from One Native Life

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THERE ARE TIMES when something as simple as the rain that freckles slate grey water can take me back to it—that feeling I remember from my boyhood when the ragged line of trees against the sky filled me with a loneliness that had nothing to do with loss. The land sometimes carries an emptiness you feel in you like the breeze.

It's not a sad feeling. Rather it's a song I learned by rote in the tramp of my young feet through the rough and tangle of the bush that shaped me. I come to the land the same way still, expectant, awake to the promise of territories beyond the horizon, undiscovered and wild. All those years in cities never took away that feeling of tremendous awe.

When I rejoined my native family after twenty years, it was the land that framed our reconnection. It was a balm for the awkwardness of strangers who bore the same blood and history and wounds.

It wasn't easy coming back. I had little of the Ojibway left on me and they had no experience with the urban world I knew. But all of us felt a kinship with the territory we called our home, and it was there, among the muskeg,

rock and spruce of the northern land, that my family found a way to scrabble past our differences.

We went camping the second summer I was home. We drove to Silver Lake on the gravel road that leads to Grassy Narrows and found a place above a wide sweep of beach. There were five of us: my uncle Archie, my mother, my stepfather, my brother Charles and me.

I watched as they erected their canvas tent, cut saplings with an axe for the frame, bound the frame with long strips of bark and lined the floor with cedar boughs. When I put up the small orange hump of nylon that was my pack tent, they laughed.

As we stood on the beach, my uncle told us stories about the lake and the land across the bay from where we stood. He told us about the portages the people used according to the season, moose or deer or fish drawing them at different times. He'd learned those routes as a boy, he said, and he could find his way from there to Whitedog, a hundred miles away.

My brother and I took off in the canoe to find the first portage for ourselves. It was a calm, perfect afternoon and the paddling was easy. We talked some, but mostly we concentrated on looking for the landmarks my uncle had described. We found the portage without a problem. We hauled our canoe up and over the half-mile distance to a long narrow lake edged with wild rice. At the far end we found the stone marker for the next portage. This one

was shorter and steeper. The lake we came onto was an almost perfect bowl, encircled by walls of pink granite where eagles nested. We paddled slowly around that lake, neither of us inclined to talk.

There were no vapour trails above us, no drone of airplanes. We were back in the bush five miles or more, and there were no outboard motors to be heard. There was only the land, the symphony of it, the orchestral manoeuvres of wind and rock and sky. I could feel the presence of my people, the staunch heart of them beating here for millennia, and I felt joined to them.

We paddled back as evening fell. Both of us were touched by the opportunity to experience history, and we talked about how it must have felt in pre-settlement times to make this same paddle back to a camp set up above the beach. We could smell woodsmoke as we approached, and we saw the fire burning in the middle of our camp.

It was an idyllic scene, the Ojibway world unchanged, unaffected. But when we beached the canoe and walked to the camp, we found the others in lawn chairs, watching a ball game on a battery-operated television.

I laugh about it now, that collision of cultures, but back then it confused me. I was so desperate to reconnect, so needy for definition that the cultural anachronism was jarring. I wanted my people to be as tribal as I dreamed them. But time and circumstances had made that impossible.

All Canadians have felt time disrupt them. Everyone has seen the culture they sprang from altered and rearranged into a curious mélange of old and new. So the country between us is not strange. We all carry a yearning for simpler, truer times. We all crave a reaffirmation of our place here, to hear the voices of our people singing on the land.