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Telkwa, BC
Moricetown
16 yrs.

The Hiatsk

It's late on a long December day. Nisga'a chief Joseph Gosnell sits in his fishing spot along the Nass Valley. He imagines fishing on a warm summer day. The glistening rays of heat contradicting the cool liquid waves ravishing his body and mind. However, the temperature is below freezing point and chills of wind are running through the stiff air, bringing him back to the present.

Chief Gosnell ponders his latest battles of recognition. It's been a month since he led his people through the doors of BC Legislation hoping it would be the final cry for a treaty. Unfortunately it is not official yet. The Nisga'a people are so close to being recognized as a distinct government. So close to having their name put on the map. But not yet.

He sighs, gets up and starts to return home in the dark completely at ease. Out of nowhere a small animal runs across the path, it means no harm, but Joseph is startled and trips falling head first into a deep crevasse. He yells for help though he knows he's too far for anyone above to hear. He struggles uselessly feeling the freezing snow around his body, closes his eyes, and awaits death.

"Grab my hand."

He reaches out and grabs the stranger's hand. They both stumble onto the path. Chief Gosnell stands up to thank his savior. It's a young man from town; maybe 16 years old.

The boy runs off before Joseph got a chance to give thanks.

Days later the chief visits the highschool to ask after the boy who saved him.

"What did he look like?" asks the principal.

Chief Gosnell describes him, dark skin, small eyes, ratty hair, wearing a red winter coat that's far too small for his large frame.

"If I'm correct in the boy you're referring to, you must be mistaken."

"I'm certain. I could never forget his face, why are you so startled?"

"Well, it's just that the boy that you are referring to is no savior. He steals, he...he's just given up.

"Yet he saved me."

"Well he does two things, causes problems and shoots hoops in his front yard."

"What's his name?"

"Jon."

Chief Joseph recalls seeing this young man shoot hoops hour after hour in his front yard. He always looks hard, unapproachable.

Chief pulls up to a small house. The paints peeling, bits of garbage clutter the yard, and Jon is shooting hoops.

He watches Jon take shot after shot.

“You would be a lot more accurate if you kept your elbow in.”

Jon turns to him, slightly startled.

“What do you want?”

“I’ve come to repay you.”

“You can repay me by leaving me alone.”

“Look, you deserve a reward. And I think I can offer something that you might like. I’d like you to join my basketball team.”

Jon’s ears perk up like a puppy. It looks like he wants to answer, but hesitates for a moment.

“Don’t worry, I’ll pay your expenses. Consider it a thank you gift.”

Jon still looks uncertain. “But what team...where...what is this for?”

“It is our Nisga’a team. You would be representing us. We will be going to the All-Native Basketball tournament in Prince Rupert, in a couple of months.”

Jon looks torn, but agrees.

“There are a couple of conditions however. Since you are starting a lot later than the rest of the team you need to have private practices with me two days a week along with the three regular ones. Also all children under 18 must be in school full time. You can do this?”

Jon nods.

Regular practices are easy for Jon; he just puts his head down and works. Private practices are another matter, physically, emotionally and spiritually Jon is pushed to his limits. Chief Gosnell knows some of the things Jon has done, but these things are past, and they need to write a future. He tells Jon of their nations fight for recognition and an independent government. And he seems to listen. Things are going well, until one practice.

“You’re very physically fit,” Chief starts off. “But that is not all there is. There has to be balance. You must be strong spirited, emotionally stable and mentally alert. The blame for the past is not all yours, some of it the responsibility of your parents. But...”

Jon abruptly stops his work out. “Don’t talk about my parents old man,” he says coldly.

Chief Gosnell’s shock turns too offence. “I’m sorry if I offended you Jon, but you don’t speak to me like that. Ever.”

“Just shut your hole. NO ONE talks about my family.”

The ceiling fan swishes above them in the silence. Jon turns for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

Jon slams the heavy door behind him.

A week later, Jon comes home from school. He hasn’t gone to practice since his outburst, but on this particularly rough day he misses it. His mother is sprawled out on

the couch with a drink in her hand. His father is still at the mill. He's just going to come home and join his mother with a bottle anyways. His younger brother and sister are arguing in the other room; he thinks it's the source of his mom's desire drinking.

Dark arrives with Jon's dad. The smell of liquor is draped on his dirty uniform. Jon presses his ear up against his door. He can faintly hear his younger siblings, and parents. Something smashes, somebody screams. Jon can't take it anymore. He opens his door to see his younger brother and sister scurrying into their room. Jon puts on his small coat and heads for the door.

"Where are you going boy?" His father scowls at him.

"Out."

"You aren't going to that stupid ball again are you? You are wasting your time. You need to find a job and start contributing to our nation."

"Like you?" Jon challenges as he slams the door behind him.

Chief Gosnell wanders down the familiar path. He hasn't been back since he fell. The ice has begun to melt, and winter is slowly pulling away. He looks down upon the brilliant scene, to a figure in the distance. As it gets closer he realizes it's Jon.

"It's been awhile." Chief starts off, not exactly sure what to say. Jon stares. Chief Gosnell thinks for a moment. "You can do some great things for us. Not just our basketball team, but also our nation's team. Our home. We need you as much as you need us; for our reputation and future.

Jon stands up. "What reputation? There's nothing I can do to stop people from thinking the way they think about me. And what future? I'm just going to grow up, go work at the mill, and come home and yell at my family. There's nothing else, nothing else that'll ever come."

"Do you know what your name is?"

"My..yea of course. Name?"

"You're Nisga'a name."

"Oh, yea. It's Hiatsk.

"And do you know what that means? The Hiatsk is a symbol of wealth, power, and prestige. It will be our nation's symbol when we win our fight. When we gain our recognition and independence. We need you. You're our Hiatsk. You're your parents Hiatsk."

"I'm nothing to my family."

"You're everything. You are the wealth and power that they don't have. You are their most prestige gift. They love you, they just don't know how to show it."

Jon just sits there, absorbing the man's words.

"Do you know how many times I have wanted to give up on our treaty negotiations? It's about persistence through adversity. Our basketball team was put together for a reason. We'll put our nation on the map. The young men on the team are representing what we've been fighting for all along, unity of our people for independence of our nation." Chief Gosnell takes a few deep breaths through an agonizing moment of silence then turns back to the trail and leaves.

Jon thinks in silence for the longest time. The wind rushes in the darkening sky. Chief's words swirl through his head, mixing and matching and forming one big epiphany.

“I am Hiatsk,” he whispers quietly. His mind begins to settle down. He realizes now. The team is the Hiatsk. The team is the Nisga’a. The team will show the world how rich and proud the Nisga’a people are. It was up to them. The Hiatsk.

Hundreds of people are packed into the gym. The Nisga’a take part in the opening ceremonies. Jon looks into the crowd. They are part of a historical event. They are representing their people.

“You did the right thing.”

Jon looks up into the chief’s eyes. He just nods in agreement. He’s where he needs to be.