

Care kids

COLIN MURPHY

Three years ago, I wrote a long piece for this magazine about a woman named Linda Lambe, who died in 2007. In a life marked by an intellectual disability and chronic homelessness, Linda had had nine children, all of whom were taken into state care. One of her children was a boy named Danny Talbot, who died in 2009; the circumstances of his death were documented, anonymously, alongside those of 195 other children and young adults who had been in care (or were 'known to the child protection services'), in the Report of the Independent Child Death Review Group, published last year. This work opened a window for me onto a world I hadn't known existed. This was the world of the care system.

There are now roughly six thousand children in state care, which means that legal responsibility for their welfare resides with the Health Service Executive (HSE) rather than their parents. The vast majority of these children are in foster homes. Some four hundred children are in what is known as 'residential care', living in centres run by the HSE or by private contractors. Sometimes this is because the child didn't adapt well to initial foster placements, or because he or she came into care late and the HSE was unable to find an appropriate foster home; other times it is because the child displayed behavioural or other problems that required specialized care and therapeutic services, or, in rare cases, secure detention.

In Dublin there are also hostels for homeless teenagers, which are used by the HSE's 'crisis intervention service' to house young people who need emergency accommodation. This service is known, colloquially, as the 'out of hours' because it is available outside of working hours. To access it, the young person reports to a Garda station at night, from where a duty social worker is called and a hostel placement is arranged, if possible.

When a young person in care turns eighteen, he or she is discharged from the care of the state and allocated an 'aftercare' worker to help them with their dealings with state

agencies and to offer guidance and support. The aftercare worker may help the young person find supported accommodation with a private aftercare provider and may arrange funding from the HSE for various needs. Typically, this service continues until the age of twenty-one; if the young person is in full-time education, aftercare may be extended.

There is, however, no legal right to aftercare, and its provision is extremely patchy. Young people and care workers I have spoken to say that the support offered is often inadequate and that its quality varies hugely according to location. They say it is anomalous that those in full-time education, whose circumstances are apparently most secure, have greater access to aftercare than those who may be more vulnerable.

The stories that follow are those of four young people, now aged between nineteen and twenty-three, who have been in the care of the HSE. I met them through two organizations: the After Residential Care Trust, based in Co. Kildare, and EPIC (which stands for 'empowering people in care'), based in Smithfield, Dublin. I met other young people who were generous and courageous in sharing stories which, for various reasons, I have not included here. The accounts below are based on recorded interviews. I transcribed the interviews, edited the transcripts and gave them to the subjects for approval. I did not include information or opinion that reflected on other identifiable individuals, except a minimal amount of information on their parents, where this was relevant to establishing why they had been taken into state care. References to the names of specific institutions have also been omitted in cases where descriptions of conditions in those institutions could have been seen to reflect on staff. But the accounts by these four young men and women do include information and opinion relating to their interaction with the HSE. Although much of this would be impossible to verify (the HSE, correctly, will not comment on individual cases), it seemed to me that to strip these accounts of any direct or implied criticism of the HSE would undermine their integrity and do a disservice to the young people concerned. These are their stories; for large periods of their lives, the HSE took responsibility for their care; if they feel that care was inadequate, they are entitled to say so. These criticisms are echoed in numerous other accounts I have been given by people associated with the system and young people who have been in care.

The HSE, of course, is the Irish public health system, funded by the Irish state and overseen by the Department of Health. To the extent that the HSE took the place of these young people's parents, it did so on behalf of the state and, therefore, of the public. Its failings are our failings.

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Sarah

I went into care when I was two. They found a dead body in my house. She was only about eighteen. My parents were drug addicts: she had overdosed with them and that's how she died. They had to take all us children out, and we all got split up. I was put with a series of foster families. But I didn't get along with them and didn't like getting moved from family to family. I just wanted my own, I guess. I ended up going from foster family to residential placement to foster family to residential placement to on the streets to off the streets – back and forth, really. I was in about twenty-five placements altogether.

