



FREEDOM

Dorothy Stirling

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INVINCIBLE: Our Voices from Care. A Storytelling Project by
Indigenous Youth in Care

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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.

Dorothy Stirling 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 2021.

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Freedom



By Dorothy Stirling



In the early morning of January 27, 2016, at exactly 9:02 AM on a Wednesday, I entered into the foster care system on a youth agreement. I was scared. I had little to no experience in the world. I had only traveled downtown twice before and did not even know that there were skyscrapers in Victoria. I had no idea that Langford was full of flowers, or that lizards came out in the summer, along with my freckles and cherry blossoms. I never knew that buses could take you across the city, and the freedom this could give me. I had no idea how the world worked, and I had no idea who I was.

I was sheltered, to say the least. I didn't do normal things that most 16-year-olds did. Once I got on a youth agreement, I worried about and navigated parts of life that most people my age had already dealt with a long time ago. On a youth agreement, you're allowed to take care of yourself as an adult, using skills most youth my age would have already practised such as cooking your own meals, buying your own food, going out into the world on your own, and buying bus tickets to commute to a job or school.



I didn't have those skills; walking into adulthood wasn't exactly easy for me. I thought it was going to be a party where everything would go perfectly fine, because I couldn't imagine how anything could go wrong. Instead, on my first week on a youth agreement, I discovered how expensive food and the cost of living were. I instantly knew this was not going to be as fun as I thought it would be.



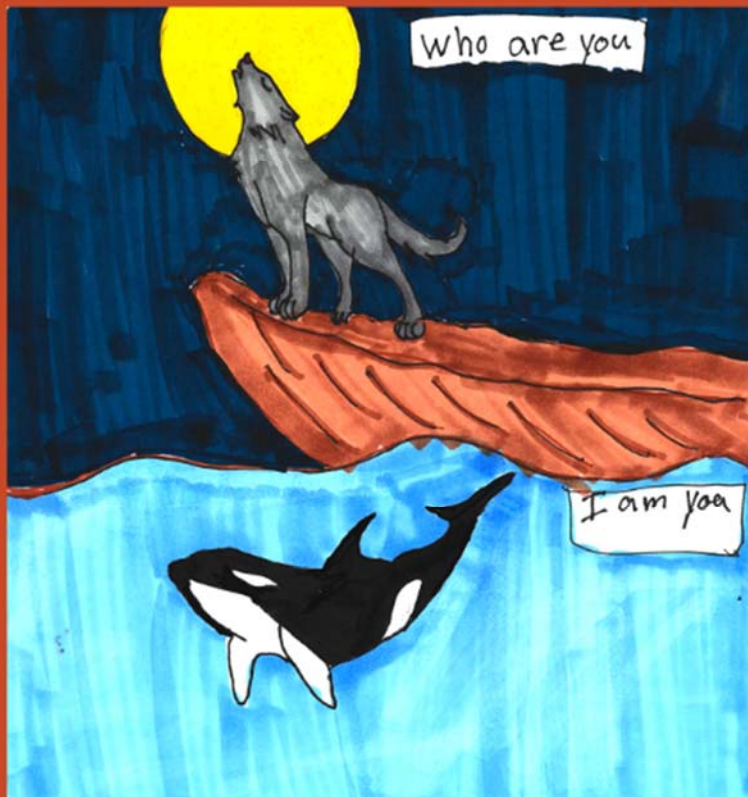
The most important life skill is reading. I don't know what happened when I was younger that led me to not being able to read, and how the school let me go through every single grade without knowing how. I could not count or read or spell any of the colours. I couldn't read a single thing on the whiteboard, understand what was said in school, or what I was supposed to write down. I didn't know what homework I was supposed to finish, so I never even put it in my bag.

