My Parents Expected to Be Retired. Instead, They Are Raising My Sister’s Kids.

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 My parents put off suing for custody of my sister’s children for a long time.

Shy and artistic, my sister was a straight-A student who played soccer in college. It wasn’t clear what came first — the drugs or the depression or the terrible men — but when she dropped out in 2011 as a freshman and spiraled into addiction, having four babies in less than two years, her dissolution was shocking. We’d known, vaguely, that the disease ran in the family — my grandmother warned that most of her 11 siblings dealt with substance abuse. But we had never seen the fallout up close.

For years, my parents held out hope that my sister would get clean or sign over custody willingly. My dad often said, “The idea of shaming my daughter, of standing in a courtroom and listing all the ways she’s failed as a mother, makes me feel physically sick.”

But eventually it sank in that nothing was changing. My sister, L, was 30. The older two children were 8 and 7. The twins were 6. They had been living with my parents for nearly five years. It was time. So when L was reachable — stuck in jail for a few months in 2023 — they served her the papers.

On the day of the hearing last year, my sister and her children’s father showed up to the courthouse in Winston-Salem, N.C. Each was physically present, anyway. The father, a man more than 20 years my sister’s senior, seemed high and slept through most of the proceedings. My sister was alert, if strung out, casual and modest in a sundress and a jean jacket.

My parents presented their case to the judge, the primary facts being that L hadn’t lived with her children for years and had been in and out of jail for a decade. She had left or been kicked out of so many treatment programs that it was hard to keep track of how many — eight, maybe, including private and state rehabs.

The big picture was clear enough, but as with every story of addiction, the more intimate details throw the chaos of daily life into perspective: She brought fentanyl and needles into the house. She impersonated my mom at the bank, using her Social Security card to withdraw money from my parents’ account. The children’s father consistently sabotaged her attempts at sobriety, and hit her with a car the night before my wedding, so she arrived halfway through cocktail hour with a broken wrist and road rash.

When it was time for my sister’s argument, she took the stand. Despite the overwhelming evidence against her, she gave a spirited defense of how much she loved her children and how hard she had fought to stay alive for them. But the judge granted my parents sole custody, no visitation rights.

Later that night on the phone, my dad described my sister on the stand: “When she first started talking, she sounded really smart and put-together. I was proud of her. I thought, Wow, she could have been a lawyer!”

Not for the first time, I was struck by the brutal emotional dichotomy at the heart of my parents’ whole endeavor. Raising a child is an inherently hopeful act, but when it falls to a grandparent, it’s often because something tragic has happened. Or in our case, is happening. It’s not just sad or dramatic moments that are permeated with this complexity; joyful moments carry their own weight. When the grandkids were babies, my mom would get excited every time they hit a new milestone. Then she would think about why she was witnessing this, and not my sister. She’d ruminate on what she could have done differently. She would wonder what she could say or do, right then, to bring her back.

My parents’ situation is becoming more common. At the kids’ small church school alone, there are a handful of children being raised by their grandparents. “Grandfamilies” are a fast-growing but often invisible demographic. Last year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2.4 million children were being raised by grandparents or other relatives. The opioid epidemic has only exacerbated these numbers — evidenced by the fact that many of the states with the most grandparents raising grandchildren are also those with the highest opioid prescribing rates. But it’s impossible to know the exact number, because many grandparents never formally legalize their relationship.

For parents like mine, doing what’s best for their grandchildren can feel like abandoning their suffering child or, at the very least, choosing to prioritize the younger generation. And this says nothing of how it affects their other children — my three “healthy” siblings and me — who have learned to ask for less, because there is simply less to give. Less time, less money, less attention. We all recognize a new hierarchy of needs. The children take precedence. The sister I grew up with, whose eyes I would find across the table when my dad started on one of his nerdy tongue twisters, has not been around for a long time. Addiction scrambled her life and, with it, our family dynamics. Roles have been challenged and responsibilities blurred. It’s confusing and guilt-inducing for everyone, trying to do right by everyone else.

