**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. ”