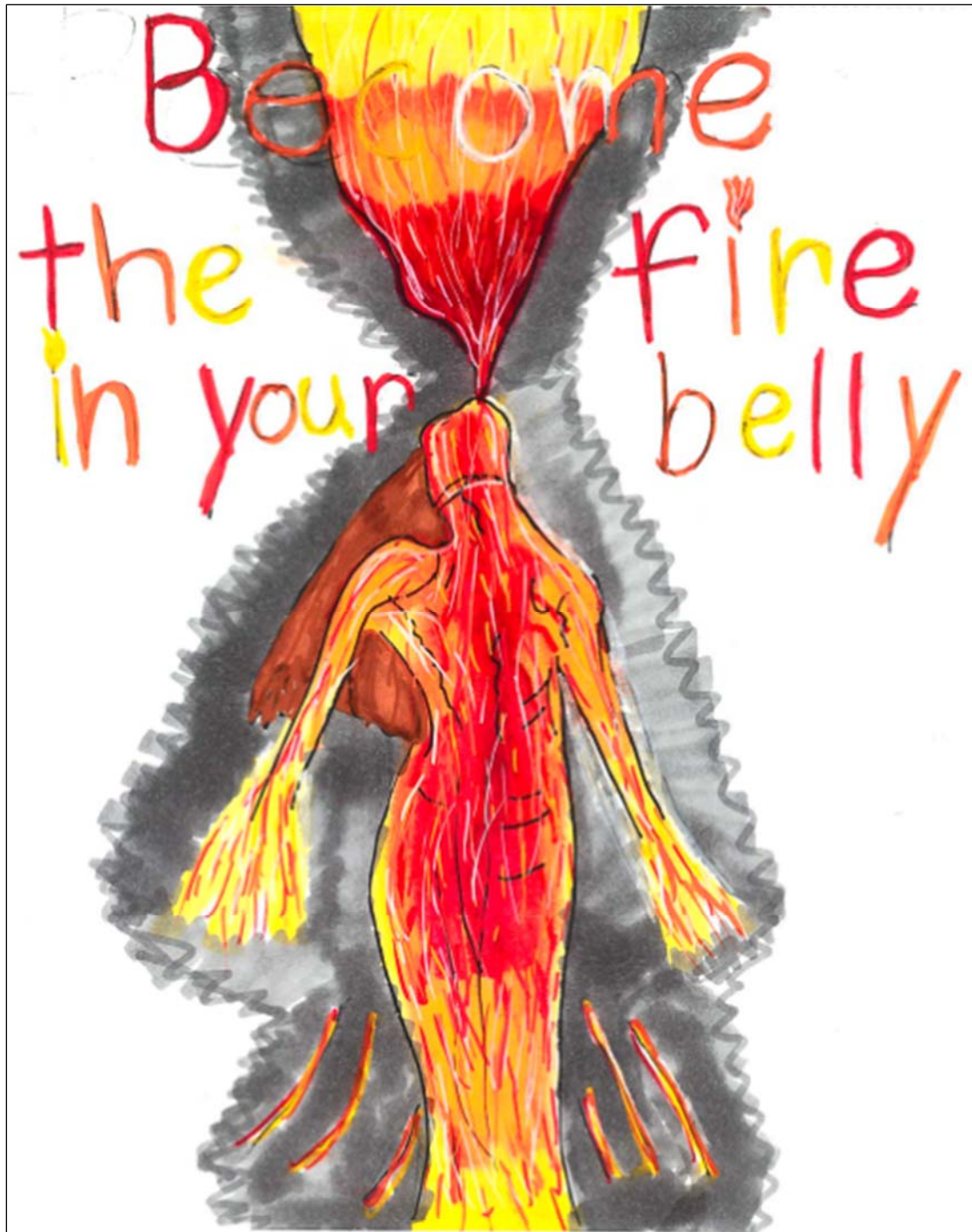
Throughout middle school, I decided I would be fine in the world without knowing how to read. I thought reading was just a skill that only some people needed to know. The way I was getting through school was through poetry and artwork – some of my teachers supported me to learn differently. I even did a poetry book cover for a local non-profit agency during the Covid-19 pandemic.



At 18, I moved into my best friend's family home where we shared one room with two beds, a closet full of chaos, carpets full of paint splatters and long strands of hair, and pencil shavings. I was an artist and she was a writer – we made a lot of memories together. I lived there for my last year of high school and my first year of college. I learned how to really take care of myself from my amazing adopted mother and stepdad. They took care of me, grounded me as a person, and taught me the life skills I needed for adulthood. As horrible as I was at driving, they also helped me learn how to drive. I am grateful to them for all the care they gave me.

Once I turned 18, I knew I needed to learn how to read somehow, but at that point, I honestly didn't even know how to read my middle name. I knew that even if I tried my hardest, I would never be able to complete school, because I simply couldn't even read. While my peers were learning how to drive or worrying about prom and university programs, I never had the reassurance that I would graduate. College was a thought that would cross my mind at times, but pursuing that level of education without having basic math, writing, and reading skills not only felt daunting – it felt nearly impossible. How could I work on homework when I couldn't even read at a first-grade level as an 18-year-old?





So many people thought I was going nowhere and that I would do nothing. This motivated me to show them that I could do this. I could learn how to read.

Finally, one of the Educational Assistants at my school took the time to help me learn to read. She worked with me every day after school for two years and with her help, I learned to read. We started with preschool level reading, numbers, and colours. I literally had to work my way through each grade over two years. I made flashcards, studied, and finally learned to read at 18. Writing is still hard - but I wrote this! And I am surprisingly good at math and art. I graduated high school, and I am proud of myself because I didn't think I would ever complete school.

