The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, was born in Spokane and grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, WA. He has been a self-described "urban Indian" since 1994, when he moved to Seattle—he still lives there with his family. Over the course of his long and storied career, Alexie has published 26 books, including poetry, novels, collections of short stories, a young adult novel, a picture book, and a memoir. He also wrote and co-produced the movie *Smoke Signals*, which featured an all-Native cast, crew, and creative team, and was based on several of the stories collected in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Alexie has won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction (in 2010, for *War Dances*), the PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction (in 2001), and the National Book Award for Young People's Literature (in 2007, for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*). Alexie is known for his brutally direct, darkly funny, occasionally "blasphemous" writing about the Native American experience and the "small American traged[ies]" encapsulated therein.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1990, the United States Congress passed the Native American Languages Act, which declared as policy that Native Americans were entitled to use their own languages, and declared the intention of the United Sates to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American Languages." In the 19th century, legislation had been passed to mandate that English be used as the "exclusive" language of instruction on all American Indian reservations. The Spokane Reservation of Alexie's youth is the reservation represented in these stories. Its creation in 1881 divided the larger Spokane Indian territory and separated the three bands of the tribe's configuration—the Upper, Middle, and Lower Spokane Indians—along the Spokane River. The reservation is a little less than 160,000 acres; once, the Spokane's ancestral territory sprawled across three million acres of land in what is now Washington and Idaho. The current population of the Spokane reservation is about 2,700, though it was, in the days of Alexie's youth, closer to about 1,900.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"In some sense, artists always betray their tribes," Alexie says of being an Indian writer in the twenty-first century; "so an Indian artist's betrayal is exponentially worse." Carving out a unique space for himself and his stories within the overwhelmingly White landscape of American literature, Alexie writes alternately toward and against an idea of Native American literature established by Native American writers such as N. Scott Momaday (*House Made of Dawn*; *The Way to Rainy Mountain*) and Louise Erdrich (*The Plague of Doves*; *The Round House*). In *The New York Review of Books*, Joyce Carol writes that "Alexie is the bad boy among [these Native writers], mocking, self-mocking, unpredictable, unassimilable."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*
- **When Written:** Early 1990s
- **Where Written:** Spokane, WA
- **When Published:** 1993; Reissued in 2003 to include two new stories
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary fiction
- **Genre:** Short story sequence; Literary fiction; Autobiographical fiction; Humor
- **Setting:** Spokane Indian Reservation
- **Climax:** Though the stories that comprise the narrative are nonlinear and often only loosely connected, we can see moments of revelation, high emotion, or the delineation of a "point of no return" in several stories, such as when Thomas Builds-the-Fire is incarcerated; when Samuel Builds-the-Fire lays his head down on train tracks as an oncoming train approaches; and when Victor and Thomas travel to Arizona to collect Victor's father's body and belongings.
- **Antagonist:** White America; alcohol; the institution of the Indian reservation
- **Point of View:** Various

EXTRA CREDIT

Smoke Signals. In 1998, Alexie adapted "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" into a script for an independent film. The movie, *Smoke Signals*, was an all-Native production, produced, directed, performed, and supported technically by a 100% Native cast and crew. It currently holds an 86% rating on the popular review-aggregation site Rotten Tomatoes.

Fiction or Non? A great deal of Alexie's writing—in *The Lone Ranger* as well as his many other books—has been termed "autobiographical fiction" by critics, as well as by Alexie himself. On the experience of reading his past work years out from its completion, he himself remarked that he once declared: "that's memoir." Now, Alexie has finally written a true memoir: *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* is a memoir of Alexie's

relationship with his mother, written alternatingly in prose and verse. There are 78 pieces written in each style, meant to signify the 78 years of his mother's complex life.

PLOT SUMMARY

In "Every Little Hurricane," Alexie introduces the volatile world of Victor's childhood—the Spokane Indian Reservation, 1976—when a hurricane "drops from the sky" during a raucous, **drunken**, violent party at Victor's family's HUD house.

In "A Drug Called Tradition," Victor and his friends Junior Polatkin and Thomas Builds-the-Fire take drugs in hopes of each experiencing their own **visions.**

"Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" is an ode to Victor's father, who was, according to Victor, "the perfect hippie during the sixties, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians." Victor recollects nights when his father would come home drunk, and could only be comforted and lulled by Jimi Hendrix tapes. This story outlines the dissolution of Victor's father's marriage to Victor's mother; "when an Indian marriage starts to fall apart, it's destructive; Indians fight their way to the end, holding onto the last good thing, because our whole lives have to do with survival."

In "Crazy Horse Dreams," Victor meets an attractive and engaging Indian woman at a powwow. They go home together, but each find that they are disappointed by the other.

In "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore," Victor and his friend Adrian are drinking Pepsis on Victor's porch when they see a group of Indian boys walking by. They recognize one of them as Julius Windmaker, "the best **basketball** player on the reservation." They muse about his potential and whether or not he'll make it off the reservation and find basketball stardom. The story flashes forward to a year later, where they are once again drinking Pepsis on the porch. Julius Windmaker "stagger[s] down the road, drunk as a skunk." Victor and Adrian lament his lost potential, and head inside. In the morning, they find Julius "passed out on the living room floor." They head out to the porch with their coffees, and another group of Indian kids walks by; they recognize one of them as a third-grade girl named Lucy, who is "so good [at basketball] that she plays for the sixth grade boys' team." Victor and Adrian sip their coffees, hoping that Lucy "makes it all the way."

In "Amusements," Victor and his friend Sadie, while attending a carnival, see an Indian known as Dirty Joe passed out in a drunken stupor in the grass. Rather than help him to safety, they put him on board the roller coaster and watch as he rides it again and again, eventually staggering off, sick and disoriented. Victor catches sight of himself in a funhouse mirror and experiences a vision of himself as an "Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty."

In "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," Victor learns that his father has died of a heart attack in Phoenix. He has no money, and needs a way to get to Phoenix, so Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor's childhood friend—who'd had a vision as a boy of Victor's father's weak heart—offers to lend Victor money if Victor takes Thomas with him to Phoenix. Victor agrees. During their trip to Phoenix, and while cleaning out his father's depressing trailer, Victor experiences remembrances of his and Thomas's childhood, both good and bad; stories Thomas used to tell, and the fights they got into with each other as teens. Thomas reveals that he'd had another vision, years ago, of Victor's father finding him on a vision quest, and bringing him back to the reservation. Thomas believes that Victor's father had been his vision all along, and that his "dreams were saying *Take care of each other*." Victor and Thomas drive back to Spokane, and divide up Victor's father's ashes between them. Thomas asks Victor to "stop and listen, just one time" the next time he hears him telling a story.

In "The Fun House," an unnamed narrator tells a series of stories about his aunt. In one, a mouse crawls up her pant leg while she quilts; in another, she and her husband crash their car after a night out drinking; in another, she jumps, in frustration with her son and his father, into a river, though she does not know how to swim; in another, we witness her child's birth, and see that she is sterilized immediately after delivering him.

In "All I Wanted To Do Was Dance," we see a series of vignettes of Victor drinking, dancing, falling in love with several different women, struggling with sobriety, and juggling odd jobs.

In "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire," Thomas stands trial after offending a member of the Tribal Council. In a Kafkaesque (dark, dystopian, and disorienting) proceeding, Thomas recounts several of his stories (the majority of which seem to be dreams or visions rather than fact) and ultimately indicts himself on several trumped-up charges. He is sent to prison on a bus, and his fellow inmates ask him to share a story.

"Distances," one of Thomas Builds-the-Fire's stories or visions, depicts an alternate reality in which the white man was decimated, and only Indians remain in America. The Tribal Council rules that anything having to do with whites must be destroyed. The Others, long-dead Indians, return from "a thousand years ago," and Thomas repeatedly "dream[s] about **television**" and "[wakes] up crying."

"Jesus Christ's Half-Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation" chronicles the infancy and childhood of James Many Horses during the late 1960s and early 1970s. After his parents die tragically in a house fire, the story's unnamed narrator—who saved him from the fire—is charged, as per Indian tradition (supposedly), with raising him. James is silent and immobile for the first several years of his life, but when he does begin speaking, he displays a deep sensitivity and

exceptional intelligence.

In "A Train is an Order of Occurrence Designed to Lead to Some Result," we meet Samuel Builds-the-Fire, grandfather to Thomas. Also a prolific, gifted storyteller, he works as a maid at a motel in Spokane, and on his birthday he is fired. He proceeds to a bar, where he takes his first drink of alcohol; he becomes inebriated and, at the end of the night, stumbles and falls when crossing a set of train tracks. He hears the train's whistle approaching, but chooses not to move out of its way.

In "A Good Story," Alexie creates a meta-narrative in which the narrator, Junior, tells his mother, who is busy quilting, a story about a man named Uncle Moses—presumably Moses MorningDove—telling a story to a local boy named Arnold.

"The First Annual All-Indian Horseshoe Pitch and Barbecue" recounts several vignettes from the titular event. Victor plays a piano that he brought back to the reservation from a flea market; some people eat and drink and dance; some play horseshoes, and one Indian notes that "basketball was invented just a year after the Ghost Dancers fell at Wounded Knee."

"Imagining the Reservation" is an ode to imagination, and the role it plays in Native American life. Imagination is, the narrator notes, "the only weapon on the reservation." The story speculates on what life might be like for Indians if "**Crazy Horse** invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C."; if "Columbus landed in 1492 and some tribe or another drowned him in the ocean"' if "a story [could] put wood in the fireplace."

"The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor" is narrated by James Many Horses, now an adult known on the reservation for his incessant joking. He angers his wife Norma by joking about dying while confessing to her that he has received a terminal cancer diagnosis. His wife leaves him, and, during his ongoing cancer treatments, he reflects fondly on their relationship. Norma returns, eventually, to help James "die the right way."

"Indian Education," narrated by Junior Polatkin, tells the story of his time in school on and off the reservation. He is subjected to cruel treatment by his classmates and by his second-grade teacher, Betty Towle. He finds success as a basketball player, though he endures racism and suspicion from coaches of opposing local teams. He graduates valedictorian of his "farm town" high school, "try[ing] to remain stoic as [he] look[s] toward the future" while knowing that back on the reservation, his former classmates "look back toward tradition."

"The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven" follows Victor, now living in Spokane, as he takes a middle-of-the-night walk to a 7-11 to buy a creamsicle, reflecting all the while on a long-since-ended relationship with a white woman in Seattle. The relationship was volatile and marked by intense arguments, during or after which Victor, frequently drunk, got in his car and drove through the night or otherwise broke lamps in their shared apartment. Victor remarks that "these days" he doesn't sleep; "he know[s] how all [his] dreams end anyway."

In "Family Portrait," an unnamed narrator reflects on his childhood. He notes that "the television was always too loud," and that "'Dinner sounded like 'Leave me alone;' 'I love you' sounded like 'Inertia.'" He reflects on stories that may or may not have actually happened but that were "created [in the] collective imaginations" of his parents and his siblings. He sums up his coming-of-age and that of his siblings by remarking: "Jesus, we all want[ed] to survive."

"Somebody Kept Saying Powwow," also narrated by Junior, tells the story of his long friendship with Norma, James Many Horses's wife.

"Witnesses, Secret and Not" is set in 1979; a thirteen-year-old unnamed narrator's father has been summoned to the police station in Spokane to answer questions about the disappearance of Jerry Vincent, a man who went missing ten years earlier. His father reminds the questioning officer that he's been brought in nearly every year to answer the same question over and over, and the officer sends the narrator and his father away. When the narrator and his father return home that night, his father "[sits] at the table and [cries] into his **fry bread**" while his family watches.

In "Flight," a young Indian man named John-John has repeated visions of his brother Joseph's return from the armed forces. Joseph was taken prisoner "during a routine military operation" while serving as a jet pilot. John-John saves money to "escape" the reservation and "dreams of flight."

"Junior Polatkin's Wild West Show" follows Junior to college in Spokane, where he attends Gonzaga University. He is the only Indian there. While staying in the dorms over Christmas break in order to avoid going home to the reservation, Junior has a one-night stand with a white woman named Lynn. She becomes pregnant and has a baby, which she names Sean Casey. Lynn's parents refuse to acknowledge the child's Native heritage, but Lynn reads the child books about Indians and allows him to speak to Junior over the phone. Junior eventually drops out of school and returns to the reservation, anticipating "a new and painful sequel to the first act of his life."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Victor – Victor, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, is the protagonist of the majority of these stories, and is, in many ways, an emotional stand-in for Sherman Alexie himself. We follow the path of Victor's life from his childhood through to his adulthood, and watch—sometimes from a close or first-person vantage point, and sometimes from afar—as he struggles with his relationship to himself, his relationship to his parents, and his relationship to his tribe. As a child, Victor seems to be

withdrawn, pressured often into silence by the difficulties of his home life—his parents are **alcoholics,** and he has been raised in extreme and debilitating poverty on the Spokane Indian Reservation. As Victor matures, he navigates his relationships with his friends on the reservation, Junior Polatkin and Thomas Builds-the-Fire; he experiences the rise and fall of potential **basketball** stardom; he loses his father to a presumed suicide; he falls in and out of love with several women both on and off the reservation; he struggles with substance abuse, and ultimately conquers his addiction; and he ultimately ends up living alone in Spokane, confident, finally, that he "knows how his dreams end." We see the world of the reservation largely through Victor's eyes. His view of his own upbringing, adolescence, and adulthood, though tinged with raucous humor and a healthy dose of sarcasm, is a bleak one, and his tales of poverty, violence, loss, and disappointment illuminate a simultaneous resentment toward and longing for an ideal of reservation life.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire – One of Victor's childhood friends, Thomas Builds-the-Fire has the gift of storytelling, and his stories often seem to be **visions** of the past or the future. However, Thomas is described as "always talking to himself… [he] was a storyteller that nobody wanted to listen to." Victor says that he has "never been very good" to Thomas, but that Thomas has "always" been good to him. When they are older, Thomas accompanies Victor to Phoenix in order to collect Victor's father's ashes. During their trip, the two reconcile, and Thomas forgives Victor his abuses in exchange for the promise that Victor will, just once, stop and listen to one of the many stories Thomas tells. After Thomas offends a member of the tribal council, he's brought to trial, and ultimately indicts himself in crimes he may or may not have actually committed—crimes that may just have been stories he felt compelled to tell.

Junior Polatkin – Another one of Victor's childhood friends. Junior Polatkin is present for many of Victor's childhood escapades, and he narrates a few of the stories throughout the text. He gives an account of his education both on and off the reservation, and ultimately travels to Spokane to attend Gonzaga University. There, he has a one-night stand with a white woman, Lynn, who becomes pregnant with his child. Junior drops out of school and returns to the reservation, and is only able to speak to his son on the telephone. Junior is smart and sensitive, and, through his interactions with Norma, reveals that he carries some past secrets he still feels guilty about.

Victor's Father – Victor's father, who's unnamed in the book, is an **alcoholic** and a complicated force throughout these stories. He drives much of the narrative, though he's not always present—or alive. Alexie himself has claimed that the book is about "love and hate" between fathers and sons, and through our glimpses of Victor's relationship with his father, we see a complicated bond evolve as it grows and changes over the years. After a devastating motorcycle accident in which he is hospitalized, Victor's father tells Victor that he "ain't interested in what's real; [he's] interested in how things should be." Victor is mesmerized by his father's stories, but perturbed by the volatile relationship his parents share; when his father leaves, it seems to be almost a relief. Victor at various turns idolizes and reviles his father, and all the love and sadness and failure he represents.

Victor's Mother – A steadfast woman, a beautiful dancer, and a source of comfort and stability far greater than any other in Victor's childhood. She was sterilized by the Indian Health Service doctor who delivered Victor just moments after he was born, and bears the scars of violence and an inescapable cycle of poverty and loss. Her marriage to Victor's father is tumultuous, and, after he eventually leaves them for Arizona, Victor notes that his mother "misse[s] hi[s father] just enough for it to hurt."

Dirty Joe – An Indian of whom Victor and his friend Sadie make a spectacle when they find him passed out in an **alcoholic** stupor at a local carnival. Though knowing it's a "shitty thing to do," Victor and Sadie place the unconscious Joe on a roller coaster called the stallion and watch as he goes, unconscious, around and around again. Victor ultimately feels awful, and, when looking in a funhouse mirror at the end of the story, has a **vision** of himself as an "Indian who offered up another Indian like some kind of treaty."

