

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

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Essays on Alternative Services



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the Washington, D. C., runaway house

Each year, between 10,000 and 18,000 young people in the Washington metropolitan area run away from their homes, or from the correctional or mental institutions where they have been confined. 400 or 500 of them find their way—through therapists and ministers, friends, hotlines and street gossip—to Runaway House, a broad, grey-white, three-story building near Dupont Circle. Once there, the young people, 75% of whom are from Washington D.C. or its suburbs, have a chance to “get their heads together”; to live for a short period with fellow runaways and the counselors who work in the house; to consider with them the situation they left and the alternatives they have for dealing with it and themselves.

I first came to Runaway House in 1971. Like the others, I was in flight from one world, in search of another. I had just finished my psychiatric residency, was newly enlisted in the U.S. Public Health Service, and was about to begin the two years of work which would fulfill my military obligation. I had managed to get assigned to the Mental Health Study Center, the National Institute of Mental Health's laboratory in community mental health. My assignment was to do research into “nontraditional services for youth.” Having battled hospital and clinic administrations for three years, I was eager to find a setting in which I could be comfortable and useful. I would justify my salary by writing about these groups—runaway houses, hotlines, group foster homes, free schools. I would justify my presence among them—in an atmosphere relatively free from the constrictions of hierarchy, rigid roles or therapeutic dogma—by being helpful to them.

Wondering what I could be to the Runaway House, anxious that I be relaxed and open enough to be accepted, I knocked on the door. At the window on my right, young faces, pale, framed by long hair, gathered and stared. “Hi,” said the woman who opened the door with a smile of welcome. Long after Ruth has left, long after many hundreds of runaways and several generations of Runaway House counselors have come and gone, her smile still lingers around the House. “The runaways,” she said in response to an unasked question, “have to ask us before they open the door. It might be someone they can't deal with, an angry parent, or a policeman with a warrant.”

Physically, the House has changed little since then. The living room wall is still covered with writings—love notes, drug lore, exotic names, praise of

counselors and counter-culture heroes and heroines, anti-establishment slogans; the furniture is still old, overstuffed and shabby; the kitchen is cramped; and the dining room, a desk in one corner, is still dominated by the huge wooden table at which meals are eaten and meetings held. Upstairs, the boys' room is still on the second floor; and the girls' room, then as now, neater than the boys', is on the third. There are mattresses, blankets and bunkbeds in each. Though they no longer live in the House, the women counselors still sleep on the third floor and the men on the second.

As we sat and talked and drank coffee, Ruth told me about the House. I liked the way she talked about the young people. Her concern for their dilemmas never seemed to intrude on her respect for their ability to choose and decide for themselves. And I liked too, the feeling of the House, the easy way kids had of passing in and out of the dining room to cook or check for messages or simply say hi; the casualness of the people—neighbors, friends of the counselors and runaways—who dropped in.

Ruth explained how she and Mario, the other counselor, tried to give the kids who came there some time away from their families and school and the hassles from which they fled; a place to pause and figure out what to do next. There were ten runaways there that day, an average number. Most would go home soon, after a few days or a week or two away, some individual counseling, and perhaps, a first session with their parents. Others, long on the road or on the run, might stay for a few days and move on. And still others, at the end of the rope with their parents, would try to be placed, with court permission, in a foster home, or in one of the two group foster homes that were associated with Runaway House.

I told Ruth and Mario about myself, how I had tried to "destructure" a ward in a mental hospital, to give the patients there the freedom to experience—with support and guidance but without drugs or coercion—whatever kind of anxiety or madness they were going through; how I wanted now to be part of a setting which, and a group of people who, functioned outside of institutional structures and strictures, who tried in the fullest sense to be therapeutic without being selfconsciously professional or moralistic or coercive.

I decided with them that I would hang around for a week or two, try to get a feel for the House and how I might fit in, ask questions, talk with the runaways, sit in at meetings and counselling sessions. I would share my feelings, ideas and observations with them and we would decide together if and how I might fit into the House.

At first I was a little tense, suspicious of the young people, of their abrupt demands and sullen silences, even as I had sometimes been when I myself was a teenager. But I began after a few days to relax with them as they jumped and screamed, laughed and pouted, and soliloquized their way through the House. I found I could talk directly to the young people. I was interested, and they were eager for an older person to talk to, to share the bravado of the evening before or the one ahead; or the pain of the inexplic-

able beatings, the endlessly repeated arguments from which they fled. "Hey, man," one would say, bouncing to attention in front of me, tugging at my sleeve, flopping onto a couch next to me, "Hey, man, do you think I can pass for eighteen?" Or another, genuinely puzzled, interested in my reaction to his family, "What do you think of my old man saying that?"

