

This House Is Not a Home



KATŁIÀ

Advance praise for *This House Is Not a Home*

A crucial and intimate story that unpacks the devastating truths of the past and current crisis faced by displaced Indigenous Peoples.

It intricately moves through three generations living a traditional life, to land dispossession, and the inspiring recovery of a family determined to return and reclaim the beloved territories of their ancestors.

This House Is Not a Home singularly captures the legacy of Canada's colonial agenda to rid the land of Indigenous Peoples and the fallout that ensues.

— Brandi Morin, author of *Our Voice of Fire*

Absolutely exquisite. Told with such love and gentle ferocity, I'm convinced *This House Is Not A Home* will never leave those who read it. I am in awe of what I've witnessed here. Mahsi cho, Katł̓à. Bravo!

— Richard Van Camp, author of *The Lesser Blessed* and
Moccasin Square Gardens

Just finished your book. It is wonderful, Kat! Enlightening and touching! Miigwetch!

— David Bouchard, author of *We Learn from the Sun*

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Excerpt

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Development and copyediting: Kaitlin Littlechild

Text design: Jessica Herdman

Cover design: Ann Doyon

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*For my children,
May you be as strong as the ancient rocks at your feet,
yet as gentle as a resilient northern flower,
and may this contrasting beauty surround you
on the land that calls you home.*

PROLOGUE

Before the public housing system entered the Northwest Territories, many Indigenous Peoples lived off the land in canvas tents, teepees and log cabins, but when housing was introduced, families were divided through the separation of households and a new way of living was introduced. This lifestyle change caused a further loss of culture for Indigenous Peoples other than the enforced methods of assimilation into colonialism such as residential schools under the Indian Act.

Many Indigenous Peoples were accustomed to living together in close quarters with close and extended family members, aunts, uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers. Government housing policies call this overcrowding, but if we look closer, it's actually a part of a larger support system whereby families come together to help each other, where everyone has a role to play.

Today, many of our Elders live in old folks homes on the outskirts of the community, rarely visited by family, often passing away much earlier because of the loneliness and depression that overcomes them. Young people are losing their cultural traditions, including language, because their Elders are not in the household to help parents take care of the children and pass down teachings with wisdom, patience and guidance.

Men rarely hunt and woman rarely gather or harvest and prepare meat like before because our lands have been encroached. Society says we should leave the old ways behind and work for a living to pay bills, something that my ancestors never had to worry about when living on the land. When they

did try to find work in the days of forced assimilation, they often had a hard time because of lack of access to proper education and workplace discrimination, and their strengths were on the land. They became labelled as idle because they had a hard time getting hired and often had to rely on social assistance. This is the cycle that many Indigenous Peoples have become trapped in and often resort to other means of income, sometimes illegal, to survive. However, with globalization, efforts like Idle No More and land back are gaining significant support as Indigenous Peoples resist government power and control and assert our inherent Aboriginal Rights and Title. Indigenous Peoples are collectively rising up as the rightful stewards of the land that we have lived on since time immemorial in order to once again live a more sustainable, harmonious, unified lifestyle in line with Indigenous law like our ancestors once lived.

INTRODUCTION

I was inspired to write this story when I learned of a family that I know that had been living in poverty within the housing system for many years in the Northwest Territories, Canada. Before housing came into their small Dene community they lived in a small shack by the water. They did not have running water or electricity, but still, they had everything they needed.

Once a year they would set out on a hunting trip where they would be gone for a couple of weeks. They left most of their belongings behind and took only what they needed for surviving out in the bush. It was a beautiful event that the family looked forward to.

But when they returned from that hunting trip they came back to a vacant, empty lot where their humble shack once stood, with all their personal, irreplaceable belongings gone with it. Their home had disappeared. The family started frantically asking around the community about what had happened to their home. They were told that the housing corporation had come and assumed they had abandoned their home, and as such, it had been bulldozed to the ground.

This family then lived in a tent for the next year with nowhere to go. Eventually, in its place, the government built a boxed home with running water, electricity and appliances and told them they could live there if they paid rent. They had no choice but to move into the new housing unit because they required shelter for the coming unforgiving winter months.

This took place in the late 1980s. Since then, this family has had a strong resentment towards the government. They have

difficulty keeping up with their bills because they do not have a formal education. Their knowledge was on the land and still is; they never had to rely on making money to live. To this day, this family continues to struggle — living in poverty and never getting the justice they deserve for what happened to them.

This family and many other families across the North had to involuntarily give up their homes for something that was considered a better way of living by the same government that imposed their policies and beliefs, denying the principles and laws of traditional Indigenous ways of knowing. In this way, housing is a direct infringement of Indigenous Rights and Title.

