

10TH ANNIVERSARY  
EDITION

BONUS CONTENT INSIDE!

# SHERMAN ALEXTIE

FOREWORD BY JACQUELINE WOODSON  
ART BY ELLEN FORNEY



The  
Absolutely  
True Diary  
of a  
Part-Time  
Indian



The **Absolutely** True  
Diary  
of a  
Part-  
Time  
Indian

10th Anniversary Edition

by Sherman Alexie

Art by Ellen Forney

Foreword by Jacqueline Woodson



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## Foreword

“I was born with water on the brain.” The opening line from a masterful work by a genius storyteller. The other night I thought I’d try reading this book out loud to my nine-year-old son. The copy we have is worn and dog-eared, a first edition bought only a few days after it was published in 2007. At the time I didn’t yet have a son, and my daughter was still very young. I had bought Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* for myself, having already, before it was published, heard how amazing it was. With that opening line, Alexie brought me into the world of Junior—struggling artist, ballplayer, survivor of two very different kinds of education. And inside Junior’s world, I was awakened to life on the reservation—meeting people and finding myself in situations I had never imagined.

Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, who has written extensively about the importance of children’s literature, talks about how books can be both mirrors and windows—mirrors in which readers can see themselves on the pages of literature and thereby know their existence in the world is valid and true, and windows into worlds they might never have imagined. This book is a window into Junior’s world—a window Alexie pulls the curtains back from and lovingly invites us into. But it is also a mirror for the many First Nations people who have not seen themselves in literature. It is hard to read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and not find a part of yourself in its pages.

The other night, as my son and I ascended the stairs to his bedroom, I grabbed the book off the shelf—“Let’s just try it,” I said. My son, holding a comic book, said, “No.” Flatly. “Yes,” I said. “We’re going to give it a try.” I knew at once he’d love Junior and Rowdy and the many people he’d meet on the reservation. With that first line, my boy was hooked, the way I had been many years ago. The way my now-teenage daughter had been two summers ago, when she closed the book and exclaimed, “This book is *so* good, I *cannot* believe it was assigned.”

How does one author touch so many different people at so many different points in their lives? Alexie’s brilliance lies in his ability to speak truth to power with humor, grace, and love. He loves the characters he brings to the page, and, by extension, we fall in love with them, too. Two pages in, I told my son we could move on to his comic book if he wanted. “Nah,” he said. “Keep reading.” After a moment, he smiled and said, “I think this book is going to be good.”

We read long past his bedtime. For me, moving back into Junior’s world felt like visiting an old friend. For my son and for so many of you coming to this story for the first time, I know this book will be revisited often and, most of all, loved deeply.

—Jacqueline Woodson

**There is  
another world,  
but it is in this one.  
W.B. Yeats**

## The Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club



I was born with water on the brain.

Okay, so that's not exactly true. I was actually born with too much cerebral spinal fluid inside my skull. But cerebral spinal fluid is just the doctors' fancy way of saying brain grease. And brain grease works inside the lobes like car grease works inside an engine. It keeps things running smooth and fast. But weirdo me, I was born with too much grease inside my skull, and it got all thick and muddy and disgusting, and it only mucked up the works. My thinking and breathing and living engine slowed down and flooded.

My brain was drowning in grease.

But that makes the whole thing sound weirdo and funny, like my brain was a giant French fry, so it seems more serious and poetic and accurate to say, "I was born with water on the brain."

Okay, so maybe that's not a very serious way to say it, either. Maybe the whole thing *is* weird and funny.

But jeez, did my mother and father and big sister and grandma and cousins and aunts and uncles think it was funny when the doctors cut open my little skull and sucked out all that extra water with some tiny vacuum?

I was only six months old and I was supposed to croak during the surgery. And even if I somehow survived the mini-Hoover, I was supposed to suffer serious brain damage during the procedure and live the rest of my life as a vegetable.

Well, I obviously survived the surgery. I wouldn't be writing this if I didn't, but I have all sorts of physical problems that are directly the result of my brain damage.

First of all, I ended up having forty-two teeth. The typical human has thirty-two, right? But I had forty-two.

Ten more than usual.

Ten more than normal.

Ten teeth past human.

My teeth got so crowded that I could barely close my mouth. I went to Indian Health Service to get some teeth pulled so I could eat normally, not like some slobbering vulture. But the Indian Health Service funded major dental work only once a year, so I had to have all ten extra teeth pulled *in one day*.

And what's more, our white dentist believed that Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did, so he only gave us half the Novocain.

What a bastard, huh?

Indian Health Service also funded eyeglass purchases only once a year and offered one style: those ugly, thick, black plastic ones.

My brain damage left me nearsighted in one eye and farsighted in the other, so my ugly glasses were all lopsided because my eyes were so lopsided.

I get headaches because my eyes are, like, enemies, you know, like they used to be married to each other but now hate each other's guts.

And I started wearing glasses when I was three, so I ran around the rez looking like a three-year-old Indian *grandpa*.

And, oh, I was skinny. I'd turn sideways and *disappear*.

But my hands and feet were huge. My feet were a size eleven in third grade! With my big feet and pencil body, I looked like a capital *L* walking down the road.

And my skull was enormous.

Epic.

My head was so big that little Indian skulls orbited around it. Some of the kids called me Orbit. And other kids just called me Globe. The bullies would pick me up, spin me in circles, put their finger down on my skull, and say, "I want to go there."

So obviously, I looked goofy on the outside, but it was the *inside* stuff that was the worst.

First of all, I had seizures. At least two a week. So I was damaging my brain on a regular basis. But the thing is, I was having those seizures because I *already* had brain damage, so I was reopening wounds each time I seized.

Yep, whenever I had a seizure, I was *damaging my damage*.

I haven't had a seizure in seven years, but the doctors tell me that I am "susceptible to seizure activity."

*Susceptible to seizure activity.*

Doesn't that just roll off the tongue like poetry?

I also had a stutter and a lisp. Or maybe I should say I had a st-st-st-st-stutter and a lisssssssthhththp.

You wouldn't think there is anything life threatening about speech impediments, but let me tell you, there is nothing more dangerous than being a kid with a stutter and a lisp.

A five-year-old is cute when he lisps and stutters. Heck, most of the big-time kid actors stuttered and lisped their way to stardom.

And jeez, you're still fairly cute when you're a stuttering and lisping six-, seven-, and eight-year-old, but it's all over when you turn nine and ten.

After that, your stutter and lisp turn you into a retard.

And if you're fourteen years old, like me, and you're still stuttering and lisping, then you become the biggest retard in the world.

Everybody on the rez calls me a retard about twice a day. They call me retard when they are pantsing me or stuffing my head in the toilet or just smacking me upside the head.

I'm not even writing down this story the way I actually talk, because I'd have to fill it with stutters and lisps, and then you'd be wondering why you're reading a story written by *such a retard*.

Do you know what happens to retards on the rez?

We get beat up.

At least once a month.

Yep, I belong to the Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club.

Sure I want to go outside. Every kid wants to go outside. But it's safer to stay at home. So I mostly hang out alone in my bedroom and read books and draw cartoons.

Here's one of me:



I draw all the time.

I draw cartoons of my mother and father; my sister and grandmother; my best friend, Rowdy; and everybody else on the rez.

I draw because words are too unpredictable.

I draw because words are too limited.

If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning.

But when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it.

If I draw a cartoon of a flower, then every man, woman, and child in the world can look at it and say, "That's a flower."



So I draw because I want to talk to the world. And I want the world to pay attention to me.

I feel important with a pen in my hand. I feel like I might grow up to be somebody important. An artist. Maybe a famous artist. Maybe a rich artist.

That's the only way I can become rich and famous.

Just take a look at the world. Almost all of the rich and famous brown people are artists. They're singers and actors and writers and dancers and directors and poets.

So I draw because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation.

I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats.

## Why Chicken Means So Much to Me



Okay, so now you know that I'm a cartoonist. And I think I'm pretty good at it, too. But no matter how good I am, my cartoons will never take the place of food or money. I wish I could draw a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, or a fist full of twenty dollar bills, and perform some magic trick and make it real. But I can't do that. Nobody can do that, not even the hungriest magician in the world.

