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Lexi's Saga: A Lost Childhood Leaves Emotional Scars

by Dan Gorenstein

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Enlarge Courtesy of Rebecca

Lexi (middle) with her two younger brothers Jorge (left) and Keegan. Before Lexi and her brother's were adopted, Lexi was their prime caretaker. "I fed them when they were very, very hungry," Lexi says.

May 30, 2011

Last names and hometown were withheld from this story to protect the family's privacy.

A girl in New Hampshire celebrated her seventh birthday Sunday.

But she's had to spend the first few years of her life acting a lot more like a mother than a little girl.

Before entering the foster care system, she was forced to take care of herself and her two younger brothers. Now, her first instinct is to take care of everybody. It's the impulse that helped her survive.

A Gift That's More Of A Curse

It's just after twilight in a small New Hampshire city, on a kind of busy street, in a two-story house. It's where Lexi and her little brothers Jorge and Keegan live with their adoptive parents Rebecca and Doug.

And in this house, *typical* things happen all the time. Kids come home from school. The family eats together. Kids get wound up right at bedtime.

But things also happen here that aren't typical.

Rebecca remembers Lexi and the apples.

"When we hit three apples, I think was when she would start to panic because she knew there was only one each left for her and her brothers," Rebecca says.

Lexi's got a gift that's really more of a curse. When she was four, Lexi had to take care of her little brothers. There really wasn't anyone else around.

Rebecca, a social worker, is the type who runs toward the "hard cases" everybody else backs away from. She guesses what their world — an apartment 20 miles away — must have looked like.

"I imagine it probably was not a very clean place," Rebecca says. "Lexi told me there was always dirty diapers on the floor."

Rebecca isn't certain about this, but she's pretty sure that, along with their mom, Lexi's dad was around on weekends. There were grandparents up the street. And that's the mystery of it all. It seems that, for all of the adults around, none of them was really looking after these kids.

"They were left alone sometimes, days at a time," Rebecca says. "I think that she ended up definitely taking the primary role in the household, keeping it running."

When asked who used to take care of her brothers, Lexi says: "Me."

"I fed them when they were very, very hungry," Lexi says. "And I had to put the bib on them."

Lexi says she also changed their diapers.

"I wonder how the house didn't catch on fire," Rebecca says. "And she wouldn't have known how to call 911, or to get help from anybody."

An Anxiety Disorder

Ultimately, they did get help.

"I believe they were found by the police outside, playing in the street by themselves," Rebecca says.



Courtesy of Rebecca

This undated photo shows Lexi before she was adopted. She had an anxiety disorder where she would pull her hair out by the roots.

Rebecca and Doug adopted Lexi and her brothers in the summer of 2009.

The kids had just finished a 10-month run through the foster care system. Now they finally had a home and a mom and dad. At that point, Jorge and Keegan were toddlers. They weren't potty-trained, they ran out of control and swore like sailors.

"Keegan was two at the time," Rebecca says. "I didn't even know all the words that he knew. F**k up. F**k up. F**k up all the time. You f**king whore. You bitch."

But considering everything, the boys were doing OK.

"The boys had a caretaker," Rebecca says. "They had Lexi."

Lexi wasn't as lucky. And it showed.

"The first picture we saw of Lexi, she had what looked like kind of a Mohawk, off center on the top of her head," Rebecca says. "There were like patchy areas everywhere. It was an anxiety disorder. She pulls her hair out by the roots and sometimes she ate it afterwards."

Take Care Of Her 'Boys'

From the start, Rebecca and Doug surrounded Lexi and her little brothers with warmth, love and routine. But Lexi had real trouble letting go of that sense of responsibility — for everything. She told Rebecca her mother needed her back at the apartment.

"About a month after she moved in with us, she started sobbing hysterically and shaking, and she said, 'If I was just better at taking care of the boys, we would never have been taken away,'" Rebecca says.

Lexi didn't call Jorge and Keegan her brothers, they were "my boys."