With government cutbacks, many of the houses that are currently listed as public housing units in northern communities are in major need of repairs, and they are riddled with mould, which makes people sick. Although there is a declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples to live in safe environments and suitable housing conditions, this treaty is being broken because it is not binding.

Because of scenarios like this, and many other similar stories, the mindset of some Indigenous Peoples living in housing today is that they shouldn't have to pay to live on their own land. Many Indigenous Peoples are reclaiming their land, connecting back to their traditional lifestyles of living off the land and asserting their rights as part of reclaiming their cultural identity in an assertion of land back.

I am a domesticated creature of colonized habit
I don't know how to wield an axe or snare rabbits
Yet today I am going out for a drive on the highway to find
a new place to call home
Somewhere past the reservation zone
Yet not too far because I'm scared to be alone
I am settling in somewhere between urban and wild
I am freeing myself of society and acting like a disobedient child
I will not settle on the money man just because he might know how
to help me survive
I will know when I'm home again
When I feel reclaimed and alive
Whether this home I build be in the form of a mansion or a shack
I will stake my heart on the land and never turn back

Excerpt

CHAPTER 1

Kò was taught that every animal had a reason for being, but he had great difficulty understanding the purpose of the mosquito. Letting one of the annoying buzzards land on his exposed, balmy skin, he watched the pesky insect curiously. Why was its long stinger designed solely for the purpose of drinking blood? Kò wondered. Without consent, the insect took as much as it could carry and flew away, low to the ground, heavy with the weight of Kò's sticky red blood, leaving a cruel itch and a large welt in exchange. Not a fair trade at all, Kò thought.

It was early morning, still dark, but Kò and his father were already on the move. Kò tried to sit still and quietly like his father, but he was restless. Their backs upright and straightened against a towering cold piece of flat slate, they waited for the perfect opportunity to approach the large bull moose they had been following closely for the past day and a half.



Kò was born in one of the most unforgiving parts of the world. In a place where the cold can kill a man in a matter of minutes. Where one wrong move could end a life. Where there is no room for mistakes, no room for doubt, no room for anything other than survival. Where at the end of the day gratitude sets in. A deep appreciation to Creator. Having lived now for the count of ten winters, Kò was thankful to be alive each and every day and grateful for all things Creator made.

Kò learned from a young age not to let one day go by without giving thanks to Creator. To Kò, Creator was the land, and the land was Creator. They were one and the same. For thousands of years, Kò's family travelled the vast North. They had many gathering places that spread far and wide in all directions. They knew the best spots to pick berries and where to set traps. They knew where to lower their fishing nets and which migratory routes the caribou would take from year to year. The land was their home. They had many homes. Some areas they travelled to for the summer, other places they would hunker down for the long winter. They had no need to stay in only one place; the entire countryside was theirs to explore. Kò's ancestors passed on the knowledge of the land and how to live as one with the land from generation to generation so as not to lose their way of life.

Kò developed a sense of pride in knowing how to survive on the land with his heart and his hands, mostly through the teachings of his father. Because of this, Kò learned to both love the land and fear it for he knew nothing was as powerful as nature, and for that he respected it greatly.

Kò studied his father's serious weathered face as they sat together in wait. He couldn't remember the last time his father had spoken other than giving him short orders. His father had no need for words; one look from him told Kò all he needed to know. On the land, words had little meaning. Words were weak sounds carried away by the wind, but actions had strength behind them.

The rare time Kò's father did speak was when he told stories, stories that Kò could not entirely piece together all at once. Kò's father was a good storyteller, but Kò was often left with many unanswered questions.

"Ts'ehwhì." He was assured by his mother that, in time, he would come to know the ancient teachings in the stories and the meaning behind them, that he would one day be the one

to tell those same stories and pass them on to his own children. Everyone Kò knew was a storyteller. They all told stories with lessons behind them. Stories were told incrementally, throughout the years, so that the message would become ingrained in the listener, retained for life after an entire lifetime of repetition.



Kò's father started in on one of his stories to pass the time as they sat in the reeds near the mouth of the river at dusk, their two hidden figures blending in perfectly with nature far downstream from the rushing waterfall, in a quiet place where the river lapped into a calm stir. The cascade still towering over them from afar. It was no question to Kò that the moose was alive just as much as he was. It lived and breathed. And although beautiful, it was very dangerous. If one were to get too close, one would surely be taken under by the sheer force and power behind it, his father warned. "Hoji." It continuously created its own storm, the rushing current dancing together night and day endlessly.