After a week, the counselors decided that I could and should stay around. They already had a weekly meeting with a psychologist who helped them deal with the hassles that came up in their work with each other—hassles that were magnified and intensified by their attempts to live communally and work collectively—but they also appreciated the help that I was able to give. Exempt from the daily pressures of the House, I could lend perspective to their dealings with particularly baffling or infuriating runaways. Accustomed to doing therapy with whole families, I could help them see the runaway as part of, as well as defector from, his home. And then, we all enjoyed the time spent together at the House.

After two and a half years, with experience with more than 2,000 runaways and three new groups of counselors, I am still around Runaway House. It is, as Debbie, one of the present counselors, reminded me, "where the kids are." And it is where, I add, people are still trying to be helpful without being coercive; compassionate without condescension.

The D.C. Runaway House was started in 1968 by an activist minister and a former civil rights worker. These men, like others in other cities, were responding to concrete needs of a group of young people. But the form of their response was shaped more by the spirit of the civil rights movement, the political point of view of the New Left, and the social orientation of the counter culture than it was by any conventional notion of social work.

The young people who came there were granted their full "civil rights" within the House. The counselors were committed to respecting their ability to make the decisions that affected their lives. Running away was seen not as evidence of psychopathology and potential criminality, but as a symptom of a family's decay and a society in turmoil. The Runaway House was a refuge and an alternative: There would be minimal rules to insure the House's survival, but no one would be compelled to contact his or her parents; neither parents nor police would be permitted in the House without the consent of the young person or without a warrant.

According to law, the young people who come to Runaway House are criminals. Running away—like such other "status offenses" as truancy; incorrigible, ungovernable, and unruly behavior—is a crime. Many of them have been adjudicated and confined for these offenses, a few for actual crimes against people or property.

Many others have been labeled by psychiatrists and psychologists: "acting-out disorder of adolescence" is most common, but many have been told that they have a "passive-aggressive personality disorder," that they are "hysterical," "schizoid," or "schizophrenic."

Within the first year it became clear to the founders and the staff they recruited that Runaway House was not adequate to the needs of many of the young people who stayed there. A few days away from home and some friendly advice might go a long way toward resolving an isolated family quarrel; a 16-year-old who had lived on her own for three years might need no more than a place to crash for a few nights. But between these extremes of pique and emancipation were large numbers of young people who experienced seemingly intractable difficulties with their families, communities, and schools. They could not go home without becoming embroiled in the same futile destructiveness, could not live on their own for long before being picked up or locked up. Again and again they returned to Runaway House.

To meet the needs of some of these young people, Runaway House counselors established other projects. In 1970, they set up a group foster home in which five or six teenagers who could not go home could live with two counselors; in 1971, another was begun. A job cooperative—designed to locate jobs, provide vocational counseling and training—was founded, as was a free high school. These served both runaways and other young people.

For several years, additional foster home placement capabilities were small. Young people who could not go to either of the group foster homes were generally referred back to traditional social service agencies. But, in 1972, a comprehensive foster placement service based at Runaway House was begun. Other House, an intermediate-length residence, was opened in the same year; young people referred from Runaway House and from social welfare agencies could stay there for two to six months while working out plans for the future—a permanent foster home, independent living, or return to their family.

As of this writing, the SAJA community that evolved from Runaway House includes a network of twelve service projects. Some, like Runaway House, Other House, and the group foster homes, are intimately related; others, loosely connected. They are staffed by 27 full-time workers, more than 20 volunteers, and 10 part-time consultants. There is coordinated program planning, but no administrative hierarchy. Each project functions as a collective, sharing resources and arriving at decisions. Young people who live in the group foster homes and attend the school are given full voice in, and power over, policy decisions. People who live and work in each of the projects meet in weekly discussion groups about program, policy, and common problems; many of them come together at monthly SAJA community meetings.

As Runaway House has grown and changed, as it has generated its own community of alternative services, it has begun to provide a bridge to adulthood for some young people. Many preserve the memory of their experience at Runaway House as a touchstone. At the House they were allowed to be themselves; their rights and wishes were respected, their responsibility for their own lives acknowledged and insisted on. At home again, under stress, they draw strength from it. They are not really trapped; they can always call

or write or return to Runaway House. Knowing that they can leave, they are free to choose to stay. Remembering, feeling their own strength, they are less likely to be overwhelmed by the struggle to work things out.

