

An Indian's Journey Through Reservation Life

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Rez

A photograph of a person in a small, dark boat on a body of water. The person is wearing a white shirt and dark pants, and is holding a long wooden pole. The water is dark, and there are tall, yellowish-brown grasses or reeds in the background. The sky is a pale, overcast grey.

Life

DAVID TREUER

*Indian Reservations in Minnesota
& Wisconsin*



ALSO BY DAVID TREUER

Little
The Hiawatha
The Translation of Dr. Apelles
Native American Fiction: A User's Manual

REZ LIFE

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David Treuer



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IN MEMORY

Ron LaFriniere, Eugene Seelye, Thomas Stillday Jr.,
and
Art Koch

FOR

Elsina, Noka, and Bine



Jesse Seelye at the United States Penitentiary, Florence, Colorado, 2010.
Courtesy Jesse Seelye

INTRODUCTION

In northern Minnesota, not far from the headwaters of the Mississippi River, you may see a sign. From a passing car it is easy to miss: in the summer the trees that march over fields and the ditch grass that crowds the road threaten to overwhelm it; in the winter, when the snow has been pushed from the road and has leveled off the ditches, the sign sometimes blends too well with the snow to be seen at all. Seen or not, the sign reads: WELCOME TO THE LEECH LAKE INDIAN RESERVATION HOME OF THE LEECH LAKE BAND OF OJIBWA PLEASE KEEP OUR ENVIRONMENT CLEAN, PROTECT OUR NATURAL RESOURCES NO SPECIAL LICENCES REQUIRED FOR HUNTING, FISHING OR TRAPPING.

If you're driving—as since this is America is most likely the case—the sign is soon behind you and soon forgotten. However, something is different about life on one side of it and life on the other. It's just hard to say exactly what. The landscape is unchanged. The same pines, and the same swamps, hay fields, and jeweled lakes dropped here and there among the trees, exist on both sides of the sign. The houses don't look all that different, perhaps a little smaller, a little more ramshackle. The children playing by the road do look different, though. Darker. The cars, most of them, seem older. And perhaps something else is different, too.

You can see these kinds of signs all over America. There are roughly 310 Indian reservations in the United States, though the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) doesn't have a sure count of how many reservations there are (this might say something about the BIA, or it might say something about the nature of reservations). Not all of the 564 federally recognized tribes in the United States have reservations. Some Indians don't have reservations, but all reservations have Indians, and all reservations have signs. There are tribal areas in Brazil, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, among many other countries. But reservations as we know them are, with the exception of Canada, unique to America. You can see these signs in more than thirty of the states, but most of them are clustered in the large places to be permanently settled by Europeans: the Great Plains, the Southwest, the Northwest, and along the Canadian border stretching from Montana to New York. You can see them in the middle of the desert, among the strewn rocks of the Badlands, in the suburbs of Green Bay, and within the misty spray of Niagara Falls. Some of the reservations that these signs announce are huge. There are twelve reservations in the United States bigger than the state of Rhode Island. Nine reservations are larger than Delaware (named after a tribe that was pushed from the region). Some reservations are so small that the sign itself seems larger than the land it denotes. Most reservations are poor. A few have become wealthy. In 2007 the Seminole bought the Hard Rock Café franchise. The Oneida of Wisconsin helped renovate Lambeau Field in Green Bay. And whenever Brett Favre (who claims Chickasaw blood) scored a touchdown there as a Packer, a Jet, or a Minnesota Viking, he did it under Oneida lights cheered on by fans sitting on Oneida bleachers, not far from the Oneida Nation itself.

Indian reservations, and those of us who live on them, are as American as apple pie, baseball, and muscle cars. Unlike apple pie, however, Indians contributed to the birth of America itself. The Oneidas were allies of the Revolutionary Army who fed U.S. troops at Valley Forge and helped defeat the

British in New York, and the Iroquois Confederacy served as one of the many models for the American constitution. Marx and Engels also cribbed from the Iroquois as they developed the theories of communism. Indians have been disproportionately involved in every war America has fought since its first, including one we're fighting now: on July 27, 2007, the last soldiers of Able Company 2nd-136th Combined Arms battalion returned home to Bemidji, Minnesota, after serving twenty-two months of combat duty in Iraq. At the time Able Company was the most deployed company in the history of the Iraq War and was also deployed in Afghanistan and Bosnia. Some of the members of Able Company are Indians from reservations in northern Minnesota.

Despite how *involved* in America's business Indians have been, most people will go a lifetime without ever knowing an Indian or spending any time on an Indian reservation. Indian land makes up 2 percent of the land in the United States. We number slightly over 2 million (up significantly from nearly 240,000 in 1900). It is pretty easy to avoid us and our reservations. Yet Americans are captivated by Indians. Indians are part of the story that America tells itself, from the first Thanksgiving to the Boston Tea Party up through Crazy Horse, the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and Custer's Last Stand. Indian casinos have grown from small bingo halls lighting up the prairie states into an industry making \$14 billion a year. No one in America today is untouched by our lives—from a schoolchild learning about the birth of his or her country to the millions of Americans who have lost (and sometimes won) money in an Indian casino.

Whites have not just been captivated by us; they've been captured. In 1790, when he was only ten years old, John Tanner was captured from his family's home in Kentucky by the Shawnee. Later, he was sold to an Ojibwe family as a slave and traveled with this family as far north and west as the Little Saskatchewan River. (My tribe, the Ojibwe, has been called Chippewa, Ojibway, and Chippewa—but Ojibwe is our name for ourselves). He spent his life among the Ojibwe and eventually married an Ojibwe woman. As an adult he was reunited with his birth family, but he was uncomfortable on the East and went back to his Indian home as soon as he could. Then there is the story of Mary Jemison. She was also taken captive, along with a neighbor and her brothers, also by Shawnee, in 1758. Her brothers and another captive were scalped en route to Fort Duquesne (in modern-day Pittsburgh). Mary survived. She married a Delaware. But, afraid that she would be stolen back, the young couple moved to the Genesee Valley in what is now upstate New York. Mary's husband died and she remarried a Seneca and had many children with him. She never went back to "white society." Many captives didn't go back, preferring life with Indians.

