Couples receive “parent points”, which they can use to purchase their children. Most parents wait for a few thousand, but the Carsons didn't want to wait. They chose to buy the cheaper, hundred-point child.

Notes

Written in response to this prompt on Tumblr.

This story got a big reception on Tumblr. Huge. Much bigger than I expected. I wrote it in mid-December 2016, in a fit of inspiration, over the course of an hour or so. I made some minor edits (the text is still ~99.5% the same as it was when I first banged it out) just for tidiness and clarity and present it here.

Pete and Jane Carson were poor, so poor, and lived so far out away from town that they had trouble managing to earn many Parent Points. The points were awarded very strictly, and since their truck was…third-hand at least, well, they didn’t always make it everywhere exactly on time.

But they were so in love, and so enthusiastic about it, that as soon as they managed to reach that magical hundredth point, they practically ran to the Ward Building.

The lady took down their information and showed them all the brochures and read them all the disclaimers with a distinct air of disdain. It was obvious she thought no one had any business taking in any child worth less than a thousand points. Still, there was nothing to stop them from...
doing it—at least, nothing she could legally get away with—so she showed them to the hundred-point children.

It was agony making a choice. There were so many children there, and they were all so obviously in need of help. But one boy, the oldest and he was probably about seven, pointed them to a tiny child who’d been very sick lately and explained that the heat in the room didn’t work very well, and so when the little ones got sick, their tiny bodies sometimes couldn’t work hard enough to keep them warm and get them better. There was a look in his eyes that said sometimes there had been sick children who’d been eventually taken away and hadn’t been brought back.

So they took the sick child, whose name was Jakob, and gave him a home in their big, rickety farmhouse so far away from town, but they agreed. “That’s our next child.”

They fixed the truck. They worked harder. They improved their income. The next hundred points came faster, but this time the boy—Alex was the only name he’d give them—pointed them towards a girl. She had a twisted lip that made her unable to speak very clearly, and he said the other children—the more valuable ones—made fun of her for it. Last time, some of them had started hitting her and it took the hundred-pointers a long time to find a grown-up who believed them enough to investigate and intervene. She’d had a broken rib when the caretaker came in. So this time Delia went home with them.

The Carsons redoubled their efforts. It started to be easier. They even managed to afford a surgeon to repair Delia’s lip (a very simple surgery, they learned, but The Ward hadn’t felt they needed to waste the money on a child only worth a hundred points), but that set them back on when they were next able to get the parent points for a third child. It was two years before they went back to The Ward.

But every time Pete and Jane returned, Alex pointed them to a new child. Someone who needed them. Someone who could die if they didn’t get out. And points were awarded very strictly. The more children you had, the fewer points you could get towards the purchase of future children. Soon they had six children and they were only earning one point every few months.

When they went back the next time, the lady at the desk—a new one, since the old one had retired, but even more disdainful—informed them that the Parenting Board had determined them ineligible to purchase any more children based on their poor choices of children so far.

The word of the Parenting Board was final.

Pete and Jane cried bitter tears over that. They had a big house and a huge farm, and they were doing much better now that they had so many hands to help in the work. It was the kind of place a child would love to grow up with so much space and color.

But they loved each other and they loved their children, so they learned to adjust. Delia’s singing lessons were only one thing they started fitting in to their busy schedules, but she had such a beautiful voice that listening to her rehearse was actually pleasant. They thought that between that, Jakob’s soccer practices, and keeping the farm going, they were as busy as they could get, but soon it was soccer for Jakob, Henry, and Lionel, band for Darrin, singing for Delia, track for Sarah, and keeping the farm going.

The Carson children never lacked for friends or things to do, and Pete and Jane couldn’t be happier but for that one missing voice that they had known right from the start belonged in their house.

Hundred point children aged out of The Ward at sixteen. After that age, they were no longer legally required to attend school, and if they hadn’t shown enough...whatever, to entice a buyer,
The Ward washed their hands of them then. Alex celebrated his sixteenth birthday by being handed a paper bag with exactly enough money in it to rent a single-room apartment in town for one week—technically long enough to find a job, if he wasn’t too picky about what kind—and ushered very abruptly out of the door of the only home he’d known with cold hands and a perfunctory “Good luck” to chase him on his way.

Alex stared at the ornate doors of the front of The Ward and realized that he was totally, utterly terrified. He didn’t even know how to get anywhere to rent a cheap apartment or look for a job. He clenched his fist around the paper bag and drew it in close, knowing he must look very vulnerable and small and turned around, trying to chase away his tears.

Pete Carson was in the parking lot, leaning on a very old truck, waving him over.

Alex approached him warily. He and his wife had seemed nice, but then they’d stopped coming and he’d assumed they had all the kids they wanted. “Come to see me off?”

Pete shook his head. “It’s your birthday, right? You’re sixteen?”

“Um…yeah.”

“So you’re free?”

“Nobody wants a hundred-point kid. Who would want a free one?” Alex said with a sneer.

“I would,” Pete replied. “But I didn’t mean free like price. I meant free like jail.”