My mom and dad have had to relinquish the notion that any “ideal” outcome is possible — for them, for their children, for the grandchildren. As artists and dreamers, they’ve had to let go of aspirations that they had for the rest of their lives. I’m pregnant with my first child now, and watching my parents, I have found it impossible not to wonder how much sacrifice is inherent in this lifelong errand. They are still grappling with what it means to be parents. But they’re also upending old narratives about happy children and lives well lived, in ways that we never could have predicted.

Before all this happened, one word I might have used to describe my parents, Jane and Michael Dodds, was “innocent.” They were — and still are, at their core — trusting, idealistic people. My mom is a writer and painter, whose father, a pastor and theologian, moved his family around the country while he taught at different seminaries. My dad is an academic and violinist who grew up in the Peruvian jungle, where his father was a missionary doctor. My parents were raised outside mainstream American culture, and when they met in college, they recognized a similar Christian worldview and an all-consuming love of the arts.

They didn’t plan to have five kids. The pill gave my mom chest pains, so they used other methods, and five (different!) failed forms of birth control later, there we were. Four girls and one boy. I’m the oldest, 36 now, and my youngest sister is 23.

As they had children, it seemed as if they did their best to fold us into their pursuits and passions — making us part of the “project” — the way their parents did with them. My mom home-schooled us for most of my elementary-school years, putting on theater productions with the neighborhood kids, giving still-life drawing lessons. We moved to a plot of wild land on a dirt road in Texas for three years, living out her dream of a country life. She took us to museums to sketch sculptures and cemeteries to make rubbings on the gravestones. Making art was the best way my mom knew to cope with life’s challenges, and she poured that knowledge into us.

Still, nothing was easy. Money stress was a constant drumbeat. My mom started taking portrait commissions when I was in elementary school, and my dad got a weekend job. He’s 59 now and has worked two jobs for 25 years. He’s a full-time professor at a state arts school and a half-time music director at a Presbyterian church. Not coincidentally, for 25 years he was also working on a book, which was finally published last year by Oxford University Press. It tackles, as the first sentence reads, “one of the most elusive questions in music history: the nature of the transition from the Renaissance modes to the major and minor keys of the high Baroque.”

My dad is a perfectionist, but he finally made real progress on the book when my youngest sister was in high school and the pressures on him and my mom eased. He composed and conducted a symphony, which became the subject of a documentary. My mom started writing and illustrating children’s books, trying to get an agent. They were moving into a new, less encumbered chapter.

But around that time, L and the four children — two toddlers and twin babies — were living in a house nearby that my grandmother bought for them, and things were starting to feel out of control. There often wasn’t enough milk or baby formula or diapers. It was clear that L and the kids’ dad were still using together. He was in and out of the house, increasingly violent.

One night, L took the kids and fled to my parents’ house, afraid for her life. They stayed with my parents for a while, and she went to meetings. She was sober for a month. But then she began to disappear, going to get high with the children’s father. After a three-day disappearance, she returned and told my mom she wanted to take the kids home. My mom said she didn’t think it was a good idea. My sister began disappearing more. And then she was just gone — for three, six, nine months at a time.

For my mom, those first years with her grandchildren were plagued with doubt that she had made a mistake, that she should have let my sister take the kids home. It seemed unsafe at the time, but my parents’ ensuring the children’s safety also enabled my sister to use with fewer consequences. My dad, meanwhile, struggled with his instinct to view the situation in legal terms. “These are their children,” he would say to my mom. He was uncomfortable mandating what my sister could or couldn’t do with her own kids, even if she had abdicated her responsibilities. Wasn’t she allowed some lapses in judgment as a mother?

On top of their concern for my sister and the children, they were just desperate for the situation to end. Early on, the chaos felt interminable, unsustainable. All four kids were still in diapers when they moved in. And while all babies cry, traumatized babies cry a lot, and these babies wailed at the slightest provocation. They were all so close in age that they moved in a blond mob, playing, fighting and screaming as they whipped through the house, destroying one room after another in fresh and inventive ways.

My parents couldn’t really afford help, but they tried hiring a few different part-time nannies. In interviews, my mom would warn them: “These babies cry a lot. Like, more than normal. And there are four of them.” None of the nannies lasted very long.

