

SHATTERED

By Elizabeth Brown

"Both of Riley's wrists and his left ankle were broken. His skull was fractured in multiple places. The physician stated that it was the worst he had ever seen. His skull was almost shattered." I closed my eyes briefly before I continue. "He had HEALING rib fractures as well as four new broken ribs. At the time, Riley was seven weeks old. All he ever knew was pain. "

I paused for a moment to gauge the effect my words were having on the Judge before me. I am astonished at what I see. This seasoned Judge, who has presided over countless horrendous cases, has his head down and his face in his hands. His eyes are hidden but they probably looked as mine had when I first read the facts of this case.

Finally, the Judge raised his head. In a flat, lifeless voice, he says: "I find the State has met it's burden in this case by clear and convincing evidence. It is the order of this Court that the rights of both parents are terminated, and the child is freed for adoption."

And so it is over. This case has consumed me for months. I still have my questions as to who the actual abuser was. But if one parent abuses a child and the other fails to protect the child, there is often no choice but to terminate the rights of both parents.

Approximately a year later, I returned to the same courtroom. The case worker excitedly reported:

"Riley has been adopted!"

"Has he recovered from his injuries?" I asked.

"He is doing great!" she says with a smile in her voice. "The neurologist believes there will be no long-term effects from the abuse."

I released a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I caught the Judge's eye and he sent me a nod and a smile. Then he said to the District Attorney: "Call your next case, Counselor."

Please note that names have been changed to protect the identity of clients.