Navajo Lessons

The van had been jolting over the rocky dirt road for more than an hour. “My teeth will fall out if we drive another mile,” Celine thought bitterly.

She couldn’t believe her grandmother lived so far away from everything. Even more unbelievable was the fact that her parents were making her and Josh spend their summer on the Navajo reservation in northern Arizona. Celine had planned a great summer—early-morning runs with Dora to get in tip-top shape for track; sunbathing at the pool with her friends every day; spending evenings dancing, laughing, and having fun at the Teen Center.

Then Mom received a letter from Aunt Billie. Cousin Sonia was getting ready to have her Kinaaldá, the Navajo girl’s coming-of-age ceremony. Everyone was so excited, as there would be a big family party to celebrate. With that, she and Celine’s dad decided to send Celine and Josh to their grandmother’s house—not only for the Kinaaldá, but for the entire summer. Celine’s mom caught the surprised expression on Celine’s face that said, “for the whole summer?” Celine wondered why they couldn’t all go home after the party.

“Grandmother misses you two,” Mom had said. “It would be good for both of you to spend quality time with her.”

A few days later, the van pulled up to her grandmother’s hogan. Celine had been there before and was dreading seeing it again. The dirt floor, the lack of electricity and running water—all that and a few pieces of furniture would be her home for the next few months. Celine couldn’t believe she had to spend the summer here, but this was her fate.

“Yáá’téél,” Grandmother, Shímásání, greeted them. She only knew a few words of English, and even then it was difficult to understand her. The plan was that Celine and Josh would learn Navajo by necessity. If they wanted to communicate with anyone but each other, they’d have to speak Grandmother’s language.

Celine survived the first few days by pointing and also by listening to her favorite music all day and night. It was almost as if she was living in denial.

Josh, on the other hand, was enjoying himself thoroughly; he was inquisitive about and interested in everything. He’d point at something, and Grandmother would say the word in Navajo. Josh would recite the word, and Grandmother would laugh and say it again, correcting his intonation. Then Josh would repeat it over and over again like a broken record until Celine thought she would scream.

Josh had even managed to find other human life near Grandmother’s hogan. Granted, it was a mile away—Navajos didn’t like to crowd one another. Even so, Josh didn’t mind the lonesome hike down to the Begay hogan. There were two boys his age there, and the three of them would spend all day jabbering away in Navajo and chasing each other up and down the arroyos.
Celine had picked up only one Navajo word, *Shį́į́łanilyeed*—which means “help.” It was ironic because it was how Celine felt and also all she heard all day long. “Shį́į́łanilyeed,” Grandmother would say as she pointed to the pot on the stove that needed stirring. “Shį́į́łanilyeed,” she said to Celine, intending for her to take the sheep out to graze.

Yet staying at Grandmother’s wasn’t all work. There were some special moments. Grandmother had a way of saying “Celine” that brimmed with affection. And every night, after Josh and Celine were snug in their sleeping bags, Grandmother would begin a long tale.

“What’s she saying?” Celine would whisper to Josh. It all sounded like gibberish to her, but she could sense that whatever Grandmother was saying was important.

“Shh, this one’s a story about Great-grandfather. He was a Code Talker in World War II. Code Talkers helped win the war against Japan because the Japanese couldn’t decipher the Navajo language.”

By the time Grandmother had finished her story, Josh would be fast asleep, while Celine would be lost in the dark, wondering about Great-grandfather’s adventures.

Celine stuck to her training routine each morning when she went for a run. Even if she couldn’t train with Dora, she would be in shape and conditioned for track when school started. One morning as she was returning to the hogan, Josh met up with her. He looked devastated: he was holding back tears.

“*Shimásáni* is ill,” he sobbed. “What are we going to do?”

Celine sprinted back to the Hogan, where she found Grandmother lying on her side. Celine heard Grandmother’s shallow breathing and bravely fought her own feeling of panic. “We’ve got to get help!” shouted Celine. “You stay here with her. I’m going to run over to the Begays. They have a pickup truck, right?”

Josh nodded with his head resting against Grandmother’s arm.

“She’ll be all right, Josh. I’ll be back soon.” Celine quickly looked around to get her bearings. Which way was the Begay hogan? Could she run fast enough? Sweat streamed down her face and hair. How would she communicate? Could she ask for help?

Soon, though, the Begay hogan came into view, and the truck was parked nearby.

“Hello, hello?” she shouted. And then the words came to her. “*Shį́į́łanilyeed! Shimásáni. Shį́į́łanilyeed!* “Help! Grandmother. Help!” The grandfather was home. He grabbed the keys and they both rushed to the truck. They drove back to Grandmother’s hogan in silence. When they arrived, they lifted her gently onto a blanket and into the back of the truck. Celine and Josh rode next to her, shading her from the blistering sun.

A few hours later, they were in the hospital in Tuba City, surrounded by family members. “You did the right thing,” they told Celine. “Because of you, she got here in time. You run fast, like the Diné,” they told her in English.

“Thank you, but please say it again,” Celine prompted. “This time, in Navajo.”
The Importance of Setting

The setting controls everything in the story “Navajo Lessons.” In this example of realistic fiction, Celine and her brother are sent to live on a reservation with their Navajo grandmother for the summer. Missing her friends back home, Celine resists learning Navajo, the only language her grandmother speaks. Celine resents being there—until one morning, when she suddenly has to get help for her ailing grandmother. In this story, the setting directly affects the characters, the plot, and the climax.

The setting affects how the main character, Celine, interacts with her grandmother. Celine does not understand or speak Navajo, which is her grandmother’s only language. Celine reacts to the situation by withdrawing. For example, she spends her first days and nights at the reservation listening to music. At home, her behavior would have been very different. The setting affects the grandmother, too. Living by herself in the desert, she has had no need to learn English. Only Celine’s brother, Josh, is not affected by the setting. A happy kid, he quickly adapts to living with Grandmother, finds friend, and starts learning how to speak and understand Navajo.

The setting also directly affects the plot. In fact, the story is based on how Celine responds to the setting—the Navajo reservation. If she were spending time with an aunt in the city or another relative in the suburbs, the plot would have been entirely different. Celine would have missed her friends, but she probably would not have felt so isolated. Plus, she most likely would have been able to communicate with those around her.
Even the story climax relies on the setting. In this isolated area, little help is available, and there are no working land phones or cell phones. In another, less remote setting, Celine and Josh probably would have called for an ambulance. Other people might have been nearby and available to help, too. Even if Celine had to go find help, she most likely would have been able to explain the problem in English instead of struggling with her limited Navajo. The setting contributes to the tension of the climax.

In conclusion, the setting of “Navajo Lessons” controls the entire story, from the characters to the plot to the climax. In another setting, the story would have unfolded differently. The setting establishes how the main characters interact and how the problem in the story is believable and solved. The setting supplies a key role for Celine, and she has a change of heart at the end of the story.

Think About It

In your opinion, which point presented in this response is the most convincing?

Which point most strongly supports the importance of the setting in this story?