



# Suicide Note

*A Memoir by Julie Richardson*

As Told to Lilian Duval



## Dedication

For my sister and brothers and all those  
other foster children who spent their  
childhood moving from house to house,  
and who were lucky if just one of those  
houses was a real home.

## Twenty Houses, No Home

This book started life as a suicide note. I was going through some rough times, feeling hopeless and worthless, and looking forward to nothing at all. So I started to write a suicide note, a short one. Then I added to it, and I just kept on writing and writing. There was so much to say. After a while, I felt relieved that I'd written down some of the facts of my life, so I decided to write the whole story. And I'm still alive.

The place where I was born is beautiful and outwardly happy—the San Francisco Bay Area, a tourist magnet that includes picturesque cities such as San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose. The Bay Area is rich in natural beauty, and a lot of its residents are very rich too. It is also home to the very poor and everyone in between. Our family was all the way over on the poor end of that spectrum.

In my earliest memory, I'm six years old and standing in a stranger's kitchen with my sister and two brothers. I don't remember our dad picking us up or taking us here. It was like my life jumped a frame in a movie—one minute, I'm at home with my family, minus my mom, who wasn't a part of it; and next minute, I'm somewhere else.

Something's wrong—my dad is holding two old suitcases stuffed with most of our clothes, all jumbled up together. On the tile floor, there's a supermarket bag filled with more of our things. We can't stay with him just now, he tells us. We don't know why. We're going to be staying here just for a while, he says, till he can get things sorted out.

Sunlight fills the kitchen we're in. The ceiling is really low, just a bit higher than my dad's head. The house looks poor, but clean and homey. The four of us are standing side by side like kids in a Gap ad. Mrs. Hollins, our new foster mom, squats down in front of us. "What are all your names?"

I go first: "My name is Julie." Other family members live here—her husband, her grown son, his daughter, and some grandchildren, and all of them are standing right here in the kitchen, ogling us. "Julie" is what my family calls me, short for my full name, Julianna Priscilla, which sounds aristocratic, but don't get me wrong, we're not. In school, when I manage to get to school, I'm Julianna.

"My name is John," my little brother says, copying me. He's five. I can tell he's scared because he's holding my hand real tight, and he never does that. "My name is Teresa," my older sister says. She's eight. "I'm Bruce," says my seven-year-old brother. So that's all of us, ages eight, seven, six, and five; born one after another of a drug-addicted mother who disappeared from my life long before I could even pronounce all of my siblings' names. I have little or no memory of her.

I'm not scared, but I'm hungry, so hungry that all I can think of is the delicious smell of what's cooking, which makes me want to stay. I can smell the fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, string beans, and some kind of yummy fruit pie. Kid food.

"It's only these two girls," my dad says, indicating Teresa and me.

“*Separate* them?” Mrs. Hollins asks. Everyone looks at her. The room is quiet except for the fried chicken sizzling in the pan.

“The boys are going to live somewhere else,” my dad explains.

Teresa is holding my hand, too. She and I have barrettes in our hair, pinned somewhat haphazardly. There’s no mom in our family to fix girls’ hair.

“I’ll play no part in separating the family,” Mrs. Hollins declares. “They all stay together, or nobody stays.”

And so we stay. We’re home—for a while. We have each other, and that’s all we have. Sure, we’ll argue and quibble like ordinary siblings, but we’re kind to each other and we’re all close friends. We look out for each other every step of the way.

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I wish I could say that Mrs. Hollins was our first and last foster parent. We always had plenty to eat at her house, and we had enough clean clothes to wear to school. We truly felt like part of her family.

But permanence is not typical of the foster system. People who take in foster children rarely keep them for longer than a year. And there simply aren’t enough quality homes for all of the children who need foster care.

That day was only the first displacement for many years to follow. I can’t speak for my brother and sisters, because we were separated after we left that first home. By the time I was 15, I had lived in at least 20 different foster homes. Some were decent. Most were mediocre. And some were horrible. I’m still trying to make peace with my personal history.

Getting an education was a challenge. I attended six different grade schools, two junior highs, and two high schools. Moving from school to school was our way of life. Making real friends was not. Ashamed of my living conditions, I could never bring a friend home to visit.

There will always be foster children in need of temporary homes while the adults in their lives straighten out the messes they have gotten themselves into. But there must be a better way to handle these small, vulnerable human beings. My brothers, my sister, and I didn’t ask to be put here on Earth. We’ve done our best all our lives to cope with a terribly rough start.

If my story can help just one grown-up foster child feel loved and valued, I will have accomplished something worth living for. The foster system is here to stay, but so much can be done to help its transient visitors along their way. Telling my story can help, I am sure.

Let me begin.