I wish I were magical, but I am really just a poor-ass reservation kid living with his poor-ass family on the poor-ass Spokane Indian Reservation.

Do you know the worst thing about being poor? Oh, maybe you've done the math in your head and you figure:

$$\text{Poverty} = \text{empty refrigerator} + \text{empty stomach}$$

And sure, sometimes, my family misses a meal, and sleep is the only thing we have for dinner, but I know that, sooner or later, my parents will come bursting through the door with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Original Recipe.

And hey, in a weird way, being hungry makes food taste better. There is nothing better than a chicken leg when you haven't eaten for (approximately) eighteen-and-a-half hours. And believe me, a good piece of chicken can make anybody believe in the existence of God.



So hunger is not the worst thing about being poor.

And now I'm sure you're asking, "Okay, okay, Mr. Hunger Artist, Mr. Mouth-Full-of-Words, Mr. Woe-Is-Me, Mr. Secret Recipe, what is the worst thing about being poor?"

So, okay, I'll tell you the worst thing.

Last week, my best friend Oscar got really sick.

At first, I thought he just had heat exhaustion or something. I mean, it was a crazy-hot July day (102 degrees with 90 percent humidity), and plenty of people were falling over from heat exhaustion, so why not a little dog wearing a fur coat?

I tried to give him some water, but he didn't want any of that.

He was lying on his bed with red, watery, snotty eyes. He whimpered in pain. When I touched him, he yelped like crazy.

It was like his nerves were poking out three inches from his skin.

I figured he'd be okay with some rest, but then he started vomiting, and diarrhea blasted out of him, and he had these seizures where his little legs just kicked and kicked and kicked.

And sure, Oscar was only an adopted stray mutt, but he was the only living thing that I could depend on. He was more dependable than my parents, grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins, and big sister. He taught me more than any teachers ever did.

Honestly, Oscar was a better person than any human I had ever known.



“Mom,” I said. “We have to take Oscar to the vet.”

“He’ll be all right,” she said.

But she was *lying*. Her eyes always got darker in the middle when she lied. She was a Spokane Indian and a bad liar, which didn’t make any sense. We Indians really should be better liars, considering how often we’ve been lied to.

“He’s really sick, Mom,” I said. “He’s going to die if we don’t take him to the doctor.”

She looked hard at me. And her eyes weren’t dark anymore, so I knew that she was going to tell me the truth. And trust me, there are times when the *last thing* you want to hear is the truth.

“Junior, sweetheart,” Mom said. “I’m sorry, but we don’t have any money for Oscar.”

“I’ll pay you back,” I said. “I promise.”

“Honey, it’ll cost hundreds of dollars, maybe a thousand.”

“I’ll pay back the doctor. I’ll get a job.”

Mom smiled all sad and hugged me hard.

Jeez, how stupid was I? What kind of job can a reservation Indian boy get? I was too young to deal blackjack at the casino, there were only about fifteen green grass lawns on the reservation (and none of their owners outsourced the mowing jobs), and the only paper route was owned by a tribal elder named Wally. And he had to deliver only fifty papers, so his job was more like a hobby.

There was nothing I could do to save Oscar.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

So I lay down on the floor beside him and patted his head and whispered his name *for hours*.

Then Dad came home from *wherever* and had one of those long talks with Mom, and they decided something *without me*.

And then Dad pulled down his rifle and bullets from the closet.

“Junior,” he said. “Carry Oscar outside.”

“No!” I screamed.

“He’s suffering,” Dad said. “We have to help him.”

“You can’t do it!” I shouted.

I wanted to punch my dad in the face. I wanted to punch him in the nose and make him bleed. I wanted to punch him in the eye and make him blind. I wanted to kick him in the balls and make him pass out.

I was hot mad. Volcano mad. Tsunami mad.

Dad just looked down at me with the saddest look in his eyes. He was crying. He looked *weak*.

I wanted to hate him for his weakness.

I wanted to hate Dad and Mom for our poverty.

I wanted to blame them for my sick dog and for all the other sickness in the world.

But I can’t blame my parents for our poverty because my mother and father are the twin suns around which I orbit and my world would EXPLODE without them.

And it’s not like my mother and father were born into wealth. It’s not like they gambled away their family fortunes. My parents came from poor people who came from poor people who came from poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people.

Adam and Eve covered their privates with fig leaves; the first Indians covered their privates *with their tiny hands*.

Seriously, I know my mother and father had their dreams when they were kids. They dreamed about being something other than poor, but they never got the chance to be anything because nobody paid attention to their dreams.

Given the chance, my mother would have gone to college.

She still reads books like crazy. She buys them by the pound. And she remembers everything she reads. She can recite whole pages by memory. She's a human tape recorder. Really, my mom can read the newspaper in fifteen minutes and tell me baseball scores, the location of every war, the latest guy to win the Lottery, and the high temperature in Des Moines, Iowa.



Given the chance, my father would have been a musician.

When he gets drunk, he sings old country songs. And blues, too. And he sounds good. Like a pro. Like he should be on the radio. He plays the guitar and the piano a little bit. And he has this old saxophone from high school that he keeps all clean and shiny, like he's going to join a band at any moment.

But we reservation Indians don't get to realize our dreams. We don't get those chances. Or choices. We're just poor. That's all we are.

It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow *deserve* to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and *there's nothing you can do about it*.

Poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor.

So, poor and small and weak, I picked up Oscar. He licked my face because he loved and trusted me. And I carried him out to the lawn, and I laid him down beneath our green apple tree.

"I love you, Oscar," I said.

He looked at me and I swear to you that he understood what was happening. He knew what Dad was going to do. But Oscar wasn't scared. He was relieved.

But not me.

I ran away from there as fast as I could.

I wanted to run faster than the speed of sound, but nobody, no matter how much pain they're in, can run that fast. So I heard the boom of my father's rifle when he shot my best friend.

A bullet only costs about two cents, and anybody can afford that.

## Revenge Is My Middle Name



After Oscar died, I was so depressed that I thought about crawling into a hole and disappearing forever.

But Rowdy talked me out of it.

“It’s not like anybody’s going to notice if you go away,” he said. “So you might as well gut it out.”

Isn’t that tough love?

Rowdy is the toughest kid on the rez. He is long and lean and strong like a snake.

His heart is as strong and mean as a snake, too.

But he is my best human friend and he cares about me, so he would always tell me the truth.

And he is right. Nobody would miss me if I was gone.

Well, Rowdy would miss me, but he’d never admit that he’d miss me. He is way too tough for that kind of emotion.

But aside from Rowdy, and my parents and sister and grandmother, nobody would miss me.

I am a zero on the rez. And if you subtract zero from zero, you still have zero. So what’s the point of subtracting when the answer is always the same?

So I gut it out.

I have to, I guess, especially since Rowdy is having one of the worst summers of his life.

His father is drinking hard and throwing hard punches, so Rowdy and his mother are always walking around with bruised and bloody faces.

“It’s war paint,” Rowdy always says. “It just makes me look tougher.”

And I suppose it does make him look tougher, because Rowdy never tries to hide his wounds. He walks around the rez with a black eye and split lip.

This morning, he limped into our house, slumped in a chair, threw his sprained knee up on the table, and smirked.

He had a bandage over his left ear.

“What happened to your head?” I asked.

“Dad said I wasn’t listening,” Rowdy said. “So he got all drunk and tried to make my ear a little bigger.”

My mother and father are drunks, too, but they aren’t mean like that. Not at all. They sometimes ignore me. Sometimes they yell at me. But they never, ever, never, ever hit me. I’ve never even been spanked. Really. I think my mother sometimes wants to haul off and give me a slap, but my father won’t let it happen.

He doesn’t believe in physical punishment; he believes in staring so cold at me that I turn into a ice-covered ice cube with an icy filling.

My house is a safe place, so Rowdy spends most of his time with us. It’s like he’s a family member, an extra brother and son.

