

Sam's Journey on Placement Day

Bella's been crying since eight this morning. She's only 2 years old, the youngest of the two Henry kids in my foster family. Charlie, who's seven, left this morning for his swimming lesson. As we said goodbye, he started crying too. I know why he's upset – even though I tried to prepare him. I've been telling him for months that I'd be leaving soon. Amanda, my foster mom, says he just refuses to believe that I'm going. I'm not sure I'm ready to believe it either, but it's Saturday, and it's happening. This is the day I'm leaving.

I pack a few more things into my backpack and zip it up tight. I stand there for a minute and just stare at the backpack. My birth mom got it for me when we were shopping at Metrotown. It's plain purple with black straps. I pulled it off the hook and turned toward her, and before I could even ask, she said "Yes, you can get it!" That was about a year and half ago. On a good visit. Now, without warning, my eyes begin to sting, and I quickly rub away the tears. You're fine, I firmly remind myself. You get to call her later today.

I hear Amanda shout up the stairs "Sam, Sarah's here!" My social worker. I straighten my shirt, throw my backpack over my shoulder, and make my way down the hallway. It suddenly hits me. This is the last time I'll walk down this hallway. I take a last look at the family pictures hanging on the wall. The newest addition includes a picture of me holding Bella while Charlie hovers over my shoulder. We're both looking down at Bella and smiling. I've always wanted a brother and sister. I mean, Charlie is annoying and all, but he does make me laugh a lot. I also like taking care of Bella. Amanda likes it when I help feed her.

As I make my way down the stairs, Sarah calls up, "Hey Sam, we've got your stuff in the car. It's time for us to go. Have you got everything?" Amanda comes over and pulls me into a tight hug. She's been really kind to me. Most of her time is spent looking after Bella of course, but she's always found time to check in with me, make sure things are ok. We say goodbye and I head to Sarah's car. I never had any issues living at the Henry's - not like the first foster placement I had to go to. The Henry's weren't too strict. It was a nice place to stay, for a little while.

[Car starting] We back out of the driveway and head down the street. I always thought I would feel relieved to leave...but my stomach is in knots. My head feels kind of dizzy...so I rest it on the window and close my eyes.

I wonder who Amy's going to sit next to when school starts again? I started a new school when I moved in with the Henrys. It's a small school. Each grade only has one class. Amy has been my best friend since my very first day there. I remember how nervous I was – and how nice she was right away. When I told her I had to move away, she started crying. I felt so bad – I told her she could visit me anytime at my new house. I don't actually know if Blair or Thomas will let her visit...but I didn't want to bother them by asking yet - it just feels weird.

I open my eyes and we've headed onto the highway. As the car speeds up, I look out the back window. Shoot! I forgot to give Amy my new number. The knots in my stomach tighten. I wonder if I'm ever going to see her again. I watch the mountains get smaller and smaller, until they disappear altogether.

I don't have anything to do, so I just watch the other cars pass by. We can't be going more than 90km an hour – Sarah is such a slow driver! Most of the cars are packed with families. Two of the cars have paddle boards strapped to the top! It's Saturday, so I guess they're going on trips. Grandma, mom and me used to go to the lake on Saturdays. Grandma would drive, and mom would sit beside her changing the radio stations back and forth. It drove Grandma nuts! One time she even made mom sit in the back with me for awhile. I know that Blair and Thomas can't swim. They told me a few weeks ago when we were out for dinner. I guess we won't be going to the lake any time soon. Sigh. Sarah looks at me through the rear-view mirror. "Everything OK back there?" (I whisper) "Yes."

I rest my head on the windowsill and close my eyes. All of a sudden the car screeches to a stop and I lurch forward. My eyes pop open – whoa. Thank god I'm wearing a seat belt! Sarah giggles nervously and says "Sorry" - everything is OK. We're stopped at a red light. I look out the window and the street looks familiar. Ahhh – there's the park where we went on a picnic a few months ago when Sarah dropped me off to hang out with Blair and Thomas. We should be there any minute now. Suddenly I feel like I can't breathe. I grab my backpack and bury my face into it. Sarah slows and parks in front of the house. She opens my car door and I manage to get out. Sarah's talking... but the only thing I can hear is my heartbeat thumping really loud as we walk to the door. Breathe, Sam, breathe.

Sarah knocks on the door. I have the urge turn and run like I've never run before, but I can't get my feet to move. The door finally swings open, and I hear Thomas say hello. Here we go. I walk in behind Sarah. After a quick hello, I run upstairs with my backpack. Down the hallway to the room they told me would mine. With a gentle push I slowly open the door. The room is spotless. I tip toe over to the bed and place my backpack on the floor. The Henry's home wasn't dirty, but it was never this clean either. The room has changed since my last visit. There's a new dresser next to the closet and the blinds are pulled all the way up. It got painted too. I remember it was dark blue. Now it's white. I think it used to be Thomas' office. It still smells a little bit like paint. I step toward the window and lean against the ledge. When I was here last time the window was dusty and there was a dead fly on the ledge. Now, the glass sparkles as the sun passes through it. A circle of fog begins to form on the window from my breath. I quickly pull my head away and wipe the glass with my sleeve. This room is so clean, I don't want to make it dirty. It might upset them.