I first went into residential care when I was about seven, into a home in Dublin. I remember exactly what my social worker told me: 'You don't have to go to foster placements any more – no new families for you.' I seen this big playground in between these two big houses and I just thought, 'This is the life. This is going to be great craic.' And by God, was it a smack of reality that night. I'm a real fussy eater and I didn't eat the food. I remember them telling me: 'That's not how it works here, honey. You eat what's cooked for you in this house. You eat what's given or you don't eat at all.'

I remember kids outside the gate and their ma's saying to them, 'If you're bold, that's where you're going.' And we'd be sitting inside the gate and it's like they see you as invisible. And you're like, 'I'm *here!* Just because I don't

have parents doesn't mean that doesn't hurt.' You'd always hear, 'Orphan Annie, Orphan Annie, Orphan Annie'. I got awful bullied in primary school 'cause all the kids in the estate knew what the home was. They just used to eat into us: 'There's them care kids, there's them care kids.' That's all you'd hear. I think the name just stuck with all the care kids. Now it's the name that care kids have for themselves.

It's very hard to try to keep control of your life when you're in care 'cause you have one set of friends that are from one part and you've another set of friends from another part, so you've friends all over; it's very hard to grasp real friends and hold onto them. Where junkies would have their junkie friends and alcos have their alco friends, care kids tend to have their care kid friends, 'cause their lives are chaotic as well. Because when you're going out with normal friends that have mams and dads, they have no clue, they have no idea, and it's so hard to even try and explain your life to them.

It's hard living in a residential. You have twenty or thirty staff coming in daily, telling you what you can and can't do, telling you that you can't phone your family. Loads of times, I'd try and run out the gate and they'd grab me and pull me into the house and lock me into this room called the 'cushion room'. Care kids would know what it is. It's a solitary room where there's just the four box walls and cushions and they just fuck you in there and if you run amuck in there they'll just go in there and restrain you: it's their way of pulling you away from the rest of the house so it doesn't act up. You could be sitting in there all night. I remember having to break windows because I couldn't breathe – if you're claustrophobic and you're in a boxed room and there's somebody sitting on you, restraining you, by the time they get off you, you're, like, you can't breathe, and so you're trying to get out a window, and so you smash a window. So when it's written in a report about care kids that they smashed a window, that they did this and that, it makes it look really bad: makes you look like you're mad, going around putting out windows, breaking up the place; but people don't realize that there's a story

behind every action.

Care kids are very good at listening and observing. They understand a lot quicker than an average kid would. They want to know what adults are saying. When you see two adults talking you always think: 'They're talking about me, they're giving out about me ... Why are they talking about me? ... I have to have done something ... What have I done? ... They're talking ... They're giving out ... It's a *meeting*.' Because everything is a meeting.

I was in that residential for about five years. It ended up falling apart 'cause I just think I'd had enough. I'd had enough of the HSE. I ended up breaking up the house one night and left. I went into town and stayed in my friend's for a few days. If I hadn't had her, where else would I have went? I don't have any family. That's what people don't understand: most people have aunts, uncles to fall back on. The HSE rely on them to pick up the pieces. I was in care all my life. Where was I going to go? I was trying to avoid going to the homeless service. My sister and a lot of my friends were in it: I didn't want to go through them doors, because I knew it was harsh.

I called the social worker. People think your social worker is your guardian angel; the truth is the complete opposite. It's like nine to five: if you ring after five, you're definitely not getting through; if you ring before five, you might get a voicemail. It was hard enough to keep track of your social worker, because one year you could have a social worker and by next week you could have a different one, there was just so many of them, and you wouldn't even know that you had a different one. 'Go to the Garda station,' she said. I went to the station: the guard said, 'Listen, love, I can't ring the out-of-hours before six o'clock. Come back in two hours.' I was with a friend; the two of us sat in McDonald's, in the toilets, and just cried our hearts out. That first night, I got a bed in Lefroy House [*a Salvation Army hostel in Dublin providing emergency beds for young people*]. I was the youngest in Lefroy; my sister had been in there two nights previously. It has four or five bedrooms; you have your lockers and your kitchen with a camera watching you. But if your

stuff goes missing, it's your problem. They'll make you a toastie, or sometimes you're in time for dinner. You've to be out by nine in the morning. During the day, you literally just walk around town and hope to God that your social worker is going to ring, or that something is going to help you. You're just sitting in McDonald's, without paying for anything, trying to charge your phone, hoping they won't kick you out 'cause you haven't bought anything. Thank God, I had friends around town.