“You want to head down to the powwow?” Rowdy asked.

“Nah,” I said.

The Spokane Tribe holds their annual powwow celebration over the Labor Day weekend. This was the 127th annual one, and there would be singing, war dancing, gambling, storytelling, laughter, fry bread, hamburgers, hot dogs, arts and crafts, and plenty of alcoholic brawling.

I wanted no part of it.

Oh, the dancing and singing are great. Beautiful, in fact, but I'm afraid of all the Indians who aren't dancers and singers. Those rhythmless, talentless, tuneless Indians are most likely going to get drunk and beat the shit out of any available losers.

And I am always the most available loser.

"Come on," Rowdy said. "I'll protect you."

He knew that I was afraid of getting beat up. And he also knew that he'd probably have to fight for me.

Rowdy has protected me since we were born.

Both of us were pushed into the world on November 5, 1992, at Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane. I'm two hours older than Rowdy. I was born all broken and twisted, and he was born mad.

He was always crying and screaming and kicking and punching.

He bit his mother's breast when she tried to nurse him. He kept biting her, so she gave up and fed him formula.

He really hasn't changed much since then.

Well, at fourteen years old, it's not like he runs around biting women's breasts, but he does punch and kick and spit.

He got into his first fistfight in kindergarten. He took on three first graders during a snowball fight because one of them had thrown a piece of ice. Rowdy punched them out pretty quickly.

And then he punched the teacher who came to stop the fight.

He didn't hurt the teacher, not at all, but man, let me tell you, that teacher was angry.

"What's wrong with you?" he yelled.

"Everything!" Rowdy yelled back.

Rowdy fought everybody.

He fought boys and girls.

Men and women.

He fought stray dogs.

Hell, he fought the weather.

He'd throw wild punches at rain.

Honestly.

"Come on, you wuss," Rowdy said. "Let's go to powwow. You can't hide in your house forever. You'll turn into some kind of troll or something."

"What if somebody picks on me?" I asked.

"Then I'll pick on them."

"What if somebody picks my nose?" I asked.

"Then I'll pick your nose, too," Rowdy said.

"You're my hero," I said.

"Come to the powwow," Rowdy said. "Please."

It's a big deal when Rowdy is polite.

"Okay, okay," I said.

So Rowdy and I walked the three miles to the powwow grounds. It was dark, maybe eight o'clock or so, and the drummers and singers were loud and wonderful.

I was excited. But I was getting hypothermic, too.

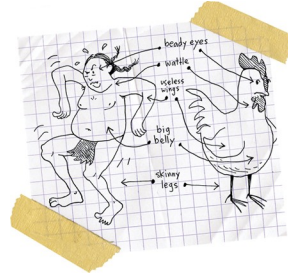
The Spokane Powwow is wicked hot during the day and freezing cold at night.

“I should have worn my coat,” I said.

“Toughen up,” Rowdy said.

“Let’s go watch the chicken dancers,” I said.

I think the chicken dancers are cool because, well, they dance like chickens. And you already know how much I love chicken.



“This crap is boring,” Rowdy said.

“We’ll just watch for a little while,” I said. “And then we’ll go gamble or something.”

“Okay,” Rowdy said. He is the only person who listens to me.

We weaved our way through the parked cars, vans, SUVs, RVs, plastic tents, and deer-hide tepees.

“Hey, let’s go buy some bootleg whiskey,” Rowdy said. “I got five bucks.”

“Don’t get drunk,” I said. “You’ll just get ugly.”

“I’m already ugly,” Rowdy said.

He laughed, tripped over a tent pole, and stumbled into a minivan. He bumped his face against a window and jammed his shoulder against the rearview mirror.

It was pretty funny, so I laughed.

That was a mistake.

Rowdy got mad.

He shoved me to the ground and almost kicked me. He swung his leg at me, but pulled it back at the last second. I could tell he wanted to hurt me for laughing. But I am his friend, his best friend, his only friend. He couldn’t hurt me. So he grabbed a garbage sack filled with empty beer bottles and hucked it at the minivan.

Glass broke everywhere.

Then Rowdy grabbed a shovel that somebody had been using to dig barbecue holes and went after that van. Just beat the crap out of it.

*Smash! Boom! Bam!*

He dented the doors and smashed the windows and knocked off the mirrors.

I was scared of Rowdy and I was scared of getting thrown in jail for vandalism, so I ran.

That was a mistake.

I ran right into the Andruss brothers’ camp. The Andrusses—John, Jim, and Joe—are the cruelest triplets in the history of the world.

“Hey, look,” one of them said. “It’s Hydro Head.”

Yep, those bastards were making fun of my brain disorder. Charming, huh?

“Nah, he ain’t Hydro,” said another one of the brothers. “He’s Hydrogen.”

I don’t know which one said that. I couldn’t tell them apart. I decided to run again, but one of them grabbed me, and shoved me toward another brother. All three of them shoved me to and fro. They were playing catch with me.

“Hydromatic.”

“Hydrocarbon.”

“Hydrocrack.”

“Hydrodynamic.”

“Hydroelectric.”

“Hydro-and-Low.”

“Hydro-and-Seek.”

I fell down. One of the brothers picked me up, dusted me off, and then kned me in the balls.

I fell down again, holding my tender crotch, and tried not to scream.

The Andruss brothers laughed and walked away.

Oh, by the way, did I mention that the Andruss triplets are thirty years old?

What kind of men beat up a fourteen-year-old boy?

Major-league assholes.

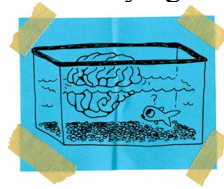
I was lying on the ground, holding my nuts as tenderly as a squirrel holds his nuts, when Rowdy walked up.

“Who did this to you?” he asked.

“The Andruss brothers,” I said.

“Did they hit you in the head?” Rowdy asked. He knows that my brain is fragile. If those Andruss brothers had punched a hole in the aquarium of my skull, I might have flooded out the entire powwow.

“My brain is fine,” I said. “But my balls are dying.”



“I’m going to kill those bastards,” Rowdy said.

Of course, Rowdy didn’t kill them, but we hid near the Andruss brothers’ camp until three in the morning. They staggered back and passed out in their tent. Then Rowdy snuck in, shaved off their eyebrows, and cut off their braids.

That’s about the worst thing you can do to an Indian guy. It had taken them years to grow their hair. And Rowdy cut that away in five seconds.

I loved Rowdy for doing that. I felt guilty for loving him for that. But revenge also feels pretty good.

The Andruss brothers never did figure out who cut their eyebrows and hair. Rowdy started a rumor that it was a bunch of Makah Indians from the coast who did it.

“You can’t trust them whale hunters,” Rowdy said. “They’ll do anything.”

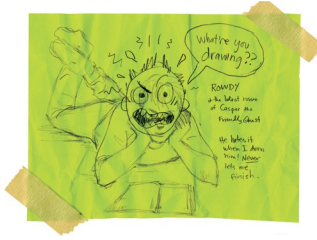
But before you think Rowdy is only good for revenge, and kicking the shit out of minivans, raindrops, and people, let me tell you something sweet about him: he loves comic books.

But not the cool superhero ones like *Daredevil* or *X-Men*. No, he reads the goofy old ones, like *Richie Rich* and *Archie* and *Casper the Friendly Ghost*. Kid stuff. He keeps them hidden in a hole in the wall of his bedroom closet. Almost every day, I’ll head over to his house and we’ll read those comics together.

Rowdy isn’t a fast reader, but he’s persistent. And he’ll just laugh and laugh at the dumb



jokes, no matter how many times he's read the same comic.



I like the sound of Rowdy's laughter. I don't hear it very often, but it's always sort of this avalanche of ha-ha and ho-ho and hee-hee.

I like to make him laugh. He loves my cartoons.

He's a big, goofy dreamer, too, just like me. He likes to pretend he lives inside the comic books. I guess a fake life inside a cartoon is a lot better than his real life.

So I draw cartoons to make him happy, to give him other worlds to live inside.