Samuel Builds-the-Fire – Grandfather to Thomas, Samuel Builds-the-Fire is also in possession of "the gift of storytelling." He works as a hotel maid in Spokane for many years before losing his job suddenly and without warning. On the day that he's let go, he goes to a bar where he takes his first drink of **alcohol**, then drinks until he becomes massively drunk. Walking home from the bar, he falls down onto a set of train tracks and stays there, though he can hear the train's whistle approaching.

James Many Horses – Orphaned in a house fire that took his parents' lives, James Many Horses is raised by the unnamed young man who saved his life, through whose eyes we see the early years of James's life unfold. As a child James is silent and slow to develop language and motor skills; he does not cry, he does not crawl, and he does not speak. When he does begin to talk, he is, according to his guardian, deeply spiritual, intelligent, and advanced for his age. When we encounter James next, he is grown; a man "who [tells] so many jokes that he even ma[kes] other Indians get tired of his joking." He is married to a woman named Norma, who leaves him after an argument they have when he makes several jokes in the middle of telling her that he has late-stage cancer. He receives "useless" cancer treatment in a Spokane hospital for a time, but is then sent home so that he can be more "comfortable." Norma eventually returns home as well, with the intention of helping James to "die the right way."

Norma – Wife to James Many Horses and close friend to Junior Polatkin, Norma is described as a "warrior," a "cultural lifeguard," and "the world champion **fry bread** maker." She grows intolerant of her husband James's many jokes when he continues making them in the face of a terminal cancer diagnosis, and leaves him for several months to go and live with a "cousin," who may or may not be her lover. She eventually returns home to help James die in peace. Norma teaches Junior Polatkin that "watching automatically makes the watcher part of the happening," and that "even the little things matter." Norma is a wild dancer, a sexual adventurer, and is critical of Victor, unable to forgive him for the bullying he perpetrated in his younger years.

Betty Towle – A white missionary teacher who instructs Junior during the second grade. She is bigoted, unfair, and continually punishes Junior throughout the year; she sends him home with a letter "that [tells his] parents to either cut [Junior's] braids or keep [him] home from class." She calls Junior "indian without capitalization" in an attempt to debase and humiliate him, but this treatment seems to cause Junior to accept and own his cultural identity in a defiant, steadfast way.

Lynn – A young white woman of Irish heritage who attends Gonzaga University in Spokane with Junior Polatkin. The two of them have a one-night stand while both living in the dorms over Christmas break; their affair results in a pregnancy, and Lynn fathers a child named Sean Casey. Her parents "refuse to accept Sean Casey's Indian blood," but Lynn "continually" reminds Sean of his heritage by reading him books about Indians. Lynn and Junior remain in touch, and Lynn ensures that Junior is able to talk to his son on the phone after he decides to quit school and return to the reservation.

Nezzy – Victor's aunt; a "beautiful dancer" and a steadfast woman who remains strong in the face of forced sterilization, derision and ungratefulness from her husband and son, and several other traumas such as car crashes and reckoning with her husband's **alcoholism**. She is an accomplished dressmaker, and constructs a heavy beaded dress which she believes will, when worn by the right person, reveal "the one who will save [the tribe.]" When Nezzy dons the dress she struggles at first under its great weight, but eventually stands and begins to dance.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sadie – One of Victor's friends. Together, they humiliate Dirty Joe and turn him into a spectacle for white carnival-goers by placing him on a roller coaster when he becomes **intoxicated** at a local fair.

Sean Casey – Junior Polatkin's son with a white woman, Lynn. Lynn's parents deny the child's Indian heritage, and Junior is only permitted to contact his son through sporadic phone calls.

Julius Windmaker – A young Indian man who seems destined for **basketball** stardom, but who falls victim to **alcoholism** before he can achieve his potential and make it off the reservation.

Lucy – A young Indian girl, and a promising **basketball** player, on whom Victor begins to hang his hopes after Julius Windmaker falls victim to **alcoholism**. Though she is in the third grade, she plays for the sixth grade boys' team. Victor hopes she "makes it" against all odds.

Rosemary MorningDove – Mother to James Many Horses. She perishes in a house fire that also claims Frank Many Horses' life.

Frank Many Horses – Father to James Many Horses. He dies after succumbing to injuries sustained in a house fire.

Moses MorningDove – Grandfather to James Many Horses, and uncle to Junior and John-John. He does not assume custody of James Many Horses after Rosemary and Frank's deaths, as it is (supposedly) Indian tradition for the baby to be raised by the man who saved his life.

John-John – A young Indian man haunted by his brother Joseph's disappearance after being taken prisoner during military service. He **dreams** of escaping the reservation, but has insufficient funds to do so.

Joseph – A young Indian man taken prisoner while serving as a jet pilot in the military. His brother John-John **dreams** of him, and imagines scenario after scenario in which he miraculously returns home from the war.

Arnold – One of Victor's uncles and a character in a story that Junior Polatkin tells his mother.

Jerry Vincent – An Indian man who was once a friend of Victor's father. He died under mysterious circumstances, and his murder remains unsolved. Victor's father is called into the Spokane police department "annually" to answer questions about Jerry's disappearance.

Big Mom – The spiritual leader of the Spokane Tribe during Victor's youth. She is in possession of "good medicine," and she gives Victor a small, antique drum as a totem; she tells him it is her "pager."

David WalksAlong – The tribal chairman and onetime tribal police chief whose wife, Esther, leaves him after listening to one of Thomas Builds-the-Fire's stories. David orders Thomas's arrest, and creates false charges to bring against him.

Esther – The wife of David WalksAlong, the tribal chairman. When she leaves him the day after listening to one of Thomas Builds-the-Fire's stories, David blames Thomas, and has him arrested on trumped-up charges.

Tremble Dancer – A character in one of Thomas Builds-the-Fire's stories. In a **vision** of a future in which white people have gone extinct and Indians are charged with burning all vestiges of white America, Thomas loves Tremble Dancer, though she is an "Urban"—a city Indian who carries a deadly disease.

Randy – One of Junior Polatkin's sixth-grade classmates, Randy is an "Indian kid from [a] white town" who gets into a fight on his first day at the reservation school. He teaches Junior a "valuable lesson about living in the white world: *Always throw the first punch*."

Adrian A friend of **Victor**. He and Victor watch the children on reservation, such as **Julius Windmaker**, play basketball. They hope one of them will "make it all the way," but over and over see these children fall to alcohol or other things and squander their talent.

Adolph One of **Victor**'s uncles.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

VIOLENCE, POVERTY, AND LOSS

From the collection's first story, "Every Little Hurricane," readers are thrust into a world defined by extreme poverty, casual and tragic violence, and a haunting, pervasive sense of both cultural and personal loss. As Victor watches his uncles Arnold and Adolph fistfight in the middle of an approaching hurricane, he notes how the rise and fall of their violence against one another mirrors the trajectory of the storm—it is unthinking, destructive, and undoubtedly a force of nature.

Violence is a constant throughout Alexie's stories—sometimes the violence is tied to motivations such as love and hatred, as is the case with Victor's uncles' fistfight, but often the violence is random, or senseless, or due to an ineffable sense of loss and frustration. Alexie uses violence this way to mirror the rippling effects of the pervasive historical violence against Native Americans. The confusion, anguish, and profound sadness of that violence creates a sense of hopelessness and of futility in the face of it. As a teenager, Victor mercilessly beats Thomas Builds-the-Fire, one of his childhood friends and a young man blessed with intricate storytelling abilities. An Indian woman is sterilized by her doctor after giving birth to a son. Bloody and even fatal car crashes abound throughout the narrative, and more often than not, they're due to a driver's intoxication. A man's body is ravaged by cancer—his "favorite" tumor is the size of a baseball. When Victor moves off of the reservation and into a Seattle apartment with his white girlfriend, their relationship is plagued by intense verbal conflict and, occasionally, physical violence. A police officer robs Victor and his wife during a sham of a traffic stop. All of these violent acts and more are just a sampling of the intensity of a life calibrated by generational trauma and an intimate understanding of what it feels like to always expect the next blow, the next slight, the next random act of personal or institutional violence.

Reservation life is rendered carefully but never romantically in this collection, and the devastating effects of inescapable poverty permeate every page. The reservation is alternately a haven and a prison for Alexie's characters—the lack of opportunities and cyclical nature of reservation life creates a veritable whirlpool of destitution, danger, and rampant substance abuse. The ubiquitous and pervasive subjugation of Native peoples provides the majority of Alexie's characters with little outside of the reservation to hope for—off the reservation, Alexie notes," among white people, every Indian gets exaggerated." Some characters work hard at minimum-wage jobs or are let go from their jobs without warning; some characters are robbed by authority figures; one character saves dollar bills in a shoebox; one character seeks a loan from the tribal council in order to travel across the country to collect his father's body. There is rarely enough money for good food, and what little money there is is often spent on **alcohol**. Alexie engages common stereotypes about reservation life in order to express to readers the maddening cycle of poverty, neglect, desperation, and abuse that plagues many Native Americans. He depicts money as a resource that is simply unavailable to many Native people, and the fruitless pursuit of it is a frustrating disappointment that is, unfortunately, both commonplace and expected to the majority of his many characters.

In one story, a group of Indians at a party "remember their own pain. The pain grew, expanded… The ceiling lowered with the weight of each Indian's pain until it was inches from Victor's nose." The influence of individual pain on the collective community's experience of pain—and vice versa—is revealed deeply in these sentences. After Victor's father dies in "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," Victor notes that though he had "only talked to [his father] on the telephone once or twice, there was still a genetic pain, which was soon to be pain as real and immediate as a broken bone." The Native American experience as rendered within these stories is one of profound and seemingly unending loss on both a personal and cultural level. The decimation of Native American peoples, traditions, and agency over the course of the last 500 years has left a mark, so to speak, in the hearts of each of Alexie's characters. Some bear the loss with grace, and others bear it with anger and resentment, but Alexie never casts judgment or proclaims any one way of dealing with such staggering cultural loss as the "right" way. Though the stories jump around from character to character, perspective to perspective, one thing the book's arc never loses sight of or interest in is the way Native Americans confront—or don't confront—a generational pain and loss that is difficult to comprehend and impossible to forget.

MEMORY, BEARING WITNESS, STORYTELLING, AND IMAGINATION

In the face of a ravaged cultural landscape, Alexie stresses in nearly each story the importance of four vital acts to the Native American community of his youth: remembering, witnessing, telling stories, and imagining the future. Many stories take place within characters' memories, and are constructed so that the characters the reader encounters are not actually present within the action of the narrative but only as memories or distant figures. The tension between action and memory demonstrates the erosion of Native American culture, and the idea that the gatekeepers of so much of that culture exist now only in memory. Memories are kept close, and their presence is often a difficult one; one character keeps the memory of a violent car crash "so close that she [has] nightmares for a year." In "Flight," Alexie's narrator refers to memory as "a coin trick, dropping out of sight, then out of existence" and "an abandoned car, rusting and forgotten though it sits in plain view for decades." Memory is vital in this community, but its importance is a double-edged sword; though important to the preservation of cultural life and the learning of lessons, most memories experienced by Alexie's characters are rife with pain and trauma.

Bearing witness is one of the text's most potent themes not only on a narrative level, but also on a meta-narrative level. Alexie's work as a writer is centered around making visible both a cultural perspective and a world that are often deliberately made invisible through oppression, shame, or neglect. In "Every Little Hurricane," as Victor's uncles beat one another, the narrator refers to the party guests as "Witnesses…Witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale. This little kind of hurricane was generic. It didn't even deserve a name." During Thomas Builds-the-Fire's trial, he serves as his own witness, and ultimately indicts himself through his grand storytelling, which references events hundreds of years gone by; events that may or may not have actually happened. In "Witnesses, Secret and Not," an unnamed 13-year-old narrator—possibly Victor—accompanies his father to a Spokane police station after he's called upon to provide information about a disappearance that took place ten years ago. Though the narrator's father tells the officer that he's been questioned several times and cannot remember any new details, his position as a witness—whether he is a reliable one or not—is a synecdoche (a part of a thing that stands in for its larger whole) for the larger problem of being a "witness and nothing more" that Alexie explores throughout these stories.

"Imagine a story that puts wood in the fireplace," the narrator commands the reader in the final lines of "Imagining the Reservation." We're asked to imagine a world in which storytelling—such a crucial aspect of Native life—is enough. "I know the story because every Indian knows the story," Victor's father tells him on the way to the Spokane police station in "Witnesses, Secret and Not." Storytelling is another theme that works as a meta-narrative device—Alexie himself is telling several stories that are delivered to the reader out of order, and require a readjustment with each new tale. Many of his characters, similarly though in a more exaggerated way, are almost possessed by the stories they have to tell, and use stories alternately as currency, as punishment, and as a kind of salve.

In "A Drug Called Tradition," Victor, Thomas, and their friend Junior drive out to a nearby lake in order to take drugs. "It'll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit, you know?" Victor tells Thomas in order to convince him to come along. The boys "all want to have their **vision**," and, after they take the drugs, they do. The experience is a rite of passage, but one that the boys have claimed for themselves in a way very different from their ancestors.

In "Distances," Alexie creates a vision of the future inspired by a quote—or a vision—from Wovoka, the Paiute Ghost Dance Messiah. Wovoka was the leader of a religious movement which began in the late 1800s and which predicts a time when the Great Spirit will arrive to bring back "game of every kind" and "all [the] dead Indians." Visions of the future—and of the past—are vital to Alexie's characters; they press on in the face of dire circumstances powered by their hopes for a better life for themselves and for future generations.

CULTURAL PAIN VS. PERSONAL PAIN

Cultural pain and personal pain, in Alexie's estimation, are inextricably linked. The personal pain his characters experience is, of course, often born of strife between family members, friends, and partners, but Alexie renders his characters' pain in such a way that highlights its connection to an inherited cultural or generational pain that comes from loss of land, tradition, and agency.

"When children grow up together in poverty, a bond is formed that causes so much pain." This quote, from "Every Little Hurricane," ties together themes of love, poverty, loss, and pain both cultural and personal. The pain that many of Alexie's characters have experienced is a result of a cultural void that comes from the oppression and decimation of Native cultural life. This creates a bond on the personal level, though it is one that is heavy with pain, loss, and even, for some characters, deep resentment.

Alexie describes a "genetic pain" in one of his stories—and though he doesn't use the term repeatedly, its effects are felt deeply and resonate throughout the collection as his characters navigate that specific and difficult kind of pain. A pain that's inherited from one's parents or ancestors carries with it the weight of oppression, loss, and expectations that

that pain will somehow, in some way, be soothed—but the institutional restrictions on Native people coupled with personal pain make it difficult to escape from the vortex of deep, inherited cultural suffering.

"There is just barely enough goodness in all this," says Victor of reservation life. The pain and suffering that have permeated nearly every aspect of his childhood, and even his adult life, are nearly insurmountable. Small moments of "goodness" or happiness are "barely enough" to make a dent in the experience of that suffering, though they're present. The inability to fully inhabit moments of goodness is another result of the personal pain that haunts most all of Alexie's many characters.

COMMUNITY VS. ISOLATION

The recurring characters that make up the world of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* are often in conflict with their inner selves as well as their community. We see characters again and again at several very different points throughout their life—namely Victor, who functions as a stand-in of sorts for Alexie himself—and come to understand them through several perspectives, disjointed in time, place, and point of view but nonetheless interconnected. The intensity of the focus on the self—the ever-changing self, the many-sided self—throughout the text is rivaled only by the intensity of the focus on the tribal community and its intricacies. Characters rebel against their upbringing or fall into step on the paths their parents and grandparents have already tread; they seek refuge in one another or reject one another in a chaotic but profound maelstrom of action.

In "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," Victor asks himself after he is cruel to Thomas-Builds-the-Fire: "Whatever happened to the tribal ties, the sense of community? The only real thing he shared with anybody was a bottle and broken dreams."

The sense of community that many of the characters—namely Victor—struggle with again and again is something that's alternately desired and rejected. In "Amusements," Victor and a woman named Sadie find an Indian man, Dirty Joe, a well known **drunk**, passed out at a carnival. They put him, unconscious, onto a roller coaster, and watch and laugh while he rides it again and again. In "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore," Victor and his friend Adrian discover a young Indian man—once a budding basketball star full of promise—in a similarly drunken state, but rather than subjecting him to violence or mockery, they care for him, and Victor allows him to stay in his home.

