



A BITTERSWEET STORY WITH A BITTERSWEET ENDING

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Keywords: Indigenous youth, Indigenous youth in care, Indigenous child welfare, reconnecting with Indigenous identity, returning home

Acknowledgement: We raise our hands in deepest respect and gratitude to the ancestors and families of the ləkʷəŋən and WSÁNEĆ nations and to our own ancestors and Nations. We raise our hands to all Indigenous children and youth who have grown up in colonial systems, to those we have lost, and to those who survive, resist, and imagine justice and resurgence. INVINCIBLE is grateful for funding provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Insight grant 435-2020-1191) and the Canet Foundation.

Angel Houle is an Indigenous youth in care and an INVINCIBLE youth storyteller/researcher who has been working with the Kinship Rising research project at the University of Victoria since 2023.

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by
ANGEL HOULE

A Bittersweet Story
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This is my story of growing up in the foster care system, as well as dealing with a rough start to life, and then going back to my home community.

This is my story of growing up in the foster care system, as well as dealing with a rough start to life, and then going back to my home community. I felt many negative emotions as a result of my not-so-great experiences involving foster care. If care is even the right word.



There's the anger and distress I often felt, along with confusion and worry. I never stayed in one place long enough that I could truly call home. I was in and out of care or living at another family member's place.

Sometimes my mum would get a place that we could consider our very own, but that never lasted as long as I wanted before we moved on. It was either into care or a women's shelter or to a whole other province to start all over again. It all happened in such a short amount of time - from birth until I was around 7 or 8ish. It's very overwhelming to remember every detail.

The family members that my siblings and I would stay with included my grandparents on my maternal side, my great grandma, and my great aunt. I wish I could remember the foster parents. I do remember the things they did. Some memories are nice, and some are just down right not okay.

Being stripped away from my family and siblings without any notice is something I never got used to - no matter how many times it happened. As the oldest, I would be the one that was separated first when they couldn't find a place for all of us. I missed everyone. It was rarely ever explained to us why we were leaving or where we were going.

Despite the many negative experiences I had, there were also many good ones. My family often took my siblings and I out to do fun things. My papa took my sister and I to a circus, and I loved the balloons. My uncles would take us sledding and to the park. So many good memories with my family that I will hold with me for the rest of my life.

So, those were the fragments of my life between Manitoba and Alberta. But how did I get from there to the west coast? One day, we got picked up from the shelter and taken to a bus station. No one really explained what was happening. My mum just told my siblings and I that we were going on a little vacation to Vancouver Island.

We saw pretty mountain views and it was the first time I ever saw the ocean! It seems silly now, but I only realized that we weren't actually on vacation when a van pulled up to the bus station. We went into care again until mum eventually got a place. We lived in a little trailer with a pretty ocean view. She worked hard to get us back that time.



After many years, we moved into a house. There were many problems and we often dealt with annoying social workers that were not very helpful. I have very strong feelings about the people that came into my home saying they wanted to help us, only to end up making excuses and making our lives harder. I could rant long and hard about it, but I'm not gonna do that today.

Many issues occurred and we eventually made our way to our grandparents' place back in Manitoba where I was born. They had not heard from us for a long time. They didn't really know where we went. Our little family stayed with our grandparents for a while and then we slowly made our way to a women's shelter in Fort Mac, Alberta, with a few stops along the way.

Things turned sour while I was up in that little town, so I took a bus back to Vancouver Island by myself. I can't even put into words the emotions I felt when leaving without knowing what the future would bring.

