

Excerpt from *Cocoon: How One Woman Created a Shelter for Teens and Found Hope Along the Way* by Sarri Gilman.

HOLLI

Everett, Washington

1990

Holli was sleeping under my desk. In my tiny counseling office at the school, there was barely enough room for the two of us.

Still, the office where Holli squeezed under my desk was one of the nicer school offices I'd had. There was a window that looked over the street. My door opened to the main office where the school secretary cheerfully greeted teens and staff with Hershey's Kisses from the candy dish on her desk, decorated with a bright yellow smiley face.

The principal was next door to me, which was handy, as I often needed to run something by him. Besides, having worked in a few schools, I was used to being given office spaces the size of an airplane bathroom. I'd once worked as a counselor from the broom closet of a middle school.

This school was not your typical public school. This was a school for kids on probation, kids who had served time in detention, often many times – repeat “offenders.” Our school was an outpost, tucked inside of a two-story building in downtown Everett. It wasn't designed to be a school; it was an office building, suitable for adults who wore ties, behaved in elevators and didn't throw chewing gum wherever they damn well pleased.

The school population was 70 teenagers, more boys than girls, and each kid carried heavy problems to school – problems no kid could solve.

Holli was often sleeping in my office. She had glued herself to me. In a school like this, having a kid stick to you was a good thing. The kids had so little in their lives, they needed adults they felt attached to. While Holli slept under my desk, I would sometimes leave my office and unlock an empty classroom to see other kids. I would stick a sign on my door that said “HOLLI.” Then, the school secretary and principal knew she was under my desk or in my chair.

Holli was often up walking the streets at night. She was avoiding the evening parade of men her mother brought home. Holli had long, thin, light brown hair. She was 17 years old, but seemed much younger, more like an 11-year-old. Her mascara was gooped on her tiny lashes, which left dark blotches under her wide, brown eyes.

It had been early in the morning when she came to my door, wiping away tears and mascara. She told me she was going to her “place,” which meant under my desk. Holli rarely told me about how things went at home. But this day was different. The tears were my opening.

I closed my door for privacy. “Holli, what happened?”

I didn’t know if she would answer – some things are too hard to talk about. And I carried many things inside, buried deep.

I was certain no one would ever hear me say those things aloud. I respected silence.

I would wait with my question.

This day, she would open her door.

Her words floated one by one, slowly, as if she were in a dream.

She described a man her mother brought home. He’d cornered her in the bathroom. He’d ripped her shirt.

Then her dream ended.

She said she was never going back home.

Holli’s home was in a dilapidated part of town, a motel full of cheap rooms rented by the hour or month.

Nearby bars were open day and night.

Holli closed her eyes and drew her knees up tight against her chest.

I knew not to ask questions. Her eyes were closed. She said all she could. I took my jacket off the back of my chair and laid it over her shivering knees. She wasn’t cold – she was traumatized.

I called Child Protective Services for the third time about Holli. The law required me, as a counselor, to call Child Protective Services every time I heard from a child about a threat to their safety, or about abuse or harm to them from their parents or grandparents, whoever they lived with. If I didn’t make the reports, I could lose my license. The teenagers I worked with were often hit, thrown out of their homes and not fed. I had a stack of calls to make every week to Child Protective Services. They never sent a worker to investigate a single call.

I usually wrote out my words before making a call. Maybe if I said just the right ones, they would come. Sometimes I pleaded with the person taking my call: “Please, please send someone.” Other times I was demanding.

“Repeat back to me what I just said,” wanting proof that my report was being written somewhere. Over time I learned to just be neutral, do my job, make the report, note that I made the report and expect nothing.

Child Protective Services was underfunded and understaffed, with only a few workers to cover 277 miles along Interstate 5 in Washington State. They had to prioritize the youngest, most fragile, vulnerable kids. I had a school full of teenagers on probation. The school was nicknamed “The Dumpster.” The kids weren’t seen as vulnerable; they were labeled “criminal.” The teens in my school didn’t seem as vulnerable as, say, a three-year-old in a daycare center with a bruised neck.