I draw his dreams.

And he only talks about his dreams with me. And I only talk about my dreams with him.

I tell him about my fears.

I think Rowdy might be the most important person in my life. Maybe more important than my family. Can your best friend be more important than your family?

I think so.

I mean, after all, I spend a lot more time with Rowdy than I do with anyone else.

Let's do the math.

I figure Rowdy and I have spent an average of eight hours a day together for the last fourteen years.

That's eight hours times 365 days times fourteen years.

So that means Rowdy and I have spent 40,880 hours in each other's company.

Nobody else comes anywhere close to that.

Trust me.

Rowdy and I are inseparable.

## Because Geometry Is Not a Country Somewhere Near France



I was fourteen and it was my first day of high school. I was happy about that. And I was most especially excited about my first geometry class.

Yep, I have to admit that isosceles triangles make me feel *hormonal*.

Most guys, no matter what age, get excited about curves and circles, but not me. Don't get me wrong. I like girls and their curves. And I really like women and their curvier curves.

I spend *hours* in the bathroom with a magazine that has one thousand pictures of naked movie stars:

*Naked woman + right hand = happy happy joy joy*

Yep, that's right, I admit that I masturbate.

I'm proud of it.

I'm good at it.

I'm ambidextrous.

If there were a Professional Masturbators League, I'd get drafted number one and make millions of dollars.

And maybe you're thinking, "Well, you really shouldn't be talking about masturbation in public."

Well, tough, I'm going to talk about it because EVERYBODY does it. And EVERYBODY likes it.

And if God hadn't wanted us to masturbate, then God wouldn't have given us thumbs.

So I thank God for my thumbs.

But, the thing is, no matter how much time my thumbs and I spend with the curves of imaginary women, I am much more in love with the right angles of buildings.

When I was a baby, I'd crawl under my bed and snuggle into a corner to sleep. I just felt warm and safe leaning into two walls at the same time.

When I was eight, nine, and ten, I slept in my bedroom closet with the door closed. I only stopped doing that because my big sister, Mary, told me that I was just trying to find my way back into my mother's womb.

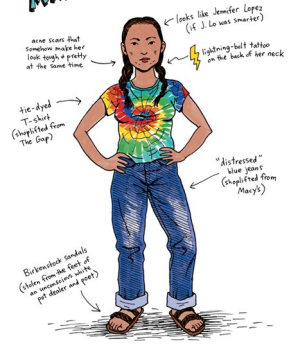
That ruined the whole closet thing.

Don't get me wrong. I don't have anything against my mother's womb. I was built in there, after all. So I have to say that I am pro-womb. But I have zero interest in moving back home, so to speak.

My sister is good at ruining things.

After high school, my sister just froze. Didn't go to college, didn't get a job. Didn't do anything. Kind of sad, I guess. But she is also beautiful and strong and funny. She is the prettiest and strongest and funniest person who ever spent twenty-three hours a day alone in a basement.

# MARY RUNS AWAY



She is so crazy and random that we call her Mary Runs Away. I'm not like her at all. I am steady. I'm excited about life.

I'm excited about school.

Rowdy and I are planning on playing high school basketball.

Last year, Rowdy and I were the best players on the eighth-grade team. But I don't think I'll be a very good high school player.

Rowdy is probably going to start varsity as a freshman, but I figure the bigger and better kids will crush me. It's one thing to hit jumpers over other eighth graders; it's a whole other thing to score on high school monsters.

I'll probably be a benchwarmer on the C squad while Rowdy goes on to all-state glory and fame.

I am a little worried that Rowdy will start to hang around with the older guys and leave me behind.

I'm also worried that he'll start to pick on me, too.

I'm scared he might start hating me as much as all of the others do.

But I am more happy than scared.

And I know that the other kids are going to give me crap for being so excited about school. But I don't care.

I was sitting in a freshman classroom at Wellpinit High School when Mr. P strolled in with a box full of geometry textbooks.

And let me tell you, Mr. P is a weird-looking dude.

But no matter how weird he looks, the absolutely weirdest thing about Mr. P is that sometimes he *forgets* to come to school.



Let me repeat that: MR. P SOMETIMES FORGETS TO COME TO SCHOOL!

Yep, we have to send a kid down to the teachers' housing compound behind the school to wake Mr. P, who is always conking out in front of his TV.

That's right. Mr. P sometimes teaches class in his *pajamas*.

He is a weird old coot, but most of the kids dig him because he doesn't ask too much of us. I mean, how can you expect your students to work hard if you show up in your pajamas *and slippers*?

And yeah, I know it's weird, but the tribe actually houses all of the teachers in one-bedroom cottages and musty, old trailer houses behind the school. You can't teach at our school if you don't live in the compound. It was like some kind of prison-work farm for our liberal, white, vegetarian do-gooders and conservative, white missionary saviors.

Some of our teachers make us eat birdseed so we'll feel closer to the earth, and other teachers hate birds because they are supposedly minions of the Devil. It is like being taught by Jekyll and Hyde.

But Mr. P isn't a Democratic-, Republican-, Christian-, or Devil-worshipping freak. He is just *sleepy*.

But some folks are absolutely convinced he is, like, this Sicilian accountant who testified against the Mafia, and had to be hidden by that secret Witness Relocation Program.

It makes some goofy sort of sense, I suppose.

If the government wants to hide somebody, there's probably no place more isolated than my reservation, which is located approximately one million miles north of Important and two billion miles west of Happy. But jeez, I think people pay way too much attention to *The Sopranos*.

Mostly, I just think Mr. P is a lonely old man who used to be a lonely young man. And for some reason I don't understand, lonely white people love to hang around lonelier Indians.

"All right, kids, let's get cracking," Mr. P said as he passed out the geometry books.

"How about we do something strange and start on page one?"

I grabbed my book and opened it up.

I wanted to smell it.

Heck, I wanted to kiss it.

Yes, kiss it.

That's right, I am a book kisser.

Maybe that's kind of perverted or maybe it's just romantic and highly *intelligent*.

But my lips and I stopped short when I saw this written on the inside front cover:

**THIS BOOK BELONGS TO AGNES ADAMS**

Okay, now you're probably asking yourself, "Who is Agnes Adams?"

Well, let me tell you. Agnes Adams is my mother. MY MOTHER! And Adams is her *maiden* name.

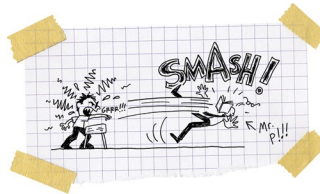
So that means my mother was born an Adams and she was still an Adams when she wrote her name in that book. And she was thirty when she gave birth to me. Yep, so that means I was staring at a geometry book that was at least thirty years older than I was.

I couldn't believe it.

How horrible is that?

My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world.

And let me tell you, that old, old, old, *decrepit* geometry book hit my heart with the force of a nuclear bomb. My hopes and dreams floated up in a mushroom cloud. What do you do when the world has declared nuclear war on you?



## Hope Against Hope



Of course, I was suspended from school after I smashed Mr. P in the face, even though it was a complete accident.

Okay, so it wasn't exactly an accident.

After all, I wanted to hit *something* when I threw that ancient book. But I didn't want to hit *somebody*, and I certainly didn't plan on breaking the nose of a mafioso math teacher.

"That's the first time you've ever hit anything you aimed at," my big sister said.

"We are so disappointed," my mother said.

"We are so disappointed *in you*," my father said.

My grandmother just sat in her rocking chair and cried and cried.

I was ashamed. I'd never really been in trouble before.

A week into my suspension, I was sitting on our front porch, thinking about stuff, *contemplating*, when old Mr. P walked up our driveway. He had a big bandage on his face.

"I'm sorry about your face," I said.

"I'm sorry they suspended you," he said. "I hope you know that wasn't my idea."

After I smashed him in the face, I figured Mr. P wanted to hire a hit man. Well, maybe that's taking it too far. Mr. P didn't want me dead, but I don't think he would have minded if I'd been the only survivor of a plane that crashed into the Pacific Ocean.