Life off the reservation, when glimpsed throughout these stories, is more often than not portrayed as isolating. In the collection's final story, "Junior Polatkin's Wild West Show," Junior goes off to a "small Jesuit college" in Spokane. He is the only Indian there, and his experiences lead him to feel trapped between two worlds. He doesn't go home for Christmas break because he doesn't want to "go back to his reservations and endure the insults that would be continually hurled at him"; however, in his relationship with a white woman, with whom he fathers a child after a one-night stand, he is made to feel othered and even rejected.

Off the reservation, jobs—another kind of community—are also described as difficult or dangerous for Natives to hold. Victor is robbed during the graveyard shift at his 7-11 job; "More than that," he says "[the robber] took the dollar bill from my wallet, pulled the basketball shoes off my feet, and left me waiting for rescue [in the cooler] between the expired milk and broken egg." In another story, Samuel Builds-the-Fire—Thomas's grandfather—is let go from his job as a cleaner at a hotel on his birthday.

As a meta-textual device, Alexie positions the reader—a single, isolated entity—at the feet of his vast cast of characters. At the start of each new tale, the reader must reset their perspective in order to take in the members of the tribal community with new eyes every few pages. Alexie throws the isolated reader up against this troubled, vibrant, chaotic community in order to highlight the distance, perhaps, between the reader's experience and that of the characters—or, in some cases, the lack of that distance precisely.

LOVE AND HATRED

One review of this collection refers to it as a series of "cultural love stories," and Alexie himself, in the foreword, writes that "[in] trying to figure out the main topic, the big theme, the overarching idea, the epicenter" of the collection, he arrived at "the sons in this book really love and hate their fathers." The line between love and hatred—for many of Alexie's characters, not just the sons and fathers in the text—is a fine one that is traversed back and forth time and time again. On the reservation, care and community are important but often overlooked, and treasured friendships and partnerships are similarly both valued and easily or thoughtlessly discarded. By the same token, hate and resentment spring up in many small or unexpected ways; pockets of reservation communities are again and again torn asunder by violence and ill will.

In "Every Little Hurricane," Victor's uncles "slug each other which such force that they had to be in love"—the narrator describes how, during the fight, "Victor watched as his uncle held his other uncle down, saw the look of hate and love on his uncle's face." In another story, Victor says of his parents' tumultuous marriage that his mother loved his father "with a ferocity that eventually forced her to leave him. They fought each other with the kind of graceful anger that only love can create." In one of Victor's major romantic relationships, things come to a close on a note of both love and resentment. "I love you. And don't ever come back," one of his girlfriends tells him

as he prepares to leave their home in Seattle and return to the Spokane Indian Reservation. Victor and his classmates, growing up, "hate" Thomas Builds-the-Fire "for his courage." Thomas is an important person in Victor's life, and Victor does seem to, in a way, grow to love him throughout the course of these stories. However, the foundation of hatred and jealousy speaks to the complicated emotions that define so many of the relationships that appear in these pages.

Because the narrative isn't linear, the rise and fall of love and hatred throughout the book doesn't necessarily resolve itself or point to any kind of conclusion. Rather, the chopped-up, ever-changing narrative acts as a metaphor of sorts for the tumultuous nature of human relationships, and especially of relationships whose surroundings and foundations are calibrated by an atmosphere of poverty, violence, cultural loss or pain, and personal isolation. Alexie demonstrates the volatility of both familial and romantic relationships that come to fruition within the borders of the reservation.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ALCOHOL

In almost every story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Sherman Alexie engages directly with the common cultural stereotype—and devastating real-life epidemic—of Native Americans falling victim to alcoholism, or engaging in excessive drinking. In the introduction, Alexie himself states that he was "vilified in certain circles for [his] alcohol-soaked stories" when the collection debuted. "Everybody," he continues, "in the book is drunk or in love with a drunk." Throughout the text, the appearance of alcohol—or an alcoholic character—represents the cultural loss, longing, and pain that all of these characters experience each day; alcohol represents a void that opportunity might have filled in, were opportunities for success, health, and happiness more readily available to the Indians of Alexie's reservation. In "A Drug Called Tradition," Alexie writes longingly of a shared **vision** experienced by Victor, Junior, and Thomas—a vision attained after the three of them experiment with drugs at a local lake. "They are all carried away to the past [by their visions], to the moment before any of them took their first drink of alcohol." This longing can be seen as a symbolic metaphor for a kind of cultural longing that resents the pain of white America's influence on Native life.

CRAZY HORSE

Crazy Horse, a Native American war leader and member of the Oglala Lakota tribe, lived from the mid-to-late 1800s, and is perhaps most recognizable as the leader of a victorious war party at the Battle of Little Bighorn, which took place in June of 1876. Crazy Horse was also known for his **visions** and vision quests—in one such vision, he was told that he would be remembered as a leader and protector of his people.

Alexie references Crazy Horse several times throughout the narrative. Crazy Horse is, in many ways, the "ideal Indian." His status as a platonic ideal is one that's both perpetrated by white romanticizing and stereotyping of Native people, and one that's grown to become internalized by several of Alexie's Native characters as well. After a failed sexual encounter with an Indian woman, Victor says he "wished he was Crazy Horse." In "Imagining the Reservation," Alexie asks his reader to "imagine Crazy Horse invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C.," wondering if the plight of Native people would have continued had Crazy Horse—or someone like him—come to their rescue. When Junior Polatkin wins a basketball game for the Wellpinit Redskins in the last three seconds of the game, gossip "all around the rez about Junior's true identity" abounds; "I think he was Crazy Horse for just a second," says one Indian.

Crazy Horse's appearance throughout these stories signals both individual and collective yearning for the embodiment of a cultural touchstone that represents strength, agency, and connection to the spiritual world—three traits that, as we see through Alexie's stories, are difficult to come by on the modern-day reservation.

DREAMS AND VISIONS

"Nobody dreams all the time," one of Alexie's unnamed narrators says, "because it would hurt all the time." Throughout this text, dreams represent an alternate reality, and symbolize either an escape from the present or simply an improvement on it. In one dream Victor has as a child, he and his family visit a restaurant, and it is warm inside. Victor describes his **alcoholic** parents, on nights in his youth when he sleeps between them, as "dreamless"—their dreamlessness symbolizes a resignation, a loss of drive, an acceptance of the mundanity and predestination of their lives. In "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," Thomas Builds-the-Fire describes a dream he had of journeying to Spokane—in the dream, he knew he would receive a vision if he waited by the Falls. Once he walked there, though, in his real, waking life, Victor's father came upon him and chastised him for foolishly awaiting a vision, and brought him home to the reservation. "Your dad was my vision," Thomas tells Victor; "*Take care of each other* is what my dreams were saying." In "Distances," Alexie's dystopic alternate vision of an Indian-only American society, the narrator repeatedly dreams of **television** "and [wakes] up crying."

In "A Drug Called Tradition," Victor, Junior, and Thomas Builds-the-Fire "all want to have their vision, to receive their true names, their adult names." As we see at several points throughout the collection, receiving a vision is seen by many of Alexie's characters as a rite of passage; this line of thought seems to be connected to the same idea his characters have when imagining **Crazy Horse**. It's both an imposed line of thought and a deeply culturally internalized one, and one that's morphed as the tribe itself has changed. "Does every Indian depend on Hollywood for a twentieth-century vision?" one character asks. Visions symbolize a yearning toward an identity and a way of life that may or may not be long gone; toward an emergence into adulthood that may not be an option for young Indians anymore. Alexie's characters' rites of passage are much more mundane than receiving spiritual visions, or going off on vision quests, and their reckoning with this fact is a thread throughout the entire collection.

FRY BREAD

Fry bread represents home and domestic comfort. A food created by Native Americans out of necessity when they were forced from their arable land, and made from ingredients given to Native people by the United States Government, fry bread as a traditional food is both a generational tie and a symbol of a painful inheritance. Nonetheless, throughout the text, it represents a connection to the home, to family, and to tradition.

Victor's mother cooks fry bread during times of distress throughoutVictor's childhood as a distraction from his father's depression and **alcoholism**. Victor's aunt remarks that she doesn't know "where [his uncle] would be if [her] fry bread didn't fill [his] stomach every damn night." When Samuel Builds-the-Fire speaks of his childrens' domestic success, he remarks that they "got their own fry bread cooking in the oven" before and above anything else. Victor describes putting on "a good jacket that smells of fry bread and sweet smoke," referring to the comforting smells of his home. "Making fry bread," one character says to her dying husband, "and helping people die are the last two things Indians are good at." In a culture that clings desperately to its remaining institutions and traditions, fry bread represents an ideal of a Native American home that, sadly, many of Alexie's characters don't fully get to experience; a home full of good, plentiful food, good friends, and a calm and safety foreign to many on the reservation.

BASKETBALL AND TELEVISION

Basketball, in these stories, symbolizes hope for the future and the opportunity for change, advancement, and even escape from the reservation. Alexie himself was a gifted basketball player as a child, and he endows his characters with a reverence for the sport born of a kind of magical thinking that elevates success in basketball to represent potential success in life—both for an individual and for the tribe. Victor describes himself as a "former basketball star," and he and his friend Adrian have high hopes for a rising star named Julius Windmaker, though Julius ultimately falls victim to **alcoholism**, and his potential is both immediately erased and immediately forgotten—not mourned or lamented. "Our basketball team drives into the river and drowns every year," Victor jokes in one story; "It's tradition." His dark, facetious remark actually reflects the cyclical failure and hopelessness of many promising young basketball stars on the reservation. The swiftness with which the opportunity for escape, either physical or emotional, is taken away from children on the reservation parallels the competitive nature of the sport itself—the dog-eat-dog mentality present in all aspects of reservation life, which Alexie has described as a "locked room on fire" from which the only escape is to stand upon the bones of his ancestors and climb his way out.

Television as a symbol functions throughout the narrative in largely in the same way as basketball; anytime television is mentioned, a character is thinking of, dreaming of, or longing for escape. Television is a limited resource on the reservation—there are certain times of day it functions and certain times it does not—and, as such, it acts as an oft-desired portal between the "locked room" of the reservation and the larger world beyond it. The difference between basketball and television within the narrative is the omnipresence of television. When characters are in their homes, it is almost always left on in the background, with the volume turned low; during the early hours of the morning, characters watch the white noise that replaces programming in the middle of the night. In a description of his childhood, Victor notes that "the television was always too loud, until every emotion was measured by the half hour" and that he would wake "from nightmares to hear the television pounding the ceiling above [his] bed." Later in his life, when Victor's existence in Seattle—and his relationship with a white woman—fall into disrepair, he returns home to the reservation and attaches himself to the television, "search[ing] for answers."

Alexie has referred in interviews to the public's willingness to ignore the second half of his hyphenated Indian-American identity; through lifting up basketball and television to revered, symbolic status in these stories, Alexie acknowledges the unique place both basketball and television hold in traditional American life, and how their simplicity, comfort, and escapism are desired and valued commodities on the reservation as well.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* published in 2013.

Every Little Hurricane Quotes

❝ Victor could see his uncles slugging each other with such force that they had to be in love. Strangers would never want to hurt each other that badly.

Related Characters: Adolph, Arnold , Victor

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, and the moment it describes—a drunken, messy fight between two of Victor's uncles, Arnold and Adolph, which takes place in the middle of Victor's parent's New Years Eve Party, which itself takes place in the middle of a storm—introduces several of the major themes operating throughout the text. Love and hatred, bearing witness, and cultural versus personal pain are all thematic engagements here. Victor bears witness to his uncles' fight—he knows that they love one another, and that their desire to hurt one another is folded into that love. The personal pain between them that leads them to such a climactic, destructive fight is also borne of a cultural, familial, or genetic pain, and that pain leads to feelings of isolation and antagonism despite the familial ties these two men share. This moment sets readers up for a journey throughout the course of these stories, one that spans years in the lives of Victor and his family and friends as well as a host of small and large-scale tragedies. Death, violence, loss, love, pain, discrimination, and the building and destruction of communities will all come into play throughout the collection, and Alexie pins the weight of all that is to come on this high-pressure moment.

A Drug Called Tradition Quotes

❝ Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you... Indians never need to wear a watch because your skeletons will always remind you about the time. See, it is always now. That's what Indian time is. The past, the future, all of it is wrapped up in the now. That's how it is. *We are trapped in the now.*"

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker), Junior Polatkin, Victor

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Builds-the-Fire, after having gone on a modern-day "vision quest" to the nearby Benjamin Lake with Victor and Junior—despite not having been initially invited due to his burgeoning status as an eccentric and an outcast—shouts out to his two peers to warn them "not to slow dance with [their] skeletons." The boys are unable to discern his meaning, but Thomas's narrative voice then immediately takes over the story. Thomas explains, in his meandering but meaningful storyteller's voice, that the past and the future are "skeletons." The personification of the past and the future as bony, stripped-down, uncanny, and frightening figures gives them a leering, looming quality. Thomas explains how to handle the skeletons: "Keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons," he says. He then delves into an explanation of "Indian time," and of the idea that Indians are "trapped in the now," caught between their two skeleton companions. Native people, the victims of unfathomable violence on an unfathomable scale, bear the wounds of that violence in every aspect of their lives. Thomas acknowledges this, and argues that the tension between a battered past and a bleak future forces Indians to remain caught in a present that can never escape the dual pull of both what is behind and what lies ahead.

Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play... Quotes

❝ During the sixties, my father was the perfect hippie, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians.

Related Characters: Victor (speaker), Victor's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Victor's relationship with his father is a difficult, complicated one, and one that we see from several different angles at many points in time as the book unfolds. Our first introduction to him is this quote, which positions him as the unwitting emblem of a movement that has co-opted his culture, his appearance, and his values. Victor's father, protesting the Vietnam War, was photographed holding a rifle above his head while a fellow protester held a sign reading "MAKE LOVE NOT WAR." The photograph made

the cover of Time Magazine, though after the immortalized moment Victor's father was arrested in place of the white demonstrators and spent two years in prison. Through introducing his father through this anecdote, Victor describes the disadvantage that his father—and that all Native people—has had to face all his life. As we learn more about Victor's father and the difficulties in his marriage to Victor's mother, shortcomings as a parent, surrender to substance abuse, reckless behavior, and eventual abandonment of his family and his tribe, this context allows us to see Victor's father as a whole, complex person. We are given a sense of the extreme appropriation and discrimination that Native people face, and made to understand how the ripple effects of such emotional violence create even more difficulty, pain, and isolation.

Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation... Quotes

It's almost like Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land and rights. It's the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn't take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins. And, just like everybody else, Indians need heroes to help them learn how to survive. But what happens when our heroes don't even know how to pay their bills?

Related Characters: Victor (speaker), Julius Windmaker, Adrian

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Victor and his friend Adrian, while sitting on Victor's porch, notice that the only traffic light on the reservation has broken. A group of kids walk by the porch—one of them is Julius Windmaker, a rising basketball star. The kids are on their way to make some trouble, and Victor and Adrian discuss the basketball stars of the past, the "reservation heroes" who become "heroes forever," even after their failures to make it big or make it out—often due to the fact that they succumb to alcoholism. Victor and Adrian wonder whether Julius will be able to make it "all the way," and Victor then muses internally on the nature of heroism, idols, racism, and survival. Indians' ability to "survive the big stuff" still yields a tremendous deal of loss, cultural pain, and isolation in the wake of that grappling for survival. "The small things"—the casual racism, the white world's commodification and caricature of and disrespect for Native culture—grate hard each day, though, and create a need for positive "small things" to ensure survival. The heroes that Victor and his friends continually select often fall short of inspiring the hope that they should due to obscurity or their own personal inability to survive and thrive despite being a model for their peers. Victor's open-ended question—"what happens when our heroes don't even know how to pay their own bills?"—indicates both a longing for an answer and a fear of it; a need for a better way of thinking, living, and moving through the world, but an inability to conceive of what that might look like or how it might tamper with the careful alchemy needed to continue surviving "the small things."

Ain't no children on a reservation.