"She felt like they were hers — more than they were anyone else's," Rebecca says. "We were putting her in bed one night she just stopped, and she was crying and she just said, 'Thank you for taking care of my boys.' And oh, Doug and I just burst into tears."

Lexi went around picking up after the boys. Lexi tried to put Jorge and Keegan in timeout. And all along, Rebecca and Doug kept telling her, that wasn't her job. But she couldn't help herself.

"One story your mom told me is that sometimes you would come downstairs to the kitchen at night," Doug says to Lexi. "And you'd get food, and you'd wake up your brothers. Did that happen?"

"Yeah," Lexi says.

"Why did you do that?" he asks.

"Because they were hungry," she says.

Forcing her brothers to wake up and eat in the middle of the night wasn't a gentle nurturing act from a big sister. It was more about a terrified little girl used to feeding her brothers.

"I think she thinks her value as a person is in her taking care of other people," Rebecca says. "Therapists and psychologists I've talked to have said, you know, this was a role she had and it was actually taken away from her when she moved in with us. And we no longer allowed her to do everything for everybody else. So, it's taken a while for us to realize that she needed to have things that she could do that still would make her feel valued and able to contribute."

Things like helping Rebecca cook, and setting the table. Sometimes the love and nurturing pays off. Lexi doesn't feel she needs to protect her brothers. When apples run low, she doesn't freak out.

Contact With The Birth Mother

Still, that terrible sense that she has to take care of everything — the gut instinct that helped her and her brothers survive — eats at her.

That dread has weighed heaviest when Lexi gets together with her birth mother. The adoption agreement stipulates a monthly call with two visits a year.

The families have had a lot more contact than that.

"We really feel it's very, very important that the birth family stay in their lives," Rebecca says. "Questions that a lot of children will have about, 'Where did I come from?' and 'How did I get here?' are more easily answered."

It's a fine line Rebecca and Doug are walking. They want to preserve the link with the birth mom. But when the mother got pregnant, Lexi's caretaking instinct kicked in. The girl was convinced if she didn't return home, the baby would die.

After that pregnancy, the birth mother got pregnant again.

Rebecca remembers the visit when Lexi got the news.

"Lexi's head kind of jerked back, like somebody had just slapped her across the face," Rebecca says. "And her birth mom said to her, 'What do you think? Are you excited?' And Lexi said, 'Yeah, yeah. I'm happy.' And then ran off to the playground."

Before the holidays, Rebecca and Doug set up another visit. It didn't go well.

"She's gone back to peeing her pants a lot," Rebecca says. "She's gone back to throwing tantrums. So we are seeing a lot of backwards progression from this."

A Healthy Mother-Daughter Relationship

Rebecca knows there's little she can do to soothe Lexi's guilt about her birth mom. She hopes she can at least show Lexi how a mother-daughter relationship *should* work.



Courtesy of Rebecca

Rebecca and Doug adopted the three siblings in the summer of 2009.

Recently, to reward a string of positive school reports, Rebecca took Lexi out for one of her favorite things. They treated themselves to pedicures and manicures at the spa.

In those moments, Rebecca catches Lexi just being a little girl, getting her nails painted. Or fixing her hair before school.

Over the last year and a half, Lexi's hair has grown in. It's down to her shoulders.

"She is just a girl who wants an average life," Rebecca says. "She wants to be a princess."

"A fire girl," Lexi chimes in.

"She wants to be a fashion star."

"Police girl," Lexi says.

"You know, she wants to be a mom some day," Rebecca says.

"Do you want to be married?" Rebecca asks Lexi.

"Yeah!" Lexi says.

"You gonna have kids?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"18!" Lexi says.

"I asked her, when she grew up what she thought her husband was gonna be like," Rebecca says. "And she said, 'I don't know, but he's not going to cut up my clothes and throw my computer out the window.'"

And with that, Rebecca is reminded her daughter is not out of the woods.