

I am Homeless but not Hopeless

I am homeless. A First Nations woman and 35 years old, I am unique, as is everyone. I was born to parents who used and I was in foster care for 18 months and then considered for adoption by a First Nations family, but that did not work out when they saw my problems and then adopted by a white family: my parents. I had a good and stable upbringing, but my birth history chases me relentlessly.

I started using somewhere around 15 to try to outrun myself, I guess. I am in rehab now trying to figure it out. My parents are successful, especially my mom and maybe sometimes I don't feel that I can be that. My head is always chasing different things when I know I should chase other things. I have 100 thoughts a minute even when I am not using. It is hard chasing down all of those thoughts. So I had a nice stable life and then I learned the street life and I bounce back and forth. My mom says that I have a higher tolerance for risk than most. I guess she is right. I look at my sisters who all finished school- I didn't. I want that but it's also boring. How do I balance me?

I have two children from two different dads, and my mom has both. I can tell with the older one that I have really influenced him in a good way but in a not so good way. My youngest is two. She is not yet influenced. She is chill. I stayed off stuff when pregnant with her...so maybe her life will be different. My dad died of cancer when I was 27. I put him through so much. He was such a good guy and now my mom has to carry on. She is strong, but she is getting tired. She wants to retire. She loves my daughter, but it's not fair that she has to care for her. I want to.

So I am in rehab. Can I do it? I don't know. I am scared but I want to.

Some of my experiences with discrimination started when I was in Grade 7. I was doing ok in school but my following the shiny ball behaviour was mentioned to my mother. Somewhere in the discussion my mother mentioned my First Nations background and she distinctly heard the teacher mutter under her breath, "well that explains it." My mother said, "what did you say?" The teacher said "nothing."

I was always a magnet. My risk taking behaviour would have the "good kids" surrounding me while we all did something dippy. When we got caught, they scattered to their safe good kid personality with the phrase "she did it." My mother always tried to recognize the bigger picture, but in effect I was part of it so I had to wear it. Somehow the others never seemed to wear it. It was the crowd they associated with. I was the bad girl.

I am tall and my birth father was probably white although my birth father declared a Metis fellow as my dad...but I have streaks of red in my hair and I am almost 6 feet. I do not look at first glance as First Nations, but I am. So I was wearing a necklace with my name in Arabic. A gift from my mother. I was on the subway and this guy goes off on me about being a Muslim. I can stand up for myself and I am tall and I can be intimidating, but it was the first time I experienced racism as another race.

Being homeless, I have lived in two different worlds. I am homeless because I have a problem with alcohol and drugs and I did something stupid and I endangered my daughter. I can't live at home now until I get it together. I really want to get it together. But I am out on the streets with my partner. I love him and he is First Nations and he came from a really dysfunctional background. I love him and I want to help him, but I also want my daughter. I go back and forth about what is best for me and for her. But I am homeless.

People look at you differently. My mom helps out and we will go into a store with money to buy something and they will be on us in seconds. I have not shoplifted since I was a teen. When I walk in by myself, security is immediately there. But when I walk in with my mother....nothing.

While I can get food from home, it's a long way from setting up your tent and getting home in the rain. So even though I have a back up plan I am out there and I am hungry. One guy offered me an apple and I thank him. I heard him laugh as I walked away. I turned over the apple it was rotten.....why is this funny? Why bother being mean? Isn't the judgement enough for you?

People say, "Go get a job." So many times. I get it. I want to be normal at times like everyone else and get a job. If I could focus like everyone else does, it would be easy. I am smart, but I can't seem to settle. Part of me is with street people because I know I have more going than they do and I can maybe help them. I am trying. I am on the right meds now. I am trying, but it is hard. Sometimes it is just easier to cave.

We would like to move on from where we are tenting. But where? Shelters are full and every time I go to one I get stuff stolen. Everyone is using, and I am trying to get away from it, but there it is in the shelter. There is no safe space. Some people have gotten space in modules, but there isn't enough room for everyone. "There are no places," the housing worker says. So how do I come out of the cycle? There are cheaper places to go in Canada but my daughter is here...the cycle of anxiety. I work with MCFD but they keep getting new social workers and the story keeps getting lost. The mental health team I work with are good though. They are out there on the street and they listen.

So here it is. I am in rehab. I am safe for a bit. I am scared. Will there be a place to live when I am out? Can I do it? Will my partner make it? Do I stick with him or do I figure it out alone? I hate being alone. I have lived the life of normal and I have lived the life of homeless abnormal. Don't know if I can focus enough to be what is called normal, but I will try.

When you look at me, what you see is a homeless First Nations woman who in your vast knowledge of me is obviously a product of her ethnicity. The days of believing all First Nations people are drunk are not gone. I struggle to reintegrate my identity and live in two worlds. I have supports, and maybe I will learn to use them ok. Others in this world do not. They all have stories. And yes, some part of the story is not true, survival of self I guess, but a lot of it is. People fear us when we are homeless, but in reality most of us are harmless, and a danger to ourselves and struggling with our story. Racism is many forms, but it is fear of the other. When you combine poverty with it, you get a picture that is skewed. Combine money with it, you get the rich acting badly....but that is not my life.