Other young people, having spent months or years in reform schools and mental hospitals, have sued to be released from their parents' custody and have been allowed by the courts to live in the group foster homes. And still others, wishing to live at home, have returned to volunteer at Runaway House, to do, for the first time, work which seems useful, to use what they have learned from their own experiences as runaways to help others who are troubled and confused.

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Jean has grown up with Runaway House. I remember her from my first week there, an attractive girl, serious, responsible, appearing older than fifteen. She had just run away for the fifth time from the mental hospital where her parents had put her the year before. She did not exactly hate the hospital, she said, but it was confining and degrading with its locked doors, its little pills, and its insistence that she always be accompanied by a staff member. Every once in a while she had to get away. In fact, the hospital staff had almost gotten used to her need for more room. They knew that periodically she would come to Runaway House; that she felt close to the counselors there and that they gave her emotional support.

Sitting in a corner of the living room, her legs over the arm of a chair, Jean debated aloud her current dilemma. Her mother, an alcoholic, was in a hospital again, this time with liver trouble and hypertension. Her stepfather, a midlevel corporation executive, now lived alone with his youngest daughter; they saw one another only during the stony silence of the dinner table. Should Jean try to go home to help out? Should she stay on in the hospital and continue the farce of being a patient? Should she try once again to get placed in a foster home?

Once before when Jean had gone home to work things out, her mother had "double-crossed" her, had said on the phone that she would be "so pleased"—here Jean mimics Mrs. Jerome's shrill voice—to have her home; and then had the police waiting for her. That was when Jean was first brought to the mental hospital and, against her will, committed.

Jean recalled that her diagnosis was "acting out disorder of adolescence." "My mother was boozing every day, and my stepfather was making it with her best friend. At night they fought so loud, breaking mirrors and bottles, we could hardly sleep. And they put me away"—here a giggle interrupts her outrage—"and said I was acting out."

Jean held out little hope for going home. Her parents felt that, except for Mrs. Jerome's physical problems, they were doing fine. It was Jean who was having problems, she and her two older brothers, who had run away before, and the younger sister who had taken up with a motorcycle gang. The Jeromes would give Jean neither her freedom nor the opportunity to work out family problems with them. They had refused the family counselling that the hospital offered and delayed the court proceedings that might have placed Jean

in a foster home. Clearly, she concluded, she would have to go back to the hospital; maybe eventually the doctors would let her live in one of the SAJA group foster homes.

I next saw Jean a year later. She was about to be discharged from a second hospital, one to which she was sent because she had run away once too often from the first one. The doctors at the second hospital had finally decided that she was ready to be discharged, that she was "much improved."

To me she said that she had learned "which games to play." When she had first protested against being in the hospital and had refused to take the mind fogging doses of Thorazine her doctors had prescribed, the staff had injected her with the drug—"I could hardly walk sometimes." When she continued to protest, cutting her wrists in frustrated rage, they locked her in a stone floored seclusion room and "threatened to put me on the shock treatment list for next week." Then "I started to behave myself; I got up early and went to school, and was sweet and nice and helpful, the most perfect, agreeable patient you could find." After nine months, with a place in a group foster home assured and the approval of the court, Jean was released to SAJA.

For a year and a half following her release Jean lived with five other young people and three counselors in the group foster home. Recently Jean told me that this time was "the complete turning point of my life." It gave her "time to try out different things—different fantasies of myself and different personalities . . . time to go from being a dependent mixed up, pushed around kid to an adult." She spent some of that time working on a farm that SAJA rented and some helping out at Runaway House; she learned how to live with a group of people; she went to a free high school and worked as a secretary; she became part of a community in which she and her ideas were respected and valued.

Now Jean is on her own, living with friends, working as a craftswoman, thinking of going to college. No longer legally controlled by her parents, she is trying, slowly, sometimes painfully, to be friends with them.

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There have been a dozen counsellors since Ruth and Mario left. Some have stayed for only six months; their time at Runaway House has been an interlude, an occasion for grassroots work with people before entering graduate school in medicine or law, social work or psychology. Others have become integral members of the SAJA community, leaving Runaway House after six months or a year to extend the House services or work in other, slower paced projects. Two former counsellors are involved in training new counsellors; another is a counsellor in "Other House," a residence where young people can stay for several months before they find a more permanent home; another has taught at the free high school which some of the Runaway House alumni now attend; a fourth works with families of runaways; and a fifth has begun a program to find foster parents—single people and communes as well as couples—for former runaways.