At the very least, I thought they were going to send me to jail.

"Can I sit down with you?" Mr. P asked.

"You bet," I said. I was nervous. Why was he being so friendly? Was he planning a sneak attack on me? Maybe he was going to smash me in the nose with a calculus book.

But the old guy just sat in peaceful silence for a long time. I didn't know what to do or say, so I just sat as quietly as he did. That silence got so big and real that it felt like three people sat on the porch.

"Do you know why you hit me with that book?" Mr. P finally asked.

It was a trick question. I knew I needed to answer correctly or he'd be mad.

"I hit you because I'm stupid."

"You're not stupid."

Wrong answer.

Shoot.

I tried again.

"I didn't mean to hit you," I said. "I was aiming for the wall."

"Were you really aiming for the wall?"

Dang it.

He was, like, *interrogating* me.

I was starting to get *upset*.

"No," I said. "I wasn't aiming for anything really. Well, I was planning on hitting

something, you know? Like the wall or a desk or the chalkboard. Something dead, you know, not something alive.”

“Alive like me?”

“Or like a plant.”

Mr. P had three plants in his classroom. He talked to those green things more often than he talked to us.

“You do know that hitting a plant and hitting me are two different things, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I know.”

He smiled mysteriously. Adults are so good at smiling mysteriously. Do they go to college for that?

I was getting more and more freaked out. What did he want?

“You know, Mr. P, I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but you’re, like, freaking me out here. I mean, why are you here, exactly?”

“Well, I want you to know that hitting me with that book was probably the worst thing you’ve ever done. It doesn’t matter what you intended to do. What happens is what you really did. And you broke an old man’s nose. That’s almost unforgivable.”

He was going to punish me now. He couldn’t beat me up with his old man fists, but he could hurt me with his old man words.

“But I do forgive you,” he said. “No matter how much I don’t want to. I have to forgive you. It’s the only thing that keeps me from smacking you with an ugly stick. When I first started teaching here, that’s what we did to the rowdy ones, you know? We beat them. That’s how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child.”

“You *killed* Indians?”

“No, no, it’s just a saying. I didn’t literally kill Indians. We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren’t trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture.”

Man, at that second, I hated Mr. P *hard*. I wished I had a whole dang set of encyclopedias to throw at him.

“I can’t apologize to everybody I hurt,” Mr. P said. “But I can apologize to you.”

It was so backward. I’d broken *his* nose but he was trying to apologize *to me*.

“I hurt a lot of Indian kids when I was a young teacher,” he said. “I might have broken a few bones.”

All of a sudden, I realized he was *confessing* to me.



“It was a different time,” Mr. P said. “A bad time. Very bad. It was wrong. But I was young and stupid and full of ideas. Just like you.”

Mr. P smiled. He smiled at me. There was a piece of lettuce stuck between his front teeth.

“You know,” he said. “I taught your sister, too.”

“I know.”

“She was the smartest kid I ever had. She was even smarter than you.”

I knew my sister was smart. But I’d never heard a teacher say that about her. And I’d never heard anybody say that she was smarter than me. I was happy and jealous at the same time.

My sister, the basement mole rat, was smarter than me?

“Well,” I said, “My mom and dad are pretty smart, too, so I guess it runs in the family.”

“Your sister wanted to be a writer,” Mr. P said.

“Really?” I asked.

I was surprised by that. She’d never said anything about that to me. Or to Mom and Dad. Or to anybody.

“I never heard her say that,” I said.

“She was shy about it,” Mr. P said. “She always thought people would make fun of her.”

“For writing books? People would have thought she was a hero around here. Maybe she could have made movies or something, too. That would have been cool.”

“Well, she wasn’t shy about the idea of writing books. She was shy about the kind of books she wanted to write.”

“What kind of books did she want to write?” I asked.

“You’re going to laugh.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

Jeez, we had both turned into seven-year-olds.

“Just tell me,” I said.

It was weird that a teacher was telling me things I didn’t know about my sister. It made me wonder what else I didn’t know about her.

“She wanted to write romance novels.”

Of course, I giggled at that idea.

“Hey,” Mr. P said. “You weren’t supposed to laugh.”

“I didn’t laugh.”

“Yes, you laughed.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Maybe I laughed a little.”

“A little laugh is still a laugh.”

And then I laughed for real. A big laugh.

“Romance novels,” I said. “Those things are just sort of silly, aren’t they?”

“Lots of people—mostly women—love them,” Mr. P said. “They buy millions of them. There are lots of writers who make millions by writing romance novels.”

“What kind of romances?” I asked.

“She never really said, but she did like to read the Indian ones. You know the ones I’m talking about?”

Yes, I did know. Those romances always featured a love affair between a virginal white schoolteacher or preacher’s wife and a half-breed Indian warrior. The covers were hilarious:





“You know,” I said, “I don’t think I ever saw my sister reading one of those things.”

“She kept them hidden,” Mr. P said.

Well, that is a big difference between my sister and me. I hide the magazines filled with photos of naked women; my sister hides her tender romance novels that tell stories about naked women (and men).

I want the pictures; my sister wants the words.

“I don’t remember her ever writing anything,” I said.

“Oh, she loved to write short stories. Little romantic stories. She wouldn’t let anybody read them. But she’d always be scribbling in her notebook.”

“Wow,” I said.

That was all I could say.

I mean, my sister had become a humanoid underground dweller. There wasn’t much romance in that. Or maybe there was. Maybe my sister read romances all day. Maybe she was trapped in those romances.

“I really thought she was going to be a writer,” Mr. P said. “She kept writing in her book. And she kept working up the courage to show it to somebody. And then she just stopped.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t have any idea?”

“No, not really.”

Had she been hanging on to her dream of being a writer, but only barely hanging on, and something made her let go?

That had to be it, right? Something bad had happened to her, right? I mean, she lived in the fricking basement. People just don’t live and hide in basements if they’re happy.

Of course, my sister isn’t much different from my dad in that regard.

Whenever my father isn’t off on a drinking binge, he spends most of his time in his bedroom, alone, watching TV.

He mostly watches basketball.

He never minds if I go in there and watch games with him. But we never talk much. We just sit there quietly and watch the games. My dad doesn’t even cheer for his favorite teams or players. He doesn’t react much to the games at all.

I suppose he is depressed.

I suppose my sister is depressed.

I suppose the whole family is depressed.

But I still want to know exactly why my sister gave up on her dream of writing romance novels.

I mean, yeah, it is kind of a silly dream. What kind of Indian writes romance novels? But it is still pretty cool. I love the thought of reading my sister’s books. I love the thought of walking into a bookstore and seeing her name on the cover of a big and beautiful novel.

*Spokane River Heat* by Mary Runs Away.

That would be very cool.

“She could still write a book,” I said. “There’s always time to change your life.”

I almost gagged when I said that. I didn’t even believe that. There’s never enough time to change your life. You don’t get to change your life, period. Shit, maybe I was trying to write a romance novel.

“Mary was a bright and shining star,” Mr. P said. “And then she faded year by year until you could barely see her anymore.”

Wow, Mr. P was a poet.

“And you’re a bright and shining star, too,” he said. “You’re the smartest kid in the school. And I don’t want you to fail. I don’t want you to fade away. You deserve better.”

I didn’t feel smart.

“I want you to say it,” Mr. P said.

“Say what?”

“I want you to say that you deserve better.”

I couldn’t say it. It wasn’t true. I mean, I wanted to have it better, but I didn’t deserve it. I was the kid who threw books at teachers.

“You are a good kid. You deserve the world.”

Wow, I wanted to cry. No teacher had ever said anything so nice, so incredibly nice, to me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” he said. “Now say it.”

“I can’t.”

And then I did cry. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I felt so weak.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You don’t have to be sorry for anything,” he said. “Well, you better be sorry for hitting me, but you don’t have to feel bad about crying.”

“I don’t like to cry,” I said. “Other kids, they beat me up when I cry. Sometimes they make me cry so they can beat me up for crying.”