That is exactly what many people whose lives are intertwined with Indians say today. My father, after escaping Austria and the Holocaust in 1938, fled to the United States with his parents. After much wandering and one marriage and three children he settled just off the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. Here he felt safe for the first time in his life. More than that, he felt he had found with his new friends and new family, something that had eluded him all the years before. He devoted his life (and still devotes it) to the community he has come to call his own, and is as passionate today about the rights and respect owed to Indians as he was when he moved to Indian country in the 1950s.

A lot of people (this includes Indians and non-Indians) don't think of the story of rez life as a story of beauty. Most often rez life is associated with tragedy. We are thought of in terms of what we have lost or what we have survived. Life on the rez is usually described as harsh, violent, drug-infested, criminal, poor, and short. White-on-Indian violence occurs at ten times the rate of white-on-white

violence. Indian-on-Indian violence is close behind; in 2006, the police department on the Red Lake Reservation received more 911 calls than Beltrami County, which has ten times the population of Red Lake. The small village where my family comes from once had the highest ratio in the state of felons who had done hard time to people who had not been to jail: it has been said one in six residents of Bena (population 140) had done more than ten years in prison. The average life expectancy for Indian men is sixty-four. When white people turn sixty-five they, on average, retire. Indians are lucky to live long enough to see retirement. The average household income on my reservation is \$21,000. On some reservations in the Dakotas the median income hovers just above \$10,000; for the rest of America the median income is \$52,029, as of 2008. Life is hard for many on the rez.

If the usual story we hear of life on the rez is one of hardship, the subplot is about conflict. More often than not, the story of “the Indian” is understood as a story of “Indians versus whites” or “Indians versus everyone.” This notion is further sharpened by the cherished idea (cherished by Indians and whites alike) that the real story of Indian life is “how Indians, quietly going about their business in the New World, were abruptly and violently screwed by white people against whom the Indians had no defenses and gosh it’s really a pity because Indians *were* a noble people.” Most treatments of the history of Native America can be represented by a running balance sheet with positive Indian values and contributions on one side and white transgression and crimes on the other. Like this:

<i>Native Americans</i>	<i>Anglo-Americans</i>
Provided food and shelter to Pilgrims	Gave Indians blankets saturated with smallpox
Introduced Europeans to corn, squash, tomatoes, and chocolate	Introduced Indians to “firewater”
Love Mother Earth	Hurt Mother Earth
Promote community and togetherness	Promote capitalism
Were forced onto reservations	Were forced into the suburbs
Signed treaties in good faith	Broke treaties in bad faith

But this isn’t the whole story. Reservations and the Indians on them are not simply victims of the white juggernaut. And what one finds on reservations is more than scars, tears, blood, and noble sentiment. There is beauty in Indian life, as well as meaning and a long history of interaction. We love our reservations.

My tribe, the Ojibwe, has it good compared with others. We are both vast and underrated. Originally a coastal tribe from the eastern seaboard belonging to the Algonquian language family—which includes Cree, Pequot, Passamaquoddy, and Delaware, among others—we began a slow migration west before the first white people set foot on this continent. Our language still bears traces of this coastal existence. We have words for “seal,” “whale,” and “bagel,” though these aren’t used very often where we now live. The migration, as it’s called, lasted for many centuries, and according to tribal lore the tribe was following a vision of one member who dreamed that we should move west to where food grows on water. As far as prophecies or directives go, this has to be one of the weirdest. But here we are, in the land of wild rice, where food does grow on water. We occupy the land around the entire Great Lakes, stretching from just east of Toronto westward to Montana and from as far south as

Chicago all the way up to the underbelly of Hudson Bay. We are the most populous tribe in North America, though not the most populous in the United States. That would be the Cherokee.

And even though we were ass-kickers and name-takers—having fought and defeated the Iroquois, the Sac and Fox, and the illustrious Sioux—we aren't really known as such. In fact, the Sioux (perhaps the most famous Indian warriors are Sioux) used to live where we now live—in the northern forests of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and northwestern Ontario. But we pushed them out to the plains, where they made a good living hunting buffalo. And maybe that's the problem. The Sioux hunt buffalo from horseback and we Ojibwe go out on snowshoes to snare rabbits. The Sioux have cornered the market on Indian cool. This is true for Indian names, too. They had chiefs named Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud. We had chiefs called Moose Dung, Little Frenchman, Flat Mouth, Bad Boy, Yellow Head, and Hole in the Day. But we did have a chief with the name White Cloud, which is almost as cool as Red Cloud. These were tough men, but a guy named Yellow Guts doesn't sound much like a death-dealer and doesn't make for good copy. We do have a lot of "wind" and "sky" names, which you might think would be cool. But Big Wind, Downwind, and Fineday (which are names I think of as being among the most beautiful Indian names) don't compare to Mankiller (Cherokee) or Destroytown (Seneca).

It's a blessing, I suppose. We have largely avoided being written about by others—who prefer to write about the Apache, Comanche, Blackfeet, Nez Perce, and Sioux. And we have avoided being overrun by wannabes and "culture vultures" because, after all, who wants to be an Indian who doesn't own horses and lives in a swamp and traps beavers and didn't evolve striking geometric beading patterns or cool war bonnets? But to the victors go the spoils, as they say, and also to the victors go the naming rights. Many other tribes labor under names given to them by us. Sioux is short for "Naadwesiwag" (snakes, a euphemism for enemies). Winnebago comes from the Ojibwe word "Wiinibiigoog" (the "Ones by the Dirty Water"), and Eskimo comes from "Eshkimoog" ("Eaters of Raw Flesh").