"Ejìecho eyits'ò hòezipejì deh nàlì ɬak'a ts'òhk'e negùhà nùdè, ekò dè asùdeè goxè ɬaɖi agode ha." His father stared out at the waterfall in the distance as he told his son one of the oldest prophecies he knew. It was said that when the two animals, the bison and muskox, from different parts of the land meet on either side of the waterfall it would be a sign of great changes to come.

Kò had passed by that very same waterfall countless times when he accompanied his father on his fall hunt. He had always admired it knowing it was an important landmark. This time though, as his father painted the picture of the two large brutes at the top of the waterfall in his imagination, he looked up at the high cliffs that encased it in astonishment, admiring the falls from a new perspective. He imagined the great creatures

standing at the foot of the cliffs looking at one another, ready to fight or maybe to make peace — he wondered. Kò would never look at the waterfall the same again without hoping to catch a glimpse of the two powerful animals.

The prophesy of the muskox and bison would eventually mark a change in the life that Kò lived, his father continued. “Èkiyeh nùdè, gòèt’ù òù neèk’e nàgede gígha dezhi agode ha.” His father’s words struck deep and gave Kò a pang of panic he’d never felt before. He didn’t want to believe it. To not be able to live on the land was unfathomable to Kò, and he forced the thought from his racing mind, happy to be distracted by another small swarm of mosquitoes drawn to the sound of his fast heartbeat and hungry for blood. When one of the blood-suckers landed on the back of his hand, his reflex took over and he flattened it before it had a chance to take from him. He hoped it would set an example to the others but they were relentless.

The tanned moose hide wraparounds and red fox fur collar that Kò’s mother made for him blended in with the red, orange and brown autumn leaves that he covered himself in head to toe to blend into his surroundings, hidden from the moose they were tracking.

When Kò and his father hunted, they never came back empty-handed. They would be gone for days, sometimes weeks, only to return home when they were successful. To go home empty-handed was the unspoken failure of a man. One moose was enough to feed and clothe their small family for a season, more than that, and they would share what they had with the community. Through giving and taking, Kò was taught that all parts of the animal were equally important and never wasted; if not used for food, the animal would be used for clothing and tools.

Kò grew more and more restless as they waited in the reeds for the moose to enter their range. They had been calling and waiting all day, exchanging the tried-and-true mating ritual

through their mimicked moose calls knowing it was only a matter of time until the moose would come into view. Moose hunting was still a steep lesson in patience for Kò. It was difficult for him to sit still for he was still too young and full of energy, not like his father who seemed to have all the time in the world, napping in between moose calls or praying to Creator, Kò couldn't be sure.

Kò's eyes grew big when he finally saw the smooth brown body and large antlers that looked like old brittle bone walk out into the open. He tugged quietly at his father's sleeve. He knew better than to speak but couldn't help it. "Dendi," he whispered. Kò scrambled to a kneeling position to get ready to jump up quickly into a run, but his father held his arm out in front of him using the universal sign to be quiet by putting his finger to his lips.

Not knowing its end was near, the large animal walked directly in front of them towards the water, dipping its large front hoofs into the crystal-clear lake. The bull moose took a long look at the view of the great waterfall in front of him before lapping up a much-needed drink. Kò watched and wondered in awe if the animal was capable of admiring the beauty that it was born into or if it didn't have a mind to think apart from its own survival.

Kò's father collected himself and slowly crouched onto one knee raising his bow and arrow in wait, giving the bull a chance to finish its long-meditated drink. As sure as the winter nights are dark, the animal took its time, almost as if it knew it was going to be its last sip. Through the trees, Kò's father closed one eye and pointed the scored end of the arrow directly at the magnificent creature as it turned in their direction to make its way out of the water.

The bull's ears flinched from the faint sound of the million-year-old stone, the sharpened edge already on its way, travelling with a sharp zinging sound that could be heard over the crashing of the distant falls. Spinning sharply, the slate punctured the

moose right below its left ear on the thick, folded skin of its neck, yet it wasn't pierced deep enough to slow the large beast down entirely and the moose turned and ran in the opposite direction, its instincts kicking into full force.

Kò was already on the move, trailing closely behind the animal and well in front of his father. He splashed through the water, his feet barely skimming the surface, his knees high in the air to gain more speed. He took a shot with a smaller version of his dad's arrow without taking a moment to aim only to meet with the animal's rear. Not slowing it down in the least, the bull reared its front legs up for a moment and splashed down into its wake and ran even faster. Not quite the target Kò had in mind. He broke the dry spruce bow in half over his bent knee, angry at himself for missing his chance at proving he was a skilled hunter.

Kò's father had already situated himself on the other side of the shoreline, correctly assuming how the scene would play out. Facing the animal head on, Kò's father fearlessly stood in front of the ramming bull waiting for it to come to him knowing it had nowhere left to run.