Still other Runaway House counselors have left for awhile, to study or

write or wander; to do carpentry or construction or pick apples. In recent months some of them have returned to Washington. They work nine-to-five jobs but are still part of the SAJA community. They spend time at Runaway House helping out when the building needs repairs or cleaning or when the number of runaways swells; they share their experience with new counselors and help provide them with a sense of continuity and history.

Though recent generations of counselors come from a variety of socioeconomic, political and educational backgrounds, they all, like the founders and the early counselors, respect the young people—their right to leave home and their ability to decide what to do next. This respect makes it possible for many of the runaways to look clearly at their situation, to decide what to do next, and to learn from their decisions. If the runaway is not constrained, it is possible for her to choose; if the person who is helping her refuses—even under threats from parents, hospitals or police—to be coercive or to violate a confidence, then perhaps she can trust that person to help her make choices.

At the same time the counselors know that the physical act of leaving home is a sign to even the most preoccupied or indifferent parent that something is wrong. Just as the act of running away may help the young person to become more conscious of himself as a person with rights and responsibilities, so it may provide the impetus for the whole family to take a look at the stresses which have resulted in the flight of one of its members.

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I met David about six months after I met Jean. He seemed to move without transition from self-absorbed silence to rapid fire speech. One moment he would be staring into space, a slim, dark, 13-year-old, sitting cross-legged in a corner of the living room; suddenly, unbending, he would rise to stand beside a counselor, offering to share a candy bar, a hand of gin rummy, or a game of chess. No, he maintained for several days, he would not talk about his parents, much less contact them; nor would he discuss his plans for the future. None of them were important. "Only," he would say, with a fixed and meaning stare, "only now is important."

After he had been in the House for several days, Rachel and Kurt asked me to talk with David. They were concerned about him. He had told them that a psychiatrist said he was "schizophrenic." Some of the runaways thought he was weird; they edged away from him at the dining room table, would not speak directly to him at morning housemeetings. And then there were times when the counselors felt uneasy—finding David awake at four in the morning, chanting, meditating on the dining room table.

Sitting upstairs on the floor of Kurt's room, David and I talked. At the beginning, our conversation was like a chess game or a wrestling match. He would lunge forward condemning all psychiatrists, and then retreat to obscure puns and conspiratorial giggles. For a while I listened, attentive but not understanding. Then he began to lean toward me, to speak softly, insistently, almost pleadingly about a desire to go far away, to woods where there was no human sound; to go with only a sleeping bag and a pocket

knife. There he would be free to be himself. Every action would be his. He would create every product he used: fire, shelter, food. I simply listened feeling with David the paradox which seemed to give such urgency to his speech. He wanted to be himself, had to be absolutely alone to be sure that it was he who was feeling, and acting and speaking. And yet he wanted equally much to be heard, to be taken seriously by another.

A few days later, David went home.

A year and a half later, he returned to Runaway House. He was taller, broader, more solid. His voice had deepened. Claude, who had never met David before, felt easy with him and the way he regarded his life situation. He wanted, he said, to leave his home. His parents were constantly nagging him about the length of his hair, his clothes, his grades, one friend's language and the length of another's skirts. He resented the nagging, but what made him feel worse—and he was not sure in view of his parents' obvious attention to him that the counselor would believe him—was a growing feeling that he did not matter to his parents; that he was not, in spite of all their nagging and their arguments, a member of the family.

David wanted to move. When he told them, his parents were "sure" he wanted to quit school, to move into one of the sex and drug saturated communes of their imaginings. On the contrary, David said he liked school and would continue no matter where he lived. What he wanted was "a real family," one where he would have "a place." He thought he would become a live-in babysitter.

Claude and Liz, the new counselors at Runaway House, helped David look into the possibilities of finding such a job. But they also reminded him that at fourteen he was very much his parents' child; subject to swift arrest if they decided he was "beyond control" or "in need of supervision," or simply if he was on the street when the police thought he ought not to be there. It was unlikely that he could get a live-in job without his parents' permission. And then too, the counselors wondered if David might not be able to work something out with his parents. He seemed to want care and intimacy, to be looking for more, not less, of a family.

David called his parents, told them where he was and that he was thinking of leaving home and taking a job. He said that he needed time to make decisions about his future; asked that they not try to force him to come home; and mentioned, tentatively, that he would like to see them.