Related Characters: Adrian (speaker), Julius Windmaker, Victor

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Adrian's assertion that there "ain't no children on a reservation" speaks to the sealed-off, insular culture of reservation life, and the losses and advantages that comprise most of existence in the world of the reservation. Victor and Adrian are talking back and forth about Julius Windmaker, a bright and talented young basketball star on whom both Victor and Adrian—and their friends and families—have pinned hopes of not just success but glory. Julius's ability to make it off the reservation, to make it through college, to make it as a basketball star—these are all things that Victor and Adrian envision with joy and hope. They strip Julius of his childhood by elevating him to a status that can never be reached; he becomes their idol, in a way, despite his youth. Adrian's message, though, is that he feels Julius is "going to go bad." When Victor tells Adrian that Julius is "just horsing around," just being a kid, Adrian retorts with the above quotation. His awareness that childhood is a luxury and a comfort that most reservation children don't get to experience opens up themes of loss, pain, and isolation that will be developed further throughout the larger text in various characters' encounters with their memories of their own childhoods. We have a

very strong thesis statement at this point about the nature of childhood on the reservation, and the fact that it may not, for all intents and purposes, even exist at all.

This is What it Means to Say Phoenix Quotes

"The fireworks were small, hardly more than a few bottle rockets and a fountain. But it was enough for two Indian boys. Years later, they would need much more.

Related Characters: Victor (speaker), Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of his father's death, Victor embarks on a journey to retrieve his remains. When Victor does not have enough money to make the journey to Phoenix alone, his childhood friend (and victim) and local eccentric Thomas Builds-the-Fire volunteers to help monetarily, as long as Victor brings him along on the trip. Throughout their journey, Victor reminisces intermittently about his and Thomas's shared childhood—the happiness they shared, the cruelties Victor eventually inflicted upon Thomas, and the gulf that developed between them over the years. In one such reminiscence, Victor recalls a Fourth of July one summer when the two boys shared a bicycle and went nearly everywhere together. The boys watch a paltry fireworks display, but it is "enough" for them. The narrative then looks forward, though, at the end of the quote, stating that "years later, they would need much more." This quotation speaks to a yearning that will develop in both boys as they become men; a yearning for an amorphous, changeable "more" that will drive their actions—Victor's eventual move to Seattle and then to Spokane to escape the reservation, and Thomas's extreme retreat into his inner life of stories, memories, and his visions of both the past and the future. The foresight of the narrative itself within a passage that describes a memory from the past engages meta-textually with intertwining themes of memory, bearing witness, storytelling, and imagination, and signals a nesting of sorts between all these modes of recollection, reminiscence, and internal lives.

"Wait," Thomas yelled from his porch. "I just got to ask one favor."

Victor stopped the pickup, leaned out the window, and shouted back. "What do you want?"

"Just one time when I'm telling a story somewhere, why don't you stop and listen?" Thomas asked.

"Just once?"

"Just once."

Victor waved his arms to let Thomas know that the deal was good. It was a fair trade, and that was all Victor had ever wanted from his whole life.

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker), Victor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas, an eccentric storyteller whose retreat into his own inner world has only deepened as time has gone on, has grown to be largely ignored by almost his entire tribe—Victor included. The two were once close as young boys, but the opposite directions of their lives—and Victor's own personal anger, insecurities, and feelings of isolation—drove a wedge into their friendship. Thomas became more and more of an outcast, and Victor longed to get away from the reservation and his life there. Now, as adults, after a long, difficult, and revelatory journey to Arizona and back again, the two men find themselves thrown together both physically and emotionally. Victor, who borrowed money from Thomas for the journey (and will probably never pay him back) and who, moments before this exchange, discovered that his father had charged Thomas with "taking care" of him, is indebted to Thomas, and so Thomas's request of Victor—to "just listen, just once" to one of his fabled stories—holds a weight that suggests a few different things. Either Thomas is so profoundly isolated that his entreaty to Victor to listen is a cry for help, or Thomas believes that, with one of his stories, he can save Victor—a character who, we will come to learn, "needs saving." The very end of the quotation suggests that "all [either] has ever wanted" is a fair trade—to be on an even playing field, to give and to receive, to be visited by friendship, goodness, and fairness (and also a subtle allusion to the many unfair trades of Native people's past). Thomas and Victor are finally able to give each other that, and while their friendship is not necessarily restored, their relationship to one another is cast in a new light.

All I Wanted To Do Was Dance Quotes

He counted his coins. Enough for a bottle of wine in the Trading Post. He walked down the hill and into the store, grabbed the bottle, paid for it with nickels and pennies, and walked into the parking lot. Victor pulled the wine from its paper bag, cracked the seal, and twisted the cap off. Jesus, he wanted to drink so much his blood could make the entire tribe numb.

Related Characters: Victor

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

"All I Wanted To Do Was Dance" reveals to readers Victor's life in the middle of a low point. He has left a failed relationship with a white woman off the reservation, and has now returned. Lonely, isolated, embarrassed, and in pain, Victor endures a struggle with alcoholism, insomnia, and desperation for escape. In the story's climactic moment, Victor, after having succumbed to his desires and experienced a drunken night out, remembers his struggles to remain sober, his efforts to escape from the desire to make himself "numb." However, his desire for escape seems to win out, and he goes to the Trading Post, preparing to drink enough to numb not just himself but "the entire tribe." Throughout the collection, Alexie's engagement with the stereotype of Indians as alcoholics rings loudly. Here, we see his protagonist—and, in many cases, the stand-in for Alexie himself—in a moment of profound desperation, wanting to escape or cloud his losses through alcohol, and wishing he could do the same for his entire tribe. The claustrophobic feeling this moment creates speaks to themes of cultural and personal pain, as well as community and isolation—a sort of communal isolation, so to speak, as explored in Victor's wish to numb his tribe's many wounds.

The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire Quotes

Your honor, if I may continue, there is much more I need to say. There are so many more stories to tell.

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Builds-the-Fire, after twenty years of silence, begins speaking again right before the start of this story. To call it speaking, actually, might be overstating it—he makes "noises," one of which is so pure and profound it inspires the wife of one of the tribal council leaders to leave her husband. Thomas is brought to trial for this offense, and the tribal council creates trumped-up felony charges to use against Thomas. However, in his own trial, Thomas begins telling stories—visions of the violent past of his people, in which he describes himself as many different incarnations of what might be the same soul, and admits to enacting violence in retribution against white oppressors. Thomas, admitting to the murders of at least two men through his insistence that his stories are true, and that he was present at the time of their unfolding, indicts himself. These stories he "need[s]" to tell are more valuable to him than his own freedom, and though they cost him two concurrent life sentences, Thomas is compelled by his visionary gift. Thomas seems overwhelmed by the stories that come to him, that have come to him all his life—nevertheless, he appoints himself as a witness (both to the stories and at his own trial) and shoulders the isolating burden of telling the stories that need to be told and saying the things that need to be said.

Distances Quotes

Last night I dreamed about television. I woke up crying.

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Television is a recurring symbol throughout the book. Its presence denotes a desire for escape, and it functions as a portal of sorts between the reservation, which is insular and often isolating, and the rest of the world. In "Distances," Thomas tells a story—in which he is a character—about a future in which a cataclysmic event has wiped out every population in America except for the Native population. A

new society forms, one that seeks to destroy all artifacts and remembrances of white culture. The absence of television as a way to escape this new order—one that is not as utopian as it hopes to be, one that divides and disregards its own people—weighs heavily on the Thomas of the future, and he "dreams" of television. He wakes up crying, unable to find an escape from his situation, plagued by remembrances of his life before.

A Good Story Quotes

It is warm, soon to be cold, but that's in the future, maybe tomorrow, probably the next day and all the days after that. Today, now, I drink what I have, will eat what is left in the cupboard, while my mother finishes her quilt, piece by piece. Believe me, there is just barely enough goodness in all of this.

Related Characters: Junior Polatkin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

With this quotation, readers glimpse a rare moment of unfettered optimism, followed by a realization that optimism is "barely enough." Life on the reservation is difficult for Alexie's characters, and they often experience pain and isolation. In "A Good Story," Junior's mother asks him to tell her a happier story than the ones he writes. He tells her a simple story of an old man, Moses, telling a young Indian boy, Arnold, a story about themselves. His mother approves of the story's benign and interesting ending, and Junior then takes stock of the small blessings of his current moment. So many of Alexie's characters—Junior often included—are mired in memory and recollection, or struggle to keep the line between their visionary imaginations and the present clear. For this moment, Junior is firmly in the now—he is grateful for what he has at present, and is willing to accept the "goodness" that has come to him, knowing that there is not nearly enough to go around or to bolster him all the time.

Imagining the Reservation Quotes

Survival = Anger x Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Though we don't know the identity of this story's narrator, readers at this point in the book are well-enough acquainted with the symbolic and thematic importance of imagination to understand that a story which "imagines" the reservation—past, present, and future, attainable and unattainable—is concerned with the larger themes of the text and each of the characters encompassed within it. In this story, the narrator urges his audience to "imagine" alternate futures and pasts, noting that imagination is a weapon—"the only weapon on the reservation." As Alexie portrays it, reservation life—insular, isolating, painful, and often requiring those living there to bear witness to loss, violence, poverty, and hatred—is a thing to be survived. Imagination, then, which many characters—Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Junior, Nezzy, and others—use as an escape, can be weaponized. It can be used as armor, as a tactical offense, as a barbed vision that allows for a more palatable version of the world to shine through.

Imagine Crazy Horse invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C.; imagine Columbus landed in 1492 and some tribe or another drowned him in the ocean... Imagine every day is Independence Day. Imagine that your own shadow on the wall is a perfect door. Imagine a song stronger than penicillin. Imagine a spring with water that mends broken bones. Imagine a drum which wraps itself around your heart. Imagine a story that puts wood in the fireplace.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 149-153

Explanation and Analysis

In the previous quotation, imagination was a "weapon;" now, imagination is an escape, a salve, a tool for mending, providing, and sheltering. Imagination is not just a weapon, but a shield. It protects so many characters throughout the book, and provides them with an escape. The narrator of this story urges his audience to imagine a world in which imagination is enough, and in which the things imagined can become real. The desire for a rewriting of history—for the

victory of Crazy Horse and "some tribe," any tribe, for the destruction of white colonizers and oppressors in Washington D.C. and on the shores of "The New World," or for "a song" to be as powerful as the life-saving invention (penicillin) of a white European man—is given just as much weight as the desire for enough wood in the fireplace, for a celebration with fireworks each day, for an escape into a better future through "your own shadow"—for that shadow, the darkest part of you, to yield a path into light.

Indian Education Quotes

I picked up a basketball for the first time and made my first shot. No. I missed my first shot, missed the basket completely, and the ball landed in the dirt and sawdust, sat there just like I had sat there only minutes before. But it felt good, that ball in my hands, all those possibilities and angles. It was mathematics, geometry. It was beautiful.

Related Characters: Junior Polatkin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 174-175

Explanation and Analysis

In fifth grade, Junior Polatkin finds basketball. Readers then watch as he becomes a talented young basketball star, and hopes to use that currency or capital to "make it." Basketball is a strong symbol throughout the text and, like television, represents escape or even a portal to a world beyond the reservation. In "Indian Education," Junior details his time in school from the first grade through twelfth grade, describing the successes, slights, discrimination, and "beautiful" moments of "possibility" that define his education, both in school and out of it. His first encounter with basketball lifts him out of the "dirt and sawdust" he'd been sitting in, and opens up a world of imagination, possibility, and opportunity. Though readers will see the rise and fall of his high school basketball career, and will later follow Junior off the reservation to college, at this moment all readers have—and all Junior has—is a moment of potential and a vision of the future, suspended in excitement and longing.

There is more than one way to starve.

Related Characters: Junior Polatkin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Junior, in the eighth grade now and newly transferred to a "farm town junior high," can hear, through the wall separating the girls' and boys' bathrooms, the "forced vomiting" of his white female classmates. He watches as they "grow skinny from self-pity." Back on the reservation, Junior and his family stand in line for government-issued food—"canned beef that even the dogs wouldn't eat." Junior and his family eat the meat, and likewise grow skinny. Junior notes that there is more than one way to starve, making a comment about the duality of—and the growing gulf between—his life on the reservation and his life at school. While he watches his classmates elect to vomit up their meals, making themselves skinny, his own family is near-starving, forced to eat food that is neither nutritious, nourishing, nor comforting. All around Junior, people are "starving." While he and his family "starve" more literally, they also starve for escape, for a reprieve from the loss and poverty that define their lives, for a sense of community without the baggage of centuries of cultural pain. His classmates, meanwhile starve for an idea of themselves, an imagined vision of their bodies, that they are attempting to force into existence. The two struggles could not be more different but, as readers will see, much of Junior's life is defined by the dual pull of reservation life and life outside of it. Here, readers watch as he navigates the early stages of that tension, grappling with his conception of the world around him and the new world of life off of the reservation.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven Quotes

These days, living alone in Spokane, I wish I lived closer to the river, to the falls where ghosts of salmon jump. I wish I could sleep. I put down my paper or book and turn off the lights, lie quietly in the dark. It may take hours, even years, for me to sleep again. There's nothing surprising or disappointing in that. I know how all my dreams end anyway.

Related Characters: Victor (speaker), Victor's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

"The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven" follows Victor, now living off the reservation in Spokane, as he, unable to sleep, journeys out into the night to the local 7-11 in search of a Creamsicle. Throughout his walk, Victor reminisces about a failed relationship he had with a white woman years ago, when he lived in Seattle. Trapped in his memories and suffering from insomnia, Victor recounts the decline of their emotionally—and almost physically—violent relationship. At the end of the night, Victor is still unable to sleep, but tells readers that his insomnia doesn't matter to him—he knows how "all" his dreams will end. The failure of his relationship traps him in a cycle of fear of failure in general, and Victor is similarly haunted by his past. His desire to live near the Spokane falls "where ghosts of salmon jump" calls back to Thomas's vision of Victor's father's spirit as a jumping salmon there, and even Victor's former job at 7-11, where he was mugged, represents a familiarity, though it's not a pleasant one. This is the last moment readers see Victor in the "present" in the collection, and they are left with a bleak portrait of where he's landed. Knowing how his dreams end represents an inability, or a lack of desire, to journey anymore into the realms of imagination or storytelling. Victor is firmly entrenched in the past, unwilling or afraid to engage with his future, dreams, or inner world.

Family Portrait Quotes

❝ The television was always loud, too loud, until every emotion was measured by the half hour. We hid our faces behind masks that suggested other histories; we touched hands accidentally and our skin sparked like a personal revolution. We stared across the room at each other. We were children; we were open mouths. Open in hunger, in anger, in laughter, in prayer. Jesus, we all want to survive.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

The family portrait delivered in this story, which recounts an unnamed narrator's distorted, disjointed childhood memories, is not a very flattering one at all. The overall tone of the story is a chaotic one, and the feeling of shouting to be heard over the television, an intense, tangible memory from the narrator's childhood, gives us a different view of a symbol we've come to see as a shorthand for pleasure, escape, or distraction. The television in this story is an adversary to be contended with, an unchangeable force in the narrator's troubled home. The narrator and his siblings remember clamoring for attention, for food, and to be heard and seen. This quote displays the desperation of their symbolically "open" mouths (like baby birds fighting for attention and food), ready to receive anything that might nourish them—physically, emotionally, or spiritually. The finality of the quote's end—"Jesus, we all want to survive"—returns the story to the present tense, as if the power of the narrator's memories has whisked him back to his childhood, to the immediacy of that time.

Somebody Kept Saying Powwow Quotes

❝ Sometimes it feels like our tribe is dying a piece of fry bread at a time.

Related Characters: Junior Polatkin (speaker), Norma

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Fry bread occupies a peculiar symbolic place in the text. It represents home, domesticity, tradition, and comfort, but the food itself was created during a painful time in Native American history. When Native people were moved off of their land by the United States, they used the ingredients given to them by the government to make fry bread. It has since become a staple of Native American culture, but its high-fat content has led to health problems, obesity, and diabetes for many Native Americans. Nonetheless, within the context of this collection, its appearance signals comfort, connection to heritage, and echoing of tradition through the years; when Junior says that the tribe is "dying one piece of fry bread at a time," the quote is a double-edged sword. Fry bread is linked to health concerns but, moreover, the loss of the old recipes and ways of preparation, and the growing difficulty of finding "good" fry bread represents a loss of connection to a tradition, and to the tribal elders.