You see a lot of things in hostels, things you shouldn't see. I remember seeing people gearing up in hostels. My first night in the hostels, the next morning I got a syringe put up to me outside the door to take me phone off me. If the beds in the hostels are all filled, tough titty, you're sleeping on the floor of Store Street or Kevin Street [Garda stations]; if you're lucky, the guards might let you into a cell. Supposedly it's meant to be an emergency service but I spent months in and out of the 'out-of-hours' service. It's a real eye-opener: you really are on your own and it makes you see things from a different angle. You're walking in the street past all these people that are meant to be 'society' and you're, like, left walking around hungry, cold, and none of them could give a flying fuck.

I was a few months in the out-of-hours service. Then I went to a private placement for a month. Then I went to another private placement for a month. I ended up going to me sister's house and staying there, till they got another placement for me. Then, when me sister died, that's when it all spiralled out of control again. [*Sarah's sister died of a drug overdose.*] I just thought everyone was to blame for me sister dying: loads of people could have prevented it but they didn't. My sister was eighteen when she died; she grew up in care, like me, and she had a horrendous life, much worse than me. She never settled, till the day she died.

I didn't want to go homeless and I didn't want to end up going down the road that my sister went. So I took an overdose. I remember them saying in the hospital, 'You're so lucky to wake up,' and I said to the doctor, 'I don't

want to wake up, I don't want to be alive. Who wants to be in the world when it's like this? I was like, nobody cared about my sister when she died and nobody's going to give a fuck about me when I die. I was like, let me be another number for their records, I don't care. I just had had enough of it.

[*Sarah recovered and, after a number of further placements, went to live with Sharon and her family; Sharon had previously been a care worker in a centre in which Sarah had been placed.*] I get to see my sisters and brothers once a month. That's put together by the HSE. It's called 'sibling access'. They get your family and they have a social worker sitting there and they supervise it and we all get a visit for an hour and a half. It used to be in Superdome leisure centre or bowling alleys, not even in a visiting centre or anything like that. That's not the right place to have a visit if you want to ask your family questions. The HSE have rules around access: you can't go into the past too much; they say there's another place and time for that. They tell you that you can't tell your siblings certain stuff about your family, like about my sister dying; they'd say, 'Don't be saying things like that around your little sister.' But they should know that they have a big sister that died. Why should you block that off from them? I feel like the HSE just pull families apart.

That's the one thing about being a care kid: there is no line of trust. You can't trust nobody when you're in care. You stick to yourself. A lot of kids when they're new in care think it's great; they think everyone that smiles at them is their friend. And it's not that way at all because the person that's smiling straight to your face and asking you loads of questions is the first person that's talking behind your back. You can't trust no one. Even the friend that you're hanging out with, you can't trust them 'cause your stuff goes missing.

I have got a bond with Sharon and I do trust a little. But I wouldn't trust a lot. You can't trust anyone fully. Because anyone can switch. People change their minds like the weather. With a care kid, it kind of sticks to you more. You nearly reject them before they reject you. You're like, 'I'm going! I'm

packing my stuff! I'm leaving, I'm not staying here!' Care kids tend to be like that: they'll reject you before you reject them or if they think for one minute that you're thinking of it.

I am a system child. This is what happens when the system rears you.

Alan

I was put into to care when I was nine years of age. There was lot of trouble going on in the family, and other stuff I don't want to talk about. I had about thirteen care placements in all. I couldn't handle it at the foster homes: waking up every morning, coming down and seeing them as a family and then seeing myself as an outsider. So I'd just take myself back upstairs.

Then I went into residential care. It was better; I wasn't waking up and seeing the same people every day. There was two staff members each day and they'd come in and help you with everything you needed; if you wanted help with your cooking or cleaning, they'd help you out.