After seeing his mother and father for an hour, David came to the counselors. He was still pretty sure he was going to move out; but just the same, maybe they could help him and his parents work some things out. At least he would like them to understand him better.

In the course of half a dozen sessions, the Wojack family spoke and played and lived out some of their tensions and confusion. The counselors were more the occasion, the catalyst for, than the directors of the process. They acknowledged and shared with all the family members the way they saw and experienced the Wojacks: How Mr. and Mrs. Wojack never seemed

to talk to each other, but only to discuss *things*; how they shifted with disarming swiftness from a quiet discussion of family finances to a fierce condemnation of David's extravagance; how Mr. Wojack turned away to look at his watch and Mrs. Wojack fidgeted with her eight-year-old daughter's hair while David tried painfully to talk to them about his loneliness; or again, the way David had, when his parents occasionally talked intimately to one another, of drawing their attention away, toward him, by humming to himself or giggling.

As the family became more comfortable with the counselors, stereotyped noncommunication and stale recriminations yielded to a less defensive reconstruction of the past. The Wojacks, it turned out, had always been a distant family, more inclined to control or withdraw from one another than to speak directly. They had always been focused particularly on David, the older son, the one whose brilliance, they felt, was destined to redeem the mediocrity of their own social and intellectual position. They knew that David wanted more warmth, that he felt their pressure to be oppressive. Indeed, things *had* gotten better after David returned from his last time away; his parents, realizing they could not control all his movements, allowed him to have more responsibility for himself.

But a year ago Mr. Wojack's father had been diagnosed as having cancer. Since then he had not been able to relax. Nightmares kept him awake. At work he made foolish errors. He did not want to burden his family with his concern, so he withdrew still further from them. At meals he read the paper. Later at night he watched TV. He spoke to David, it seemed, only when he was dissatisfied with him.

Mrs. Wojack had felt her husband's anxiety and withdrawal, which frightened and sometimes angered her; but she did not feel comfortable being cross with him; he already had so much to deal with. How could she burden him with her complaints? Both parents seemed increasingly to focus on David. His performance in school, his friends, his comings and goings, were events they could safely share and discuss and worry about.

David felt the intrusiveness and the distance, and felt too that he could not question either. When he did, his parents scolded still more, and withdrew, fidgeting behind the rustle of newspapers. They would not let him go out. He couldn't stand to stay home.

David got stoned at night. Grass and barbiturates cooled him out. He could giggle at the shapes of shadows and the strange puns they suggested; or nod out. After a while he was drawn to LSD. Tripping in his room he discovered a world of vividness, of bright colors and strange secret patterns. Yet, sometimes he felt a need for something more, a need to be seen and heard and touched by another. One night, tripping, he wandered naked into the street. When his parents saw him sitting cross-legged on the lawn, stroking his torso, staring through the trees toward the moon, they called the police.

In the family sessions the grotesque tragi-comedy of nonconnection begins slowly to grind to a halt. Needs and feelings begin to be shared. His

parents, closer to their real fears—fears about Mr. Wojack's father's death and their difficulties with one another—seem more relaxed about David and his future, more sensitive to his needs. Meanwhile, David is living with a woman, taking care of her young child in the evenings while she works. He enjoys the trust she puts in him, but feels after a few weeks, the pressure of the work and the length of the commute to his school. Then, too, the family sessions are helping him feel closer to his parents; he actually misses them. He visits home on weekends, then decides to stay. At the end of the fifth session he and his father embrace awkwardly. They say, after the next session, that they have had enough counselling for now; that things are going well at home; and that they will call Runaway House if they need more help.

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The people who work at Runaway House are trying to learn from its and their history. The fantasy of a counter-culture entirely separate from and independent of the dominant society has, in 1974 in Washington, D.C., faded away. To sustain itself, Runaway House has to establish strong supportive ties not only with other SAJA projects but with other community groups. To continue to provide a safe place for the young people who come there, the House must ensure its own safety and security.

Without sacrificing the fluidity of a nonhierarchical, nonbureaucratic structure to the demands of funding agencies or to dependency on professional fund raisers, Runaway House is struggling to become financially secure. Without diminishing their responsiveness to the young people, the counselors are trying to slow the exhausting pace of their work. Instead of being on call, as Ruth and Mario were, six days a week, twenty-four hours a day and leaving "burnt out," exhausted, after six or eight months, the present counselors are trying to pace themselves; to make better use of volunteers, professional therapists, students and community people. This is a matter of conviction as well as necessity. Runaway House and SAJA are stronger, more sure of themselves. There are lessons to be shared as well as work that needs to be done.

