

To Those it May Concern

By: *Maureen Winsor*

This is a letter to all the people who have felt the need to discern biological children from adopted or foster children. They have told me to my face that Eric isn't my *real* brother. If that is how *you* feel then *I* feel the need to educate you, since you obviously have no background knowledge of my family or how we came to be. My name is Mariland Walker and this is the story of how we got my little brother.

My little sister, Andrea, used to be best friends with a girl from her school. They grew up together and loved to do everything together. It wasn't until the summer of 2016 that we met her family. Her mom was struggling with some things at the time and asked if we could watch her three youngest children (my sister's best friend being the oldest of the three). Eric was the youngest and was about five months old at the time. It was the first time we'd met him and his mom wanted to leave him overnight.

In a few short weeks he was basically living with us, his mom only taking him every so often. My parents were "Uncle Jacob" and "Aunt Michelle" to him. Around the time that the school year was starting, Eric's mom had a house fire. A while later, she had a car accident that resulted in her having a serious neck injury. By this point, you can probably see why Eric was living with someone other than his parents. His mom was trying to make it work with his dad but it was a one-sided relationship. Eric didn't really see either of his parents until about December of 2016. We didn't mind watching him because he was the sweetest, most energetic, lovable thing.

He spent Halloween, Thanksgiving, and even Christmas with us. His mom tried taking him more often in January since her neck was pretty much healed. What we didn't know at the time was that she and Eric's dad had completely broken up and she was only taking him to drug homes. His dad came two, maybe three times to our house to see Eric. He'd only ever show up shirtless and drunk. It not only scared Eric but the rest of us, too (neither of my parents has ever had alcohol or drugs, furthermore been drunk).

Three days before his first birthday, his mom took him and said she'd bring him back at the beginning of the following week. We didn't hear from them again. His dad stopped by once more and told us Eric was put into foster care. We spent all of February trying to contact social services. We wanted to know more because our lives felt empty without Eric. We finally got a hold of them and were given information on how to become a licensed foster family. March 8th of 2017, a social worker came to our house and talked to us about Eric. She said we probably wouldn't get to see him for a while because of the way the system works. I'll never forget the very next day, March 9th, 2017.

I was walking home from school and saw the social worker's car in our driveway. I didn't know who it was at first, but by the time I had reached the driveway, she was pulling Eric out of the backseat of the car. I still don't know the details of how he was able to transfer homes so quickly, but somehow he was. I'll never forget that day and I'll never forget the feeling of overwhelming joy seeing him again. You can imagine how suddenly my heart dropped when I realized he didn't even recognize me. He'd already spent about half his life with us and after a

month of no contact with us, he didn't even know who I was. The only one he recognized was my dad. He had always favored my dad, even though he saw my mom and us kids more. We weren't the only ones, though. He didn't recognize his biological parents either. Even before he was put in the system, he never called his biological father "Daddy", because he never was his daddy. He had called my parents "Mommy" and "Daddy" before, but they'd always correct him to "Aunt Michelle" and "Uncle Jacob".

After we got him back, though, I noticed my mom no longer corrected him. When I asked why, she said, "This little boy has been through so much. Right now, he needs a mommy and a daddy." That was the exact moment he became my brother. He has been with us through foster care for more than two years. His dad might have had one visitation with him. Maybe two. Definitely not more than that. He was too busy getting high, drunk, or arrested. He had absolutely no interest in Eric.

If you want to more about Samuel, you'll have to ask someone else, because no one in my family knows him. To us, he's just a sperm donor. He always gave me creepy vibes. Eric's mom signed over her rights when she found out we had him. I know she did a lot to hurt Eric, but I have so much respect for that woman because she loved him enough to let him go. She waited until he wasn't her responsibility before she let herself go. I have no idea where she is right now. Last I heard, she was on the wanted list for a drug bust or something. It's going to be hard because one day Eric will have to know both of his biological parents chose drugs over him. He might not ever see them again. With their way of living, they might not live to his tenth birthday. But he has a right to know and we won't take that from him. He is in a better place now with a home and a family that loves him. And he loves us.

I want you to know all of this because a judge recently made a decision that changed something. So much has been happening recently. We have been trying to adopt Eric for about two years now. We spent all of last year trying to set up a court date to terminate his dad's parental rights. Literally, *all* of last year because his lawyer kept pushing back the date. November was the furthest they could push it back, but I was pushed even further when we had to get a new judge because one of Samuel's crimes involved a friend of the judge (so he had a bias on the case). It also took a while because the one after that was retiring and we weren't sure if he'd be able to take the case. We finally had the court date in December and there, terminated his dad's rights. Guess what? He appealed. Several months later we got a call. Not the call saying "Eric is able to be adopted", but the call saying the court meeting doesn't really count because apparently, the judge wasn't really there (he was there electronically, which we have learned is not best practice for the court.). So now he is no longer a ward of the state and his dad has more say in what happens. Which makes it nearly impossible to take Eric anywhere away from home.

Nothing has ever come easy to my family. We have been working toward a vacation out west for a long time. We haven't seen *any* of our relatives out west since 2017. (Eric was able to come with then). My mom was born in California and grew up in Arizona. I am fifteen years old and I have *never* seen the land my mother was raised on. We were planning to visit Utah and Arizona this summer because my grandparents might not be alive next summer and we haven't seen any of them in two years. I have one living great-grandma and she is 82. Both of my grandmothers are getting weaker with age. My grandpa had Meningitis and Mrsa last year so

none of them would be strong enough to travel to us. We had bought our plane tickets and paid for a rental car back in May but we recently had to cancel our entire trip.

Since Eric is no longer a ward of the state, we had to have a court meeting to get permission to take him out of state. We had had permission to go, but with the change in status, Samuel had a right to say yes or no. The court date was set three days before we were scheduled to leave. The new judge that was assigned to hear the case decided that his biological father should have the right to decide if Eric should go. The biological father that wasn't even present at the court meeting. Everyone in the room was saddened by the decision. For in that moment, a child's rights were less important than an adult, who had done very little to use his parental rights for the benefit of his child.

When we got Eric back from his first foster home, he was a different kid. He wasn't outgoing and energetic, he was shy and scared of being left alone. We had to have all of the doors inside our house left open because he would cry otherwise. My mom had to bring him with when she left the house because he was afraid she wouldn't come back. I don't know what happened in the month we didn't see him, but to this day he will not let you get his head wet. Bath time used to be his favorite time but now he has a fear of water and we don't know why.

Taking a three-year-old away from his family and leaving him with strangers would likely be a traumatic event for Eric. He gets homesick when we take trips without my dad or one of my siblings. Being separated from all of us would definitely scare him. Even if my mom or dad were to stay behind with him so the rest of us could go, it would freak him out. So we officially are not going on our trip. We are in the process of trying to get a refund from the plane tickets and rental car. I hope you now understand how much Eric means to us.

Having Eric's dad get his parental rights back has been a major setback for us. Having a judge put his "rights" over Eric's rights was like a slap in the face for us. Anyone that knows us knows that Eric is part of our family. When the judge said it was Samuel's choice to let Eric leave the state, it felt like he was trying to separate our family. It wasn't just about a vacation, it was about rights. I believe Eric should have the right to be with his *real* family. You don't have to have the same biological parents to be siblings, all it takes is love. Eric can be my *real* brother without sharing DNA and that is all I want you to know and understand.

Sincerely,
Mariland Walker