“I know,” he said. “And we let it happen. We let them pick on you.”

“Rowdy protects me.”

“I know Rowdy is your best friend, but he’s, he’s, he’s, he’s—,” Mr. P stuttered. He wasn’t sure what to say or do. “You know that Rowdy’s dad hits him, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said. Whenever he came to school with a black eye, Rowdy made sure to give black eyes to two kids picked at random.

“Rowdy is just going to get meaner and meaner,” Mr. P said.

“I know Rowdy has a temper and stuff, and he doesn’t get good grades or anything, but he’s been nice to me since we were kids. Since we were babies. I don’t even know why he’s been nice.”

“I know, I know,” Mr. P said. “But, listen, I want to tell you something else. And you have to promise me you’ll never repeat it.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Promise me.”

“Okay, okay, I promise I won’t repeat it.”

“Not to anyone. Not even your parents.”

“Nobody.”

“Okay, then,” he said and leaned closer to me because he didn’t even want the trees to

hear what he was going to say. “You have to leave this reservation.”

“I’m going to Spokane with my dad later.”

“No, I mean you have to leave the rez *forever*.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were right to throw that book at me. I deserved to get smashed in the face for what I’ve done to Indians. Every white person on this rez should get smashed in the face. But, let me tell you this. All the Indians should get smashed in the face, too.”

I was shocked. Mr. P was *furious*.

“The only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up. Your friend Rowdy, he’s given up. That’s why he likes to hurt people. He wants them to feel as bad as he does.”

“He doesn’t hurt me.”

“He doesn’t hurt you because you’re the only good thing in his life. He doesn’t want to give that up. It’s the only thing he hasn’t given up.”

Mr. P grabbed me by the shoulders and leaned so close to me that I could smell his breath.

Onions and garlic and hamburger and shame and pain.

“All these kids have given up,” he said. “All your friends. All the bullies. And their mothers and fathers have given up, too. And their grandparents gave up and their grandparents before them. And me and every other teacher here. We’re all defeated.”

Mr. P was crying.

I couldn’t believe it.

I’d never seen a sober adult cry.

“But not you,” Mr. P said. “You can’t give up. You won’t give up. You threw that book in my face because somewhere inside you refuse to give up.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about. Or maybe I just didn’t want to know.

Jeez, it was a lot of pressure to put on a kid. I was carrying the burden of my race, you know? I was going to get a bad back from it.

“If you stay on this rez,” Mr. P said, “they’re going to kill you. I’m going to kill you. We’re all going to kill you. You can’t fight us forever.”

“I don’t want to fight anybody,” I said.

“You’ve been fighting since you were born,” he said. “You fought off that brain surgery. You fought off those seizures. You fought off all the drunks and drug addicts. You kept your hope. And now, you have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope.”

I was starting to understand. He was a math teacher. I had to add my hope to somebody else’s hope. I had to multiply hope by hope.

“Where is hope?” I asked. “Who has hope?”

“Son,” Mr. P said. “You’re going to find more and more hope the farther and farther you walk away from this sad, sad, sad reservation.”



## Go Means Go



After Mr. P left, I sat on the porch for a long time and thought about my life. What the heck was I supposed to do? I felt like life had just knocked me on my ass.

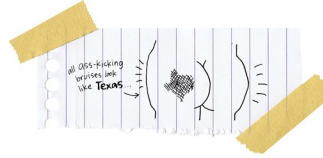
I was so happy when Mom and Dad got home from work.

“Hey, little man,” Dad said.

“Hey, Dad, Mom.”

“Junior, why are you looking so sad?” Mom asked. She knew stuff.

I didn’t know how to start, so I just started with the biggest question.



“Who has the most hope?” I asked.

Mom and Dad looked at each other. They studied each other’s eyes, you know, like they had antennas and were sending radio signals to each other. And then they both looked back at me.

“Come on,” I said. “Who has the most hope?”

“White people,” my parents said at the same time.

That’s exactly what I thought they were going to say, so I said the most surprising thing they’d ever heard from me.

“I want to transfer schools,” I said.

“You want to go to Hunters?” Mom said.

It’s another school on the west end of the reservation, filled with poor Indians and poorer white kids. Yes, there is a place in the world where the white people are poorer than the Indians.

“No,” I said.

“You want to go to Springdale?” Dad asked.

It’s a school on the reservation border filled with the poorest Indians and poorer-than-poorest white kids. Yes, there is a place in the world where the white people are even poorer than you ever thought possible.

“I want to go to Reardan,” I said.

Reardan is the rich, white farm town that sits in the wheat fields exactly twenty-two miles away from the rez. And it’s a hick town, I suppose, filled with farmers and rednecks and racist cops who stop every Indian that drives through.

During one week when I was little, Dad got stopped three times for DWI: Driving While Indian.

But Reardan has one of the best small schools in the state, with a computer room and huge chemistry lab and a drama club and two basketball gyms.

The kids in Reardan are the smartest and most athletic kids anywhere. They are the best.

“I want to go to Reardan,” I said again. I couldn’t believe I was saying it. For me, it seemed as real as saying, “I want to fly to the moon.”

“Are you sure?” my parents asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“When do you want to go?” my parents asked.

“Right now,” I said. “Tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?” my parents asked. “You could maybe wait until the semester break. Or until next year. Get a fresh start.”

“No, if I don’t go now, I never will. I have to do it now.”

“Okay,” they said.

Yep, it was that easy with my parents. It was almost like they’d been waiting for me to ask them if I could go to Reardan, like they were psychics or something.

I mean, they’ve always known that I’m weird and ambitious, so maybe they expect me to do the weirdest things possible. And going to Reardan is truly a strange idea. But it isn’t weird that my parents so quickly agreed with my plans. They want a better life for my sister and me. My sister is running away to get lost, but I am running away because I want to find *something*. And my parents love me so much that they want to help me. Yeah, Dad is a drunk and Mom is an ex-drunk, but they don’t want their kids to be drunks.

“It’s going to be hard to get you to Reardan,” Dad said. “We can’t afford to move there. And there ain’t no school bus going to come out here.”

“You’ll be the first one to ever leave the rez this way,” Mom said. “The Indians around here are going to be angry with you.”

Shoot, I figure that my fellow tribal members are going to torture me.



## Rowdy Sings the Blues



So the day after I decided to transfer to Reardan, and after my parents agreed to make it happen, I walked over to the tribal school, and found Rowdy sitting in his usual place on the playground.

He was alone, of course. Everybody was scared of him.

“I thought you were on suspension, dickwad,” he said, which was Rowdy’s way of saying, “I’m happy you’re here.”

“Kiss my ass,” I said.

I wanted to tell him that he was my best friend and I loved him like crazy, but boys didn’t say such things to other boys, and *nobody* said such things to Rowdy.

“Can I tell you a secret?” I asked.

“It better not be girly,” he said.

“It’s not.”

“Okay, then, tell me.”

“I’m transferring to Reardan.”

Rowdy’s eyes narrowed. His eyes always narrowed right before he beat the crap out of someone. I started shaking.

“That’s not funny,” he said.

“It’s not supposed to be funny,” I said. “I’m transferring to Reardan. I want you to come with me.”

“And when are you going on this imaginary journey?”

“It’s not imaginary. It’s real. And I’m transferring now. I start school tomorrow at Reardan.”

“You better quit saying that,” he said. “You’re getting me mad.”

I didn’t want to get him mad. When Rowdy got mad it took him days to get un-mad. But he was my best friend and I wanted him to know the truth.

“I’m not trying to get you mad,” I said. “I’m telling the truth. I’m leaving the rez, man, and I want you to come with me. Come on. It will be an adventure.”

“I don’t even drive through that town,” he said. “What makes you think I want to go to school there?”

He got up, stared me hard in the eyes, and then spit on the floor.

Last year, during eighth grade, we traveled to Reardan to play them in flag football. Rowdy was our star quarterback and kicker and middle linebacker, and I was the loser water boy, and we lost to Reardan by the score of 45–0.

Of course, losing isn’t exactly fun.