The counselors are slowly, tentatively, reaching out toward the larger society from which both they and the runaways have come. They are trying, without diminishing their respect for the runaway and his or her confidentiality, to work more cooperatively, more mutually, with parents and police, mental health clinics and probation officers.

My own concerns sometimes reflect, sometimes catalyze, these changes. I have become more a part of Runaway House and SAJA, attending meetings of all SAJA members as well as consulting with individual projects; I think now about planning for a future which involves me, as well as dealing with the present. I am more in SAJA and Runaway House, a worker as well as a consultant. Paradoxically, being more in has made me, like the counselors, more sensitive to the limitations of the work, to the exigencies of the world which surrounds us.

Together with Runaway House counselors, a psychologist, a social worker and some graduate students in psychology, I organized a program in counsel-

ing for runaways and their families. Over the last two years our counselors have met several times with each of 40 to 50 families; once or twice with many more. We have seen the same young people in flight from unchanged or deteriorating family situations; we have investigated with them over and over the same meager alternative situations; and slowly we have learned the importance of trying, from the beginning, to work with the runaway and his or her family.

We do not, as we were originally tempted to, react against the parents' view of things. If they claim that the runaway is "the problem," we do not respond reflexively, "No, *you* are the problem." Things always are much too complicated, too tragic, for blame. With unsettling regularity we discover a pattern of victimization, of loss and dissatisfaction and dimly understood unhappiness; a web which spins out from the tightness of the nuclear family back into history, out into the worklife of the parents and the schools of the children. Too often it dims vision and constricts all movements, save perhaps for the fitful bursts of energy that propel the runaway from home.

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Talking with Anita Foster one has the sense only of injustice. Here is a nice girl—the word nice seems peculiarly apt—a junior at a suburban high school who does well academically, plays field hockey and basketball. Anita is 16, bright, soft-spoken, earnest. Her face is broad and plain, her body chunky in new dungarees and a pressed plaid shirt. She has run away from home because her father, an Air Force pilot, forbids her to go out with Ron, a Black college student whom she likes very much. When she speaks with Ron on the phone, her mother listens in, reports later to her father. She cannot even visit a girlfriend without her mother—terrified that she might be meeting Ron—checking with the other girl's mother, asking when she arrived and what time she left.

In a few weeks Captain Foster will be transferred to a base in Mississippi. According to Liz, the Runaway House counselor who is closest to her, Anita is thinking about staying behind in the D.C. area. Yes, she says, she would like to be around Ron. But that's not the only reason. She has friends in school, real friends for the first time in sixteen years of periodic migrations; and she doubts that she will be able "to be myself if I stay with my parents."

I am prepared not to like the Fosters. Captain Foster has served in Vietnam and I have a particular horror of the pilots who dropped their bombs there. Nor am I sympathetic with what I understand to be the Fosters' racism or their moralistic intrusiveness.

For the first minutes of the family session I am tense and wary. The cool logic that Captain Foster wields seems at times an emblem of our national destructiveness as well as a means of dominating his daughter. It is my house, he says. There are certain rules. You are not to see Ron. We do not approve. You have snuck out behind our backs, betrayed our confidence. It is not that he is Black, though it is "harder" for interracial couples, only that he is too old for you. Mrs. Foster takes notes on a stenographic pad, turns away from my glance. Anita tries ever more weakly to refute her father's arguments, to

justify her disobedience even as she apologizes for it. Her parents gesture toward a silent younger brother, mention a sister who stayed home to babysit. They are good, respectable. They obey our reasonable rules. They are willing to leave their friends to go to Mississippi. Why can't you be more like them? I feel Anita retreating into a corner, her parents hardening against her. I'd like, I say, to find out what has happened.

Life for Anita and her family has gone from "fine" to "uncomfortable" to "unbearable" in six months. It turns out that Ron is Anita's first real boyfriend, the first guy who has been more than just an acquaintance or a pal. She thought from the beginning that her parents might be uncomfortable with her having a Black boyfriend, but she tried to put that out of her mind. He was responsible, wasn't he--in college studying to be a lawyer, working part-time. The first time he came to the house she knew they hated him. They had been so pleased that she was going out, and then so cold when they met him.

After she came home that night, her father came downstairs for a "talk." He forbade her to go out with Ron. Anita reasoned and argued and pleaded and finally, surprisingly for a usually stoic girl, she even cried. How could he do this to her?