Witnesses, Secret and Not Quotes

❝ I'm always asking myself if a near-accident is an accident, if standing right next to a disaster makes you part of the disaster or just a neighbor.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

The unnamed narrator of this story recalls a time when he was thirteen and he and his father were on their way into town, so that the narrator's father could be questioned at the police station regarding the long-ago disappearance of an Indian man named Jerry Vincent. On their way into town, their car hit a patch of ice and spun out of control. The car eventually straightened out without incident, and the narrator and his father "don't talk about" the near-accident at the time of its occurrence or at any point in the future. The near-accident, though, haunts the narrator into his present; he is "always," he says, wondering about the nature of being adjacent to an accident, or being its "neighbor." The narrator's question mirrors his father's reluctance to discuss the specifics of what he knows—or does not know—about Jerry Vincent's death. His father may or may not have information that the authorities have been hunting down for years, and the narrator wonders to this day if his father's proximity to Jerry Vincent's murder implicates him in it. Questions of bearing witness and the responsibility of an individual who finds him or herself in the role of a witness are asked again and again throughout the collection, but never are they in such sharp relief as in this story.

Junior Polatkin's Wild West Show Quotes

❝ Junior hung up the phone and walked down the highway toward the reservation. He wanted to imagine that he was walking off into the sunset, into a happy ending. But he knew that all along the road he traveled, there were reservation drive-ins, each showing a new and painful sequel to the first act of his life.

Related Characters: Junior Polatkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

Junior Polatkin reappears as the subject of the book's final story, in which Junior is in college at a small Jesuit school in Spokane, where he is the only Indian student. Obsessed with movies and frequently visited by dreams of Wild-West-style shootouts, Junior has a brief affair with a woman named Lynn. The affair results in a pregnancy and Lynn, who is Irish Catholic, elects to keep the baby. Junior is not permitted to be involved in the child's life except through intermittent phone calls, and Lynn's parents deny the child—who is given the name Sean Casey—any recognition of his Indian heritage. Junior drops out of school, though Lynn implores him not to, and plans to return to the reservation. In the last lines of the story—and the entire book—we watch as Junior travels a long and lonely road back to the reservation, where he knows deep down that each "reservation drive-in" he encounters will only feature a "new and painful" vision of his present and future.

The filmic motif that recurs throughout this story mirrors the symbolic importance of television, but also incorporates a dreamlike, visionary weight. Junior's decision to abandon his studies and return home to the reservation is isolating, difficult, and painful, and despite knowing all these things, he marches on into a future that really represents a cyclical, ritualistic return to the past. This moment recalls Thomas Builds-the-Fire's speech about the "skeletons" of the past and the future that follow every Indian throughout his or her life: the tension between the awareness of a cyclical, inescapable past rife with repetition, violence, and loss, and an unsteady, idealized, often unattainable ideal of the future.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

EVERY LITTLE HURRICANE

In January of 1979, a hurricane falls "from the sky [and onto] the Spokane Indian Reservation"; the storm wakes nine-year-old Victor from a **nightmare**. A third person narrator describes Victor's experience; he is in the basement of his family's HUD (department of Housing and Urban Development) issued house, while upstairs his mother and father host "the largest New Year's Eve party in tribal history."

The storm (or "hurricane") in this story is both literal and metaphorical. As the weather system descends on the reservation, a storm of resentment, confusion, and anger—fueled by alcohol—rages through Victor's parents' New Year's party. What should be a time of renewal ultimately cedes to old hurts and old ways.

From the basement, Victor hears an argument begin; two Indians, like "high-pressure and low-pressure fronts," begin to fistfight one another. The music upstairs stops suddenly, frightening Victor. He can hear his father angrily ask what's going on, and he can hear his mother reply that her brothers are fighting "again," outside on the lawn. Victor runs to the window, from which he can see "his uncles slugging each other with such force that they had to be in love."

Victor's uncles are like the struggle between love and hatred personified. Alcoholism, past trauma, shared pain, familial resentment, and cultural confusion—all themes that will reign over Alexie's characters throughout this entire story collection—are seen battling their way out of Victor's uncles in this very early point in the narrative.

Victor can hear one of his parents' guests yell "They're going to kill each other," but no one at the party takes any action. "They were all witnesses," the narrator says, "and nothing more." The fight intensifies for a few moments, then ends as abruptly as it began. Victor thinks of news footage of cities devastated by hurricanes, and wonders whether it is worse to have memories destroyed, or simply forever damaged.

Bearing witness, another theme important to the characters throughout Alexie's stories, is an indictment here, as it is elsewhere in the collection. The passive watching that Victor's parents' party guests engage in is a danger in and of itself; it brings devastation, just like a storm.

Victor remembers a metaphorical "storm" four years earlier when his father, unable to purchase Christmas gifts for the family, wept. "We've got each other," Victor remembers his mother saying, but claims that she knew "it wasn't real." A few weeks before Christmas, Victor had watched his father check his wallet repeatedly for money "as if the repetition itself could guarantee change."

Victor's father repetitively checking his wallet for money, though he knows he'll find none, is a cyclical action that mirrors the cyclical form of a hurricane, and also the cyclical nature of so much cultural pain and devastation that occurs on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

Victor reflects on how he hates the rain. He used to be afraid that "he was going to drown while it was raining," and his nightmares often feature drowning. He also dreams of swallowing other liquids besides water; "**whiskey, vodka, and tequila**, those fluids swallowing him just as easily as he swallowed them."

Though Victor fears drowning in water, he is unafraid of drowning in alcohol; these substances have claimed the lives of so many of his relatives, and their claim on him is almost, even from a young age, uncontestable.

Victor's uncles give up their fight completely and return to the party arm in arm. However, "the storm that had caused their momentary anger move[s] from Indian to Indian at the party, giving each a specific, painful memory." The collective pain at the party grows and expands, and the **drinking** intensifies. Victor, back in bed, feels as if the basement ceiling above him is "lower[ing] with the weight of each Indian's pain."

Though Victor's uncles' fight ceases, their warring has gathered a storm-like strength; it continues to wreak havoc on the party, and themes of collective pain experienced on an individual and community level are introduced in its wake.

Victor gets out of bed and goes upstairs, hugs his uncles, and looks for his parents. He finds them "passed out" on their bed. He gets into bed between them, closes his eyes, and says his prayers. The party rages on. Victor closes his eyes and falls asleep. In the morning, in the wake of the hurricane, "all the Indians, the eternal survivors, gather to count their losses."

Indians, "eternal survivors," weather storm after storm, aware of the toll these "storms" take. Calling back to themes of witness-bearing and indescribable cultural pain, the "count[ing of] losses" is a rote action, and a passive one—but when it is all that can be done, it must be.

A DRUG CALLED TRADITION

Thomas Builds-the-Fire has been compensated by Washington Water Power, who paid him off in order to install ten power poles across land he'd inherited. He throws a party to celebrate. Victor, who narrates this story, and his friend Junior Polatkin are there, but they leave early go try some "new drugs" at Benjamin Lake and hopefully experience **visions.** Victor says that he hopes the experience will be "spiritual" and "very fucking Indian."

Victor and Junior engage in the cultural practice of the vision quest somewhat ironically. They do really want to experience visions, but acknowledge that their search for them is hollow in comparison to the divinely-bestowed visions of their ancestors (and even those given to Thomas, a visionary and storyteller.)

After driving a little ways, the two boys see Thomas standing by the side of the road; he has left his own party in order to follow the two boys. Victor invites Thomas to join them at the lake, but the invitation comes with a condition: Thomas can only come if he promises not to tell any stories after he's taken the drug. Thomas agrees. Victor gives Thomas the drug, a hallucinogen, and Junior asks him what he's able to **see**. Thomas "poke[s]s his head through some wall into another, better world," where he says he can see Victor—wearing braids, stealing a horse, riding by moonlight.

Victor and Junior see Thomas as an outcast or a burden, but agree to let him come along—perhaps because they are aware of his predisposition toward visions. Thomas would rather spend time with Victor and Junior than host his own party, and he is eager to be a part of whatever the two of them are up to; he is the first to take the drug (which is never explicitly named), and the first to experience its effects.

Junior asks Victor to give him some of the drug. Though Junior is driving, Victor obliges. The boys reach the lake, and Junior's **vision** begins; he can see Thomas "dancing naked around a fire." He describes his vision-Thomas as "tall and dark and fucking huge."

Junior sees a vision of Thomas that contrasts to the Thomas of now. Young, awkward, and outcast in the present, the Thomas of Junior's vision is strong and large and takes up space—it's like Thomas as he was supposed to be, in some tribal past or alternate present.

Junior spins the car in circles through the empty fields near the lake, and Victor tells him to slow down. Both Junior and Thomas are consumed by their **visions.** Victor leans over to the driver's seat to stop the car, and Junior jumps out and runs through the field. Victor follows him. Thomas drives up behind them; Victor tells him to stop the car, and asks him where he was going. Thomas replies that he was chasing his vision of Victor and his horse. Victor finally takes some of the drug, and "instantly" has a vision of Junior, standing on stage in blue jeans, strumming a guitar and singing about **Crazy Horse**.

Throughout the book visions are symbols of yearning for a way of life that is gone. The boys long to connect with what their culture and heritage was before it was decimated by white people. Even in their visions, though, they are unable to escape the loss of Native culture or arrive at their own cultural markers—visions of songs about Crazy Horse—without first experiencing white markers—blue jeans and guitars.

The boys walk down to the lake. Thomas puts his feet in the water, and Junior and Victor sit on the hood of the car while the drugs wear off, drinking diet Pepsi and watching as Thomas talks to himself, "telling himself stories." Victor and Junior speculate about why Thomas is the way he is. "Some people say he got dropped on his head when he was little. Some people think he's magic," Victor says, adding that he thinks both things are true. Thomas turns around, and asks the boys if they want to hear a story. They oblige him, and he begins.

Though Victor and Junior experience visions, they are only able to do so with the help of a hallucinogen; Thomas, however, can seemingly access his visions through his stories any time he wants, and often even when he doesn't. The boys and, eventually, the tribe as a whole, will mock and revile Thomas for his stories, but in this moment they are blessings, and Victor and Junior covet them in a way.

Thomas tells a story of three Indian boys drinking diet Pepsi out by Benjamin Lake, "wearing only loincloths and braids." The boys, Thomas says, "have decided to be real Indians tonight. They all want to have their **vision,** to receive their true names, their adult names." In Thomas's vision, the boys are all "carried away to the past, to the moment before any of them took their first drink of **alcohol**." The boys sing, dance, drum, and steal horses.

Thomas, too, dreams of being able to connect with his heritage in a pure, authentic way. He knows that Victor and Junior, too, want to participate in a version their culture without pain, suffering, or abuse. Thomas's vision is a brief and beautiful respite from the cultural baggage all three boys bear, and will carry into adulthood.

After he is finished with his story, Thomas gets up and walks away. Victor regrets being cruel to Thomas as children; he notes that Thomas has always been kind to both him and Junior. Thomas turns around and yells to Victor and Junior, telling them "not to slow dance with [their] skeletons."

Though Victor seems to have a change of heart here, his behavior toward Thomas will not change. Thomas warns Junior and Victor not to engage with their "skeletons," or the dark sides of their past and potential future.

Victor and Junior stay at the lake until the sun comes up, experiencing residual **visions.** The following day, the spiritual leader of the tribe, Big Mom, comes upon them, and tells them that she knows what they saw. She hands Victor a small drum that fits in the palm of his hand, and tells him to hang onto it in case he needs her; it is, she says, her "pager." Victor, in the present, tells us that he's never used the drum; Big Mom died, he says, a couple years ago. He still likes to keep the drum nearby, and calls it "the only religion [he has.]"

Big Mom wants for the boys to be able to get in touch with her, and with themselves. In a leap to the present day, Victor reveals that her faith in the power of their visions and their agency in reclaiming a cultural rite of passage has had a deep and lasting impact on who Victor himself has become.

BECAUSE MY FATHER ALWAYS SAID HE WAS THE ONLY INDIAN WHO SAW JIMI HENDRIX PLAY 'THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER' AT WOODSTOCK

Victor tells us that "during the sixties, [his] father was the perfect hippie, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians." He describes a photograph of his father that made the cover of *Time*; his father was protesting the Vietnam war in Spokane. In the picture, his father is holding a rifle over his head, while a "fellow demonstrator" holds a sign that reads MAKE LOVE NOT WAR. Victor reveals that his father served two years in prison after being charged for assault with a deadly weapon in the aftermath of the protest, and got out "just in time to hitchhike to Woodstock to watch Jimi Hendrix play 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'"

Victor's father's tale of being arrested at a protest highlights the inequities between white people's experiences and those of Native people. His father was used by the media as an icon, and his exorbitant, unfair, and cruel punishment—a punishment none of his fellow white protesters faced—was ignored.

Throughout Victor's childhood, Victor says, Jimi Hendrix and his father "became **drinking** buddies." Victor would put on the tape of "The Star-Spangled Banner" every time his father would come home, and his father would weep, "then pass out with his head on the kitchen table." Victor would fall asleep beneath the table where his father sat, and the two would "**dream** together until the sun came up."

Victor's father's engagement with the music of Jimi Hendrix becomes a ritual for Victor throughout his childhood, too; he sits with his father and comforts him as his father self-destructs, and together the two dream—remove themselves from the present, and imagine a different life or future.

In the wake of such nights, Victor's father would tell him stories "as a means of apology," including how he met Victor's mother. "They fought each other with the kind of graceful anger only love can create," Victor adds now.

Storytelling functions in different thematic ways throughout these stories; one of them, demonstrated here, is to act as a salve or a bridge between characters.

Victor remembers how, one night in his adolescence, when driving home with his father, someone called into the radio with a request to hear Jimi Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Victor and his father got into a long discussion about war and peace—"that's all there is," he remembers his father saying; "It's always one or the other."

It's easy to understand how Victor's father could see that war and peace are "all there is" in life—literal wars as well as emotional wars are waged around and within him, and he falls victim to them time and time again.

Victor describes his vivid **dreams** of his father at Woodstock, but admits that "as much as [he] dream[s] about it, [he doesn't] have any clue about what it meant for [his] father to be the only Indian who saw Jimi Hendrix play at Woodstock," or if he was even truly the only one.

Even if Victor's father was the only Indian at Woodstock, what would it have signified? Assimilation? Vindication? Victor will wrestle with some form of the themes raised by that question throughout many of these stories.

Victor describes his parents' arguments; a particularly difficult one occurred on a trip to visit Jimi Hendrix's grave. Another began after his father, against his mother's will, bought a motorcycle, and then wrecked it, resulting in a two-month stay in the hospital. Victor's mother cared for him in the wake of the crash, but later their marriage dissolved. Victor describes his and his parents' differing remembrances of how their family was torn apart. "Was it because of Jimi Hendrix," Victor remembers asking his mother; he recalls that she replied: "Part of it [was], yeah."

Victor's parents' marriage didn't dissolve due to Jimi Hendrix the man, but due to Jimi Hendrix the ideal. Jimi Hendrix represented, in Victor's father's eyes, a kind of exceptionalism, a freedom, a way to rise above oppression and suffering. In attempting to match or achieve those things, Victor's father created difficulties in his life, marriage, and family which ultimately couldn't be overcome.

Victor recalls a **dream** he had, soon after his father left, of his father returning to their HUD house on his motorcycle. In the middle of the dream, Victor rose from his bed, went out onto the porch, and waited. His mother came outside to wrap him in a quilt, and he remained there until sunrise, then went back inside, where his mother made the two of them breakfast and they "ate until [they] were full."

Victor yearns terribly for his father, but in the end it is his mother who provides comfort, stability, and shelter for him. Victor's father's restlessness, instability, and reckless habits create a rift in their family and leave Victor with only dreams to cling to.

CRAZY HORSE DREAMS

At a **fry bread** stand at a powwow, Victor tries to get his order taken. A woman follows him "from open space to open space," and tells him that no one will pay him attention "because [his] hair is too short." Victor doesn't respond, and walks away. He gives an old man money for gas to head over to the next powwow, but the woman finds him again. "Not much of a warrior," she tells Victor; "You keep letting me sneak up on you."

At a powwow, a community event, Victor vies for a piece of fry bread while ignoring an interested woman. She teases him about his hair—many men on Victor's reservation wear their hair in braids—and tells him he falls short of her ideal of a "warrior." Victor is not the man she is looking for, but she seeks him out anyway.