Around 5 p.m., my mom would have panic attacks, knowing what was coming. At dinner, all the children insisted that she sit next to them, and if she didn’t, they’d start screaming, their fragile sense of security shattered. Desperate to keep the peace, my mom would spend the meal moving back and forth across the table. During bath time, my parents traded off, each wearing my dad’s chain-saw earmuffs to muffle the hysterics. Getting all the diapers and pajamas on was a battle, and my sister had been giving all four of them bottles during the night, at different times, so none were on a steady sleep schedule.

For a long time, there was an otherness to the children, who, in their short lives, had already experienced — what exactly we didn’t know. What they had not experienced was clear: normalcy, stability, a parent who wakes up in the morning, a reliable intermediary between them and the world. They must have sensed, in those first days, weeks and months that my sister was gone, the confusion over who, exactly, was steering the ship. Everyone was out to sea before they even realized they were leaving the harbor.

“With your own children, there’s a comfort level,” my mom told me. “I’ve heard people say, ‘Your children are just you, basically — or they’re an extension of you, at least.’ But the grandchildren know their parents are out there, these idealized parents who are not us.”

My dad says the ongoing struggle for him is letting go of the story he told himself about life. “You grow up, go to college, get married, have a profession, raise a family, your kids graduate, you spend the next 20 years before retirement at the height of your career, maybe traveling and saving for retirement, and then you enjoy your grandkids and you grow old and die,” he said. “Well, that’s not happening for us. We will have been raising children from 1989 through 2034 — that’s 46 years of continuous parenting. Sometimes I do have panic attacks, I’ll say that. I wake up and think, I can’t sustain this.”

But one day at a time, they did sustain it. Days turned into weeks turned into years, while my sister seemed lost to time, trapped in the progression of her disease. And things began to shift. It became harder to imagine a reality in which L could recover enough to resume responsibility — at least, not for a long time. Most of her longest stretches of sobriety were when she was in jail, and when she got out, she slipped away again, surfacing when she got arrested, ended up in the hospital or asked my dad for an Uber ride or grocery money. My parents began settling into painful acceptance. And the more they accepted, the more the children came into focus. The more the children came into focus, the more it became clear that it wasn’t enough to merely accept the situation. Living with sacrifice was passive. Children need to be wanted, with the boundless devotion of parental love.

My nephew is the oldest, and he spent the most time with his parents before things went fully sideways. He’s 10 now, and his sense of abandonment is acute, his feelings explosive. He is constantly testing the depth of my parents’ commitment to him. He’s very smart and analytical; he can beat my dad at chess, and when he sets his mind to solving a problem, he can almost always do it. But he has a speech delay, which makes it hard for him to communicate. He struggles to control his anger, which can twist into rage toward his sisters or my parents or, worst of all, himself.

One night last year, my nephew became upset after getting caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to do. It wasn’t that big of a deal — my parents can’t even remember what he did — but he refused to apologize. He shut himself in his room and moved his mattress to one side, then gathered up all his carefully curated possessions and piled them up on top of it. When my parents came in, he told them to “give it all away,” his face buried in a pillow.

“I’d never seen that kind of deep self-hatred in a child,” my dad said.

A few months later, he heard his sisters asking my mom about a friend of theirs at school, who also lives with her grandmother. Child Protective Services had removed her from her biological mother’s care, and now the mother was suing for custody, wanting the little girl to testify in court about whom she wanted to live with. This was a terrifying prospect for the girl. My mom was explaining the situation, and as my nephew listened, he grew increasingly angry. He ran upstairs to my parents’ bedroom and started throwing things around. (“Though,” my dad said, “I did notice that he wasn’t really throwing anything hard enough to break it.”) When my dad tried to calm him down, he yelled: “I get it! You don’t really want us here. The only reason you’re taking care of us is because the police are making you do it!”

When my dad emphasized how untrue that was — that my parents wanted him and his sisters so much — my nephew’s body slackened, as if the fear were seeping away, and he let my dad hold him.

Moments like this were part of why my parents decided to sue for custody. Aside from the practical obstacles of parenting without legal rights — basic tasks like registering them for school, traveling or taking them to the doctor required tenuous workarounds — they felt that establishing their legal relationship with the children would enable a sense of emotional permanence. Even if the kids didn’t know the specifics, my parents did, and it helped them wrap their minds around the future.