We have reservations in Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana. We have "reserves"—as they were called in Canada, though now they are called First Nations—in Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Some are tiny and can be walked across in less than an hour. Others, such as Red Lake, are large, larger than Rhode Island. The result is that there is more variation among our people than in most other tribes: from "bush Indians" in Canada living on reserves that are accessible only by floatplane in the summer and by roads across the ice in the winter to large corporate (and comparatively wealthy) entities such as the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe in central Minnesota. We have people who know and practice traditional Ojibwe lifeways—trapping, hunting, and fishing for sustenance—who are Catholics, and we have lawyers and lobbyists who follow Ojibwe ceremonial traditions. You can travel for days or weeks and still be in Ojibwe country—the woodlands around the Great Lakes, the boreal forests of central Canada, and the margins of the Great Plains and Canadian high country. We live, I think, in some of the most beautiful places on earth.

We are known for making beautiful things, too. We evolved the birch bark canoe, a true engineering feat: a 300-pound canoe that was thirty feet long could carry twelve men and 3,000 pounds of cargo. During the fur trade it did, all the way from the far end of Lake Superior to Montreal, loaded with bales of beaver furs. In addition to canoes we made and make snowshoes and porcupine quill designs on leather and birch bark. We even figured out how to cook over open fires without metal or ceramic

Even though we haven't become as much a part of the public consciousness as, say, the Sioux or the Iroquois, our language has. Once listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the most difficult language to learn, the Ojibwe language has given English the words "moccasin," "toboggan," "wigwam," "moose," "totem," and "muskeg." We've even met on middle ground. We provided "musk" from "mashkiig," or swamp, English provided "rat" and together we built the word for swamp-dwelling rodent that looks an awful lot like a rat—muskrat. If that's not a fine example of cultural exchange I don't know what is. Through years of trade we imported only two words from the French—*couchon*, which became "kookoosh"; and *bonjour*, which was transformed into a greeting "boozhoo." Hello.

And, on top of all of that, we're funny. We really are. I should state, however, that I am among some of the less funny Ojibwe people. John Buckanaga (which means "He Wins," another perplexing Ojibwe name), from White Earth Reservation, is funny. John Buck was at a seniors all-Indian golf tournament at Fond du Lac Reservation near Duluth and someone was trying to get him to mess up his tee shot by asking him, *Hey, John, so you're getting older—do you use Viagra?* And John Buck said, *Yeah. Sure I do. Well, does it work? I guess so. At least I don't piss all over my shoes anymore.* And then he drove his ball 220 yards down the fairway.

Which brings us to stoicism. Ojibwe are not usually described as stoic. We're not usually described at all. This is just fine with most of us. We have been called some choice names in the past, though "These people are a wild, barbarous, and benighted race, and are, perhaps more than any other people under the influence of the chiefs, head men, and Prophets," suggested one writer. I would have disagreed.

2

On August 3, 2007, I drove past one of the signs on the southern edge of my reservation on my way back to Bena, our ancestral village. My grandfather had killed himself earlier that day. Eugene William Seelye, an eighty-three-year-old veteran of D-day and the Battle of the Bulge—a man who left the reservation only once in his life and made a promise never to leave again, an Indian man who dodged thousands of bullets—shot himself in the head and died alone on his bedroom floor.

My grandfather was not an easy man. He was not one of those sweet, somewhat bashful elderly Indians you see at powwows or feasts or at the clinic, willing to talk and tell dirty jokes; not the kind of traditional elder that a lot of younger people seek out for approval and advice; not the kind of woodsy Indian man who will take you hunting and explain, patiently, how to lead on ducks or where to find the best mushrooms. When we were kids and my cousins and I came into the house from playing more often than not he would say, "Get the hell out." He was, and everyone will tell you this, a hard ass.

His looks reinforced this impression. He was thin and rangy. He wasn't especially tall, but he *seemed* tall. He never changed his hairstyle. His full head of hair, black, then gray, and finally all white, was cut longish and combed back and held in an Elvis-type pompadour with Brylcreem. In many pictures he poses without a shirt on. He was tough. He was the only person I knew who had a sword hanging on his wall. The family story was that it was a Nazi officer's sword and that he took it off a German corpse. Once, when I was a teenager, I got up the nerve to ask him if he had gotten it from a German during the war. *Hell no*, he said. *That's a Knights of Columbus sword. It ain't a real sword.* I asked him where he got it. *I traded a Luger for it.* I asked him where he got that. *Where you*

think, boy? I shot a German and took it.

We had never been close while I was growing up. He scared me. We didn't have much to say to each other. I wasn't the only one who felt small next to his anger, his rage, his perpetual dissatisfaction. He didn't have a lot to say to anyone. When, as a girl, my mother saw him working without a shirt on and saw the scar that circled his shoulder, she'd asked him what happened. *Got shot* was all he said. He didn't say that after surviving D-day and the Battle of the Bulge and many other battles in France and Belgium, he and his patrol had crossed into Germany near Aachen (not half a mile from where Charlemagne had reigned as emperor). He did not say that the man in front of him, a guy named Van Winkle from Arkansas, stepped on a land mine. The mine blew off Van Winkle's legs and blew apart my grandfather's shoulder. He told us nothing about any of this.

In the 1950s he was living with my grandmother and their four children in a small two-room shack in the small village of Bena on the Leech Lake Reservation. The shack had been built around the turn of the century and at that time it was the only house with walls and a ceiling in the village—the rest of the dwellings were wigwams made from bent poles and covered with bark. All six members of the family lived in this run-down thing. No running water, no bathroom, a woodstove on which to cook. The family was terribly poor. My mother remembers one winter when they had only thirty-five cents to their name. My grandfather took the thirty-five cents and bought a plaque that read: "The Lord Shall Provide." That night at dinner my grandmother served the four kids, but instead of serving him she put the plaque on his plate. *If he's going to provide and you're not, then eat that. See how good it tastes.*

He was offered a job eight miles away—still on the reservation, only eight miles down the highway—that included a good salary; a fully furnished house with plumbing, electricity, and heat; and a beautiful view of Leech Lake itself. My grandfather turned it down.