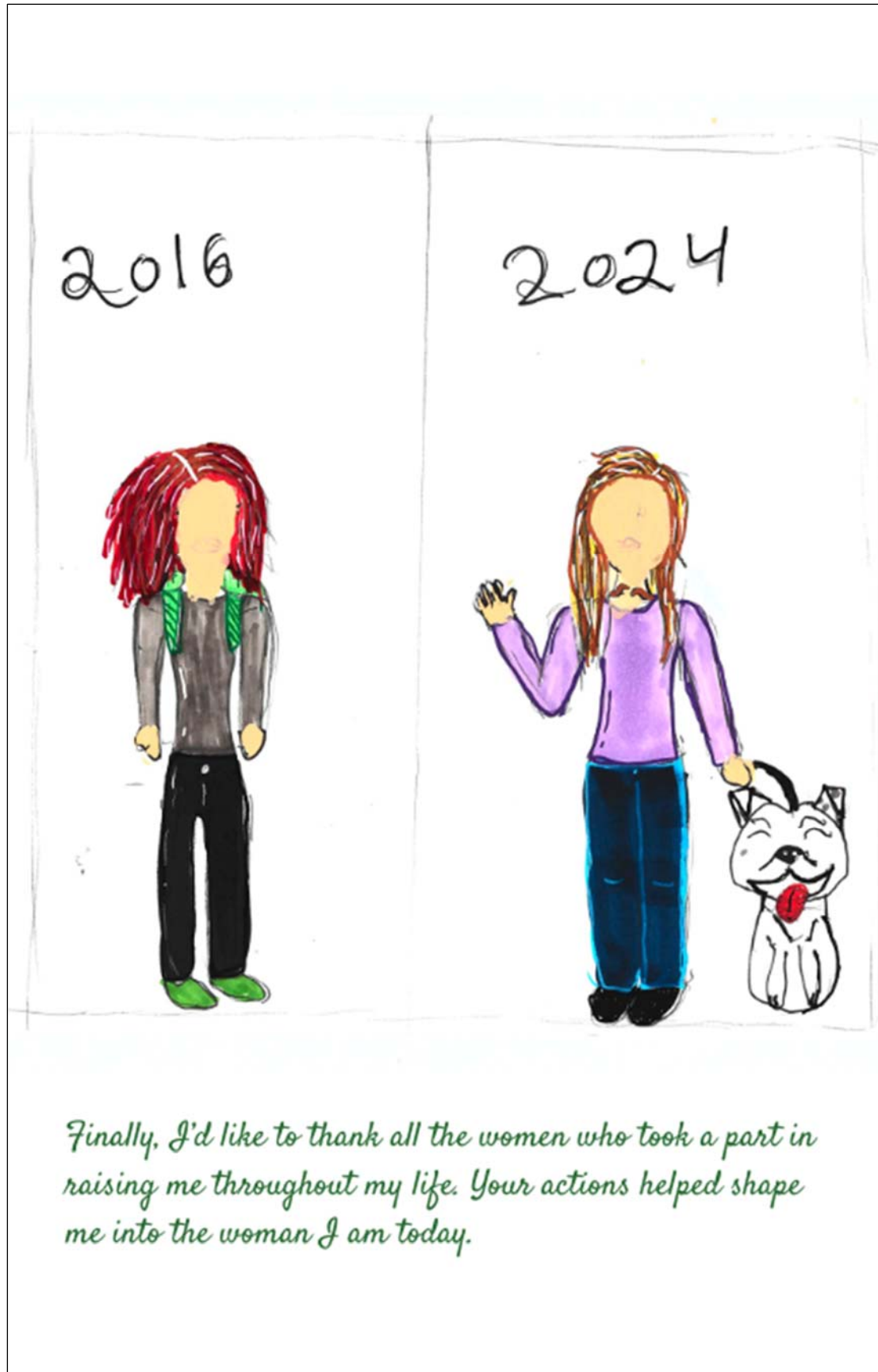


I went from knowing nothing about myself to growing up, learning to read, and taking care of myself. I went back to school, dropped out, and went back again - teaching myself that no matter how hard things get, I can continue. I have the most important things, the simple things in life. I can plant flowers in my garden in the summer, walk my dog in the morning, and stop to smell the flowers whenever I decide to. I can do whatever I want with my life because I have freedom - that is all I ever wanted.





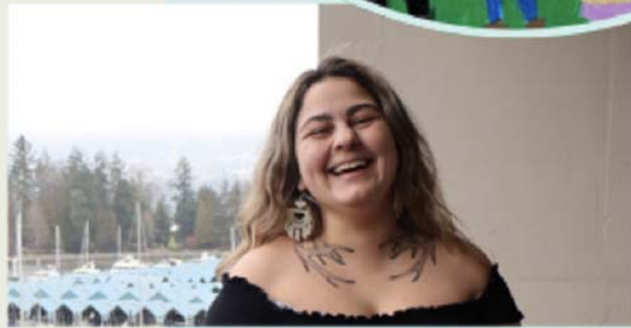
I am proud of learning how to take care of myself, having my own space and place, and having the responsibility to cook, clean, get groceries, budget, schedule, and be a dog parent – navigating adulthood. I successfully got myself to school, learned to read, and now I live in a nice house with my partner, his family, and our dog. I love art and want to be a tattoo artist. I am seeking an apprenticeship so that I can be a tattoo artist.



Dorothy Stirling
Lower Nicola Valley
Nte?kepmxc Nation

Life plan:
Working to be an Indigenous
artist and tattoo artist

Likes:
I like to write and illustrate



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