“I realized at a certain point, there is no halfway,” my dad said. “You have to be all in. And for me, that’s been the biggest change. Maybe four or five years ago, my anger was volcanic. I fixated on what had been done to me. But at some point, I just had to say: I can’t have it both ways. I can’t love them unconditionally and hold on to the anger, because then my love would be begrudging. We choose to raise them and to love them, period. The best way I can resolve the conflict between my roles as father and grandparent is to love and care for my daughter’s children when she can’t. In doing that, I am also loving her.”

There have been moments over the years, when L is sober, that she has expressed gratitude for what my parents are doing. But usually, she exists in a reality of her own making. Either she can’t remember events clearly, or they are simply too painful to deal with, so when she is confronted with her hurtful actions, she gets angry and refutes facts or recasts blame.

After the custody hearing, L was especially furious with my mom, accusing her of lying because she said that L hadn’t been present enough to care for the children or make decisions about their lives. What about that time she had toured the kids’ school with my mom? It must have been unbearable for her to fathom all the life that happened without her, the countless hours of care that occurred in her absence.

Recently my mom found “The Anger Workbook,” by Les Carter and Frank Minirth. “They say that feeling rejected is one of the main reasons for anger,” she told me. And with the grandchildren, my mom said, “feeling rejected has been a big part of this whole scenario.” My nephew especially, she said, “feels rejected by his parents, so he makes me feel rejected because I’m trying to replace his parents. There’s all these layers.”

When I was growing up, if we were disrespectful, or did something my mother saw as immoral, her wrath was hot and vicious. She could shrivel you down to size with a few words. I distinctly remember being called “evil” once as a teenager, which would be funny if it wasn’t such a loaded word in our house.

Now, though, when people see her with the grandchildren, they often comment on how unflappable she is, an immovable anchor in the storm. “With these kids, I’ve realized that for their emotions to be regulated, my own emotions have to be more regulated,” she told me. “When the grandkids get unregulated, it’s huge compared to what you all were like. I’ve realized I cannot push their buttons, and when I do, I need to back off and let them calm down. So they’re sort of teaching us how to do it differently.”

My dad has said that for him, one of the gifts of raising the grandchildren has been a liberation from expectations — both for his own life and the children’s. None of this looks the way it was “supposed to,” so why hold on to old ideas about what will make him happy or what makes a happy child? He’s better at being present than he was when we were young. He has told me that when we watch old home videos, observing his younger self is painful. He can see how distant and distracted he is, weighed down by whatever ambition he was falling short of. I can see the lost moments on those tapes through his eyes: L, 5 years old with a lisp and strawberry blond curls, shrieking with laughter as we take turns getting in the plastic car, while the rest of us rock it over on its side, and then upside down, spilling the person inside onto the grass.

“When you were kids, we never really worried about addiction or the future,” he said. “We had really high expectations and hopes for you. And with the grandchildren, it’s not that we think they’re less gifted or that they can’t achieve the same high things. But our idea of what makes a meaningful life is different. It isn’t about accomplishment or achieving some career benchmark — teaching at an Ivy League institution or whatever. My idea of what constitutes a good life has gradually shifted. Using your gifts to serve others, having close relationships, living free of addiction. That’s success.”

Expectations are an odd thing, because you don’t always realize you have them until they fall apart. At least, that’s how it has been for me and my siblings.

My youngest sister, Sylvia, was 16 when the grandkids came to live with my parents, so she went from being the baby of five to a kind of older sister to four babies. Looking back now, she says: “I think Mom and Dad kind of stopped parenting me when the kids moved in. They supported me, but they stopped really telling me what to do. It was like the kids were their own team, and I became part of Mom and Dad’s team.”

Sylvia has never been one to make a big show of feelings, but she recalls a few times when she went to the counselor’s office and cried for two to three hours. “Like full-on meltdowns.” She had a scholarship to an all-girls private high school, where most of the students came from “perfect, cookie-cutter families.” She had a lot of shame about the situation with L and the kids and didn’t tell her friends about it. At home, she says, “I remember sitting in my room trying to do homework, and the screaming every night was just deafening. Like even with headphones on.”