There began a battle of stubborn wills, a dance of evasions and restrictions which only forced Anita further from her parents, fixed them in hurt intransigence. Anita did not go out with Ron, but she met him after school. When her mother saw her with him, the rule was clarified and reinterpreted. Anita could not see Ron. Now she only spoke to him on the telephone.

Still her parents were worried and angry. They resented her disobedience to the spirit if not the letter of their wishes. Why was she even speaking to him? Why was she still so interested in him? Though there was no evidence for it, the Fosters felt that Anita's school work was suffering; thinking she might be unwell they took her to the family doctor. He said she was fine.

When the Fosters told Anita she could speak with Ron only before 9:00 P.M. she began secretly to defy them. She would go to bed early and come down later, after they were asleep, to call Ron. This was when Mrs. Foster began to listen in on the extension. Feeling robbed of her privacy, as well as her liberty, Anita began, at first quietly, then defiantly, to sneak out of the house, to tell her parents she was going shopping or to slumber parties when actually she was meeting Ron. Caught in one lie, restricted to the house for a week, Anita submitted; caught in another, restricted for two more weeks, she

As they tell the story of their estrangement, the Fosters seem to unbend. I feel along with the self-justification and self-righteousness a kind of camaraderie. All of the Fosters seem to take a certain pride in presenting an accurate history of Anita's actions and Mr. and Mrs. Fosters' reactions, as if they were building a table or a boat together. And then, too, I hear, as they near the end of the story, anguish in the parents' voices, uncertainty and questions. How have we gotten to this place? Why have we done this to her

and ourselves? We have tried so hard all our lives to live up to what we were taught, to bring up our kids right, to make sure they had what we didn't.

I begin to relax, to ask the older Fosters about their parents. As they tell me, I try to feel what it was like to grow up a shopkeeper's son and a laborer's daughter in a small southern town, to go to a fundamentalist church three times a week, to live in a tight ordered world and then to leave that world. Captain Foster recalls the giant, almost inconceivable step to college and officer's training, the strange challenging ways of Northerners and the thousand pieces of painfully accumulated evidence that led him increasingly to disbelieve their "liberalism." And Mrs. Foster tells me about being a secretary and a housewife. She is shrewd and frugal about groceries, efficient at work; but she's uncomfortable and out of place at her children's schools, at the cocktail parties of always new neighbors. Anita and her brother listen quietly, respectfully.

Now I feel closer to the Fosters. I try to talk to them about what I have seen and felt in the room: how overwhelming Captain Foster can be; how sometimes he seems more intent on winning arguments with Anita than on helping her or hearing her; how incomprehensible Mrs. Foster sometimes is, seeming at once detached and intrusive; how sad it is that the whole family can shift from equilibrium and understanding to such painful estrangement.

The tableau dissolves, re-forms, deepens. Captain Foster speaks more confidentially, more hesitantly. He has always taught his children to think for themselves, to be independent, to take the consequences of their actions. He has taught them that all people were to be judged not by class or color, but for who they are. Anita, he agrees, is putting his principles to the test, and perhaps he is failing. And then Mrs. Foster speaks. Of course, Anita should decide what she wants to do. It is wrong of her to intrude so on her privacy. Still they were at their wits' end; there seemed to be no way for them to reach, to touch Anita. They both do love her. Anita leans forward, almost crying now. The tenseness ebbs away. I feel an almost palpable tenderness in the room. Anita is her parents' child. They have helped her to become as principled, as decent, as nice as she is. They are not bad people. The moment passes.

Captain Foster straightens as if he has touched fire. Mrs. Foster begins to question Anita: What has she done with her glasses? Aren't her clothes getting dirty? Wasn't she supposed to see the doctor? Her voice is a sugary coat of a bitter message: You are not capable of taking care of those things, Anita; not capable of being on your own. You need me. Anita protests, for a moment, then subsides, hangs her head and agrees. She *has* been irresponsible. Perhaps she isn't capable. Captain Foster speaks—pontificates—of discipline and self-reliance. Anita shrinks down into her chair, away from his words.

They are back where they were, pressured by Captain Foster's departure; the parents dominating, Anita evading. There is not time to work all this out. Anita must decide whether to go with her family, to give up and submit; or to remain, on her own, struggling to find a new place to live and money to

live on. If she decides to stay she will do so against her mother's imprecations and her father's logic.