The woman takes Victor back to her Winnebago, where they banter with one another and have sex. "She was still waiting for **Crazy Horse**," Victor says. He asks her why she has no scars on her body, and she asks him why he has so many. He tells her she's "just another goddamned Indian," and she replies that she is "the best kind of Indian, and [she's] in bed with [her] father." Victor laughs, and notes that "she [thinks] he [is] Crazy Horse." Victor dresses, tells the woman she is "nothing," and leaves. He watches from a distance as the lights in her Winnebago switch on and off, "wish[ing] he was Crazy Horse."

Victor acknowledges that he cannot and will not live up to this woman's desired ideal. Their mutual resentment builds—she resents Victor for not living up to her ideals, and he resents her for highlighting that fact—until Victor leaves, frustrated, but still "wishing" he could be what she wanted him to be. In the end, each has isolated themselves from the other.

THE ONLY TRAFFIC SIGNAL ON THE RESERVATION DOESN'T FLASH RED ANYMORE

On a hot summer day, Victor and his friend Adrian, seated on Victor's front porch, play around with a BB gun and drink Diet Pepsis, since they "don't **drink**" anymore. They look out at the reservation, and notice that the "only" traffic light on the reservation does not work anymore.

The broken traffic light is a symbol of the stagnant feeling of the reservation; life there never seems to change in any significant way, and cycles of violence, poverty, and loss come around again and again.

A group of Indian boys walk by, looking to Victor like they are "off to cause trouble somewhere." Adrian recognizes one of the boys as Julius Windmaker—"the best **basketball** player on the reservation though he [is] only fifteen." Victor and Adrian remark that Julius looks good, and that he must not be drinking—yet. Victor describes Julius as "the latest in a long line of reservation basketball heroes," and says that he has a gift.

Basketball symbolizes hope for change, advancement, and leaving the reservation for something better. Victor and Adrian, both basketball players in their time, were never great enough to "make it," but they hang their collective hopes for a larger change on Julius.

Victor still feels the "ache" of his own "lost edge" as a basketball star. He asks Adrian whether he thinks Julius will be able to "make it all the way." Adrian replies, "Maybe." In the distance, they hear the group of boys breaking glass in the distance. A tribal cop drives by and then, a few minutes later, loops around, this time with Julius in the backseat, caught throwing a brick through a tribal council truck's windshield. Adrian tells Victor that he thinks Julius is going to "go bad." Victor insists that Julius is just messing around, testing his limits, being a kid. "Ain't no children on a reservation," Adrian says.

Because Adrian and Victor, who are only barely acquainted with Julius, have such high hopes for him, it's safe to assume that several other members of the tribe and of Julius's family have similar hopes for his success as a basketball star. Julius, however, is already demonstrating a restlessness and a defiance that are not just childlike willfulness. Adrian knows that childhood is a luxury, one that even Julius cannot afford.

One year later, Adrian and Victor sit "on the same porch in the same chairs."They see Julius Windmaker "staggering" down the road, "**drunk** as a skunk." Adrian and Victor know that Julius has a **basketball** game that evening, and they muse aloud about whether or not he'll sober up in time to make it.

Despite being able to see clearly that Julius is an alcoholic, Victor and Adrian continue to hope against hope for his success.

Later that night, Adrian and Victor go to watch Julius play in his **basketball** game, but he is not "the ball player [they] remembered or expected." He plays poorly, missing several shots, and eventually benches himself. Back on Victor's porch after the game, Adrian and Victor drink Pepsis and Adrian notices that the traffic light is still broken. The two of them decide to go out, and leave Victor's front door open "just a little, in case some crazy Indian need[s] a place to sleep." In the morning, Julius is **passed out drunk** on Victor's living room floor. Adrian throws a blanket over him, and he and Victor let him sleep.

A year later, the traffic light has not changed, and neither, really, have the circumstances of Adrian, Victor, or Julius—except that Julius is no longer able to provide Victor and Adrian with the vicarious hope they'd once shared. Though Victor and Adrian care for him in his time of need, they do nothing to intervene or to break the cycle of alcoholism and shattered dreams, just as no one seems able or willing to fix the traffic light.

Out on the porch, Victor and Adrian watch another group of Indian children walk by, "all holding **basketballs**." They recognize one child as a girl named Lucy, a "little warrior" who plays for the sixth grade boys team though she herself is only in third grade. Victor tells Adrian that he hopes she "makes it all the way."

Victor and Adrian's selection of a new young basketball star to pin their hopes on mirrors the constant state of brokenness of the traffic light. Their behavior is cyclical and unchanging, and readers are left with the impression that the cycle will repeat forever.

AMUSEMENTS

Dirty Joe, an Indian known on the reservation "because he cruised the taverns at closing time [and] drank all the half-empties," passes out on the ground, **intoxicated**, "in the middle of a white carnival." Victor and his friend Sadie stand over Joe's body, unsure of what to do with him. If they leave him where he lies, they know, he will "go to jail for sure." White passersby stare, gawk, and laugh at Dirty Joe. Victor hears a scream behind him; he turns around and sees a miniature roller coaster called The Stallion, and he and Sadie decide to put Dirty Joe on it—though they know it's "a real shitty thing to do."

Victor and Sadie, though familiar with Dirty Joe, have little empathy for him, and feel no remorse in concocting a plan that will humiliate him for the sake of their own amusement. This breakdown of community also occurs in a primarily white space, where Sadie, Victor, and Dirty Joe are all already isolated.

Victor and Sadie carry Joe to the coaster and pay off the "carny" operator to let Joe ride around all day. As Joe goes around and around, Victor and Sadie laugh and enjoy themselves. White bystanders, "jury and judge," look on in disbelief.

Victor and Sadie, along with the white bystanders from whom they are normally isolated, bear jovial witness to Dirty Joe's pain and humiliation.

Victor, "realizing what [he] ha[s] done," tells Sadie that they should leave. She suggests they collect Joe from the roller coaster, but Victor insists that there's no time. As they hurry out of the carnival, a small redheaded boy points his finger at Victor and mimes shooting a gun, shouting "You're dead, Indian." Victor looks back at the coaster and sees that Dirty Joe is awake. Victor watches as Joe stumbles off the ride and throws up onto the loading platform. The ride's operator pushes Dirty Joe into the grass, and a crowd gathers around him. The operator points out Victor, and beckons him.

Victor's surrender to his conscience does not extend to actually helping Joe; instead, he and Sadie leave him behind, isolated and in pain. The child who taunts Victor further stokes his guilt, and reminds him that he is still on the outside. His humiliation of Dirty Joe has not made him any more a part of the white world, though it's an act of betrayal that has arguably isolated him, at least emotionally, from his Spokane community.

Victor runs, pursued by a security guard, and finds himself in a fun house. There he catches a glimpse of himself in a distorted mirror, and sees himself as an "Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty." Victor feels "the folding shut of the good part of [his] past."

Victor sees his distorted reflection and understands it as his true one; he has made himself unrecognizable through the perpetration of such a traitorous act against one of his own. Alexie also once again connects individual suffering in the present to historical and cultural suffering, as Victor's betrayal of Dirty Joe is like a "treaty" betraying other Native people to white people.

THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO SAY PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Victor loses his job working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and shortly thereafter learns that his father has died of a heart attack in Phoenix. Victor has not seen his father in years, and has only spoken to him by phone a couple of times in those years—still, though, he feels "a genetic pain" at the news of his father's passing.

The "genetic pain" that Victor describes feeling upon learning of his father's death is a major theme, first introduced in such plain language here. Victor's journey to plumb the depths of that pain spans the entire collection.

Victor has no money at his disposal. He knows that his father has some money in a savings account, but, in the meantime, Victor needs to find a way to get himself to Phoenix. Victor contacts the tribal council, and they say that they have money set aside for the return of tribal members' bodies, but not much. Victor assures them that because his father died alone in his trailer and was not found for a week, he's been cremated—so getting him back to the reservation, Victor says, "ain't going to cost all that much." The tribal council offers Victor one hundred dollars, and advises him to ask someone to either drive him to Phoenix or lend him the rest of the money. Victor accepts the hundred dollars, and heads over to the Trading Post to cash his check.

Victor's life has been calibrated by poverty and loss; now, the two converge around Victor's grief, feeding each other and exacerbating his already dire situation.

At the Trading Post Victor sees Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who is talking to himself "like always." Victor recalls a time, when he and Thomas were seven, that Thomas told Victor a story that seemed like a prophecy or **vision**: "Your father's heart is weak. He is afraid of his own family. He is afraid of you…Sometimes he feels like he wants to buy a motorcycle and ride away. He wants to run and hide. He doesn't want to be found."

Only after the loss of his father can Victor see the truth in Thomas's visions. Victor—and everyone else on the reservation—are quick to dismiss Thomas and his stories, but in this new light Victor is able to see that perhaps Thomas has been right all along.

Thomas approaches Victor and apologizes for his loss. He tells Victor that Victor's mother was just in the Trading Post, crying. Thomas offers to lend Victor the money he needs to get to Arizona if Victor will take Thomas with him. Victor refuses. "I can't take your money," he says; "We're not really friends anymore." Thomas insists. Victor tells Thomas he'll consider his offer. He cashes his check and heads home, where he sits at his kitchen table and remembers "so many stories" from his and Thomas's childhood.

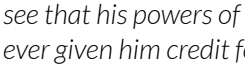
Victor, who was cruel to Thomas during their adolescence, feels incapable of taking him up on an offer of a loan. However, upon returning home to solitude, he's forced to reckon with the past, and to consider what he and Thomas owe one another.

Victor remembers one summer when he and Thomas shared a bike. On their way to watch Fourth of July fireworks, Thomas told Victor a story of "two Indian boys who wanted to be warriors," who stole a car, drove to the city, parked the stolen car in front of a police station, and hitchhiked their way back to the reservation. Upon their return, their friends and families eyes "shone with pride," and the boys were congratulated on their bravery. At the story's conclusion, both Victor and Thomas wish aloud that they could be warriors.

The desire to be strong, independent, and warrior-like defined Victor's childhood and continues to define his adulthood. Here, we see just how deep that desire runs, and how intimately Thomas is aware of it.

In the present, at his kitchen table, Victor counts his hundred dollars again and again. He knows he needs more. He places the money into his wallet and heads out his front door in search of Thomas, who is waiting on his front porch. "I knew you'd call me," Thomas says. He tells Victor that he has enough money saved to get the two of them to Phoenix, but that Victor will need to get them back. Victor agrees. Thomas, excited, asks when they'll set out on their journey.

In a moment that mirrors Victor's earlier memory of his father opening and closing his wallet repeatedly in hopes of money might appear, Victor counts and recounts the money the tribal council offered him. When Thomas shows up on Victor's doorstep, we again see that his powers of prophecy may be more real than Victor has ever given him credit for.



Victor remembers a time "when [he and Thomas] were fifteen; they had long since stopped being friends," and got into a fistfight. Victor, **intoxicated**, beat Thomas up "for no reason at all." Their friends, including Junior, stood by and watched, until Norma rescued Thomas. The boys obeyed the "powerful" and warrior-like Norma, who asked Thomas why he was always getting picked on, but received no answer from him.

Norma exhibits the characteristics that Victor and Junior wish they could; she is brave and honest, and when she "saves" Thomas from Victor, she highlights how far from achieving those values he really is. In reflecting on this memory, Victor realizes that not only does he still fall short, but he owes Thomas a debt.

In the present, Victor and Thomas sit side-by-side in coach on their flight to Phoenix. A gymnast who'd been "first alternate on the 1980 Olympic team" sits next to them, and Thomas flirts with her. Victor is amazed, and knows that if he ever told anyone back on the reservation, they wouldn't believe him.

Thomas's reputation as an eccentric storyteller belies who he is as a person, and Victor realizes that this trip will be different than he imagined it.

After arriving at the airport in Phoenix, Victor and Thomas take a taxi to Victor's father's trailer. When they get there, Victor apologizes for hitting Thomas all those years ago, and Thomas forgives him. Victor can smell the trailer from outside, and tells Thomas that he doesn't have to accompany him in, but Thomas insists that Victor is going to need help. When they open the trailer door, both of them are overwhelmed by the smell. Victor's father had lain alone in his trailer "for a week in hundred degree temperatures, and the only reason anyone found him was because of the smell. They needed dental records to identify him." Victor, thinking there might be items of sentimental value in the trailer, presses on, and Thomas follows him inside.

Victor finds himself caught between the past and the present. He lingers in his bad memories of being cruel to Thomas, not totally able to exist in the present moment they're sharing. He's then brought back to reality by the horror of visiting the site of his father's death, and realizing the extreme poverty, unhappiness, and isolation his father must have faced. Still, Victor longs for the tangible aspects of his father's memory, and that pushes him forward into the trailer.

Victor remembers a time when he was twelve, and stepped into an underground wasps' nest. Thomas helped him to pull his foot out and run away, and Victor escaped with only a few stings—"seven, [his] lucky number."

Victor realizes more and more with each intruding memory what a good friend Thomas was to him, and has always tried to be.

There is not much in Victor's father's trailer worth keeping, since everything stinks, Victor says, of death. Thomas tells a story of Victor's father. Once, as a young man, Thomas had a **dream** that "told" him to go to Spokane, stand at the Falls, and "wait for a sign." Thomas, thirteen and without a license or a car, walked all the way to the falls from the reservation. After an hour, Victor's father ran into him and asked what he was doing; Thomas replied that he was waiting for a vision. Telling him that "all you're going to get here is mugged," Victor's father drove Thomas to a Denny's for dinner and then took him home to the reservation. "For a long time," Thomas says, he was angry, because he felt betrayed by his dreams; however, he says, he came to realize that Victor's father had been his vision all along. What his dreams were saying was "take care of each other."

Thomas reveals that he had an important moment with Victor's father, one that had a profound effect on who he was, and what his relationships to others—namely Victor—would be. Thomas has strived his whole life to care for Victor and for their community as a result of this encounter with Victor's father, but his efforts have gone largely unnoticed and unappreciated. This moment allows Victor to see his father in a different light, and to understand that he had a positive effect on the lives of others, even if his presence in Victor's life was unsteady at best.

Victor is quiet, and then confesses to Thomas that his father never told him that story. Thomas tells Victor that his father, not wanting Thomas to get in trouble, promised never to tell anyone, but that Thomas had to "watch out for [Victor] as part of the deal." Victor realizes that Thomas had deeper reasons for accompanying him to Phoenix. Together, the two of them climb into Victor's father's pickup truck and head to the bank, where they claim the three hundred dollars his father had left to his name.

The deeper revelation that Victor's father charged Thomas with caring for him explains to Victor, and to the readers, why Thomas was so insistent on shepherding Victor to Phoenix and taking care of him, emotionally and monetarily, throughout the trip.

Victor remembers a time when, as a child, Thomas jumped from the roof of the tribal school, flapped his arms, and "flew." "For a second," Victor remembers, "he hovered." When Thomas fell, he broke his arm in two places. The boys jeered at him, chanting, "He broke his wing, he broke his wing" and flapping their arms in mockery. Victor knew, he says, that "everybody has dreams about flying," and that the boys hated him because "one of his **dreams** came true for just a second, just enough to make it real."

Thomas's unique relationship to his visions and dreams made him the envy, and enemy, of many of his classmates. His ability to access a cultural rite of passage that has largely faded away separated him from the other children—and moreover, he realized a dream, something that may never come to pass for many children growing up on the reservation.

Victor's father's ashes don't quite fit in one box, so Victor divides them into two. Victor and Thomas carry the ashes to the pickup truck and settle in for the long drive home. Victor drives for upwards of sixteen hours, then pulls over and asks Thomas to drive. Their journey so far has been devoid of sights of water, animal life, or any "movement" at all. As soon as Thomas gets behind the wheel, the two see a jackrabbit on the side of the road. It jumps out into the road, and Thomas, unable to stop, hits it. The two decide that it had to be a "suicide," but that Victor should rive the rest of the way, anyway.

The jackrabbit appearing as soon as Thomas takes the wheel seems to indicate a deep connection he has to nature. However, this trope is quickly overturned when Thomas hits it with the truck.

Thomas recollects walking through the hallways of the tribal school all alone, day after day; "nobody wanted to be anywhere near him because of all [his] stories." He realizes, though, that "it doesn't matter as long as I continue to tell the stories," since they are all he has. He continues to tell his stories, "long after people stopped listening."

Thomas shouldered the burden of his storytelling gift at an early age, understanding the importance of the larger stories he had to tell in the face of the small slights of his everyday life telling them. Though his gift has isolated him, he still values it.