Nobody wants to be a loser.

We all got really mad and vowed to kick their asses the next game.

But, two weeks after that, Reardan came to the rez and beat us 56–10.

During basketball season, Reardan beat us 72–45 and 86–50, our only two losses of the season.

Rowdy scored twenty-four points in the first game and forty in the second game.

I scored nine points in each game, going 3 for 10 on three-pointers in the first game and 3 for 15 in the second. Those were my two worst games of the season.

During baseball season, Rowdy hit three home runs in the first game against Reardan and

two home runs in the second but we still lost by scores of 17–3 and 12–2. I played in both losses and struck out seven times and was hit by a pitch once.

Sad thing is, getting hit like that was my only hit of the season.

After baseball season, I led the Wellpinit Junior High Academic Bowl team against Reardan Junior High, and we lost by a grand total of 50–1.

Yep, we answered one question correctly.

I was the only kid, white or Indian, who knew that Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*. And let me tell you, we Indians were the worst of times and those Reardan kids were the best of times.

Those kids were *magnificent*.

They knew *everything*.

And they were *beautiful*.

They were beautiful and smart.

They were beautiful and smart and epic.

They were filled with hope.

I don't know if hope is white. But I do know that hope for me is like some mythical



creature:

Man, I was scared of those Reardan kids, and maybe I was scared of hope, too, but Rowdy absolutely hated all of it.

“Rowdy,” I said. “I am going to Reardan tomorrow.”

For the first time he saw that I was serious, but he didn't want me to be serious.

“You'll never do it,” he said. “You're too scared.”

“I'm going,” I said.

“No way, you're a wuss.”

“I'm doing it.”

“You're a pussy.”

“I'm going to Reardan tomorrow.”

“You're really serious?”

“Rowdy,” I said. “I'm as serious as a tumor.”

He coughed and turned away from me. I touched his shoulder. Why did I touch his shoulder? I don't know. I was stupid. Rowdy spun around and shoved me.

“Don't touch me, you retarded fag!” he yelled.

My heart broke into fourteen pieces, one for each year that Rowdy and I had been best friends.

I started crying.

That wasn't surprising at all, but Rowdy started crying, too, and he hated that. He wiped his eyes, stared at his wet hand, and screamed. I'm sure that everybody on the rez heard that scream. It was the worst thing I'd ever heard.

It was pain, pure pain.

“Rowdy, I'm sorry,” I said. “I'm sorry.”

He kept screaming.

“You can still come with me,” I said. “You're still my best friend.”

Rowdy stopped screaming with his mouth but he kept screaming with his eyes.  
“You always thought you were better than me,” he yelled.  
“No, no, I don’t think I’m better than anybody. I think I’m worse than everybody else.”  
“Why are you leaving?”  
“I have to go. I’m going to die if I don’t leave.”  
I touched his shoulder again and Rowdy flinched.  
*Yes, I touched him again.*  
What kind of idiot was I?  
I was the kind of idiot that got punched hard in the face by his best friend.  
*Bang!* Rowdy punched me.  
*Bang!* I hit the ground.  
*Bang!* My nose bled like a firework.

I stayed on the ground for a long time after Rowdy walked away. I stupidly hoped that time would stand still if I stayed still. But I had to stand eventually, and when I did, I knew that my best friend had become my worst enemy.





## How to Fight Monsters



The next morning, Dad drove me the twenty-two miles to Reardan.

"I'm scared," I said.

"I'm scared, too," Dad said.

He hugged me close. His breath smelled like mouthwash and lime vodka.

"You don't have to do this," he said. "You can always go back to the rez school."

"No," I said. "I have to do this."

Can you imagine what would have happened to me if I'd turned around and gone back to the rez school?

I would have been pummeled. Mutilated. Crucified.

You can't just betray your tribe and then change your mind ten minutes later. I was on a one-way bridge. There was no way to turn around, even if I wanted to.

"Just remember this," my father said. "Those white people aren't better than you."

But he was so wrong. And he knew he was wrong. He was the loser Indian father of a loser Indian son living in a world built for winners.

But he loved me so much. He hugged me even closer.

"This is a great thing," he said. "You're so brave. You're a warrior."

It was the best thing he could have said.

"Hey, here's some lunch money," he said and handed me a dollar.

We were poor enough to get free lunch, but I didn't want to be the only Indian *and* a sad sack who needed charity.

"Thanks, Dad," I said.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

I felt stronger so I stepped out of the car and walked to the front door. It was locked.

So I stood alone on the sidewalk and watched my father drive away. I hoped he'd drive right home and not stop in a bar and spend whatever money he had left.

I hoped he'd remember to come back and pick me up after school.

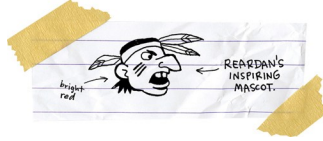
I stood alone at the front door for a few very long minutes.

It was still early and I had a black eye from Rowdy's good-bye punch. No, I had a purple, blue, yellow, and black eye. It looked like modern art.

Then the white kids began arriving for school. They surrounded me. Those kids weren't just white. They were *translucent*. I could see the blue veins running through their skin like rivers.

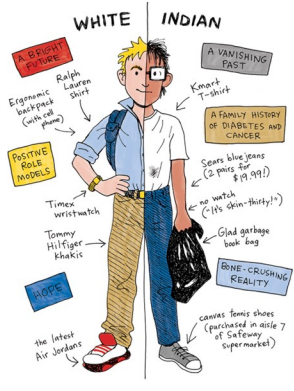
Most of the kids were my size or smaller, but there were ten or twelve monster dudes. Giant white guys. They looked like men, not boys. They had to be seniors. Some of them looked like they had to shave two or three times a day.

They stared at me, the Indian boy with the black eye and swollen nose, my going-away gifts from Rowdy. Those white kids couldn't believe their eyes. They stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO. What was I doing at Reardan, whose mascot was an Indian, thereby making me the only *other* Indian in town?



So what was I doing in racist Reardan, where more than half of every graduating class went to college? Nobody in my family had ever gone near a college.

Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me. I didn't deserve to be there. I knew it; all of those kids knew it. Indians don't deserve shit.



So, feeling worthless and stupid, I just waited. And pretty soon, a janitor opened the front door and all of the other kids strolled inside.

I stayed outside.

Maybe I could just drop out of school completely. I could go live in the woods like a hermit.

Like a real Indian.

Of course, since I was allergic to pretty much every plant that grew on earth, I would have been a real Indian with a head full of snot.

“Okay,” I said to myself. “Here I go.”

I walked into the school, made my way to the front office, and told them who I was.

“Oh, you’re the one from the reservation,” the secretary said.

“Yeah,” I said.

I couldn’t tell if she thought the reservation was a good or bad thing.

“My name is Melinda,” she said. “Welcome to Reardan High School. Here’s your schedule, a copy of the school constitution and moral code, and a temporary student ID. We’ve got you assigned to Mr. Grant for homeroom. You better hustle on down there. You’re late.”

“Ah, where is that?” I asked.

“We’ve only got one hallway here,” she said and smiled. She had red hair and green eyes and was kind of sexy for an old woman. “It’s all the way down on the left.”

I shoved the paperwork into my backpack and hustled down to my homeroom.

I paused a second at the door and then walked inside.

Everybody, all of the students and the teacher, stopped to stare at me.

They stared hard.

Like I was bad weather.

“Take your seat,” the teacher said. He was a muscular guy. He had to be a football coach.

I walked down the aisle and sat in the back row and tried to ignore all the stares and whispers, until a blond girl leaned over toward me.

Penelope!



Yes, there are places left in the world where people are named Penelope!

I was emotionally erect.

“What’s your name?” Penelope asked.

“Junior,” I said.

She laughed and told her girlfriend at the next desk that my name was Junior. They both laughed. Word spread around the room and pretty soon everybody was laughing.

They were laughing at *my name*.

I had no idea that Junior was a weird name. It’s a common name on my rez, on any rez. You walk into any trading post on any rez in the United States and shout, “Hey, Junior!” and seventeen guys will turn around.