It's only eight miles away, Gene. Eight miles.

I made a promise to God that if I made it home I'd never leave again. This is home. I plan to keep my promise. I'm not fucking leaving. He never moved away from Bena and never traveled off the reservation if he could help it.

Our small ancestral town of Bena has a population of around 140 and a bad reputation. Even though it sits on a major highway and a lot of people drive through it, it is really known for only two things: a cool-looking gas station that's on the national register of historic places, and the number of outlaws who call it home. Gerald Vizenor once called Bena "Little Chicago" because of the rough handling of outsiders sometimes get there. Vizenor has not been forgiven for that. He doesn't go to Bena much. It's got, in addition to the gas station, a bar and a post office. It used to have three gas stations, two hardware stores, two grocery stores, seven hotels, and two bars. My grandmother's father—known to everyone as Grandpa Harris—owned both bars during his life. A full-blooded Scot from Chicago, he had somehow ended up in Bena in the early part of the century. After spending most of his young life in logging camps, he eventually bought the Wigwam Bar, sold it, and then bought the Gitigan (Ojibwa for "garden") across the street. He married my great-grandmother, an Indian. An irony for you: at the time my grandmother's father, Harris, owned the Wigwam Bar, my grandfather's grandmother still lived in a real wigwam made of bent willow saplings and tar paper across the sandy street a hundred yards down the road. During the 1930s and 1940s, it was illegal to serve liquor to Indians. So Harris Matthews sold whisky and beer to his in-laws out the back door and they drank back there but came

the front to dance. Harris was, by all accounts, kind of an asshole. Once he was fixing the roof of the Gitigan and someone walked by and asked, *What are you building, Harris? A whorehouse?* He replied *If I was building a whorehouse I'd have to put a roof over the whole fucking town.*

I got the news that my grandfather had shot himself on the morning of August 3. I was in Bena by early evening. I passed the “big house,” which is what everyone calls (without irony) the house my grandfather lived in. It isn't actually big, just bigger than most of the other houses in Bena. His new Chevy Silverado was in the yard. I pulled to a stop at my grandmother's trailer, just down the hill.

Cars huddled around my grandmother's trailer and I heard voices coming from the porch, the deck, and inside. It was packed. Some people were already drinking beer; most were not. My favorite uncle was staggering around the living room without his shirt on and gave me a hug. My grandmother sat on the couch with my mother. My grandmother was the one who had found him. Other relatives—my uncle Diddy and aunts JoAnne and Kay, and friends Rocky Tibbets and his brother Buddy—milled around on the deck. Buddy had the sideways look in his eyes that he seems to get when he's been drinking all day. Some of my first cousins were already there—Nate, Josh, and Justin. Sam was driving in from South Dakota. Jesse was back in jail and wouldn't make it. The trailer was warm and well lit, and I felt folded into the soupy, complicated, and comforting trouble of family almost immediately.

The next day was beautiful. It was early August but it was sunny and crisp and clear. My cousin Sam had arrived in the night with his girlfriend and they were tangled up on the couch. He wasn't wearing a shirt; this is obviously a family trait (one I don't share). They woke up and we talked a bit and then they left for the café to get some breakfast. I talked my grieving mother into going down to the café, too. After breakfast we drove back up to my grandmother's trailer and I asked her if there was anything I could do. There's always something to do. That's one nice thing about Indian funerals, whether Catholic, traditional, or a mixture of both. There's always something—gathering saguaro, cooking, digging the grave, getting tar paper to cover the mound of dirt until a gravehouse can be built, building the rough box, carving and shaping the clan marker, getting drunk. I actually like digging the grave. It's mindless and communal.

My grandmother asked me to do two things. Would I be willing to write a eulogy to read at the service? And would I go up to the big house and take care of the bedroom? Clean it up. *We want to make it look nice in there*, she said. She was shaky. Her eyes watered constantly. *We just want to make it look nice. And your uncles, well, you know; they just can't go in there.* She asked me to do this not because I had been close to my grandfather but because, compared with the rest of the family, I hadn't been.

It felt strange to be in the big house without my grandfather there. He had spent eighty of his eighty-three years in Bena. Sixty of those years had been spent in that house. Whenever I came over to visit him I'd find him sitting in his chair by the window, the police scanner on—with the scanner, he could often follow the progress the police were making tracking down our relatives. He'd smoke and drink coffee. If he was lucky he'd have peanut brittle or beans to eat.

A stack of books and the Bible rested to the left of the chair on the small end table laden with all sorts of other things: two broken watches, glasses, a screwdriver, long and unreadable information about his medication. The chair was empty now. But his cigarettes and lighter were on the table, although he were about to smoke. Someone had written “Dads” on a Post-it and stuck it on the pack.

Without the possessive it made me think of fathers. Dads. Parents and mothers and cousins and brothers and sisters and all of us and how we could have ended up like this. I sat at the table across from the chair and smoked one of my own cigarettes. When I was finished I walked back to his bedroom.

A narrow iron-frame bed. A dresser stuffed with socks, mostly the nonslip hospital kind, and T-shirts. A drawer full of medical supplies. A large oak table mounded with clothes and the weird effluvia that are a product of living in the same place for a long time; a broken printer, two dust bedspreads, a boom box, and a portrait of my mother as a high school student, painted by his brother-in-law while he was in prison. A small safe served as his night table. When I opened it I found a few bundles of one-dollar bills, banded into stacks of 100, some rolls of quarters and silver dollars, and my cousin Vanessa's cheap gold necklace. This was the necklace she had been wearing when she got into an argument at a party and drove across two yards, up a ditch, and onto the highway, where she was struck by a passing motor home.

I looked down at my feet. A small throw rug was turned at a funny angle. What looked like grape juice had blotted through it in places. When I lifted it I found the blood.

And then I got to work.