I got into a good bit of trouble and ended up getting locked up in Oberstown for three weeks. It's a place for – as they like to call it – 'young offenders'. When I got there, it changed in my head. People look at me, they see my baggy clothes and Adidas and McKenzie and my tattoos, and they think I'm a scumbag. But in there, you see all these scumbags, with scars on their faces, and I was thinking, I don't want to be like them. It kind of changed my life. I seen two pathways: one path was a life of crime and the other path was just stay out of it. I kind of started again in life and stayed out of trouble. Like, there has been a few incidents where I did get in trouble, but nothing serious happened over it.

When I was eighteen, I got put into an apartment of my own. Some people will think it's great to have an apartment at the age of eighteen but it's actually not all fun and games. It was kind of lonely and depressing, not hav-

ing anyone there. There was bills – I just couldn't handle them. There was no one really there to support to me. I'd have my shower and then basically just sit on the couch, really. Smoke fags. Just sit there all day and just think, think, think, think. And then at night just go back to bed, and start it all over again next morning. Me head just got a bit melted.

I fell into a state of depression, just wondering, like, 'When I am going to get kicked out?' And then after six months I got kicked out, put out onto the street. I rang the After Residential Care Trust and they sent me to a homeless shelter where I am currently staying. I'm sharing a room with a fifty-two-year-old man. We're put out every morning at nine o'clock and have to wait till half five to get back in.

Sometimes, you know, I do have a bit of anger in me. Just thinking back over all the days when I wasn't with me family. Thinking where my life has gone. That gets me a bit upset. And when I dance, it just relieves all the stress. It gets me away. It's the only thing that I really like to do. It's the main talent that I have.

I've been dancing for about three years now. The movie *Step Up* – that inspired me. So I taught myself for a year and then ended up going to dance classes and it just picked up from there. I do hip-hop and breakdancing. The hip-hop is more a dance of anger: there's a lot of moves in there that will be difficult; you'll put your mind to it and it will get you off the anger and everything.

I'm teaching my own classes now. I'd like to go further. I want to do choreography for famous people, be in dance videos, dance movies; anything that involves dance, I'll do it. The main point is to work hard, stay at it, pick up more moves on the way up. I rehearse in my room in the hostel, every night.

Danielle

I was taken into care when I was fifteen and at first I was placed in emergency accommodation. I didn't like it at all, 'cause I would have got beaten a lot by older kids. I wouldn't have been streetwise at all, being placed from the country smack in the city centre of Dublin. But that taught me a lot for when I moved out into the residential centre: like, not to hand anyone my phone, 'cause they'd rob my phone on me.

Before I went into care I would have been suicidal and self-harming a lot, cutting my wrists, wanting to take my own life. And then when I went into care, it got worse, 'cause I started talking about a lot of things. It really, really got hard for me. I was using a lot of drugs to try and cope with my mental health.

I literally just hit rock bottom. I tried to hang myself. I was put on twenty-four-hour watch. Every five minutes, someone was coming in and checking on me. I was in and out of A&E. But I don't like sitting and waiting; I get really agitated in groups of people. So I ran off [back to the residential centre].

I remember lying on my couch in the house, seeing flashing lights. I got up and looked out the window. There was an ambulance. I turned around. There were four staff members, the house manager, the team leader of the social work department, two medics and two guards. And they were bringing me in the back of the ambulance to St James's. I was like, What is going on? The first thing I asked was, 'Can I go and get a bag of clothes?' They were like, 'No'. No one told me anything about this. They went and got a court order for me to be placed in hospital. [*Under the Mental Health Act 2001, the HSE can apply to the District Court for the involuntary admission of a child to a psychiatric facility.*]

I got out of the ambulance outside the main entrance of the hospital and walked up to the ward. The ward was basically just one massive, long corridor and I went to leg it and the two guards just latched on to me. I was

bawling my heart out. I wouldn't talk to anyone. I hated everybody for putting me in there. I just wanted to be out. The first week, all I done was cry. I remember one patient to a tee. She was walking really, really slow, highly medicated, and when you walked by her, she'd try to grab you. She'd just scare the bleeding daylights out of you, properly. My nephew came in to see me, and one of the patients barged into my room and tried to grab my nephew. I grabbed her and threw her up against a pillar. I remember people being sedated on the corridor. And people walking around like zombies cause they're that highly medicated. There was nothing for me to do.

