I was given a small room on the ground floor next to "Father's" art studio. The rest of the family lived upstairs. I was admonished never, never to go up the stairs to the second floor. The family dog and I were creatures of the lower story. I was vaguely envious of what might be going on upstairs, but obeyed and never saw what the upper story was like. Apparently, the family may not have had a lot of money since they had a boarder, a nurse, who had a room upstairs and was rarely ever seen.

I surveyed my surroundings. My small room was about six feet by 8 feet, with a cot, a desk and chair, and a small round table by the side of my bed where I was allowed to put my turtle aquarium. It seemed bare and without warmth even from the perspective of an eight-year-old. My room connected to the studio which was the most interesting room in the house, filled with the smell of oil pigments, and full of gadgets. I was admonished, of course, never never to touch anything in "father's" studio.

Next to the studio was the living room with a TV, which was rarely used and which, in any case, I never was allowed to watch. An exception was the Republican Convention in the summer of 1952. The family, it seemed were staunch supporters of Robert Taft. They was horrified when Eisenhower, a very bad person I soon learned, won the nomination, whatever that meant. I was expected to pay considerable attention to this event which

lasted for several days. I resisted, as best as I could, by failing to understand anything at all.

At the back of the house were the stairway to the second story, a largish kitchen where all meals were taken, and the downstairs bathroom. This last room I came to know very well. There was a modest back yard, and in the front, stone steps led down to the street, Amsterdam Ave, a small dead end street adjacent to the Bronx River Parkway.

I was given a quick summary of my situation in gentle but firm tones. I was very lucky, very lucky indeed to be staying with the Nesslege's. They were fine people, pillars in the community, devout church goers (a proper Presbyterian Church), and kind enough to invite me into their fine Christian home. What's more, Public School 8, to which I was about to be enrolled, was one of the finest in the nation. I would do very well there, I was told, and they would help me whenever that was necessary.

Kent Nesslege was not, as I remember, a well man. I don't know what his problem was, but he was apparently very delicate. I seem to recall that he walked with a cane and took lots of pills. He was a small, red-haired man with a moustache, in my memory, quite distinguished looking. I actually, had few direct dealings with him at all, in my eight months in his house. Once, he showed me some of the oil paintings that he was working on. He demonstrated how he put layer after layer of paint on his paintings to build up the final image. I wondered why he kept putting more paint on a picture that seemed perfectly complete already. The addition of so many laborious coats of oil paint appeared to be an awful lot of boring work with no great improvement with the successive layers.

He was a duck expert. All of his paintings were of ducks; in flight, swimming around, and mostly, it seemed, coming in for a landing. They all had a similar stuffed lifelessness in one of several poses, wings folded, wings up, and wings down. I remember thinking, at age eight, that this type of art was not very interesting.

The most fascinating aspect of Kent Nesslege were his clippings. He had portfolio after portfolio of clippings of pictures from magazines, newspapers, and books. They were all catalogued by subject so he could, I imagined, get endless examples of dogs if he was ever asked to produce a picture of a dog. I never saw him draw or paint anything but ducks, but no doubt, he needed his clippings to do his commercial art. I wondered then if he did anything original.

The entire household moved at the direction of Mrs. Nesslege. The husband and the daughter did her bidding. I remember her as a tall severe woman with short hair kept in a style typical of the early fifties. She dressed plainly, always in a dress of some dark color. She did not have a job. Rather she stayed home and kept house and cared for her daughter. There is little to tell about her other than her influence was ubiquitous. She projected a powerful, pious, long-suffering, tense, influence on the entire family. I don't recall that the family had much interaction with others outside the family, neighbors, or branches of their family. It seemed that the Nesslege household was a ship alone on the open sea, powered by Mrs. Nesslege.

Their daughter Ann had little to do with me. I rather liked her and thought, in a childish way, that she had a pretty poor sort of life in that family. She was twelve and must have been on the verge of womanhood and self discovery. I was, of course, unaware of any such things. To me she was a fellow child, but at a much higher level. One thing that did hurt, was an obvious favoritism that Ann, as the flesh and blood child, was accorded. First, she was permitted entrance into the inner sanctum of "upstairs". In my time there, I never saw her room. Second, she was permitted to do things, that I wasn't, and these privileges extended beyond what might be reasonable because of our different ages. For example, on one outing where the four of us went "fishing" at a local pond, the family members all had suitable fishing tackle. I was given a piece of string and a hook with no barb (too dangerous for an 8 year old). Third, Ann was a well-behaved child who achieved what was expected of her whilst I quickly turned into the bete noire, and was often and frequently "punished" for my willfulness and failures. This uneven dispensation of justice was a source of humiliation for me. My guess, is that Ann appreciated my role as a lightening rod, since perhaps some of her mother's inner anger would have come her way if I had not been a convenient target. Generally, Ann ignored me, except once when we were alone she insisted on examining my genitalia, but in a curious and considerate way. I was cautioned never to mention this lest I be subject to some especially difficult punishment.

I settled into life at the Nesslege household which had three main phases: school at Bronxville Public School 8, Church and Sunday school, and time at home.

As promised, the public school was a top notch middle class white suburban elementary school about four long blocks from the Nesslege house. My education had not been lacking, up to this time, but my basic skills were not as honed as were those of most of my classmates. I read well for my age, but my spelling was, I was informed, very very poor. This situation became the focal point of a running daily controversy with Mrs. Nesslege. She took it upon herself to eradicate my spelling deficiencies and to break me of my willful disobedience in that area. The baseline measure of achievement in my class was a list called "The Hundred Demons". This was a list of frequently misspelled and confused words in the 3rd grade vocabulary including simple words like: there, they're, and their, and some more difficult words like receive and necessary. I was consigned to work on this list for two hours every afternoon until I got it right. So I would be sent to my room to study the list until I declared I had it mastered. Then I would be quizzed and upon the inevitable failure, I would be sent back to my room. I thought the afternoon games at the Saint Christopher School were much more enjoyable.