I emptied the dresser, removed the drawers, and bagged the clothes on the oak table and the contents of the safe. I lifted the safe out of the room and lugged the mattress through the narrow door. I saw that, unbeknownst to anyone, my grandfather's dog had been waging war against him by shitting under his bed. That dog's turds, no bigger than those of a cat, were hard, preserved, nested in the humus of hair, dust, and dead skin that had collected there. I choked on the dust. The whole room smelled like my grandfather. Especially the blood—it didn't smell like "death." It smelled like him; sweet, smoky, thick.

I took a break and wandered through the house until my older brother Anton arrived. I was glad he was there. He has the right personality for such jobs—calm, seemingly unperturbed.

Anton and I lifted out the heavy furniture until all that was left was the small rectangle of a room and the smaller, more potent, more significant rectangle of the braided throw rug that covered what was left of my grandfather's brain. We weren't doing a great job and neither was the rug. It tugged under the feet, and carrying furniture while stepping over it was hard, and in short time the rug had been stepped on and flipped over and bunched up. Quite a lot of blood showed through. We tried not to notice.

We moved the bed frame out to the garage. Since my grandfather, in addition to being a hard-as-steel was somewhat sentimental, he held on to a lot of junk. For instance, he had saved all of his father's logging equipment, and so one wall was covered with two-man Swede saws, crosscut saws, axes, peaveys, and the like. In the far corner hung a small hand drum. I remember hearing about this drum from my mother.

When she was a young girl, growing up in Bena in the 1940s, everyone was Catholic, or at least acted Catholic. Her parents made all the children get dressed and go to church on Sundays even though they themselves did not attend. The Catholic church in Bena is a small, very modest building with the footprint of a very small house. The usher was a man named George Martin, an old, quiet man, who lived across from the church with his wife. My mother said that everyone was scared of George because he was rumored to be a medicine man. Whenever a dog went missing everyone would say *George must have got him. Watch your dogs or George will get them.* Every Saturday night you could

hear him singing medicine songs on a water drum. The drum, whose sound can carry for miles, sounded throughout the village. But then, on Sunday morning, George would be standing by the front door of the church in a brown suit, showing the good people of Bena to their pews and helping to pass the plate and tend the grounds. He never took Communion or knelt or joined in the prayers. Before he died he gave my grandfather—a man, it should be said, who had absolutely no interest in hand drums or traditional songs or anything of the sort—the hand drum that he had used when he played the moccasin game (a team gambling game involving singing and sleight of hand). George was the last grand medicine man from Bena.

My brother couldn't stay long. He has seven children ranging in age from six months to fifteen years. I told him I'd finish alone. I did.

The day had grown warm and as I cut the carpet and rolled it the dust and dander rose into the air and choked me. It was not hard work as far as tearing up carpet goes, but it wasn't fun. The carpet tore easily, and that was a blessing. Nonetheless, I took my time. I stopped occasionally and wandered out into the main part of the house and sat across from my grandfather's chair and smoked cigarettes, still a little shocked that he wasn't there. When I went back to the bedroom and was confronted by the patch of blood, brain, and lymph, I had the strange feeling that my grandfather—all of him, his body and self and words, his whole life—had somehow disappeared into the floor. I began to resent the carpet. So cheap. So easily torn. So incapable of holding my grandfather's blood, which had soaked through the carpet and into the subfloor.

I began to curse. I cursed that carpet as I'd never cursed anyone in my life. On I went. I hated that cheap, thin, blue, foam-backed, glue-down carpet more than I have ever hated anyone or anything. That carpet, that cheap cheap carpet, that carpet the same color as the reservation is colored on some maps of northern Minnesota. And just as torn, dusty, and damaged. Just as durable. Just as inadequate. We all struggle to do our jobs—the job of living, the job of dying, the job of muddling the two—but that carpet didn't do its job. It didn't keep its end of the bargain.

I left for home in the early evening to write the eulogy and it wasn't until eleven o'clock that I finally crawled into bed. I couldn't sleep. I wouldn't say I was traumatized by my grandfather's death or by cleaning up his blood and brain. But when I closed my eyes all I saw was blood. I read for a while and then shut off the light. Again, blood. I didn't "think" anything. I wasn't "sad." I didn't lie there in the dark pondering the greater import of what had happened. I didn't dwell on lost opportunities or missed chances. But every time I closed my eyes I saw the blood and pink curd of my grandfather's brain. I couldn't distract myself, and nothing turned into anything greater: no greater catharsis, sadness, or realization. When I closed my eyes I began to hate this, too: our Indian life. Our reservations. Is that what it's all about? Is it just this? Our brains on the floor? Is it just this? Our blood splattered all over the rug? The Native author Greg Sarris said recently that reservations are just "red ghettos." I've always disagreed with that way of thinking. There has to be something more. But when I closed my eyes that night I couldn't imagine what else we might be up to, or how better to describe our lives.

Eventually my thoughts turned to other thoughts—about my cousins, siblings, aunts, and uncles at the place we call ours. I thought about my cousin Jesse, the one who couldn't make it to the funeral because he was back in jail. Earlier that summer Jesse had overdosed on methadone. The year before he was hit by a train; his car was pushed down the tracks for over a mile. Surprisingly, he lived, but not without some damage. Jesse is a big likable guy. The methadone overdose put him in the ICU.

When my brother and I went to visit him he was still sedated and he had a breathing tube down his throat so he could not talk. His girlfriend, fresh out of treatment, was there.

He's drifting in and out. Can't talk because of the tube, she said.

The room smelled bad. His hospital gown was open to his waist.

Yeah, he was awake this morning. He can write but it don't make a lot of sense. They don't know. They don't know if it's from this or the train wreck. He makes some sense though.

