

I Eula would remember that moment when I she interviewed a woman named Eve Johnson for my her first story involving Child Protective Services. Because she Ms. Johnson had already written several letters to the paper, I Eula knew some of her story already. I she knew that Child Protective Services had taken her Ms. Johnson's grandchildren away from her daughter-in-law because her daughter-in-law's new boyfriend had been abusing them. I she knew that the children were two and five years old. And I she knew that the children had been placed in foster care, despite the fact that Ms. Johnson wanted to care for them.

What I Eula would learn, when she Ms. Johnson came to my her office, was that Ms. Johnson had a certificate in early-childhood education. She had served as a teacher's aide for seven years. She had also, by the time I Eula spoke with her, completed a series of workshops for prospective foster parents. After learning the requirements for certification as a foster parent, Ms. Johnson told me her, she had been surprised that she did not already have the children. "I'm active, I cook, I have time to give, I babysit for friends," she told me Eula. "There's no reason why I shouldn't be caring for those kids. "

When she first requested that her grandchildren be placed with her, two weeks after they were taken from their mother, Ms. Johnson was required to have a fingerprint scan and a background check. The fingerprint scan revealed that Ms. Johnson had been convicted of the felony "discharging a firearm with gross negligence" in 1989. From that point forward, this would be the fact around which her entire case revolved. It would also be the fact that interested me Eula least. At some point I she reluctantly asked Ms. Johnson why she discharged that firearm, but the extent to which I she felt that it was none of my her business is reflected by the omission of her Ms. Johnson's answer in my her notes. I Eula made only the vague notation "Domestic violence," which I she do does not now know how to interpret.

To me her, the gun was not the story. This was in part because the crime had already been punished. Ms. Johnson had served her probation without incident, and her sentence did not include any restrictions on raising her grandchildren. But, more important, I Eula was beginning to understand that the gun in Ms. Johnson's story was functioning, again and again, as an excuse for the inexcusable. And after working my her way through the file of letters that had been sent to the Voice by parents whose children had been taken away by Child Protective Services, and after doing some more interviews, I Eula was beginning to understand that there was always a

gun, there was always a crime that was being punished, no matter how far outside the law the punishment was ranging.

In the case of **Tonya**, a young mother who asked **me Eula** not to print **her** last name, the gun was a fistfight with **her** sister. **Tonya's** mother had called the police to break up this fight, and the police officer who responded had called in **a social worker** because **Tonya** had **two small children**. **The social worker** took **Tonya's two-week-old infant** and **her** toddler because **she** mistook the birthmarks on **the infant's** back and bottom for bruises. "It was like an abduction," **Tonya** told **me her**. A child-abuse expert later identified the bruises on **Tonya's baby** as permanent birthmarks, but **the baby** and **his** brother were not returned. After seven months of taking mandated classes and appearing in court and dealing with first one social worker and then another, **Tonya** still did not have **her** children.

I Eula was not unfamiliar with child-protection agencies, or their services, when **I she** began working for the Voice. **My her** stepsister had **a baby** a few years after **I Eula** left home for college, and when **her** baby was around a year old, **she** got drunk and passed out long enough for **the baby** to start wailing and for **her** landlord to call the police, who arrested **her** for endangering a child. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services took **the baby**, and for some time **my Eula's** mother and **Barry** cared for **her**. This would have been all right if **Barry** hadn't been in the process of losing **his** mind, a process that had started very quietly but was just then reaching a crescendo. **He** was, during that time, screaming at **my her** mother and then pulling the phone out of the wall when **she** tried to use it. **I Eula** had left some potted plants with **my her** mother when **I she** moved out, and when **I she** came back for them the pots were smashed. Back then, when **the baby** was passed on to another relative, **I Eula** was relieved.

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Shortly after **her** fingerprints were taken, **Ms. Johnson** was told by a social worker that because **her** felony was more than ten years old, it would not affect **her** ability to take custody of **her** grandchildren. Inspectors came to **her** apartment, and **she** was told that it would be suitable for **the children** on a temporary basis but that **she** would eventually have to move.

So **Ms. Johnson** was preparing for **her** grandchildren to move in with **her**, buying clothes and shoes and bed linens for **them**, when **she** was informed by a second social worker that not ten but twelve years must have passed after **her** conviction before **she** could have **the children**. It had been, at that time, about eleven and a half years since **her** conviction. When **she** wrote CPS to find out whether the time period was ten years or twelve, **she** received a letter from a third social worker informing **her** that it was twenty years.

I Eula sifted through all these letters, called social workers who would not talk to **me her** or would not call **me her** back, made time lines, and read **Ms. Johnson's** foster-care manual. A tradition of caring for children within kinship networks, the manual informed **me her**, is an integral part of African American culture. After being redirected many times, eventually to the licensing department at CPS, **I Eula** learned that generally an individual is eligible to serve as a foster parent if ten years have passed after a felony conviction. But, **I she** was told, these decisions are made on a “ case-by-case basis. ”