I don't believe in taking medication. I believe in reiki and acupuncture and all that, 'cause it's better for you in the long run. I was sixteen, the youngest person in that ward. The closest person to my age would have been twenty-odd. It's not appropriate for a sixteen-year-old child to be in an adult mental health hospital. There's nowhere out there for kids of that age, from sixteen to eighteen. There's nothing. The only reason I was placed in the hospital was 'cause they couldn't get a bed to suit me anywhere else. I wasn't diagnosed with any mental health illness. I just needed the security and somewhere safe, and to actually be able to sit down and talk to people and work out my problems and how to cope when I get stressed. When I was in special care, later, I done all of that. Because I had no choice. I was in a confined place. I wasn't allowed out 24/7; I had no phone. [*'Special care' units provide more intensive and specialized support for young people than normal residential centres. They are locked units: the young person is legally detained there under court order.*]

I was in the special care unit when I found out about family history. I robbed my file out of the office. I would never usually do something like that. I was just really frustrated and I went down and locked myself into the TV room. All the staff were trying to get in. I was like, What's *in* this file? I handed the file back to the staff then, after I read it. Then, two days later, my social worker came in and met with me and told me exactly what had happened.

Special care worked for me when I was in there but when I left, the world was just a different place. It was really difficult trying to settle back into everything. I didn't know what to do with myself. I ended up going wild then. I got back in contact with my old mates and all.

When I was in special care I was forced to go to counselling, and I wasn't allowed leave till I had that counselling done. I knew I wasn't ready for counselling at that time – I wasn't ready to speak about anything. And then when I left special care, any time I did speak, I went off the walls, I went wild. It was the manger of my residential who noticed the counselling was having a big impact on me: every time I'd come home from it I'd run off for days. She said it to my social worker and then I stopped going. And it's only recently, since I turned twenty-one, that I went back to counselling. There wasn't a hope when I was fifteen or sixteen of being able to deal with all that stuff. Now I know I'm ready to deal with it and I want to deal with it.

When I turned eighteen, everything changed. The first week after that it was like, you have to find an apartment, you have to go sort out your rent allowance, get onto the housing list. But I was still in education. I got an extra four months and that was it then, I was moved into an apartment on my own, and it scared the living daylights out of me. I moved out of the apartment after three months of living in the place. I overdosed. Then I tried to re-engage with the HSE. I was asking them, can I get an aftercare support? I need someone to help me get a doctor, and all that; I need somewhere to live. My request got denied and I had to appeal it and it still got turned down.

Then, when I was nineteen, I tried to re-engage with my aftercare again. Every time I rang I left a message and I was told someone would get back to me. They didn't. I'm twenty-one now and I've recently got in contact again with the aftercare services and the social work department. I asked them for funding for college, for counselling, for a top-up on my weekly money. Everything got rejected. They don't work with anyone after twenty-one. It's not nice when you can't even have someone to ring and say hello and go out

and meet them for a cup of coffee like, just to check in and see how you are. Youse are after been minding us till we turned eighteen, looking after us, cooking our dinners, making our breakfast, making sure we washed ourselves, that we got up out of bed, everything – like, practically bubble-wrapped us till we turned eighteen – and then you send us out into the world on our own. The bubble-wrap is off and we’re left standing there: how do I pay bills? Which money is for which? Can I afford everything this week? You throw us out when we’re eighteen but you wouldn’t do it to your own sons and daughters: why the hell are you doing that to us?

Mark

My ma had three kids and herself in a tiny little apartment in Ballymun. It got hard for her and she became an alcoholic. Bills weren’t paid so she decided to leave and we just ended up living on the streets in Dublin city. We spent a couple of nights underneath buildings or in shop doorways, anywhere there was shelter for a night’s sleep. Then we were taken into care. We were put in a residential centre in Dun Laoghaire. I was with my younger brother; I was six, he was three. My older brother got separated: he went into secure care. It was a very big house with a lot of staff; it was a terrifying experience, trying to figure out ‘Why are we here?’ and ‘Where’s our ma gone?’