After waiting on hold, I gave information about Holli, making my mandated report. The person on the phone asked if I could stick around for two to three hours. A Child Protective Services worker would come and interview Holli. I was shocked and relieved. I didn’t know what magic words I had spoken, but Child Protective Services was sending someone.

I wondered if I should line up all the other kids while I had the Child Protective Services worker in the building, but thought, “No, that would just distract from Holli. Focus on the one.”

“Just one. If only we could save one.” That was my mantra.

In my mind, I was getting Holli to safety. Child Protective Services was going to swoop in and give Holli a home. She would have a bedroom with a bed of her own, instead of a couch in a motel room. She’d have a foster mom that made her breakfast. I sat in my fantasy, feeling hope and relief.

I called home and asked the babysitter to stay a few extra hours with my daughters. I never got home late, but this was an exception. I wanted to stay and witness the miracle. I also didn’t want Holli to be alone when she met with the social worker, a stranger who she wouldn’t trust. She needed someone familiar by her side.

Within two hours, the school secretary popped her head in and told me the Child Protective Services worker had arrived. I jumped up to meet her.

Mary, the Child Protective Services worker, said hello while she was unwrapping her chocolate kiss. She had on glasses and a knit hat, polyester pants and a bright yellow blouse with bold-colored shapes printed all over it. The shapes reminded me of little kids and all their different shapes and sizes. Mary’s job – the job of every Child Protective Services worker – was to watch over kids, check on their safety, and if they weren’t safe, get them to a placement: a foster home or group home. Mary had the power to get Holli out of the motel room where she lived with her mom. Mary alone could say, “You are coming with me.”

Mary looked about 20 years older than me, wiser and more experienced. I was 28 years old, a new mom with twin babies, learning how to deal with croup, diaper rash, ear infections and teething. I did not know how to help Holli get out of the terrifying motel room.

Mary wanted to meet alone with Holli. I wanted to sit in, but Mary gave me a look that told me we were going to do this her way.

I opened the door to my office.

“She’s under there.”

I pointed to Holli under my desk.

“I’ll wake her up,” I said, crawling on my hands and knees.

I was certain Holli was awake and just keeping her eyes shut. Her reluctance to open her eyes was not a good start.

I got Holli to raise herself into a chair, and I left. I stood in the hallway. In less than five minutes, my door opened, and Mary walked out with her worn, experienced briefcase in one hand and her coat over her other arm. Holli was in the chair.

“What happened?” I asked Mary.

“Holli said no.” Mary continued walking. She went down the stairs to the door of the school.

I followed.

“Wait. Where are you going? You can’t just leave her on the streets. She will be raped, beaten. Terrible things are going to happen to her.”

Mary stopped and pointed her chin at me, her face taut.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

She pushed open the door to the school and kept walking. “Wait, please.” I followed Mary into the parking lot across the street. She kept moving. I felt the anger boiling up inside my stomach. I wasn’t some kid sleeping under a desk. I wanted to discuss the situation, and I wanted Child Protective Services to do something. I wanted Holli to leave with Mary.

“Isn’t there a shelter you can send her to?”

“No such thing. The shelters don’t take any kid without a parent, and they don’t even take a teenager with a parent.”

“What do you mean, they won’t take a teenager into a shelter with their parent?”

“You heard me. No one over the age of 11.” Mary lost patience with my stupidity. I was getting angry. There was an edge in my voice. “Can’t you take her somewhere safe?” Mary heard my edge and snapped at me.

“Not if she doesn’t want to go. She said NO. I have no more time for a kid that doesn’t want to go with me, and I have no more time to explain this to you. Get this in your head: I don’t have any place to take her anyway. She’d just be driving around in my car with me all day and then sleeping in a chair in my office. We don’t have placements for all the kids.”

