

Six Vignettes

A man has phoned a child and family referral line anonymously for advice. Jamal is six months old. Her mother, Yara, is twenty-nine and has been sofa-surfing, on the fringe of homelessness, since arriving in London nine months ago. Yara has claimed refugee status but has not been granted leave to remain and has no access to funds. Yara has been detained and is likely to be deported. Yara had left Jamal with acquaintances at their home just one hour before she was arrested. Five single men are sharing their one bedroom flat, sleeping and working in shifts. They do not want to identify Jamal because if the authorities reunite her with Yara, they could be deported together. The caller says he is certain that both mother and baby will be in real danger if they return to their home country and he wants to find a way of protecting Jamal.

Jamie is fourteen years old and was placed with his adoptive parents, Alan, and Richard at three months old. Alan and Richard have sought help from the agency that placed Jamie for adoption because they feel at a loss to know how to parent him. Since moving to secondary school, Jamie has been increasingly troubled and now seems to them to be profoundly unhappy, cuts his arms with sharp objects and is unable to sleep. The agency has assigned a social worker to support Alan, Richard and Jamie. In the worker's discussions with Jamie, he says his unhappiness is because he has two fathers and he never asked to have two fathers. She has encouraged him to explain the problem and he is clear that this has nothing to do with homophobia, or stigma, and does not find fault with either Richard or Alan. He compares himself to his friends and feels that having a mum and dad gives them more and better experiences and that having two dads is just not the same and not what he wants. He wants to live in what he describes as "a normal family".

Joanne, aged fifteen and Leeanne, aged sixteen, have been in care for eleven years. They experienced severe neglect and emotional harm throughout their early childhood having been systematically abused within their extended family. They were with the same foster carers until recently. Their birth parents, social workers, teachers, and therapists always commented on the strength of their attachment to each other and emphasised the importance of placing them together. Their foster mother, herself a twin, and birth mother to twin boys, felt that she understood their relationship and for most of the time they were with her she encouraged them to do everything together, dress alike, and share their toys. Neither Joanne nor Leeanne made any significant friendships either in or out of school. Their behaviour in placement was challenging from the very start and over the years the family lived in constant anticipation of their physical fights with each other, tantrums, and episodes of intense anxiety. They also engaged in bizarre rituals and sometimes in sexualised behaviour together from the very early days of placement and these seemed to take on more intensity as they grew older. Professionals had begun to wonder whether

Leeanne, particularly, was held back by Joanne's demands on her, was perhaps frightened of Joanne and might fare better on her own. On the day their foster mother suffers a stroke, the social worker and manager are faced with a dilemma: should they seek a placement for these girls together or apart?

Erin belongs to a family where four generations are addicted to heroin, are prescribed methadone and habitually misuse alcohol. The family home is known to harbour dealers and often hosts large numbers of heroin users. This family's women share a troubling history of mental health problems. Erin has been in and out of care throughout her childhood. Her last foster placement was never planned to continue beyond her sixteenth birthday, and when faced with the options available, Erin decided she would be better off going home. Six months later and pregnant, she has been asked by her new social worker to sign an undertaking that she will not at any time during her pregnancy or after her baby is born use either heroin or any other illegal substances. Arrangements have been made for regular testing and the undertaking makes it clear that if Erin is shown to have used, care proceedings will be initiated immediately. Erin is desperate to keep her baby but feels sure that she will be tempted to use heroin eventually if she stays at home. Erin can't think of anywhere else to go – she asked if she could go back into foster care but was told that it is too late.

Darren is fourteen years old and is profoundly disabled. Blind, deaf, quadriplegic and with some degree of learning difficulties, he needs continuous care. His family own their own home, and over time have sought much financial help to modify it to meet Darren's needs. He now lives in an extension built onto the side of the house which has separate access and no connecting door. His parents manage a personal budget and have been able to arrange for twenty-four-hour professional carers. These arrangements have gradually come together. The occupational therapist has come to appreciate that Darren is effectively receiving institutional care and is no longer viewed as part of the family. This was brought home to the occupational therapist when she was confronted by Darren's angry younger sister complaining that because of his selfishness her sleepover had been ruined. Darren had been admitted to hospital the previous evening with a life-threatening condition.

Zara is six years old and has been caught between warring parents almost since she was born. She lives with her mother and has regular contact with her father. The arrangements for contact have been determined by a court order but have been the subject of continuous litigation in the family court. Zara's mother wants her to have no contact with her father, her father seeks shared care. Zara, formerly an intelligent and lively little girl, has gradually become more subdued over the past twenty months. She is now no longer speaking at all, and is electively mute.