I begin to unpack my stuff on the floor. I stack my books in a neat pile next to the nightstand. I re-fold some of my shirts and place them on the dresser. Almost done with the backpack. I unzip all the pockets to double check I haven't missed anything. This is it. This is my new home, my new bedroom, I guess. The knot in my stomach tightens again. I was so excited to move in with Thomas and Blair. But now...? When I close my eyes, I can see Amanda setting the table for lunch, and Charlie trying to sneak a cookie behind her back. Bella in her highchair squealing for attention... It makes me smile just thinking about them. Do they miss me yet?

Mom was only a 20-minute bus ride from the Henry's. She is so far away now. Will mom answer when I call today, like she promised? I bet the Henry's have moved on already, I know there's another foster kid arriving next week. My eyes get wet thinking about it. What are you doing, Sam? There's no point crying. I wipe away the tears and blink my eyes.

There's a knock at my door. It's Thomas. I quickly open the door and slide back to my spot on the floor, wrapping my arms tight around my knees. I look away from him. He can't see me cry! I don't want him to think I'm crying about being here. The door squeaks and I hear him come into the room. He kind of

inches into the room and I hear him saying something about cookies and Blair. I pretend to be busy looking at my books. "Ok, thank you" I reply. Thomas stands there for a moment. I can feel him watching me. I think he says something, but I can't hear him. He leaves the room and shuts the door. (Relieved sigh.) I stretch out on the floor for a minute, but I'm restless; I decide to get up and finish unpacking.

I open the bag Sarah gave me for my stuff and pull out a few t-shirts. A cookie flies out and falls to the ground! Oh Charlie. He must have tucked it in there this morning. The cookie has completely crumbled on the floor. Ugh. I need to clean this up before Blair or Thomas come in.

I head downstairs. Both of them are in the kitchen and turn toward me as I walk in. Thomas, all wide-eyed, asks me if I want a cookie. At first I don't hear him, I'm too stressed thinking about the mess upstairs. Then I see him point toward the tray. But the smell of the cookies hurts my tummy and I shake my head. Not in the mood for a cookie after Charlie's surprise. "Is there a broom?". Thomas points toward a closet. I grab the broom and rush back. I kneel beside the mess and sweep the cookie crumbs into the dustpan. I dump the mess into the bathroom garbage and leave the broom and dustpan outside my door. (Sigh) Might as well finish unpacking. An hour later, my clothes are tucked away. The bag is stored in the closet. And I'm sitting on the bed. I'm supposed to call Mom in two hours. I hope she's ok. She works on Saturdays and might be late getting home. I drop my head down on the pillow and let myself think about her. She would have gotten up early to eat breakfast. Maybe she walked to work. Was Erin working with her today? Is she thinking about me? Will she answer my call? Does she even remember that today is placement day?

For the next two hours, my mind spins and churns. What if mom stops answering my calls? What if she's not safe and needs my help? What if I have to sneak out in the middle of the night? Could I take the bus? Or hitch hike? Should I ask Blair or Thomas? Aaargh. Why did I agree to move all the way out here? I look at the clock – it's suddenly 4:30! Time to call mom. I leap off the bed and run downstairs. Thomas is in the kitchen. "Where's the phone?". He points toward the kitchen counter. I grab the phone and rush into the family room. My hands are shaking. What's the number again? I sit down on the couch. Think, think... I know this off by heart...what's the number...? Finally I punch some numbers in. I hope it's right! It's ringing...good

[Ringing continues] *Please pick up. Please pick up.* There's a click and I hear a "Hello?" (I practically shout) "Hi Mom, it's Sam!" *She picked up! She picked up!* I'm so relieved to hear her voice. "I got here this morning, Mom. Spent most of my time just unpacking. You'll never believe what Charlie did. I'll have to tell you in person. I can't wait to see you in a couple of weeks. I really miss you, Mom." I continue to talk about my day and update Mom about the drive over. She seems really quiet today and I start to worry. "Hey Mom, maybe you could bake your double chocolate cookies the next time we meet. They're sooo good." She laughs a bit and says she would love to. I knew that would do the trick - mom and I are cookie fiends. I keep talking but mom doesn't say anything. "Mom, are you still there?" I hear a muffled noise on the other end. *OK, she's there and probably just tired after working today. Oh no. I'm talking too much, Mom needs rest.* I quickly finish talking and tell her goodnight.

I take the phone back to the kitchen and head up stairs. Flopping on the bed, I can't help but wonder how mom is. *I don't know. Did she sound ok? Is she eating and taking her medication?* I should probably check in with her tomorrow...

Before I went to live with the Henrys, Mom sat me down one day and told me about how she was sick. I can still hear her say, "I need help Sam." Thinking about it makes my head feel heavy, and I shut my

eyes. I remember, later, on a visit, her telling me about Blair and Thomas. About how they're really nice and would help me with anything I needed. "But who'll take care of you, Mom?" She wrapped me in a hug and promised she would be ok. That it wasn't my job to take care of her. My tummy starts to hurt again. *I just wish she was here.*

A voice calls up the stairs, "Dinner!" I sit up on the bed, rub my face, and straighten my clothes. My legs feel a bit wobbly when I stand up, so I go slow down the stairs. Thomas is on the couch, but I head straight for the kitchen. [Deep inhale] I didn't realize how hungry I was until I saw the table full of food. I sit down and Blair pulls out a tray of mac and cheese from the oven. *I love mac and cheese; how did they know?!* It all smells amazing. For a second I feel like I'm back home. But is it as good as Mom's? Blair sits down and tells us to eat - and for the first time today, I feel my body relax. I reach out for a dinner roll...take a bite of mac n cheese...and y'know, it's actually pretty good.