And three women.

But there were no other people named Junior in Reardan, so I was being laughed at because I was the only one who had that silly name.

And then I felt smaller because the teacher was taking roll and he called out my *name* name.

“Arnold Spirit,” the teacher said.

No, he yelled it.

He was so big and muscular that his whisper was probably a scream.

“Here,” I said as quietly as possible. My whisper was only a whisper.

“Speak up,” the teacher said.

“Here,” I said.

“My name is Mr. Grant,” he said.

“I’m here, Mr. Grant.”

He moved on to other students, but Penelope leaned over toward me again, but she wasn’t laughing at all. She was mad now.

“I thought you said your name was Junior,” Penelope said.

She *accused* me of telling her my *real* name. Well, okay, it wasn’t completely my real name. My full name is Arnold Spirit Jr. But nobody calls me that. Everybody calls me Junior. Well, every other *Indian* calls me Junior.

“My name is Junior,” I said. “And my name is Arnold. It’s Junior and Arnold. I’m both.”

I felt like two different people inside of one body.

No, I felt like a magician slicing myself in half, with Junior living on the north side of the Spokane River and Arnold living on the south.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

She was so pretty and her eyes were so blue.

I was suddenly aware that she was the prettiest girl I had ever seen up close. She was movie star pretty.

“Hey,” she said. “I asked you where you’re from.”

Wow, she was tough.

“Wellpinit,” I said. “Up on the rez, I mean, the reservation.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s why you talk so funny.”

And yes, I had that stutter and lisp, but I also had that singsong reservation accent that made everything I said sound like a bad poem.

Man, I was freaked.

I didn’t say another word for six days.

And on the seventh day, I got into the weirdest fistfight of my life. But before I tell you about the weirdest fistfight of my life, I have to tell you:

#### **THE UNOFFICIAL AND UNWRITTEN**

(but you better follow them or you’re going to get beaten twice as hard)

#### **SPOKANE INDIAN RULES OF FISTICUFFS:**

- 1. IF SOMEBODY INSULTS YOU, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM.**
- 2. IF YOU THINK SOMEBODY IS GOING TO INSULT YOU, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM.**
- 3. IF YOU THINK SOMEBODY IS THINKING ABOUT INSULTING YOU, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM.**
- 4. IF SOMEBODY INSULTS ANY OF YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS, OR IF YOU THINK THEY’RE GOING TO INSULT YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS, OR IF YOU THINK THEY’RE THINKING ABOUT INSULTING YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS,**

**THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM.**

**5. YOU SHOULD NEVER FIGHT A GIRL, UNLESS SHE INSULTS YOU, YOUR FAMILY, OR YOUR FRIENDS, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HER.**

**6. IF SOMEBODY BEATS UP YOUR FATHER OR YOUR MOTHER, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT THE SON AND/OR DAUGHTER OF THE PERSON WHO BEAT UP YOUR MOTHER OR FATHER.**

**7. IF YOUR MOTHER OR FATHER BEATS UP SOMEBODY, THEN THAT PERSON'S SON AND/OR DAUGHTER WILL FIGHT YOU.**

**8. YOU MUST ALWAYS PICK FIGHTS WITH THE SONS AND/OR DAUGHTERS OF ANY INDIANS WHO WORK FOR THE BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS.**

**9. YOU MUST ALWAYS PICK FIGHTS WITH THE SONS AND/OR DAUGHTERS OF ANY WHITE PEOPLE WHO LIVE ANYWHERE ON THE RESERVATION.**

**10. IF YOU GET IN A FIGHT WITH SOMEBODY WHO IS SURE TO BEAT YOU UP, THEN YOU MUST THROW THE FIRST PUNCH, BECAUSE IT'S THE ONLY PUNCH YOU'LL EVER GET TO THROW.**

**11. IN ANY FIGHT, THE LOSER IS THE FIRST ONE WHO CRIES.**

I knew those rules. I'd memorized those rules. I'd lived my life by those rules. I got into my first fistfight when I was three years old, and I'd been in dozens since.

My all-time record was five wins and one hundred and twelve losses.

Yes, I was a terrible fighter.

I was a human punching bag.

I lost fights to boys, girls, and kids half my age.

One bully, Micah, made me beat up myself. Yes, he made me punch myself in the face three times. I am the only Indian in the history of the world who ever lost a fight *with himself*.

Okay, so now that you know about the rules, then I can tell you that I went from being a small target in Wellpinit to being a larger target in Reardan.

Well, let's get something straight. All of those pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty white girls ignored me. But that was okay. Indian girls ignored me, too, so I was used to it.

And let's face it, most of the white boys ignored me, too. But there were a few of those Reardan boys, the big jocks, who paid special attention to me. None of those guys punched me or got violent. After all, I was a reservation Indian, and no matter how geeky and weak I appeared to be, I was still a potential killer. So mostly they called me names. Lots of names.



And yeah, those were bad enough names. But I could handle them, especially when some huge monster boy was insulting me. But I knew I'd have to put a stop to it eventually or I'd always be known as "Chief" or "Tonto" or "Squaw Boy."

But I was scared.

I wasn't scared of fistfighting with those boys. I'd been in plenty of fights. And I wasn't scared of losing fights with them, either. I'd lost most every fight I'd been in. I was afraid those monsters were going to kill me.

And I don't mean "kill" as in "metaphor." I mean "kill" as in "beat me to death."

So, weak and poor and scared, I let them call me names while I tried to figure out what to do. And it might have continued that way if Roger the Giant hadn't taken it too far.

It was lunchtime and I was standing outside by the weird sculpture that was supposed to be an Indian. I was studying the sky like I was an astronomer, except it was daytime and I didn't have a telescope, so I was just an idiot.

Roger the Giant and his gang of giants strutted over to me.

"Hey, Chief," Roger said.

It seemed like he was seven feet tall and three hundred pounds. He was a farm boy who carried squealing pigs around like they were already thin slices of bacon.

I stared at Roger and tried to look tough. I read once that you can scare away a charging bear if you wave your arms and look big. But I figured I'd just look like a terrified idiot having an arm seizure.

"Hey, Chief," Roger said. "You want to hear a joke?"

"Sure," I said.

"Did you know that Indians are living proof that niggers fuck buffalo?"

I felt like Roger had kicked me in the face. That was the most racist thing I'd ever heard in my life.

Roger and his friends were laughing like crazy. I hated them. And I knew I had to do something big. I couldn't let them get away with that shit. I wasn't just defending myself. I was defending Indians, black people, *and* buffalo.

So I punched Roger in the face.

He wasn't laughing when he landed on his ass. And he wasn't laughing when his nose bled like red fireworks.

I struck some fake karate pose because I figured Roger's gang was going to attack me for bloodying their leader.

But they just stared at me.

They were *shocked*.

"You punched me," Roger said. His voice was thick with blood. "I can't believe you punched me."

He sounded insulted.

He sounded like his *poor little feelings* had been hurt.

I couldn't believe it.

He acted like he was the one who'd been wronged.

"You're an animal," he said.

I felt brave all of a sudden. Yeah, maybe it was just a stupid and immature school yard fight. Or maybe it was the most important moment of my life. Maybe I was telling the world that I was no longer a human target.

"You meet me after school right here," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

I couldn't believe he was so stupid.

"Because we're going to finish this fight."

"You're crazy," Roger said.

He got to his feet and walked away. His gang stared at me like I was a serial killer, and then they followed their leader.

I was absolutely confused.

I had followed the rules of fighting. I had behaved exactly the way I was supposed to behave. But these white boys had ignored the rules. In fact, they followed a whole other set of mysterious rules where people apparently DID NOT GET INTO FISTFIGHTS.

“Wait,” I called after Roger.

“What do you want?” Roger asked.

“What are the rules?”

“What rules?”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just stood there red and mute like a stop sign. Roger and his friends disappeared.

I felt like somebody had shoved me into a rocket ship and blasted me to a new planet. I was a freaky alien and there was absolutely no way to get home.

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