As my stay at the Nesslege house lengthened, I became aware of a growing assumption among all the members of the household that I was somehow unworthy, below some minimum measure of Christian acceptability, not up to their standards. This started slowly and was usually subtle, but it grew until I was the established bad boy. Of course, Mrs. Nesslege was the principle articulator of this opinion. But the others, to the extent that we interacted, picked up the theme. Each misstep was further proof of this position. I could do nothing right, could not be trusted, and was certainly not worthy enough to be included in any substantive conversation. I remember a growing feeling of isolation,

uncertainty and boredom.

When my turtle died, it was all my fault. When the swordsman suddenly failed to work one day, it was clearly a case of my careless abuse of this valuable toy. I was stripped of any responsibility to feed the family dog. I was not permitted to go to movies. When I was invited to join classmates in after school activities, permission was denied on the pretext that I might embarrass the family with my behavior. Such basic personality traits as my eating habits were frequently discussed and berated. It was well known that I liked such items as cookies and sweets and had shown an ambivalence to such obviously healthy foods as beef liver, a substance Mrs. Nesslege served with great frequency cooked to the texture of a dried sponge. Behavior that was childish and mirthful was discouraged. Rebellion or sullenness was dealt with by an unkind comments and some punishment. I don't recall any serious physical abuse, but I was spanked with regularity. In my eight-year-old mind, I was beginning to feel pretty miserable and much less sure of my intrinsic worth.

Everything in the Nesslege house was minutely regulated by "Mother". An example of these rules was the rigid instruction that under no circumstances was I to use more than three segments of toilet paper when I had a bowel movement. Mrs. Nesslege, in fact, showed a keen interest in this phase of my life. I believed she would count the squares of toilet paper left on the roll and I was therefore very careful to obey her directions in this matter. There was a problem, however. Such parsimonious use of toilet paper by an eight year old, inevitably led to an inadequately wiped bottom. I was frequently informed by Mrs. Nesslege during the course of the family dinner or other public forum that my underpants in the laundry were soiled. After a number of warnings, she threatened to display my underpants on the front lawn with a sign telling all the neighbors of my unclean habits. I begged her not to do that. Even though I had never met the neighbors, this seemed like an opportunity for serious public censure. She relented by saying that if I could not do the job properly, she would show me how.

Shortly after my arrival, Mrs Nesslege showed an active concern for my digestion. She quizzed me about my eating habits, my stomach, and my bowel movements. I heard of a serious condition called "constipation", although I wasn't sure what it meant. After a few months her concern intensified. I was instructed to leave all examples of my bowel movements in the toilet so she could inspect them. It was quite awkward to have to say "Mother, my poopoo is in the toilet" in front of the family. To me, all seemed quite normal with my digestion and bowel movements. I would rather have avoided the any attention in this area. Occasionally, I would forget and prematurely flush one of my turds down the drain without thinking. This always caused an uproar and accusations that I was lying and that there had been no bowel movement and "who was I trying to fool". I soon learned that such lapses were rewarded with a new indignity, anal suppositories, a cold (kept in the refrigerator) slippery pharmacological almond-sized item that Mrs Nesslege would, with a practiced hand, slip up my rectum. It was like an offering to the gods of stool. Toward the end of my stay at the Nesslege's, my bathroom offenses and obviously lack of cooperation resulted in my having to receive an anal suppository every evening, bowel movement or not. It became a nightly ritual that Mrs. Nesslege, however busy, never seemed to overlook.

After the school year ended, I attended a Bronxville day camp during most of the summer. I was quite shy and don't remember much about the activities. I do remember that the evenings at the house were a continuation of the same monotonous activities and smoldering resentment of the school year. The fact was, I was in a state of almost continuous misery. I remember vaguely a tearful telephone call with my mother during which I asked her to come and take me home. I don't know who made the phone call or what precipitated it. Nor do I know if I talked regularly with my mother. This is the only phone call or contact with her that I remember during the time I was living with the Nesslege's.

At some point, I recall being aware that I was going to go home. I believe, Mrs. Nesslege told me that they had done all they could but that they were at their wits end and couldn't have such a spiteful bad boy around any more. I was told "Some day you will remember what we tried to do for you and you will thank us".

On the day before my departure, I was told that the family would have a combination goodby and birthday dinner in my honor. This pleased me very much and I remember a feeling of gratitude. Mrs. Nesslege asked me what I would like to eat. Trying hard to say something that would please her, I announced that I would like to have liver. So at the festive dinner that night, I was served a big plate of beef liver the consistency of a dried sponge while the rest of the family shared a succulent sirloin steak.

The final chapter of my life as a foster child took place on my ninth birthday, August 23, 1952, the day I left the Nesslege home for good. It was a Saturday and in the late morning my mother in the company a family friend arrived in a car to pick me up. I was red eyed and barely able to keep from bursting into tears. The final hour of my stay at the Nesslege's had been spent in the hated bathroom, scene of so many conflicts over toilet paper, bowel movements, and underwear. Mrs. Nesslege had noticed a superficial hairline crack in the toilet seat. How it got there, I will never know. I certainly didn't do it, and said so. "Liar" she said. "I'll teach you not to lie", and I was administered a seemingly endless spanking on my bare bottom. The pain and injustice of this final humiliation was too much. All I could remember was that it was my birthday. I wept and wept as the spanking continued seemingly for the longest time. Through clenched teeth, I heard Mrs. Nesslege say in her angry voice "More tears for a broken toilet seat. More tears for a broken toilet seat...." over and over and over.