

The First Pair of Shoes

Leo stepped out of the social worker's car, clutching a bin bag that held everything he owned.

His chest felt tight.

At twelve years old, "home" had always meant chaos, unpredictable voices, and then later when "in care" moving before he could unpack.

He didn't know what to expect. Would it be chaos? Would it be loving? Would it be cold? Would the children be like him, often feeling lonely, confused, wanting 'someone' to care for him, to be special?

A grown-up opened the door, " Hey I'm Marcus, one of the grown-ups of the house." That's who and what he said he was, a real name not like 'social worker'. He'd had a few and couldn't remember names; or 'Auntie' like the woman in that foster place.

Marcus was greeting him with a warm smile. He helped Leo take off his coat and put it on a hook with the name Leo and a photograph of him too, and then said, " How about a short tour around the rooms then something to eat and drink?" Leo nodded.

The house smelled like fresh vegetable soup, which it was as this was cooking. There was another smell that Leo came to know was fresh bread. "That's lunch you can smell."

Marcus and Leo sat at the table. "This is where you sit. And this is where I sit. Or Mary, she's here for you when I'm not. She'll be here later for our tea together."

After they had eaten Marcus suggested a walk around the house to "get to know where things are". There was a lot of information, but Marcus went slow.

" Would you like to see your bedroom?" Leo nodded.

When they reached Leo's new bedroom, he froze. On the bed sat a brand-new pair of trainers, a stack of clean clothes, and a notebook. "For your sketches," said Marcus.

"We didn't know your exact size," Marcus said gently, "but we can always swap them. They're yours."

"It's blue," said Leo.

"Yes, it's the colour you asked for your room. And Mary and me had a go at clouds

on the ceiling like you'd asked "

"Well I hoped," said Leo. " And I like rainbows."

For the first few weeks, Leo stayed quiet, expecting the warmth and comfort to be a trick. It had been before. But the rhythm of the home never faltered. The grown-ups listened without judgement when he wanted to speak.

Sometimes they seemed to know what he was thinking and had just thing he needed at that moment or gave him space when he was feeling overwhelmed. "Things get too much and I like to think of skies and rainbows".

The next day he noticed Marcus and Mary were wearing little rainbow patches. Mary gave a golden envelope to Leo with his name on the front. Opening it inside there was a rainbow patch." For you Leo," said Mary.

There was more shopping in the days that followed, things for his room. " You choose," said Mary.

"And some football kit?" asked Leo. A few days later he signed up for a local football club.

Six months later, Leo looked down at his scuffed, well-loved trainers as he lined up on training evening on the sports field. Marcus looked on cheering Leo and others. Leo scored as he did now most games to be met with the parents singing "Lee-O. Lee-O. Lee-O" to which he responded with an 'L' made by his thumb and finger. Near the end of the season Marcus was there and after a top corner goal he was singing "Leonora - Top scorer". Leo flicked the 'L' and everyone joined in.

A few weeks later when "things were too much" Mary said she thought she had something that would help. They went to his room, and Mary asked him to sit in his favourite place. Then she flicked a switch on a machine Leo hadn't seen before.

Bright rainbow light flooded the whole room. They both sat there together for a long silent getting better while. Leo flicked the switch himself from then on and things being too much started to get smaller and less often.

For the first time in his life, he was not feeling like a temporary visitor, or lonely, or confused. He felt grounded, safe, and entirely at home. He belonged someone and knew he was somewhere he could call "home".

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