We made small talk but it was hard. Every few minutes Jesse jerked in his sleep. His arms and legs flailed and then he quieted down again. When we ran out of things to talk about I looked around the room. I've grown to hate these places. I looked at Jesse. His chest was shallow. I noticed that he had a tattoo on his stomach. It was gang-style, large letters following the arc of his rib cage. REZ LIFE. We watched TV and then I picked up the loose typing paper from the side table. Some of the writing was that of my family and of Jesse's girlfriend. A lot of it was covered with Jesse's attempts at communication. She was right. A lot of it didn't make sense. Words and letters trailed off or drifted rudderless, across the pages. WHAT HAPPENED? I DID? And then a few pages later: THEY GONNA THINK I DID IT ON PURPOSE FUCK. And then later: I GOT LOTS OF HEART AND STRENGTH MORE THAN THEY THINK.

I wondered then and I wonder now. Does he? Do we? And what is this place—this rez, these reservations? What are these places that kill us every day but that we'd die to protect and are like no place else on earth? And what can we find here behind the signs that announce us?

2

This book, then, is about what can be found behind that sign and others—planted in American soil. It is about how reservations began, what they are now, and where they are going. You can tell a lot about a place by its exceptions, by turning over and inspecting the frayed corners of its quilt. You can tell a lot about the whole by looking at the part. You can tell a lot about America, about its sins and its ideals, by looking at and behind the signs that advertise our existence, the existence of a kind of American who was supposed to have died out a long time ago.

I once heard a journalist state that to write a book of nonfiction, a book about the lives of others, the writer had to feel in his gut that his informants owed him something, that he owned a piece of their lives. But I don't think this is true. I think the opposite is true. I don't think my family or my people owe me anything. I feel that I owe my life to them and I set out to write a book that reflects this. It reflects the debt I owe them, and does them honor. To understand American Indians is to understand America. This is the story of the paradoxically least and most American place in the twenty-first century. Welcome to the Rez.



Charley Grolla, Red Lake Nation Conservation Officer
Courtesy Charley Grolla

It was a hot day in May 2006 when two Red Lake tribal conservation officers sped across the mirror-smooth waters of Upper Red Lake, uncased M4 assault rifles and shotguns leaning against the bow of the reservation conservation boat. Officers Nelson and Grolla never left the guns onshore—someone could break into their vehicle and take them. They had been on routine patrol when they saw two white men fishing on reservation waters. Grolla is a big man, an intimidating man if you don't know him, and for some, even if you do. He laughs a lot. He weighs nearly 400 pounds. His Ojibwe name is Ogimaagiizhig (literally "Head of the Sky" but, more figuratively, "Head Thunderbird") and he belongs to the Caribou Clan, just as his great-great-great-grandfather the famous Ojibwe war chief Waabojiig had. "When I was at the police academy in New Mexico," Grolla said, "it was like boot camp, you know like that movie *Full Metal Jacket*. It was tough. You got yelled at a lot. I saw a few girls cry the first day. A lot of those guys had never been yelled at before, they didn't know how to do anything for themselves. I was glad I was raised the way I was. I grew up hauling wood, doing chores. At the academy all that work I did growing up helped. A lot of guys didn't know how to do laundry or how to press their clothes. I knew all of that. When I got back from the academy I got my class number tattooed on my shoulder: IPA 71. I was half the size I am now. I was about 235 pounds. I could bench three hundred-something. Now I eat all the time. Because of the stress, I think." Grolla used to work for the Red Lake police force, but he switched over to conservation in 2000, largely because of the stress. "A lot of guys quit this job. They do it for a few years and get tired of it and become what's called being 'retired on duty.' They just don't care anymore. I was getting to that place. I just didn't care anymore and I didn't want to be like that. It got to be too much. So I switched to conservation. I like being in the woods more." Grolla's partner, Corporal Tyson Nelson, is also imposing: dark, six feet tall, 235 pounds. Nelson is a boxer, one of the best from Red Lake, a place that has produced many good Golden Gloves.

Grolla's shoes and socks were on the floor of the boat. He raced across the water wearing only his pants and shirt. His gun belt was off. Later, during the trial in Red Lake Tribal Court, his manner of dress would become an issue. "You looked like you were ready to tango, like you wanted to fight," said Jerry Mueller, one of the fishermen. "No. You learn pretty quick not to go on the water wearing heavy boots. If you go over you could drown," says Charley.

Grolla and Tyson had been watching as the boat with the two white fishermen neared the reservation boundary, marked onshore with a sign and on the water with white plastic buoys. Sport fishermen often ripped down the signs and cut the buoys. Only a road remains as a reminder of where the reservation boundary lies. Even though Jerry Mueller and his son-in-law were close to shore and could see the sign, they did not turn around; they continued fishing on Red Lake waters until they were a mile inside the reservation. When Mueller saw the conservation officers approaching he started his boat, gunned it, and then stopped—clearly the officers had the faster boat. "He knew where he was," recalled Grolla. "We took him in and he was cooperative at first. He played stupid. 'We didn't know,' he said. 'We didn't know.' But we were really respectful, professional. Even though they saw the sign

down everyone knows where the boundary is. You can see it on the shore. And it was totally calm. How could you drift a mile over the boundary when there's no wind at all?"

Grolla and Nelson powered up alongside Mueller and his son-in-law (the case is referred to as the Mueller case although the boat actually belonged to the son-in-law), took hold of the 1984 Forest Service seventeen-foot fiberglass boat, and said that they were fishing on Red Lake Reservation waters and that the boat, motor, and fishing gear were being confiscated.

"If I'm on the reservation, I'm real sorry for this," Mueller recalled saying. "I had no intention of fishing on your side of the lake."

Mueller claimed later that Grolla said, "Your apology don't hold no weight with me."