Victor and Thomas arrive back home at the reservation "just as the sun ris[es]." Victor stops his truck in front of Thomas's house, and the two of them "search for words to end the journey." Before Victor can thank Thomas for his help and offer to pay it back to him, Thomas tells him not to worry about it. Victor knows that Thomas will "remain the crazy story-teller who talked to dogs and cars," and that he will never "really be friends with Thomas, even after all that had happened." Thomas, as if reading Victor's mind, tells him that he knows things will stay the same between them. Victor, ashamed, wonders "whatever happened to the tribal ties," noting that "the only thing he share[s] with anybody [is] a bottle and broken dreams." Desperate, he offers Thomas one of the boxes of his father's ashes.

Victor and Thomas, both lonely and isolated, have found strength in each other over the course of their journey; however, Thomas knows that Victor's behavior won't change so easily, and, just as he has shouldered the burden of being the tribal storyteller, he preempts Victor's apology and offers to accept things as they are, as they have been, and as they will continue to be. Victor, though, contemplates the true role of community and the gradual loss of love, understanding, and selflessness that has affected the world around him.

Thomas accepts, and tells Victor that he will go back to the Spokane Falls and scatter the ashes there. He describes a **vision** he has of Victor's father "ris[ing] like a salmon, leap[ing] over the bridge, and find[ing] his way home." Before Victor drives away, Thomas asks him a favor. "Just one time," he says, "when I'm telling a story somewhere, why don't you stop and listen?" Victor agrees, and drives away. Thomas goes into his house, and "hear[s] a new story come to him in the silence."

The bargain Victor and Thomas ultimately strike is one that allows for each to emerge from this journey feeling known and seen. Though Thomas was charged with "taking care" of Victor, Victor's only responsibility is to listen and to bear witness to one of Thomas's stories.

THE FUN HOUSE

An unnamed narrator describes memories of his aunt. An accomplished seamstress, she made lavish buckskin outfits, and "once made a full-length beaded dress that was too heavy for anyone to wear." She described it as "the sword in the stone," joking that the woman who could bear the weight of the dress would be the one to save them all. One morning, sewing while her husband and son watch **television**, a mouse crawls up her pant leg. She struggles to get her pants off while her husband and son watch and laugh; the mouse runs down her leg and out the door.

The beaded dress functions as a kind of mythical object, requiring someone worthy as its wearer. The story's format is a very condensed hero's epic; it's an ode, of sorts, and it outlines the trials that life has thrown the narrator's aunt, as well as how she has overcome them.

Her husband and son continue to tease the aunt, and she tells them that they're "ungrateful," asking "where [they'd] be if [her] **fry bread** didn't fill [their] stomachs every night." Frustrated, she leaves the house, standing in the yard and staring at the sky. She wishes a falcon would scoop up the mouse, and that a pterodactyl would grab her husband and son. "*They'd make good bird feed*," she thinks.

Fry bread is invoked as a shorthand for nurturing and nourishing. This woman, the narrator's aunt, does so much for her son and husband that they don't even begin to see, and their ungratefulness pushes her to the edge of sanity.

In a flashback to thirty years previous, before the birth of her son, the narrator's aunt—named Nezzy—**drinks** and dances with her husband in an "Indian cowboy bar." On the way back home, Nezzy's husband, drunk, crashes their car. Nezzy crawls from the wreckage. A passing car stops to help her and her husband, and drives them to the tribal hospital. Her husband is concussed, and she sleeps on a cot beside his hospital bed, leaving the **television** on all night. Thirty years later, the narrator says, their hospital bill from that night has still not been paid.

In the wake of a perilous accident brought on by intoxication, Nezzy turns to television as a soothing mechanism. When the narrator steps in to reveal that Nezzy and her husband have never been able to pay their hospital bill, he demonstrates the cyclical poverty and isolation that contributes to his family's destitution and dysfunction.

After the mouse incident, the Nezzy walks to the bank of the Tshimikain Creek. She strips her clothes off and dives in; though she can't swim, the water is shallow. Her husband and son arrive at the creek, concerned, and urge her to get out. They eventually leave her. "Cook your own damn dinner," she shouts after them, and stays in the creek for hours. Every so often, her husband and son return to the creek to "plead with her" to come home. She chants at them: "'One dumb mouse tore apart the whole damn house,' like a reservation Mother Goose."

Nezzy takes radical action to make herself seen and heard by her husband and son, pointing out how difficult their lives would be without her there. Her repetition of the refrain about the mouse highlights the isolation she feels. Though she has her husband and son, she does not feel understood by them, and instead is trapped in the repetitious world of her own memories.

In a memory from the past, we see Nezzy delivering her son. After he arrives, "the doctor tie[s] her tubes, with the permission slip my aunt signed because the hospital administrator lied and said it proved her Indian status for the BIA."

The violence against Nezzy that takes place in the hospital after the birth of her son is both a personal and cultural tragedy, and it serves to further isolate her.

Nezzy, tired, exits the creek and walks back up the road toward home. Upon entering the house, she pulls on the heavy beaded dress; she falls under its weight. Her husband and son help her to her feet, and, after taking a couple of shaky steps, she begins to dance.

Nezzy dons the dress in what looks to her husband and son as a moment of failure, but she soon proves herself to be its rightful wearer—she can even dance beneath its weight.

ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS DANCE

Victor **drunkenly** dances with a Lakota woman at a bar in Montana. He is dancing with "the one hundredth Indian woman in the one hundred dancing days since the white woman he loved had left him." Victor loses sight of the woman, blacks out, and eventually wakes up in the backseat of a Grasshopper—a riding lawnmower—"heading back to Arlee." Victor says that "all [he] wanted to do was dance."

In the wake of a difficult breakup, the details of which are unknown at this point, Victor self-soothes through drinking, dancing, and flirting. He's attempting to mitigate his recent loss and to prevent memories of it from assaulting him, hoping that company and stimulation will drown out the past.

Victor experiences a memory or **vision** of his former girlfriend; she stands by a river, and she is "so white his reservation eyes suffer." She asks Victor if he has ever heard of **Crazy Horse**, and then she disappears. Victor, unable to sleep, watches the sun come up. He goes about his morning routine listlessly.

Again, a woman—this time, a white woman—prods Victor with the ideal of Crazy Horse. It is difficult for Victor to say whether he is experiencing a dream or a vision but, in his depressed state, it doesn't much seem to matter.

Victor becomes lost in memory, and experiences another recollection of his ex; in his memory, they are in bed together, and she describes a party she attended a few nights ago. "I could really get addicted to cocaine," she says, though confessing that she did not try any at the party.

In this memory we see Victor's ex-girlfriend testing out hypothetical versions of herself; cocaine, a drug associated with wealth and white privilege, allures her, but something holds her back from trying it.

Victor, having returned to the present moment, sips his morning coffee, and tells himself that he'll go running later that day. Instead, though, he turns on the **television**, and watches as a "pretty blond woman" delivers the local news. Suddenly overwhelmed by his **hangover** from the night before, he runs to the bathroom and throws up. He returns to the living room and continues drinking his black coffee. He remarks to himself that there is "nothing more hopeless than a sober Indian."

Victor uses the television as a distraction from the relentless memories of his ex; however, he is still confronted with her likeness, and his misery exacerbates his hangover. Victor is afraid to abandon alcohol not only due to the temporary relief it provides, but also because of the "hopelessness" that accompanies the uncertainty of a life without alcohol.

Victor remembers being eight or nine years old and "fancydancing in the same outfit his father wore as a child. The feathers," Victor says, "were genetic [and] the fringe was passed down like the curve of his face." In the memory Victor looks out into the crowd at the powwow and sees his mother and his father; they wave. Victor notes that they are both **drunk.** After the dance, Victor eats **fry bread** and drinks Pepsi. His parents fall asleep together, drunk, beneath a picnic table.

Just as Victor felt a "genetic pain" at the time of his father's death, he remembers a time when the inheritance his father gave him was a benign, even happy thing. The memory of community and witnessing his parents' love at the powwow highlights his present loneliness, and his isolation now stands in stark contrast to the safety he felt in that moment long ago.

In another memory of his past, Victor recalls being **drunk** on a night out with his white ex-girlfriend. She urges him to stop drinking, but he insists on one more beer again and again. At home, Victor is unable to sleep, and he cries, twists in bed, gets up, and punches the walls. In the morning, he pretends to sleep while his girlfriend readies herself for work, wondering when she will leave "for good."

Victor reflects on how alcohol contributed to the dissolution of his relationship. His alcohol abuse isolated him from his partner, and, though she loved him, caused her to imagine a version of her future free of the burden he represented.

In the present, Victor works odd jobs in order to make ends meet. On paydays, he stands in front of the **beer cooler** at the Trading Post, staring for hours at the bottles. Once, he remembers, he bought a case and "drove for miles with the bottles beside him on the seat," tossing them one by one out the window where they shattered on the road.

Victor tempts himself with alcohol, knowing that he should commit to sobriety, but unable to fully make the leap. Victor becomes destructive in his ambivalence, watching the bottles shatter again and again, just as his life seemingly has.

After another sleepless night, Victor counts his spare change, and takes it to buy a bottle of **wine** from the Trading Post. As Victor is about to take a drink, a stranger approaches and advises him to let the wine breathe. Victor offers him the first drink; the stranger accepts, and tells Victor that it's his birthday. Victor urges him to take another drink, and the stranger drinks "half the bottle with one swallow." The stranger returns the bottle to Victor, but Victor insists he keep it. Victor walks home, hoping that "tomorrow he['ll] be dancing."

The stranger represents a sort of deus ex machina ("god from the machine," or a miraculous savior who suddenly appears to fix things in the end)—Victor is about to surrender to his darker instincts, but the arrival of the stranger, and his consumption of Victor's bottle of wine, save Victor from himself this time. Victor looks toward the familiarity and comforts of dancing as a rescue from the isolation and fear of suddenly being sober.

THE TRIAL OF THOMAS BUILDS-THE-FIRE

Thomas Builds-the-Fire sits in a Spokane tribal holding cell while Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, in another room, "discuss his future, the immediate present, and of course, his past," and claim that Thomas has "a storytelling fetish accompanied by an extreme need to tell the truth." They classify him as "dangerous."

Storytelling, a major theme throughout the collection, is literally on trial here. Thomas, bearer of stories and visions, has been marked "dangerous" and is now profoundly isolated from his community.

We learn that Thomas has been silent for almost twenty years, and only recently has begun again to "make small noises that contain more emotion and meaning than entire sentences." His noises—one in particular—recently inspired Esther WalksAlong to leave her husband David, the tribal chairman. Thomas was arrested almost immediately after Esther left.

Though we don't know for sure what caused Thomas to take a 20-year vow of silence, it's clear that he still longs to communicate, and can't help still communicating with the people around him.

The BIA members discuss what charges should be brought against Thomas. Whatever they are, they must be "felony charge[s]." Meanwhile, Thomas sits alone in his cell, counting bugs and allowing stories and **visions** to wash over him. He looks out at the sky through the bars over his cell's window, and wonders how he will be punished.

The unfairness of Thomas's predicament echoes the unfairness of the persecution of Native people throughout the years. Without rhyme or reason, Thomas is being held against his will, and the worst possible charges are being levied against him in a vaguely surreal, Kafkaesque scene.

At Thomas's trial, the traveling judge tells Thomas that "the court must be certain" he understands the charges being leveled against him. Thomas claims that "the exact nature of any charges have [not] been revealed, let alone detailed." The judge attempts to trap Thomas and implicate him in his own guilt, then asks him to call his first witness. Thomas calls his "first and only witness": himself.

Thomas's serving as his own witness is in direct engagement with larger themes of witnessing and storytelling at work throughout the text; he is, he knows, the only one able to tell the truth of his own life, and, more than that, is the only person willing to stand up for himself.

Thomas mounts the witness stand, closes his eyes, and speaks. He begins to tell a story, and describes a **vision** of himself as a pony living in 1858. Colonel George Wright, he says, stole 800 ponies from the Spokane chief Til-co-ax, the chief's "entire wealth." Then, overwhelmed by their number and fear of a stampede, Wright killed all but a few. Thomas says that he was one of the ponies who'd been spared; he watched for hours as his brothers and sisters were executed one by one. Thomas details throwing several of the Colonel's men who attempted to ride him, and, eventually, tells of his escape.

Thomas's tale of loss, violence, and horror is just a glimpse of the enormous scale of atrocities against Native people over the centuries. Thomas connects to the past in a visceral manner, linking his pain with the past suffering of his people.

The judge asks Thomas if this story is "the extent of [his] testimony," and Thomas replies that "there are a so many more stories to tell." The judge allows Thomas to continue.

Thomas is unknowingly indicting himself. His stories are what his captors want to hear, as evidence that he is "dangerous."

Thomas describes himself as an Indian named Qualchan, an escapee from Colonel Wright's camp. Wright captures Qualchan's father and threatens to hang him, too. Qualchan returns to camp and is placed in chains. After putting up a fight, Qualchan is hanged beside six other Indians. The judge asks Thomas "what point" he is trying to make by telling this story. Thomas replies that "The City of Spokane is now building a golf course named after me, Qualchan, in that valley where I was hanged." The courtroom explodes in "motion and emotion," and the judge calls for order while the attendees of Thomas's trial fight each other. One woman shouts "Thomas, we're all listening, we hear you," again and again.

The cruel irony that the city of Spokane is building a golf course named after a hanged Indian warrior in the very valley where he met his death falls, at first, on deaf ears. The judge and jury seem unmoved, though the attendees of Thomas's trial recognize the horror of the injustices his visions have been attempting to underscore. All Thomas wants—has ever wanted—is to be heard, and now, though he's on trial for crimes he didn't commit, he finally has a captive audience.

The court is cleared and order is restored, and the judge calls for "administration of justice." He calls for Thomas's cross-examination, and the prosecuting attorney approaches Thomas. She asks him where he was on a date in 1858. He replies that he was an Indian named Wild Coyote, and was, at sixteen years old, about to head into his first battle. He describes a **vision** of a bloody battle, full of days of fighting. When the prosecutor asks Thomas how many soldiers he killed in the struggle, he admits to killing at least two soldiers before abandoning the fight. The prosecutor asks Thomas if he "murder[ed] two soldiers in cold blood and with premeditation," and Thomas admits his own guilt.

Thomas's stories are cautionary tales, of a sort, though they all take place in the distant past. The court uses his own good intentions against him, and enacts a kind of violence against him by indicting him for crimes he is forced to admit he committed, as he was inhabiting and participating in a vision of the past.

An article in a local newspaper describes Thomas's sentencing. "the self-proclaimed **visionary** of the Spokane Tribe," it says, "was sentenced today to two concurrent life terms in the Walla Walla State Penitentiary." The article also notes that Thomas's "many supporters battled with police for over eight hours following the verdict."

Thomas's cruel and unfair sentencing highlights the brokenness of his community and his profound isolation within it. Yet at the moment of his downfall it seems that he has finally found some true supporters on the reservation.

On the bus to the Walla Walla State Penitentiary, Thomas sits among "six other prisoners: four African men, one Chicano, and a white man from the smallest town in the state." The men have heard of Thomas's trial and his storytelling abilities, and ask him to share a story with them. Thomas realizes that all seven of them are headed off to "a new kind of reservation, barrio, ghetto, logging-town tin shack." He closes his eyes, and begins to tell the men a story.

Thomas has a new audience, and an eager one; it is the one small reprieve in an otherwise devastating, violent, isolating situation. Thomas's litany of various dwellings for the poor and oppressed throughout history then links present-day mass incarceration and the continued abuse of various groups to larger historical cycles of oppression and suffering.

DISTANCES

Thomas Builds-the-Fire describes a **vision** of the world in the aftermath of a cataclysmic event in which "most of the white men died and most of the Indians lived." He surmises that Custer is the culprit; "only Custer could have done something that backward," he says. The only other possible reason for the event's occurrence, he says, is that "maybe the Ghost Dance finally worked."

This imaginative, myth-building story—devised by or delivered to Thomas Builds-the-Fire—creates a universe in which the Native community is the sole remaining population of America. Themes of destruction, isolation, and imagination come to light as Thomas's story unfolds.

The Tribal Council, Thomas says, "has ruled that anything to do with the whites has to be destroyed." The nights are freezing, but the Indians, naked, burn down houses and everything in them. Thomas describes finding a small transistor radio in one house's closet, "hidden away under a pile of old quilts." Thomas longs to turn it on, but is afraid of what he might hear.