Now Sylvia is finishing college in Los Angeles, studying acting, and my parents make it out to her plays every semester. But money is tight for them, and she works the opening shift at a Starbucks to pay her rent. My brother Owen is 29 and finishing a doctorate in piano on Long Island. My parents come up for his big performances when they can. But it’s hard for them to travel regularly.

Both Owen and Sylvia have talked about a tension I know well — the flashes of guilt that come with living far from home, the weeks that go by without thinking about what our parents are going through. We call and hear the news: L is in or out of jail, in or out of detox, asking for money, showing up unexpectedly, promising to go to rehab, disappearing with my mom’s car and phone. My parents are struggling to find a children’s therapist who takes Medicaid. “I don’t really tell Mom or Dad anything crazy or concerning that goes down, because they already have so much going on,” Sylvia says. “I don’t want them to worry.”

Owen tells me that for him, “I guess the hardest thing is that there’s no solution. That’s something I come back to every now and again. Like, there must be a solution. So I’ll flip things around in my mind, but I can never actually find one, because I mean, this is the solution. This is as good as it can be.”

Perhaps the one sibling who has benefited from living in a “grandfamily” is my sister Julia. She’s 33 and has an intellectual disability. Now that the rest of us are grown up and living far away, having the grandkids around keeps her close to the silly, gentle spirit of childhood. And when she’s not working in the cafeteria at my dad’s university, she helps out with the cooking and babysits; it gives her purpose. There are many birthdays in our family, and we celebrate most of them with homemade pizzas, crafted by Julia. “On nights we have frozen pizzas,” she told me, “the twins always say they like mine better.”

As the oldest, I have probably struggled the most with how much I should be helping my parents, and how much I can expect them to help me. I always imagined that after I gave birth, my mom would come stay with me and my husband for a while to help us navigate the challenges of new parenthood. But now that she’s raising four kids in elementary school, it feels like a lot to ask. We talked about it and agreed that she’ll come for a week when the baby is born.

Still, I can’t help feeling that the experience of being a new grandmother will be less exciting for her and more like the same caregiving work she does every day. She and my dad have told me how revelatory it has already been to feel all the joy without all the worry. But she also said something that made me wonder how much I was trying to press myself and my parents into a mold we never would have fit, even if none of this had happened.

A child’s pink backpack and a small desk in the Dodds house, with stuffed bookshelves to the right and children’s drawings and a calendar on the wall above the desk.

A desk in the Dodds house.Credit...Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

“I guess maybe I haven’t had the luxury of other grandparents who waited a long time for this and it being like the highlight of their life,” she said, “But also, Daddy and I have our own projects and interests, so our daughter having a child is not the center of our world. You’ll be the same way with your kids.”

There was something about this that stung, but it was also freeing. For a couple of years during the pandemic, my husband and I moved to North Carolina to be closer to my parents. Much of this decision came down to a gnawing confusion over my own responsibility. But our time near my family revealed the limits of my capacity or willingness to shoulder the load of care in any consistent, meaningful way. We would pick up the kids for school occasionally or have them over for a weekend every couple of months, but I was protective of my time to work and create. I realized I could love my parents and support them emotionally, but I didn’t want to raise my sister’s kids. And no one was asking me to. So we moved back to New York. There is a part of me that still sees this act of self-determination as a moral failing. But another part feels as if I’m choosing a life my parents raised me to live.

This past Thanksgiving, I was with my husband’s extended family in West Virginia when I began getting frantic dispatches from home. L had been bailed out by the children’s father after a month in jail, and my parents had agreed to let her stay at home for a night under the premise of leaving for rehab the next day. But one night turned into three, and by then all the meds she’d been on had worn off, and she became erratic. My dad asked when she would be ready to leave, and she flew into a rage in front of the kids, went up the street to my grandmother’s house and used fentanyl in the bathroom. Knocking and getting no reply, my 84-year-old grandmother kicked open the door, found my sister unresponsive with a syringe in her hand and called 911. All of this happened while my dad was on his way to the airport to pick up Owen and his girlfriend, who was coming to meet the family for the first time.

A few days after the overdose, my sister had a court hearing. The judge gave her the most generous possible sentence: one month in rehab, instead of five months in prison, if she paid the $900 she owed in probation fees. My parents hadn’t bailed her out in years, but they were so buoyed by the sentence that they paid the fees. Everyone celebrated. Then, that night, my dad found her passed out in the basement with a needle beside her and texts from the kids’ dad saying he was outside with an eight ball.

