

Keeper'n Me

a memoir by Richard Wagamese



George Littlechild, age nine, with blond, blue-eyed foster nephew and niece. "I endured much racism for being First Nations. I would have preferred to be blond, blue-eyed with white skin."

focus YOUR LEARNING

Reading this memoir will help you:

- use a time line to show story events
- write a journal entry
- dramatize an event in the story
- work with a partner

When I was three I disappeared. Disappeared into foster homes and never made it back until I was twenty-five. I'm thirty now, been here five years but it feels like longer so much has happened.

See, when I was born my family still lived the old way. There was a small clan of us Ravens that lived across Shotgun Bay in a few canvas army tents on what was my grampa's trapline. My ma, pa, two brothers and sister all

lived together with my grandparents and a few aunts, uncles and cousins. We trapped, hunted and fished and pretty much lived off the land like our people had for centuries, and according to everyone we were a pretty happy clan. The first words I spoke were Ojibway words and the first sounds I heard when I was born were the sound of the wind in the trees, water and the gentle murmur of Ojibway voices all around me.

According to Ma, they got an idea I was gonna be one of the wandering kind real early. I guess, I was a rambunctious little kid and got to crawling around real good. In fact, I got so good at it that I'd crawl right on outta the tent and be heading off towards the woods to look for my pa and grampa when my ma or granny would have to charge out and put the scoop on me. Guess it happened so many times that my granny finally got tired of chasing me around and made me a little harness out of moose hide, which they tied to a tree with about a ten-foot lead for me to crawl around on. Kept me out of trouble but I disappeared anyway.

What happened was a couple of guys from the Ontario Hydro showed up one day with a big sheaf of papers. They told my family they were planning on building a big dam downriver and that the reservoir behind it would be flooding right back over our traditional trapline. Even though the Ravens had trapped that area for generations no one had ever told them anything about ownership or title. It was outside the reserve lands that were ours by treaty and was actually owned by the Hydro company. So my family had to move, and since there was no work or even houses available on White Dog at the time their only choice was to head for Minaki, the nearest town.

Now according to Ma, learning to live by the clock sure was a hell of a lot tougher than living by the sun and the seasons the way they'd been used to. Finding work was tough. You gotta

understand that northern Ontario around the middle 1950s was a pretty uptight racist community and Ojibways weren't exactly the toast of the towns then. So Ma and Pa spent lotsa time away from the small shack we lived in at the edge of town and we kids were left in the care of our granny who would have been about sixty-five then.

Now, Indians got a whole different way of looking at things like family. When you're a kid around here everyone's always picking you up, feeding you and generally taking good care of you. Sociologists call it the extended family concept. When you're born you got a whole built-in family consisting of ev'ryone around. So it was natural in my parents' eyes to leave us with the old lady while they were out trying to make a living. But the Ontario Children's Aid Society had a different set of eyes and all they seen was a bunch of rowdy little Indian kids terrorizing a bent-up old lady. Now anybody who knows anything about Indians knows that if there was any terrorizin' being done at all it was being done by the old lady. We were being raised just fine, but it wasn't long before they showed up with a plan for all of us.

According to my sister, Jane, who's the oldest of us and the one who remembers the most from those days, they showed up one afternoon, a young woman and an older white-haired man. They pulled up while we kids were playin' tag and swinging from an old tire hung from a tree in the front yard. My granny was out back doin' something or other. Anyway, they called us over to this big green station wagon and handed out chocolates all around. Well, for some wild little bush Indians raised on bannock and beaver, chocolate was pretty close to heaven, so when they offered us more if we hopped into their car, well, we all piled in.

We wound up in a group home on a farm outside of Kenora, in the custody of Children's Aid.

A
brot
mys
we l
thei
on
bun
arot
exac
of r
kids
fost
por
my
to s
truc
bro
finc
I
big
ride
one
love
wit
ma
plo

R

1.

2.

About a year later I was taken away from my brothers and sister and put in another home by myself. Jane tells it like this. See, the foster home we had on that farm had about six other kids in their care. We all stayed in a kind of dormitory on the third floor of their farmhouse in bunkbeds and we had to help out with the work around the farm too. Anyway, these people didn't exactly go out of their way to show us any kind of real welcome. At Christmastime while their kids were whooping it up in the living room the foster kids were made to sit at a long table in the porch. There weren't any gifts for us either. But my brothers and sisters had somehow managed to scrape up a little cash and bought me a toy truck for Christmas. They wrapped it up in plain brown paper and put it beside my pillow so I'd find it come Christmas morning.

It was just a little toy truck, nothing like the big Tonka trucks kids get these days that they can ride around, just a little blue and red truck with one wheel missing. Well, according to Jane I loved that little truck. I slept with it and carried it with me wherever I went. It never seemed to matter that it had one wheel missing. I'd be ploughing roads, chasing bad guys, and building

cities all over the yard with that little truck.

Well, one morning I was sitting in the sandbox playing with my truck when the schoolbus came to pick up the other kids. I guess my brothers and sister had been told the night before that I was getting sent away and Jane said they all figured it was better to just let it happen rather than let me know about it. So, I'm out there playing that morning and Jane came and grabbed me up in a big, warm hug and just held on for a long, long time. I guess I got a little irritated and pushed her away finally and got back to my play.

"Jane, jeez," was all I said.

She says those were the last words she heard, and the last sight she had of me for twenty years was from the back window of that schoolbus. A little Ojibway boy all hunched over in the sandbox with a little red truck with one wheel missing, growin' smaller 'n smaller, till it looked like the land just swallowed me up. When she got home that night the sandbox was empty except for that little blue and red truck, the wind already busy burying it in the sand. When we met again twenty years later she grabbed me in that same big, warm hug and just held on for a long, long time. ■

Responding...

1. Draw a time line showing the events that led up to the removal of the children. Compare your time line with that of another student. Make any necessary adjustments.
2. Imagine that you are Richard Wagamese on the day you were taken from your brothers and sisters.

Write a journal entry recounting the events of the day and expressing your feelings.

3. Work with a partner to script and perform a re-enactment of the reunion between Richard and his sister, Jane, after their twenty-year separation.