We were there for six months and then my ma got back to normal and she was given a house in Blanchardstown and we went home. Everything was going well but then she just got back on the drink. There was no support there for her: I’d never once seen a social worker coming out, having a meeting, seeing how my ma was doing. One time, I was left with the next-door neighbours. My ma didn’t come home for three days. And then the neighbour rang the guards and the guards took us into emergency care. My mother went missing for nearly three years after that. The social workers

told us she was sick.

They couldn't get us our place back in the residential centre so we lived in Temple Street hospital for two months, me and my little brother. We were kind of freaked out for the first week we were there – we thought we were sick. Everyone in the hospital was real nice to us and after a while we got used to it. But at the back of your head, when you're in a hospital you think you are sick. Then we got our place back in the centre in Dun Laoghaire. *[Policy has changed since then: today, young children are automatically placed with a foster family rather than in a residential centre.]*

When we used come home from school we'd all do our homework at the table but you'd always have twelve kids on top of you. It was very structured: you come in, you have to do your homework straight away, then you have to have dinner. There's no leeway. God forbid if you have your dinner while you're wearing your uniform. There'd be 'settling time' or isolation if you acted up. I think isolation is gone now. Like, if you were caught mess-fighting you'd be isolated for a day and you'd have to stay in this room by yourself and you'd do work with the staff explaining why you did this and how come you felt like this at this time. After any argument that happened in the house, they would resort to isolation. You'd have two hours of 'one to one' to try to figure out what you'd do next time instead of arguing. And that would be more frustrating. You'd get two hours' cleaning work for being caught mess-fighting – sure me and my brother got that nearly every week.

There'd be staff meetings in the house. The whole staff team would come and upend your living area – your home. There'd be like sixteen staff at the meeting. And when it was over, they'd be walking around, doing things, and you'd be like, 'This is our house!' I understand that it's a workplace but at the same time they need to respect that it's our home. They shouldn't be having meetings right in front of us.

After a few years, we moved to another centre. They had 'red flag, green flag': bad touch, good touch. When we were first introduced into the house,

we were sat down and they were like, 'a green flag touch is when someone allows you to give them a hug and a red flag touch is a no go'. Some of the lads used to ask for hugs. And they'd be like, 'You have to do an appropriate hug,' and the staff would demonstrate an appropriate hug and an inappropriate hug. It's a very structured routine in those houses; it's far too much.

When I was sixteen, I was connected up with a private aftercare service and they told me what would be expected of me when I moved in with them after I turned eighteen. I was still in fifth year when I turned eighteen. That August, I moved out of the residential centre and into an apartment on my own, with support from the aftercare service. Everything was going great. I was in sixth year, doing the Leaving Cert Applied. But as soon as I finished that I wanted to take a year out. I really wanted a break to clear me own head. I started a course but I dropped out after four weeks. And because I wasn't on the course any more I was discharged from the aftercare service: goodbye, you're on your own. Sign on to the dole, sign on to the rent allowance, and good luck trying to get it.

The one that caught me there was that you had to be in education to get the supports. If I had decided to stay in education, I would have got the supports till I finished. Because I took a year out all them supports collapsed and I was discharged. Some of my friends, who live at home with their mums and dads, still haven't decided what they want to do for the rest of their lives. But when you're in care, you have to decide before you're discharged. And if you make a mistake, you can't go back.

I moved into a place and was there for two months but my rent allowance didn't come through and I had to leave. I was homeless for a month or two. I went down to Dun Laoghaire County Council and told them my story, that I hadn't a family to support me. They were like, 'We've no money; we can refer you into the out-of-hours in town.' No way, I thought. I know other people from the care system have gone into the out-of-hours service. The stories that come out of it – of people's faces getting sliced open; people getting boxed

around; people coming in pissed off their mind causing fights. Horrible shit, like. I stayed in my friends' houses. I found a place to live eventually.