Alex looked back to The Ward, realizing he couldn’t disagree, and finally said, “I don’t know how to get into town.”

“Alex, I will take you anywhere you want. But my wife and I, and our kids, would be very happy, if you’d come stay the night with us.”

He had nothing but his little bag of money and the clothes on his back and no shoes, so he clambered into Pete’s beat-up old truck and let him take him away from town.

The Carson house was a big, white farmhouse with a run-down gray barn out back. Pete showed him inside, past five rooms with little wood nametags on them, and led him upstairs and down a short hallway, past another room with a nametag until they reached…a room with his name.

“What is this?” he demanded.

“We started setting this room up for you on the day we first met you,” Pete replied.

“But you had Jakob.”

“Jakob is a wonderful son, and we are so glad we have him, but we wanted you too. We want all the children we bought, but we want you too. We’d have even more, if we could.”

Alex wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he pushed the door open.

The room was clean and neat and empty, mostly. There was a bookshelf with a dusty Bible on it and nothing else. A bed with a thick, plain, blue comforter was beside an enormous window that had a lovely view out over the countryside. There was a desk with a neat chair that was totally, utterly empty, and no pictures on the wall. What was on the wall were little framed newspaper clippings. He squinted at them and realized they were all about him. The tiny one-liner that named him the third-through-fifth grade winner of the Hundred Point science fair. The time he’d
gotten a full sentence when he’d joined the Hundred Point football team. The entire article when the Hundred Pointers—a school so forgotten they didn’t even merit a mascot—had managed to win a single game. The whole county had been shocked. Many parents had been angry. They’d paid so much for their children, didn’t they deserve to see those children win? As he recalled, the writer had agreed, but those sentences had been scribbled out in heavy black pen, so he didn’t remember what they said for certain.

Alex slowly turned, and caught sight of an open closet. In it was a small amount of clothes, just enough for a few days, for someone who was roughly his size. He stared at Pete.

“We didn’t know what you’d like, so we didn’t want to decorate and be wrong,” Pete said, as if he owed Alex some kind of explanation. “And obviously, you’d need more clothes if…” He took a deep breath. “If you stay. And you don’t have to. We would never make you stay if you don’t want to. But you’re not in The Ward anymore, Alex, so the Parent Board can’t stop us from letting you live here if we say you can. And you can, Alex. If you want to, you can live here forever. We’ll fix this room up however you like it, and you can change whatever you want, and we’ll get you different clothes if you don’t like these, and—”

“I can’t afford you,” Alex interrupted quietly. “I barely have enough money for rent.”

Pete stared at him and then shook his head. “Alex, we don’t want you to pay rent. We want to, finally, bring our last son home.”

And Alex looked at him and realized that he didn’t even know how he would decorate this room and he just sat on his borrowed bed and stared out the window and couldn’t say a word.

He didn’t speak when Jane crept in with a plate of dinner, or when he heard the kids banging up and down the hallways, confidence and happiness and security.

He didn’t speak for two days, but he didn’t leave either. Didn’t even leave the room. Not until Jakob poked his head in and said, “You got any dirty clothes?”

Alex scrubbed a hand over his eyes and tried to pretend like he hadn’t been crying in confusion nearly every moment he was there. He looked at Jakob and blinked. “What?”

Jakob waved his hand over his nose. “Sheesh, never mind, take off what you’re wearing, geez. You did find the bathroom down the hall, I hope?”

Alex shucked off his gray sweatclothes, boring but cheap, so they were perfect for hundred-pointers, and handed them to Jakob. “Yes, I found it,” he answered quietly.

Jakob blinked and said, “You’re naked.”

“There are my only clothes.”

So Jakob marched to the closet and fished out some blue pants in a rough material, a black shirt, and another shirt that was white, but had blue and gray and yellow lines all over it in vertical and horizontal stripes. “These are your clothes. I’m going to throw these other ones away. And I’m telling Dad you need underwear.”

Alex took the clothes mechanically.

Jakob looked at him quietly. Finally he said, “Mom and Dad tell me that you told them to pick me. That I was sick and you were afraid I’d die.”

Alex nodded.
“They saved my life, taking me home. And if you can be brave, they’ll save yours too.” The boy, the picture of health and tall for his age, headed for the door. “If you want, you’ve got just enough time to get dressed to come down for supper,” he called as he breezed out.

Alex had dinner with the family that night. And every night after that.

End Notes

This story was written as a stand-alone piece, although I was so eager to post it that I tacked it onto the bottom of a response to the same prompt by another author. If I had spent even half-a-minute thinking about it, I would’ve responded to the prompt in a separate reblog. But, I didn’t, and it seems to have started a trend. Since then, other stories have been added to the same thread by other writers, including one linking my story to the one by the first author (which I was very flattered by). However, my original conception was for this story to be its own little one-off.

However, I absolutely do not want to discourage anyone who prefers reading this together with the others. Nor anyone who chooses to envision it as part of the collaborative "hundred-point universe" or any of that. Obviously, this whole idea has resonated with a lot of people and I hope that it continues to do so.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!