The officers moved their assault rifles to the stern and commanded Mueller and his son-in-law to get into the bow. With the boat in tow they proceeded back to the boat landing. The son-in-law was polite, even contrite. He paid his fine and got his boat and trailer back without complaint. Mueller was a different story. When he returned home he received a summons to appear in Red Lake Reservation tribal court or to pay a fine of \$250 for fishing illegally in Red Lake waters. He said that he would not obey the summons, and that the fine was unfair. Many other whites agreed with him. He received pro bono legal representation to help him fight the fine in tribal court. A nonprofit citizen action group called Citizens for Truth in Government, based in Bagley, Minnesota, was formed in part because of the issues of water rights and fishing rights stirred up by the Mueller case. The action group argued, among other things, that Red Lake Reservation shouldn't have sole jurisdiction over the waterways inside the reservation, that it had no right to fine non-band members or confiscate their property, and that the reservation shouldn't receive any money from the state for schools on its land. "The reservation is set up to fail," says Terry Maddy, the secretary-treasurer for Citizens for Truth in Government. "I want to be clear: I'm not anti-Indian. I'm pro-Indian. I've got a lot of Indian friends. And let me tell you—when they come visit me they don't want to park out front. They're scared to be seen with me because Buck Jourdain [the chairman of the Red Lake Tribe] has got spies. They're scared to death of him. He gets a cut of everything up there," contends Maddy. "Like a kingpin. If people speak out publicly, they'll die. We're not anti-Indian, we're anti-reservation, because reservations are keeping people down. No one's happy up there. And it's because people feel entitled. They get special treatment, special rights." A coalition of sport fishermen vowed to form a floating blockade of Red Lake waters with their fishing boats. What might have been an instance of willful trespass or simply a navigational blunder looked as if it would become a serious challenge to the sovereignty of Red Lake Reservation.

Doug Lindgren, a Republican candidate for the state legislature in 2006, made Red Lake his main campaign issue. "It's been upheld in the highest court in the nation," said Lindgren, "that Red Lake belongs—and this is from the U.S. Supreme Court—is that they are saying that the navigable waters belong to the state of Minnesota. If Minnesota has the right, through the laws, then yes, Minnesota should step in and have all control over what goes on on the Red Lakes." Michael Barrett, a Republican running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, said, "This is not meant to be racist in any manner. In fact, the opposite is true. This is a statement that identifies that we're all Minnesotans, that we should all have the same opportunities and we should all live by the same rules. We have to have a state and a nation that embraces equal rights and equal access for all, not special privileges for a few."

It's the idea of "special privileges" that upsets people so much. But what Barrett, Lindgren, and

Maddy don't realize is that tribes and tribal sovereignty allowed there to be a state of Minnesota in the first place. Without the concessions made by tribes during the treaty process there wouldn't be anyplace for white people to settle. Be that as it may, Terry Maddy, the treasurer for Citizens for Truth in Government, summed up Red Lake's position by saying they've "long had a tradition up there of having their cake and eating it, too."

Red Lake Reservation is mostly water. It is a beautiful place, unlike any other in America. For starters, Upper and Lower Red Lake are almost completely undeveloped. Elm, ash, and maple march down to the water's edge. In a time when lakeshore property on sandy lakes in Minnesota and Wisconsin with good fishing has been almost completely divided and developed, sand beaches stretch for miles on Red Lake without interruption. Red Lake is actually two lakes—Upper and Lower Red Lake—connected by a narrow channel. The southern Lower Red Lake is sandy and shallow, and its 152,000 acres sit completely inside the reservation. Upper Red Lake is divided more or less in half—the 48,000 acres of the northern portion of Upper Red Lake are off the reservation; 60,000 acres of the southern half are within the boundaries of Red Lake.

There aren't really any farms on Red Lake Reservation, and there are only a few backwoods businesses advertising welding, small-engine repair, or logging. There are only four convenience stores I know of on the rez—one each in Little Rock, Red Lake Village, Redby, and Ponemah. The village of Red Lake has a grocery store and a Laundromat. Other than these small convenience stores there is no place to buy gas or food. There were no hotels until the spring of 2010, when Red Lake opened a casino on the southern boundary, far from the lake. There are no hair salons, Starbucks, Einstein Brothers Bagels, cell phone stores, RadioShacks, Jiffy Lubes, McDonald's, Arby's, Rent-A-Centers, car dealerships, Gaps or Old Navy Stores. There aren't even any real billboards. What signs do exist are often small, hand-painted on plywood, and as often as not propped against a tree rather than planted in the ground. The first sign you see upon driving into the village of Red Lake on Highway 89 is nicely painted and reads "Don's West-End Video," in red block letters written freehand on whitewashed half-inch plywood. All of this . . . this nothing, on a reservation the same size as Rhode Island. Until the new casino was built in 2010, the biggest building on the rez (except for the hospital) was the BIA jail.

The reasons for this apparent nothing are varied. Red Lake suffers from some of the most crippling economic conditions of any community in the country. Unemployment stands at 60 percent. The *average* income at Red Lake is well below the poverty level. High school graduation rates are the lowest in the state.

The village of Red Lake, arguably the capital of the rez, since that's where the high school and government offices are, doesn't offer much to look at. There is the former Red Lake Trading Post, which is now called Red Lake Foods. It is a combination grocery store, gas station, convenience store, Laundromat, and check-cashing place. There are government buildings, a few houses, a small casino, the grade school, the high school, and the powwow grounds next to the old casino. All in all, the village has a meanly municipal feel to it.