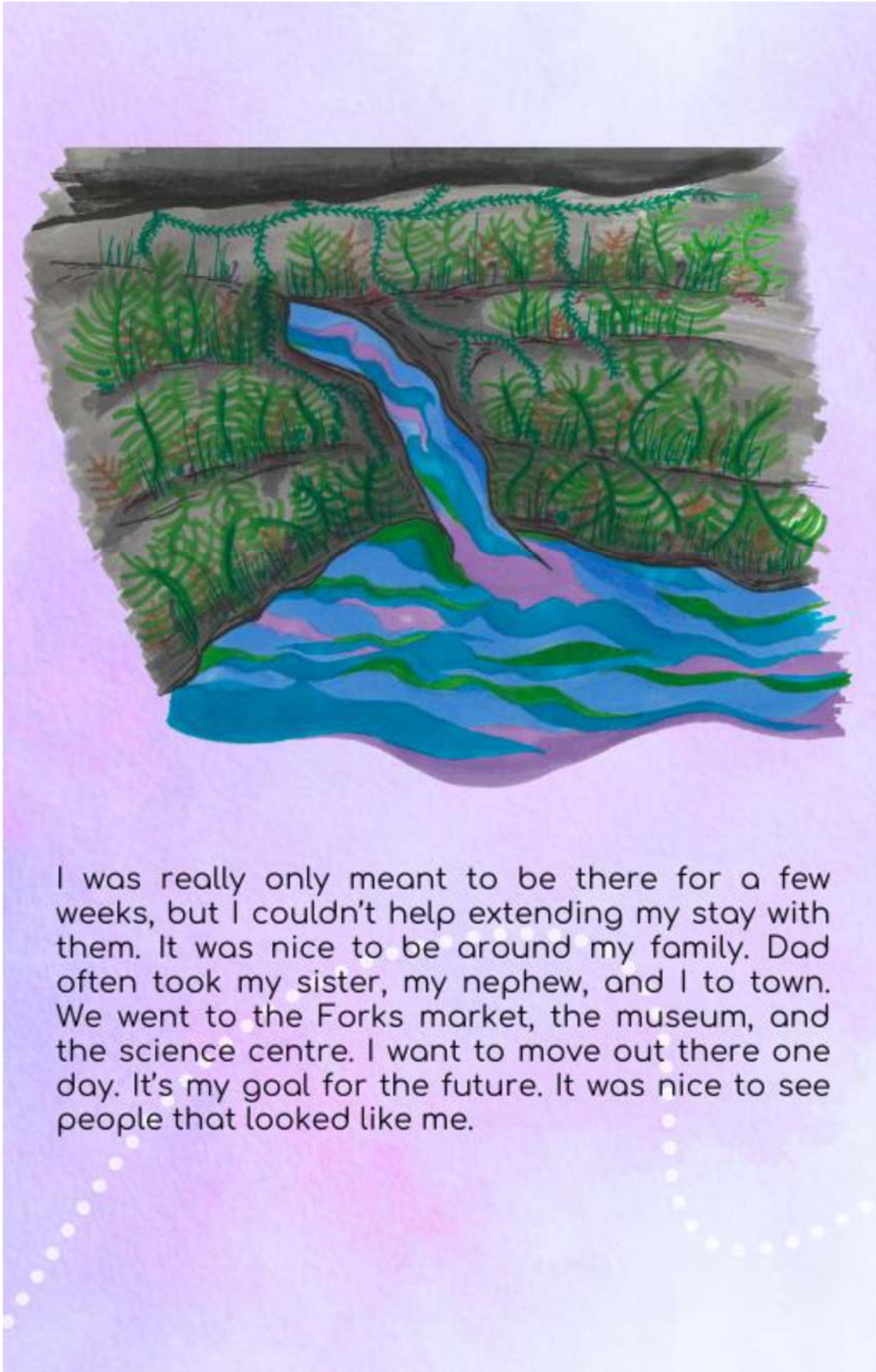
The journey back to the island was so dreadful but I did get the help of some of the nicest people I've ever met. They helped me get back on my feet and realize that I am strong. I never stressed so hard in my life.

Once I got back to Victoria, someone got in contact with the local child and family services, and there was something about a youth agreement. I was worried that they would put me in a group home or something. No one explained to me in full detail what was gonna happen until I sat with a worker.

I often felt like a burden to the people around me for staying with them and doing nothing in return for their kindness.

Now to the getting back home, following six years of my life and many hardships. My sister suggested I come to Winnipeg to see her and my dad. My dad sent some money. I was terrified and full of anxiety. I had never met this sister in person before. I also got to meet my little nephew! I was feeling so many emotions—of course, the joy and happiness of meeting a new side of my family, but also deep anxiety of messing everything up.