And at that moment, heartbreak overwhelmed the anger inside me.

I watched Mary toss her tattered briefcase into her trunk. She opened her car door. I thought about all the kids she would have to see that day, the ones who were battered enough to get into her car with her.

I knew Mary was just doing her job. I stood there as the car pulled away, feeling like a little kid who had just been dumped. The parking lot was filled with pigeon shit, which I tried to avoid as I walked back to the school.

I did not have time to listen to the little girl inside of me. She would have to wait until later.

But I felt her standing on my lungs, making it hard to breathe.

I yanked the heavy school door open, dragged myself up the stairs and returned to my desk. I wiped tears from my face, hoping no one in the office noticed. I sat at my desk, turning a pencil between my fingers over and over like a baton. I was thinking.

Holli was in her last class of the day, social studies.

I twirled my pencil.

I opened the phone book and called every one of the eight shelters listed.

“Do you take teenagers? Seventeen-year-olds? Sixteen, fourteen- year-olds?” I wondered if age made a difference. Maybe they would take pity on a fourteen-year-old.

Every single place I called said no.

When I asked why, I got vague answers. “State law.” “Too much liability.” “Teens are too difficult.” I wasn’t sure what they meant. I understood that teens could be difficult. But it left me with a lot to think about.

There were no open doors for a kid.

The school bell buzzed. It was time for me to go home, and time for Holli to go God-knows-where.

I drove off to catch my ferry and see my baby twin daughters, Somer and Aliza.

I missed my baby girls when I was at the school. Usually, I left the school at noon and was home for the afternoons and evenings with my babies. I wasn’t trying to balance working and mothering. I was a mommy. That was my full-time role. My daughters were nine months old. I was only trying to get a few hours of work in each week, *around* being a mommy. I saw a few people in private practice and worked a few hours in the school.

Because of Mary and Holli, I was returning on the 4pm ferry instead of the 1 o’clock.

I had missed the afternoon with my baby girls for nothing.

When I got home, I scooped both my girls into my arms, burying my nose in their fine, honey-colored hair. I carried Somer and Aliza, one on each hip, to the nursery to get their matching woolen sweaters (made by my mother-in-law, Ruth). I laid my sweatered daughters side by side. I picked up Aliza and carried her out to the porch, where the breeze coming up from the south cooled the air. I fastened her into her yellow swing. I jogged back into the house to fetch Somer. Socrates, our German shepherd and my companion of eight years, ran ahead of me on the way back to the porch. Our dog was like a nanny. Wherever the babies went, she went. She never left them.

Socrates lay down on the wooden porch while I pushed my laughing daughters in their swings. I looked out over Puget Sound; I could see Everett across the water.

I didn’t know if I wanted to go back to the school. Some part of me felt like I wasn’t helping anyone. But I couldn’t just not show up. I was someone to Holli and the other kids. They didn’t have other adults showing up for them. Our school was where adults showed up.

I looked out across the water of Puget Sound to the Cascade Range. I was doing laps in my head, hearing all the ways the shelters said no.

My twins were ready for a story. Their tiny, puffy hands were chilly. Back inside we went to warm up and read *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown. It always made me cry. The baby bunny says it will run away and turn into all these different things, and the mommy bunny says, “I will always find you.”

“I will be a bird and fly away from you,” said the little bunny.

“If you will be a bird and fly away from me, I will be a tree you come home to,” says the mother bunny.

The story was a prayer I was reciting: “You will always belong to me. I will never lose you.”

My daughters were too young to understand. But the little girl inside of me – the one standing on my chest earlier in the day – could sit on her cozy reading pillow in my daughters’ nursery, snuggling with stuffed

animals in the periwinkle-and-creamy-yellow color scheme, while an old cedar tree leaned over the window, and I read aloud.

I promised my daughters I would become the mother I never had.

Cocoon is available at [Amazon](#) or wherever books are sold.

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