Unpacked

When I first came to Willow house, I hated the yellow bedroom. Everyone kept saying it was nice. “It’s lovely and bright in here Mara”. “You can choose some things you like to put on the walls.” “Look, you’ve even got a little desk”.
I didn’t care. I didn’t want a desk or the fluffy cushion they put on my bed before they even knew if I liked it or not. That material makes me itch.
I wanted to go home.
Except, I didn’t really want to go home either. That’s the bit that’s confusing.
I was almost eight years old, and I was angry with almost everyone. I was angry with mum for choosing people who scared me. I was angry with Dad for making promises then disappearing. I was angry with my social worker for saying Willow house was going to be a “fresh start”, as if my life was a colouring book and she could just rip out all the messy pages.
Mostly I was angry because none of this had been my choice.
When I arrived at Willow house I had already decided nobody was going to like me, and I wasn’t going to like them. That way when they left me, I wouldn’t care.
On my first night I refused dinner. One of the staff, Nia, knocked on my bedroom door.
“Not hungry” I shouted.
“Okay.”
That annoyed me. She was supposed to argue. A few minutes later, she knocked again.
“I’m leaving a sandwich outside your door incase your stomach starts to hurt and changes it’s mind.”
“MY STOMACH DOESN’T WANT YOUR SANDWICH IDIOT!”
“Fair enough. Mine changes it’s mind all the time so thought I’d check”.
I waited until she was gone and ate the whole thing. Well, nearly. I left all the crusts so she wouldn’t think I proper proper liked it.
For the first few weeks, I tested everyone. I slammed doors. I refused education twice. I called one of the adults a name that made another adult gasp. Once, I even knocked a cup of orange juice on the floor on purpose and just starred at Nia straight in her face while it dripped off the table.
She looked at me.
Then looked at the juice.
I waited.
Adults shouting didn’t scare me anymore, I knew what to do when adults shout or hit. You tried to shout even louder than them, or just go quiet and wait for it all to end. But Nia didn’t shout.
“Well, that’s definitely not where juice goes.”
I nearly laughed.
She handed me a cloth.
“You can help me clean it up when you’re ready.”
“who said I’m ever going to be ready?”
“Then I’ll be here for a really long time holding this cloth, my poor arm”.

That time, I did laugh. I tried not to. I hated that she made me.
There were rules at Willow house, but different rules to what I was use to. The rules weren't about keeping the adults around me happy. They were things like, knowing where I was, being safe, going to school, and talking about things after something had gone wrong. And nobody punished me by ignoring me or not giving me any food. That was new.
If I had a bad day they still said goodnight. If I shouted at someone, they still asked if I wanted a snack later or a bedtime story.
If I messed up, we talked about it, why it happened and what I was feeling.
Nobody said I was a bad kid.
Then came the Tuesday when I thought they were all liars.
Mum was supposed to visit. I had been ready since 4o'clock even though she wasn't coming till 6. I wore my new trainers and asked Nia to do my hair. I acted like I didn't care how it looked, but I made her redo one of the twists because it wasn't sitting right.
At half six my mum still wasn't there.
At seven my social worker called.
Mum wasn't coming.
I can't remember the exact time I decided to smash everything up. I remember throwing the photo frame, I remember screaming, and kicking the doors so hard that it hurt my foot. I remember Nia standing in the hallway.
"GO AWAY!"
she didn't.
"GET AWAY FROM ME YOU IDIOT!"
She stayed far enough away that I didn't feel trapped.
"you're really angry Mara".
"I HATE HER!"
"I know."
"I HATE YOU!"
"I can handle that."
That made me even angrier. I picked up that stupid itchy pillow and chucked it at her. It wasn't the most dangerous weapon. Nia caught it. For a minute we just starred at each other.
"I'm really glad you chose the cushion".
I burst into tears. Not nice tears either. Not the ones you see on the films. The kind where your face hurts and you can't breathe properly and you're trying to speak but all the words come out broken.
"she said she was coming."
Nia sat on the floor, but she didn't come closer.
"she always says stuff and doesn't do it"
"I know. "
"I waited."
"I know you did."

That was when something changed. She didn't tell me my mum probably tried her best, she didn't tell me to calm down, she didn't have a go at me for throwing anything. She just understood why it hurt.
Later when I was calmer, we cleaned up together. I said sorry for breaking the frame, Nia said I was allowed to be angry, but we just needed to find a way to be angry without hurting myself or ruining my things.
As time went on, everyone kept talking to me about PACE. I thought they meant running at first. Nia said it was playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy. Apparently, it was part of how they tried to understand what was underneath someone's behaviour instead of only looking at what they had done. I realised that's what they've been doing since I had arrived.
When I refused dinner, they wondered if eating together felt strange. When I screamed and kicked off before contact, they understood I was just scared of being disappointed. Or when I acted like I didn't care, they didn't believe me. They looked underneath my anger. Nobody had really done that with me before.
Things didn't suddenly become perfect. I still had bad days. I still loved my mum, even when I was fuming with her. I still wondered why my dad didn't try harder. Sometimes if another young person moved out it made my stomach feel strange because it reminded me that people leave. But over time that changed too.
Willow house gave me things I hadn't had before. My own bedroom, school every day, swimming on Wednesdays, birthday cakes with my name spelled right. Adults who actually turned up when they said they would. Adults who remembered I hate mushrooms and loved strawberries. A photograph of me on the wall in their office of me winning a certificate at school, a thing they call AQA. Nia sitting through my show at education, even though I was a tree and had one line.
Eventually I stopped keeping my bag packed under my bed. I didn't realise I was even doing it. For nearly a year, there had always been some clothes and a few of my favourite things in there. But one Saturday I needed the bag for swimming. When I pulled it out I stared at it for a while. Then I unpacked it.
I put the clothes in my wardrobe, and the other bits where they belong. Nobody saw me do it. There wasn't a big meeting about it, nobody clapped, but I knew what It meant. I wasn't waiting to be sent away anymore. I was safe.
I'm twelve now. My bedroom isn't yellow anymore, I chose pink when they redecorated it.
I still live at Willow house. I don't know exactly what will happen next. There are meetings about my future, and sometimes adults still use too many words when they could probably use five. But I know things now that I didn't know when I was eight.
I know being angry doesn't mean I'm bad. Asking for help doesn't mean I'm weak. I know loving someone doesn't mean that everything they did was ok. I know adults can make promises and keep them. And I know being in care isn't the most interesting thing about me.

The people at Willow house let me make decisions about me. They do things like "you said we listened", and they actually DID listen. The people here didn't magically disappear without explanation or do things that adults shouldn't do. They saw me for me. Not just the angry girl, in the yellow room, who was angry at the world.
They saw me, Mara. Everything I wasn't able to be then, but I get to be now.
The girl in her own pink room.

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