I didn't want any of them to hate me, and that fear was part of the reason I had put off seeing them for such a long time. But the fear was unfounded, they were most welcoming. It felt nice to be and feel a part of a family after not having that for so long. Sure, I met some people on the island that were very welcoming, but I never felt like I wasn't intruding.



I was really only meant to be there for a few weeks, but I couldn't help extending my stay with them. It was nice to be around my family. Dad often took my sister, my nephew, and I to town. We went to the Forks market, the museum, and the science centre. I want to move out there one day. It's my goal for the future. It was nice to see people that looked like me.

Instead of going back to Vancouver Island, I migrated to my grandparents' house. I was happy to see them after having not been able to for a good portion of my life. They are very dear to me and it was nice to hear stories about my youth and their youth. My uncle also lived with them. I love that guy. He always used to spoil my siblings and I when we were younger. I also met my aunt. She made the best food and I always felt so comfortable around her.

There were stories of my grandpa taking us to the park or the little circus in town. He also remembered how I liked balloons more than the show. What can I say? I love balloons! Almost as much as I love the precious memories I share with my grandpa.





One of the many stories my grandparents told me that I vaguely remember was when I got lost at a powwow.

My grandpa and I were dancing until I got tired and I wandered off to find my mum. He kept dancing, not realizing I was gone. I didn't feel too stressed or anxious. I often ran into people that knew me, and I ended up with some aunties feeding me snacks.

Everyone told my grandpa that he should have been watching me better. It's a funny story in hindsight, but papa was terrified at the time.

My grandma told me stories of her youth. She is a strong woman who went through many hardships of her own and came out even stronger from it. I use her as a great example for the kind of person I want to be in the future. I also loved talking with her before bed, she told me many stories and memories.

I'll remember those moments with the same 3 movies always playing in the background on the TV in her room. It brings me back to childhood. I felt safe and comforted.



I received many gifts and medicines from my family and tons of people. I started my really long vacation with a backpack and ended up leaving with 2 suitcases. Then it was off to the next stop in my travels. We were headed to Alberta to visit more family

For the sake of my own wellbeing, I will keep the fine details of what happened during this time to myself. I will say that I was reunited with my younger siblings. I love them so much and they grew up to be so smart and sure of themselves. It's a strange feeling, seeing them go from children to mini adults. I missed so much of their growing up and it hurts.

I wish things weren't like this. It was hard leaving and not knowing if I was ever coming back. There was a hole that couldn't be filled in my heart when I left.

My overall experience of going home was filled with ups and downs. I felt so overwhelmed. There are so many things I wish I could speak about.

Things are so bittersweet. That's the best way I can describe it. I got many gifts that I still hold to my heart.

As for living far from home, it makes things so difficult. I want to move closer; I don't know why I am still here. Maybe I have too much resentment and emotions for my past and the people of my past.



Where were they when I needed them? Many of them knew I was struggling and what I had to deal with when I was young. Am I only good to keep in contact now that I won't be a burden? Why didn't they fight harder to keep me when they had me?

I know I overthink too much. I put so much effort into bottling up my emotions. I understand that they were most likely going through their own troubles and battles. I shouldn't be too hard on anyone for the way things turned out, including myself.

Now I sit with all the good experiences and memories, along with the negative.

I wish I didn't have all these bittersweet emotions associated with my youth. Those emotions followed me into adulthood. It's hard living away from my family. It's hard having a chaotic life going in and out of care and not knowing what will happen. The ending to my story is very much bittersweet and ongoing.

Writing out a part of my story is very healing for me. Writing helps me get out all my emotions, both the negative and positive. Writing has shown me a new way to communicate as well as learn about my emotions. I am able to process my emotions and my upbringing in a way that I feel is grounding.



For my future I hope to succeed in anything I choose to achieve and grow in a way that I deem fit, for myself and not for anyone else. I am going to school and using writing to help me heal and grow. I have come so far and wish and hope for many good things to come. I hope to inspire others to achieve the things they wish to achieve.



Angel Houle
First Nation

Life Plan: Enjoy as many pretty views as I can, as I love to explore nature.

Likes: Collecting rocks and sea glass from beaches, and playing boardgames.

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