Whether she stays or goes, Anita will have to live with the baffling contradictoriness she has discovered in her parents and in her own desires. All people are, they taught her, God's children, equals; but, they now remind her, you are not to marry one of the colored ones. And more subtly: You are free to do what you want as long as it is what we, your parents, want. If you do not do what, if you are not who we want, then perhaps you are not our daughter. Nor can she escape the contradictions between her parents' voices: You are to be strong and independent, says the voice of her father; and then her mother's voice, correcting, undercutting: You are also dangerously weak and needy. And within each of their messages there are further contradictions: "You can try to get along without us," her parents say at the end of our session, permission edged with challenge. "If you can't make it you can come home. We won't say—and then they do say it—"We told you so." All of these voices, these messages, are alive, contending in Anita.

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In a society so obsessed with private property and consumerism, it is not surprising that children are often treated like objects. Many parents view their child's running away as an inexplicable and unnatural aberration: It is as if a television set were suddenly to wander off. There is no reason, so many parents say, no reason for her to leave home. When "she" tries to tell them "the reason," they ignore her or drown out her words, denying that their child may have actually chosen to leave. Still, it seems that blame must be placed. The child, they say—desperately trying to deal with, to define and therefore reestablish control over the situation—must be "bad," a delinquent, or "sick," mentally ill. Either that or it is someone else's fault—evil friends, Blacks, hippies, drugs, sex, Runaway House. My child did not, could not choose to leave.

All too often the ideology and actions of the psychiatric and law enforcement establishment confirm rather than broaden this perspective. If a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker labels a child as sick then, no matter how much the professional may speak of family problems or of social and environmental influences, the young person's aberrations and point of view need not be taken seriously. She is mentally ill, irrational and therefore incompetent to have a valid opinion about her situation.

Recently two of the young people, aged 12 and 14 who have come to Runaway House have borne diagnoses of "epilepsy." There was no organic evidence to confirm the diagnosis—no abnormal brain waves or other neurological findings. One had periods when under stress she would stare into space; the other growing angry would fall crying and thrashing to the floor. Instead of trying to understand and interpret their behavior as inarticulate protests against confused and threatening situations, the doctors diagnosed and treated these girls, with anti-epileptic and tranquillizing drugs—with no change in the frequency of the "fits." The children and their behavior, not

the family situation or school or community, were declared to be sick and in need of treatment.

This kind of medical defining and prescribing can directly influence and dangerously distort family relationships, transforming children into patients. One runaway's father justified his indifference to his daughter's demands for his attention, to her desire for family counseling, by citing the opinion of the psychiatrist who had committed her to a State Hospital. "You are," he said to her with infuriatingly sweet reasonableness, "a paranoid schizophrenic. But that's all right. My real Diana is hidden inside of you."

The legal power which parents and society may exercise over people under 18 has even more complex and destructive ramifications. It is absurdly easy for parents to sign a "beyond control" petition for their child, to transfer domestic arguments to a legal arena in which the child stands accused; to a system in which there is often no appeal from confinement. The child is discovered, often after superficial investigation to be "the problem." Put him away, says the law—in the detention center, reform school or jail. Even if he is not sent away, the court has passed its verdict on him—"beyond control," "in need of supervision," "incorrigible."

Now the court is "responsible." It is the duty of its officers to subject every item of his behavior to the closest scrutiny. One judge, undoubtedly feeling it was his duty as well as his right, recently issued a court order forcing a 17-year-old to go to school. Should the young man, wearily struggling with his foster parents, his academic deficiencies and his outrage at being treated like a baby, miss a day of school—it's off to the detention center. Should his foster parents, people he has come to trust and love, not report his absence from school, they may be hauled into court.

This legal structure permeates and perverts even the services which it provides for young people. How can judges be fair if they feel compelled to impose strictures that have social and moral, not legal, sanction? How can the decent people who work for the Youth Division of the Bureau of Missing Persons help runaways, if they are constrained by law to arrest them? How can the kids trust the probation officers the court assigns to counsel them if these probation officers have both the power, and at times the obligation, to revoke their freedom; and how can the probation officers trust kids who do not trust them?

In this morass of moralism, paternalism and legalism, Runaway House—like sister projects around the country—must constantly struggle to keep a firm footing; to survive and change the system without withdrawing support from the young people. As our community grows more experienced and stronger, we have become able to reach out to those—police, probation officers, mental health professionals, judges—whose positions involve them with and given them power over the young. We have begun to tell them who we are and how we work, to understand who they are and what they do. Perhaps together we will be able to loosen the social and legal bonds, the anxieties and attitudes that constrain and oppress all of our children and all of us.



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