

### A Connection To The Land

What can help someone find themselves and give them a sense of freedom, comfort and healing. *Indian horse* is a novel written by Richard Wagamese following the story of a young Ojibway boy Saul. In 1960 Saul is sent to a residential school in Ontario, where he deals with a great deal of trauma. Similarly “I Grew Up” a poem written by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias follows a young First Nations girl living on the reserve. Richard Wagamese is an Ojibway from the Wabaseemoong First Nations in northwestern Ontario. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias is a poet and story teller from the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nations. Both authors aim to raise awareness on the reality of Aboriginal life throughout history. **In the story *Indian Horse* and “I Grew Up” both protagonists find comfort and healing on their land. Similarly they both feel free and claimed by the land they know and love. They find beauty and make memories. However, as time goes by in “I Grew Up” the girl begins to find that the land is not what she remembered it to be. Despite those differences, both characters made memories and were healed by their land. The reader learns that the land to the First Nations must be treated with respect and care.**

*Indian Horse* and “I Grew Up” explore the themes of freedom, teachings and comfort when a First Nations is on their land. Both Saul and the young girl feel free and comforted by the care the land provides for them. While on the land Saul feels he has the freedom to express himself in his true roots and he finds comfort in his family and ancestry found on the land. Saul feels more comfortable on the land rather than anywhere else as he no longer feels he has to isolate himself like at the residential school. As well as being more free on their land First Nations learn a great deal from their land. The land shares the teachings and beliefs to their people by simply speaking to them. Saul’s grandfather spends so much time on the land it starts

to speak to him and share its teachings: "... he spent so much time on the land, it told him things, spoke to him of mysteries and teachings" (Wagamese, 5) while staying on the land it can share their teachings. The land can also ease and comfort their spirits. First Nations often turn to the land in times of hardship for comfort and a way to feel at ease. When Saul's brother comes back from the residential school he has unfortunately contracted Tuberculosis. A result of the Tuberculosis he was in a lot of pain, his grandmother knew that the land will help him, comfort him and guide him to get through it: "We need to take Benjamin to a place where the and the land could ease his spirit" (Wagamese, 17). The land provides comfort for any First Nation in need of it and allows them to feel free. Similarly the young girl in "I Grew Up" felt free while living on the reserve and living off the land: "eating berries/cupping cool water/ to my wild stained mouth" (Keeshig-Tobias). Being on the reserve gives her younger self a sense of who she is. While living on the reserve she feels free to live the way that she wants: "I was a child/ a child who ran/ wild rhythms" (Keeshig-Tobias). As a young girl she is able to live as she wanted and that she was able to live off the land, feel free and one with nature.

In both *Indian Horse* and "I Grew Up" Saul and the young girl both find healing, comfort and aide from the land. They respect it and it cares for them. The land to them is not just any plot of land it has meaning and helps them when they are most in need. When Saul is in need of help he turns to the land for comfort and healing. All throughout his journey he is faced with many situations that result in trauma. An example of this is when Saul suffers from alcoholism. After years of trauma and hardships he turns to alcohol to cope. When he becomes more aware of the alcoholism he turns to the land for comfort and it begins to heal his broken spirit: "Only on the land did I find calm. There I could relax" (Wagamese, 174). Even in times of major change he could count on the land to aide him. Saul was offered a position on a training team to potentially become a member of the NHL, he knew that he would have to move away from his home with Fred Kelly and Virgil. Virgil and Saul went down to the bus stop and when they finally said good bye and the bus left with Saul he feels hopeless and anxious to live off the reserve however, the land was there to comfort him: "I wanted to cry, but I didn't. Instead, I watched the

land” (Wagamese, 157). Whenever Saul is undergoing a big change or trauma he would look for support from the land. The land is there to support and heal, it is his home and it takes care of him. Similarly the young girl in “I Grew Up” is healed and cared for by the land. For her the land is her home and it takes care of her. While on the land she is cared for, it rocks her to sleep and provides food for her: “ I was a child/ a child who would lie under the trees” ( Keeshig-Tobias). It is her beautiful home and at the time she never wants to leave: “ I grew up thinking it was the most beautiful place in the world” ( Keeshig-Tobias). Living on the reserve she gets everything she needs, she is healed and cared for by the land.

As the young girl grows older she begins to view the land differently than when she was younger. Throughout the poem the writer is writing in past tense, the young girl speaking is truly her older self talking about the reserve and what she believed as a young girl: “ I grew up on the reserve thinking/ I’m never going to leave this place” ( Keeshig-Tobias). This use of past tense in the poem combined with the use of repetition of: “ I grew up thinking/ I’m never going to leave this place” (Keeshig-Tobias) brings a very strong message that as she got older her opinion about the reserve changes. All throughout the poem the author repeats the same two stanzas, it gives a mysterious tone to the poem and makes the reader almost feel uneasy with the unnatural blend of happy childhood memories and her true feelings. While Saul continued to feel connected with the land, her connection was somehow severed and she no longer sees the beauty and freedom the land once provided for her.

In conclusion both *Indian Horse* and “I Grew Up” show the way that First Nations connect to the land seek it out for healing and comfort. Saul and the young girl connect to the land and in return the land provides for them, care for them and comfort them when in trauma. When Saul was about to undergo a major life change he looked to land to find calm whereas, the young girl found freedom and liberty while living on the reserve. Regardless of how the characters grew to view the land it was still a very important part of their lives and to the lives of

many First Nations in Canada. Therefore as a society we need to work to preserve and care for their land to keep their memories living and their way of healing available.