I'm doing social studies in college, training to be a social worker. They teach you not to get attached to the young people you're working with. But when I was a child in residential, I needed some sort of attachment because if I don't have that attachment I'm not going to trust anyone. And trust is a huge thing for young people in residential. I'm not going to talk to someone that I don't know. So the social worker has to build up attachment to make me feel comfortable. But then when I do make that attachment to a social worker, she leaves, and then I have to start all over again with another social worker, trying to build up a relationship to be able to talk to her, to be able to trust her. After the third or fourth social worker, the trust is gone: you just go, Fuck this, I don't care any more. I had between nine and twelve different social workers. Personally, I'd find it very hard to trust anyone. It's a fear of letting someone come in close – someone comes in and says, 'Oh, we'll help you out, we'll do this, we'll do that' – but you know a couple of years later they're just going to be gone back to their own families, or off to do their own thing, and then you'll be left by yourselves. And when you leave residential care all the attachments that you made in the residential centre are broken. As soon as you're eighteen, it's like, wash your hands, goodbye. There's nothing there any more. There's no more attachments.

I've been to all sorts of therapy. Play therapy, group therapy, one-to-one therapy. In all of them I was just forced to go. Every Friday I was picked up from school and put into the situation. I didn't want to be there, so I didn't really say what was on my mind. And then you've to try and explain to friends why you're getting out of class. I do understand why residential units enforce therapy, because automatically they think you've horrific problems and this has happened or that has happened. But sometimes the problems haven't been that bad. Some of the problems are solely to do with the residential unit or the social worker. Twenty different people around you that

you haven't got a feckin' notion who they are. But we did know who our mother and father were; we did know who our aunties were – but they were taken from us. The therapists are trained; they've studied this: 'He's very closed off,' they say. Yeh, but I'm closed off because I don't know anyone, and I don't want to know anyone here.

In September, I joined Sarah and the woman with whom she lives, Sharon, in the district court. The night before, Sarah had lain awake till four-thirty, petting her dog and watching TV to try to relax. Eventually she fell asleep, and then slept through the alarm on her phone. Sharon woke her, and she took her time getting dressed. 'You have to look ladylike for court,' Sarah told me, later. 'You don't want to look like a skanger.' She chose a black Karen Millen top that Sharon had given her and a black and white striped blazer from Penney's, and then spent twenty minutes doing her hair. She had coffee, but no breakfast. She felt sick with nerves.

Sarah and Sharon drove together to the courthouse, where I met them. They sat at the back, watching the judge go through the list: an eighteen-year-old was jailed for six months for carrying a concealed weapon; a grandmother was fined for stealing from a shop; a twenty-something mother was told to give €500 to charity for being caught with cocaine at a music festival. Sarah's case came up, and she and Sharon approached the front of the courtroom. 'Sarah, how are you?' said the judge, with a tone of brisk welcome. 'You're still alive,' he congratulated her, with only light irony. They knew each other from Sarah's previous court appearances. 'He gets it,' Sarah told me, later. 'He gets how vulnerable we are.'

Sarah was in court on a two-year-old larceny charge. This hearing was to allow the court to review the latest probation report. The judge had provided money from the court poor box to pay for a course of counselling; Sarah had responded well, and her probation officer recommended that she continue to engage in therapy and related activities.

The hearing gave Sarah's solicitor an opportunity to raise the issue of the role of the HSE. The HSE had previously been funding a package of outreach support for Sarah, but

this had been withdrawn just before her twentieth birthday. ‘The State just wants to wash its hands of Sarah,’ he said, ‘but at the moment she’s not equipped to deal with the outside world.’ The judge appeared to agree. He addressed Sarah.

‘I think it’s tragic that you have been in care since you were in nappies and now you find yourself, at twenty, in such difficulties,’ he said. ‘The state effectively took care of you, in lieu of your parents, and, now that you are twenty, has decided, to use the words of your solicitor, to wash its hands of you. ... Every day I put children into care in this court. If that’s what’s coming down the road for them when they hit eighteen – that the state ... washes its hands – it’s a sad day.’