All land is held in common by the Red Lake Band, so no non-band member can own or rent out a house on tribal land. Charley Grolla, the officer who arrested Jerry Mueller, is an enrolled member of a different reservation, the small backwoods community of Nett Lake in northeastern Minnesota. "When I was real little my ma was going to go to an AA meeting in the Cities. So she dropped me and

my brother off with Dale and Sandy [Johns] at Red Lake. She didn't come back for a few weeks. When she did come back she was kind of drunk. Dale said, "You can stay if you want. You got to do what you've been doing, work hard, work around the house, take care of yourselves." So I went out and told my mom I was going to stay. She said OK, and I didn't see her again for three or four months maybe." Grolla went back to his biological family at Nett Lake later, but life was much the same. More chaos. More drinking. "My mom had been drinking and stuff. I was fourteen. The uncle I was going to stay with, my favorite uncle Ike Leecy, he happened to do some time in jail. I was going to stay with him but I couldn't. So I hitchhiked back to Red Lake. A couple of weeks later the social workers came over. I told them I'm not going to go back. I gotta live my life, too. So I showed up in court and told them why I didn't want to live with her. It was a good life at Red Lake. A forest life. So I hunted, did sugarbush, picked blueberries. And that's where my Ojibwe stuff started, with my grandmother Fannie Johns. When I first learned my trees I learned them in Ojibwe. I didn't even know the English words for the trees. Birds, too. There's that one, she called it 'manoominikenshiinh.' It runs on the water in the rice. I still don't know what it is in English." So Charley grew up with a prominent Red Lake family, living a Red Lake life. He got married to a member of the Red Lake Band and they lived there and raised their kids there. But when he and his wife divorced, he couldn't live at Red Lake anymore. He is engaged now to a Red Lake tribal member.

While non-band members can't, as a rule, live on the rez, there is an exception, which has led to perhaps the strangest sight in the village: the Compound. Situated alongside the main highway, number 1, the Compound houses the Indian Health Services Hospital, the Jourdain Perpich Extended Care Facility, and all the "foreign" workers—government officials, doctors, teachers, and so on—who have jobs on Red Lake but are not band members. Some of the houses, known as "Walking Shield" houses, were moved here from an abandoned air force base in North Dakota. There are two batches of them, and after they were moved from North Dakota all of them had to be stripped and abated because they were insulated with asbestos. Some of the other houses were built on site. The HUD planners who designed the arrangement were smitten with the winding streets and culs-de-sac of American suburbia, and they let their love show: the Compound's ramblers and split-levels grace curving streets with curbs and streetlights, but no sidewalks. And until recently the whole thing was encased in an eight-foot-high Cyclone fence. Some people joke that the fence was there to keep Indians out. (And this is possible. When the old agency building and hospital were on the other side of the creek, they too were enclosed in a fence and referred to as "the compound"; but when the hospital and other facilities moved to where they are now, the old compound became known as "Pill Hill" because that's where everyone used to go to get medical care.) Clearly, outsiders have a complicated stake in Red Lake.

The high school sits just past the compound on the other side of the creek. It is a large, modern affair, built with bonded state and federal money in the early 1990s. Despite all the troubles that plague the reservation—crime, gangs, unemployment, suicide, and low graduation rates—the whole community is very proud, especially proud, of this school. It is the most important, most central, most conspicuous building on the reservation.

To an outsider Red Lake could look like a great nothing. But what appears as a great nothing, an economic disaster, is linked to a particular Red Lake phenomenon of independence. The "nothing" is the result of character and leadership stretching back over 150 years. Red Lake Reservation, unlike nearly every other reservation in the United States, is a closed reservation. No one can live, work,

travel, or fish anywhere within the reservation boundaries without the tribe's blessing. Mueller and his son-in-law were fishing on the wrong side of the rez.

When Terry Maddy said that the Indians at Red Lake were used to having their cake and eating it, to the "cake" he was referring to was sovereignty, and it had been baking for more than 400 years before Jerry Mueller's boat was confiscated by the sovereign nation of Red Lake. There is probably no aspect of Indian life more misunderstood by Indians and non-Indians alike than sovereignty.

Sovereignty in the Western sense—the supreme independent authority over a land or territory vested in a people or a government—predated the conquest of America. So when tribes began making treaties with colonial powers and later with the U.S. government, sovereignty, as a concept, was well in place. It was out of this concept that reservations were, in large part, born. There were ad hoc arrangements that resembled, to some extent, modern reservations, dating back to the early seventeenth century. The Delaware from New Jersey, for example, had one such arrangement. The Delaware were also the beneficiaries of what could be considered the first "reservations" in the United States, when, in the early 1700s, they were promised land that would exist under their authority in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The Province of Maryland created a 5,000-acre reservation for the Nanticoke Indians in 1698, and created another reservation of 3,000 acres in 1711. The first and largest reservation in the state of New Jersey was created for 200 Brotherton Delaware on August 29, 1758, in Evesham Township, Burlington County, New Jersey. Despite the reservation created for them in New Jersey, the Brotherton Delaware became one of the most nomadic tribes of all time. The Brotherton Reservation fell into decline almost immediately after it was created, mostly because the community's benefactor, John Brainerd, became ill and left in 1777. The Oneida of upstate New York invited the Brotherton Delaware to live with them in 1796. The Brotherton agreed. They had no power or protection in New Jersey. Instead of growing, their numbers had shrunk from 200 in 1758 to a mere 85 in 1796. They sold the reservation to New Jersey and moved to New York in 1802. The stay with the Oneida in New York was short. Some of the Oneida planned a move to Wisconsin—having lost land, rights, and villages during and after the rampages of the Revolutionary War. The Oneida, having sided with the Americans, returned to their villages to find them burned and looted by the British, the Americans, and even some of their own Indian allies. And this after the Oneida men had carried 60 bushels of corn on their backs to relieve the famine at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777–1778. An Oneida woman named Polly Cooper accompanied the men and showed the soldiers how to prepare the corn by soaking it in lye and rolling it into hominy. So grateful were Washington and his troops that Martha Washington personally presented Polly Cooper with a bonnet and shawl. That gratitude was short-lived. After the war the Oneida suffered and sought better conditions out west. The Brotherton Indians accompanied them. Other Delaware moved to Indian territories in present-day Oklahoma. Still others fled to Canada.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries up to the Revolutionary War, there were a series of arrangements, trade relationships, and antiaggression treaties between many tribes and the major European colonial powers in North America, chief among them the Spanish, Dutch, French, and English. These relationships varied among tribes and colonists, with some tribes playing both sides because they could. In many instances, as late as the mid-eighteenth century, Indian tribes controlled the natural resources, the routes of travel, and the technology to effectively control large areas of North America. The Indians in the Great Lakes region showed they were powerful enough to make an

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