Kò's father raised his bow and arrow looking the animal directly in the eye. Giving up before the kill shot, the animal did not carry the look of fear; instead it had a look of surrender as if it had already accepted that its time had come. It slowed to a stumbled trot, no longer looking around for an escape, the slight wound in its neck set in and it fell into a kneeling position as another arrow pierced through the tender part of the animal's side between its large rib cage, the kill shot. With its lung punctured, blood flooded its diaphragm, ultimately causing the creature to suffocate. Out in the open, under the setting sun, the mighty dendi had no other choice but to face its end; the great animal had met its fate.

Blood spilled out in one long steady stream from its puncture wound in the same way the waterfall fell to the earth and the bull sank into the shallows of the river on its good side. With one

of its antlers sticking straight out of the rocky bottom, it rested on its chin, its gullet sweeping in the stream. The blood from the bull discoloured the mirrored shallows until the lake turned into a swirling deep maroon around its nearly lifeless body.

Without hesitation, Kò's father walked quickly towards the moose and drove his long carving knife straight into its thunderous heart to be sure that it would not suffer any longer, for the animal still had its spirit and deserved dignity.

Kò's father pulled a handful of tobacco from his satchel as Kò slowly caught up to where they were. Crushing the dried flakey leaves in his palm, his father gave some to Kò to spread on the ground near the animal's antlers. Kò studied the horns that were as big as him, pieces of them chipped from its many battles. Their edges were sharp but every curve was full of soft fuzzy velvet. Kò realized then just how much they curiously looked like moss and lichen. Kò's father closed the moose's watery brown eyes and gave thanks to the animal for giving its life over to them for their needs.

Together Kò and his father made a fire near the shoreline and worked well into the night skinning and cutting the moose to prepare the carcass for the long journey home. They were careful not to puncture the full slippery stomach as they worked to remove the kidneys and liver. They removed its limbs first and pulled out its ribcage by cutting a handle in between the bones. With the spine left lying parallel to the ground, the head and the hide were the only things left remaining. They cut into its still warm flesh and separated the sticky thin webbed membrane from the layers of skin and fur. The nose was removed by holding onto the top lip above its rectangular white teeth and cutting around it with a small sharp blade. The heart was as big as Kò's head, and he held it carefully with both hands when his father handed it to him to place it down carefully. It was a tedious job with enough work for ten men, but they were more than skilled for the job and their stone blades were sharp.



This was the life that Kò knew. It was the only life he knew. He didn't know what the world was like outside of his hunting and trapping grounds. He couldn't know that in another part of the world a different way of living existed, nor would he have paid any mind as it had no impact on him either way. He was content. His bed was made of thick rows of soft spruce bough, the only thing separating him from the cold hard ground at night. Being that close to the earth, his dreams were always good and vivid, the energy in the ground reinvigorating him throughout the night to give him the strength he needed to endure another day of hard work.

Kò found comfort in the familiar sounds of the birds waking him in the morning with a song he could easily mimic with his whistle. A whistle that was only for the day, not at night, or it would bring unwanted spirits under the light of the dancing northern lights.

Kò enjoyed the distinct smell of the different flavours of smoke that each tree gave off when burned in the fire, comforting him with a warmth that started in the pit of his stomach and slowly filled his entire being with contentment.

In the summers, Kò spent most of his time on the banks of the lake on one long stretch of narrow rocky shoreline in the shadow of a promising lookout point where his mother would pick berries. The peninsula was the place he most resonated with what a home was. It was most familiar to him as it was where his family always returned to once the weather warmed. It was there he often sat and watched the glorious pink sun sprawl across the landscape after a long day spent helping his mother cut and hang fish to dry.

The sun hung high in the air on those long summer nights, and he found it particularly hard to sleep when the weather warmed. In fact he hardly ever slept at all in summer since the

midnight sun did not sleep either. During the peak of the warm season, when the North became hot and dry, Kò missed the winter. To find some temporary relief from the heat, he would jump off the high cliffs and into the frigid lake, swimming laps with the jumping grayling in the shadier areas near the shore.

In the winter, when out on the traplines with his father, he would catch snowflakes on his tongue to ease his thirst and pass the time when his father wasn't looking. Wherever he was he always had the open sky to guide him. He made up his own fun and games. Never bored, he would test his balance by looking up and standing on one foot under the blanket of stars melding together with the fluffy snowflakes that sprinkled down on him in the light of the fire glow, making him feel like he was flying through the night, reaching heights so high that nothing could ever bring him down. His life was uncomplicated, and he never suspected that it would ever change.