Most rehabs don’t accept opioid patients who haven’t detoxed, so this triggered a weekslong cycle. Once my sister had used, she needed to find an open bed at a detox center. Once she had detoxed and was set to go to rehab, she would pack and repack, obsessively, for the better part of a day. She would come up with more and more tasks she needed to complete before leaving and blow up at my parents if they rushed her. Then she would relapse.

My mom sat with L for many hours at detox facilities — all night, at one hospital — waiting for beds to open up. At the last one, my mom waited with her for a long time, then had to take care of something at home, so she left my sister on her own. “I still regret that,” my mom said. L left the hospital and disappeared.

My parents were badly shaken by the whole ordeal. When I arrived for the holidays soon after, my dad was particularly despondent. It was the first year he didn’t allow my sister to come home for Christmas. He told her that if she wasn’t in recovery, having her in the house just wasn’t safe for everyone else.

“Grief with an addict child is complicated,” my dad said. “We grieve what has actually been lost, and everything that might have been, while also fearing future losses, like our daughter’s death. You just learn to live with this overshadowing your life. Loss and hope are all mixed up together, making the future impossible to predict or make peace with.”

The one positive — if you can call it that — was that after my sister disappeared, the children seemed to recover quickly. There were some emotional outbursts, but far fewer than there used to be when she would come and go. They went back to school and swim practice and ballet class. They went to friends’ birthday parties and made Christmas lists. My nephew wanted string lights for his room; my nieces wanted gel pens and digital cameras. They took their allowance to the dollar store to buy gifts for the family. Life as they knew it moved forward.

People have asked my mom: When you had five kids, didn’t you think something would go wrong with at least one of them? She told me this incredulously, her eyes wide. It doesn’t matter how many children you have. When you grow a baby in your own body, watch her take her first steps and say her first words, you don’t fathom the odds that her life will become a nightmare. No one can live that way.

But now, with the grandkids, my parents do fathom the odds. They know what the kids are up against — having two parents with addictions, all the trauma of early-life insecurity and abandonment. “If any of the children end up struggling with addiction, we just want them to have all the tools and love in the bank to prepare them for the fight,” my dad told me. “So that’s what we’re focusing on now. They’ve been given to us for a time, but it’s a very short time, really. I mean, in our span of life, it feels like a lot. But in their lives, it’s a very short time. And then they’re going to choose their own path.”

It’s the kind of insight I’ll try to hold on to, as I become a parent. And even though I wish, desperately, that everything were different, there is something oddly comforting about raising a child at the same time as my parents. They haven’t been given the luxury of settling into old age, letting their views and interpretations of the past harden like fossils. They are in the thick of it, asking the big questions all over again: How do you raise children to be brave? How do you teach them right from wrong, or danger from safety, without filling them with fear? How do you make them feel special but not better than anyone? How do you push them to believe in their own potential without setting them up to fall short of expectations? How do you love them into loving themselves?

But in the end, if there’s one thing I’ve gathered from watching my parents raise children, it’s what a crushing, life-giving contagion hope can be. In recent years, my dad has talked about that I Corinthians passage everyone reads at weddings. And now, these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. “Love is the big one,” my dad says, “but people don’t pay much attention to hope. Even though it’s there all the time, right behind love.”

As of this writing, my sister has been clean for almost two months. She’s going to multiple meetings a day, is deep in her 12-step work with two sponsors. It’s the most progress she has made in years. When this stint of sobriety began, my parents kept saying, “She really seems willing this time.” But I confess that I didn’t have much hope. I was frustrated, so tired of watching them suffer.

Then, as I was getting ready for a baby shower my friends were hosting for me, I got a text from an unknown number. It was L. My stomach twisted, waiting for the hammer to drop. But she didn’t ask for money, or anything else. She just sent a meditation from a Native American elder on women being the givers of life. “The Earth Mother gives songs to the Woman to sing. These songs are about life, about beauty, about children, about love, about family, about strength, about caring, about nurturing, about forgiveness, about God.”

And there it was — a spark, hope catching. It does burn fast, if you let it.