The violence, pain, and isolation that occur in this version of reality, despite the absence of white abusers and aggressors, is palpable. Thomas envisions himself as a member of this new world, and seems paralyzed by fear and longing.

Thomas loves an Indian woman named Tremble Dancer—she is, he says, one of "the Urbans," or city Indians who survived the event and found their way to the reservation after the cities fell. There are only about a "dozen" Urbans left, Thomas says, and they are all ill. Tremble Dancer is not sick, he says, but her legs are covered in burns and scars. "Skins," Thomas says, or Indians who lived on the reservation already at the time of the event, are not permitted to marry Urbans because they are stricken by a "sickness."

The divisions between the Native community, even though they are the only remaining population in the Americas, are deep and disorienting. Rather than creating a stronger sense of community, Skins and Urbans alike experience extreme isolation and deep, unshakable cultural pain.

Thomas repeatedly "dream[s] about **television** [and wakes] up crying."

The escapism that television represents is thwarted by the absence of technology.

The weather, Thomas says, is changing. The nights are cold and the days are hot. Dead bodies are burned; The Tribal Council believes that those who fall ill have become victims of "a white man's disease."

The land and atmosphere are hostile and changeable. Illness is punished by isolating, stigmatizing rhetoric, and the loss of life throughout the community only continues.

Thomas describes his affair with Tremble Dancer. They meet in secret to "climb the branches of tree[s] and hold each other." Tremble Dancer tells Thomas that "[her] legs are leaving [her,]" and that the rest of her is soon to follow. She tells Thomas that she is "jealous" of his healthy body.

If readers apply this world as an allegory to the world of the rest of the collection, Tremble Dancer might represent the weakness and vulnerability that accompany leaving the reservation, something we see Junior and Victor struggle to do.

During the burning of another house, Thomas finds a painting of Jesus Christ. "Jesus is white," Thomas says. During the burning, Thomas can see "every color but white."

Whiteness is reviled and hastily covered up in this new world—but it still retains its power as an antagonistic and oppressive force.

At night, Thomas says, he can "hear the horses exploding [and] the screams of children who are taken." He describes the presence of "The Others," Indians who have "come from a thousand years ago with arrow, bow, stone ax, large hands." Sometimes The Others bring food and water, but often they are violent, and kill dissenters. One of the Others—presumably their leader—impregnates Tremble Dancer. She gives birth to "flopp[ing] salmon," and shorty thereafter she dies.

The Others represent the vengeance of the past, and the memories contained within it. Once they resurge, they destroy the present—including Tremble Dancer, already weakened by the "white man's disease" she brought from her old home in the city.

At a Tribal Council meeting, an Indian man named Judas offers a watch he found to the tribal chairman, who describes it as "a white man artifact; a sin." Thomas remembers watches—bygones, now—and how "they measured time exactly, coldly."

Thomas lives in a world, now, that exists outside of time. Offerings of "white man['s] artifact[s]" are made as a way to celebrate the destruction of the past.

Thomas holds the transistor radio in his hands, examining its perfect surface. He turns the radio on and cranks up the volume "until all [he can] hear [is] the in and out of [his] breath."

The allure of the "artifact" of the transistor radio offers Thomas a retreat into memory, an escape similar to the one television offers, and a remembrance of community.

JESUS CHRIST'S HALF-BROTHER IS ALIVE AND WELL ON THE SPOKANE INDIAN RESERVATION

In the winter of 1966, Rosemary MorningDove gives birth to a baby boy, despite insisting that she is still a virgin. A man named Frank Many Horses claims that the child is his. The baby comes out blue, and has trouble breathing, but soon stabilizes. Rosemary gives him a name "which is unpronounceable in Indian and English but means *He Who Crawls Silently Through the Grass with a Small Bow and One Bad Arrow Hunting for Enough Deer to Feed the Whole Tribe.*" Everyone calls the baby James.

James's given name, though deployed with a humorous effect by Alexie, actually foretells James's path in life. This story, which is rife with symbolism and gaps between the real and unreal, the imagined and the factual, will see James through his childhood, as he matures into a young boy who may or may not possess deep spiritual and practical knowledge of the world around him.

In 1967, the (unnamed) narrator is in a bar **drinking** with Frank Many Horses and another friend, Lester FallsApart. The three of them hear sirens approaching, and go to the fire station in hope of getting paid to put the fire out. They see smoke coming from Commodity Village, "where all the really poor Indians live." They run over and find that Rosemary MorningDove's house is on fire. Frank rushes into the house, and, minutes later, throws James, who is "a little on fire," out the window. The narrator runs to catch James, who slips through his fingers and hits the ground. The narrator puts the flames out, relieved to find that James is alive, though "the top of his head looks all dented in like a beer can." The narrator notes that the baby James is not crying at all.

Though we don't know what started the fire that takes Rosemary's house—and, eventually, her life—it's clear that James, tossed out a window into the unknown, has faced some degree of neglect. The miracle of James's surviving the enormous fall, which the narrator does not entirely break, sets in motion the events, happenings, blessings, and losses of James's childhood.

After getting drunk, the narrator goes to the reservation hospital to visit James, Frank, and Rosemary. When he arrives, Moses MorningDove, Rosemary's father, tells him that Frank and Rosemary have died. Moses insists that since the narrator saved James, he should be the one to raise him. Moses tells the narrator that it's an Indian tradition, but the narrator believes that Moses is "trying to get out of his grandfatherly duties [since he is] going on about two hundred years old and still drinking and screwing like he['s] twenty." Though the narrator is only twenty himself, he agrees, and he takes James home with him.

Because of the sudden and violent way in which he was orphaned, the way James is foisted upon the shocked narrator can't really be contested. Tradition and community will have a part in the way James is raised, though he and the narrator are both, at the moment, isolated figures. This development—the narrator's unexpected and quickly-assumed custody of James—falls in line with the symbolic, surreal atmosphere of this story.

One night some time later, James can't sleep, and stares at the ceiling without crying. The narrator takes James to the football field and sets him down on the fifty yard line, wanting to "walk circles around James in a new dance and a better kind of healing which could make James talk and walk."

The narrator wants a companion in James, and worries almost incessantly about his safety, security, and about how he will develop in the wake of his fall.

A year later, in 1968, the narrator's **television** has exploded and left a hole in the wall, and he hasn't replaced it. The narrator **shoots hoops** in the cold while James waits silently by the porch. The narrator believes that James is getting closer and closer to speaking, and is amazed by the care he requires. The narrator describes the ritualistic nature of childcare as his "religion."

The "exploded" television represents a lack of escape or diversion from the narrator's present circumstances. He tries to find time for himself through playing basketball, but the "religious" care with which he must attend to James is the focus of his life now.

Later that same year, James is already sitting up in his chair, but still does not talk. The narrator, though, says he sees "in his eyes a whole new set of words [that] ain't Indian or English."

Just as James's given name is unpronounceable in "Indian" and English, the narrator believes that he might begin to communicate in a way that will transcend language.

The narrator believes that James, who hasn't cried once yet, is "waiting for that one moment to cry like it was five hundred years of tears." The season has changed, and the narrator plays **basketball** in the heat while James watches from the shade on the side of the basketball court. At home, the narrator "hold[s] James with one arm and [his] basketball with the other and [holds] everything else inside [his] body."

The narrator clings to basketball as a way to imagine another life for himself (as was the case with Julius in the earlier story). James has been foisted upon him, and the narrator is finding it increasingly difficult to "hold everything."

In 1969, the narrator takes James to the clinic because he still hasn't cried though he's "a few years old." Afterward, the narrator goes out **drinking** "all night long," while James is passed around from one of the narrator's friends to another. The narrator loses track of the baby, and, the next morning, stumbles home to find one of his friends caring for James.

The narrator begins to lose his grip on things. His guardianship of James comes second to escaping, not through television or basketball, but through alcohol abuse, and James's well-being—sacred though the narrator has claimed it to be—is put at risk.

Some months later, James still doesn't speak, but kicks violently while **dreaming**. The narrator breaks his leg playing **basketball**, but is unable to afford an operation. At the hospital, doctors inquire about James; they say that he is "slow", but that that is "normal for an Indian child."

The narrator and James experience pain and isolation together. We also see another glimpse of the casual, nearly-constant racism of the world outside the reservation.

In 1970, the narrator and James sit home by the stove, since the narrator "can't walk anywhere." James is almost five years old and "still [hasn't] bothered to talk or crawl or cry." The narrator takes James to the hospital, but the doctors say he's "just a little slow." The narrator wants for James to "change the world; to dynamite Mount Rushmore or hijack a plane [or] make gold out of commodity cheese."

James's isolation within himself mirrors the narrator's sense of isolation at being sidelined by a physical injury. The narrator still believes that James possesses some kind of miracle within him, ignoring the doctors who examine and dismiss him.

On James's birthday, the narrator watches the Vietnam War on **television** in a local bar. He goes to a Christmas party and leaves James with a relative "so [he] can get really **drunk**." The narrator plays **basketball** despite his bad knee, and worries that James will stay "like a baby because he doesn't want to grow up and see and do everything [adults] do."

The narrator continues to try to escape his life through television, alcohol, and basketball, though he knows he should avoid the latter two, and hopes all the while that James will not have to deal with the circumstances the narrator himself is currently facing.

Months later, the narrator leaves James at "somebody's" house while he gets drunk, and the police arrest him for abandonment. The narrator lies in jail, drunk and experiencing **visions** of snakes, Nazis, the KKK, and **TV** dinners.

The narrator's arrival at rock bottom is accompanied by visions of frightful things, signaling his deep pain, isolation, and feelings of guilt and loss.

A month later, the narrator attends AA meetings and now lives with his aunt and his friend Suzy, "to make sure [he] doesn't drink and to help take care of James."

The narrator, after enduring horrible isolation, seeks out a sense of community and a way to repair the losses he's suffered.

In 1972, the narrator has "been sober so long it's like a dream." He and his aunt take James into the city for a checkup, since he still isn't talking.

James's ongoing silence mirrors the narrator's struggle to reach his own potential.

The narrator prays each day not to **drink** but doesn't know "who [he's] praying to, and if it's the **basketball** gathering ash on the shelf or the **television**." Sometimes the narrator wants to drink "so bad that it aches and [he] cries," though James, for his part, still refuses to cry.

The narrator here admits his worship of basketball and television. James's refusal or inability to cry stands in stark contrast to the narrator's uncontainable pain.

In 1973, James finally talks, but the narrator isn't entirely sure that it was "real." He believes James said "potato," but thinks that "maybe he said I love you or college **basketball**." He takes James to the doctor, and the doctor tells the narrator that he has "a very good imagination."

As the narrator heals, James begins to speak, though it's not entirely clear whether this is part of the narrator's imagination.

The narrator **shoots hoops** with some younger Indian boys and girls. When he plays, he says, he doesn't feel like **drinking**. James watches him play. The narrator says that James "always talks whenever [he's] not in the room or never when anybody else might hear." James, the narrator says, "says things [he] can't believe"; things about the universe, humanity, and how "everything is a matter of perception."

The narrator still clings to methods of escape and diversion from his everyday life, and now seems to have yet another escape: his "conversations" with James, which reveal the child's incredible (and even supernatural, or else hallucinatory) maturity, as well as a sense of grandeur, wonder, and wisdom.

On Christmas Day, James speaks clearly directly to the narrator, seemingly revealing a series of **visions**. "He says the world hurts. He says the first thing he wanted after he was born was a shot of **whiskey**. He says that we should be living for each other."

James is a vessel, it seems, for the narrator's sense of understanding about himself. James is attuned to the pain, both personal and cultural, that the narrator has shouldered all his life.

In 1974, the narrator takes James to the World's Fair in Spokane. James speaks to the crowds at the fair; he tells them "the earth is our grandmother and that technology has become our mother and that they both hate each other." The narrator experiences a **vision** of the future, in which James washes his old, sick body, and cares for him by "teach[ing] him something new everyday." The narrator remarks, though, that "all that is so far ahead."

The narrator's reconciliation of his uncertain future with the enormity of his present comes through James. James's wisdom and ability to "teach" the narrator about himself, his pain, and the pain of the world around them allow the narrator, finally, to have a respite from his isolation and to begin to pick up the pieces of his life. The fact that James is speaking to other people now suggests that the narrator wasn't hallucinating or imagining his earlier speech, but the story still ends on a surreal note.

A TRAIN IS AN ORDER OF OCCURRENCE DESIGNED TO LEAD TO SOME RESULT

On the morning of his birthday, Samuel Builds-the-Fire—grandfather to Thomas, and a **visionary** storyteller himself—dresses and readies for work. He is a maid at a motel in Spokane. He makes very little money, but takes pride in his work. Though his walk from his apartment to the motel only takes five minutes, he leaves home half an hour early. He has not received any cards or letters from his children, who are scattered all over the country, and though he is "hurt some, he [understands] that his children [are] busy, busy, busy." When Samuel arrives at work, his manager pulls him aside to the back office, where he lets him go from his job. Samuel takes his severance check and leaves.

Samuel is an innocent; he takes great pride in his middling job, he makes excuses for his selfish children, and he shoulders every slight with acceptance and understanding. Despite being an older man, his naïveté is remarkable, and provides a setup for Samuel's indoctrination into the ways of the world.

Samuel heads to the Midway Tavern, where he knows "all the Indians **drink** in eight-hour shifts." Samuel considers the idea that God is just the planet's maid. Samuel has never been fired and has never been in a bar or had a drink of alcohol. He sits down in the bar and asks for a menu. The bartender, laughing, serves him a beer. Samuel takes a drink, and thinks: "I understand everything."

Samuel, though aware of the effects that alcohol can have, puts himself in the line of fire anyway, and succumbs to the alluring escape from his problems that alcohol offers. What he "understands" is left unclear, but it its perhaps the brief consolation from general misery that so many Native people have found in alcohol.

Samuel reveals that he never drank for fear it would "corrupt his stories," which he used as a way to "make [the] worlds" of his friends, children, and grandchildren "into something better." Now, though, his children have left him alone, and all of his friends have died. No one has time for his stories and **visions** anymore.

Samuel clung for so long to the power his stories held. Now, in the throes of the pain, isolation, and loss that the dissolution of his power as a storyteller has brought on, he surrenders to vice, unable to believe any longer in the value of his stories.

Samuel stays in the bar until closing time. Then he staggers through Spokane, **drunk** and alone, and falls "face down" onto the Union Pacific Railroad tracks. He can hear a train's whistle approach and feel the tracks vibrate beneath him. Samuel closes his eyes, "pretending to be asleep."

Samuel, with nothing, he feels, left to live for, puts himself in the path of an oncoming train and does nothing to move or escape. The railroad again calls back to historical and cultural suffering, as it was an early marker of white expansion into and "development" of Native lands.

A GOOD STORY

The narrator, Junior—perhaps Junior Polatkin, but, as Victor once pointed out, "everybody" on the reservation is called Junior—pretends to sleep on the sofa while his mother quilts. Junior's mother tells him that his stories are too sad. She points out that nobody in real life cries as much as the people in her son's stories; he says that "nobody laughs as much, either." Junior's mother tells him that he should "write a story about something good, because people should know that good things happen to Indians too." Junior offers to tell his mother a good story, if she will listen.

This story is a meta-narrative in which Alexie seems, through Junior's mother, to be pointing out the heaviness of the themes that run throughout his own stories. She implores her son to highlight the positive aspects of the Native American experience, and to ensure that "people know" the full spectrum of the lives Native people lead.

Junior begins to tell his story, about a man named Uncle Moses—perhaps Moses Morningdove. Moses sits in a chair eating a sandwich, humming a pleasant song. He is on the porch "in front of the house he built himself fifty years before," a house that "would stand years after Moses died, held up by tribal imagination."

The interconnectedness of Alexie's characters is highlighted by the introduction of Uncle Moses, as is the power and importance of tribal imagination.

Moses watches as a boy named Arnold runs across the field toward his house. Arnold is pale and large, and, though teased by the other children, is "the best **basketball** player in the reservation grade school." Moses thinks of the words "We are all given something to compensate for what we have lost." Moses greets Arnold as he approaches his porch, and Arnold reveals that he did not accompany the rest of his class on a field trip to Spokane in order to spend time with Moses. Arnold asks Moses to tell him a story, and Moses "sits down in the story chair and [tells] this very story."

Arnold, who may or may not be Victor's uncle, is, similar to Julius, Victor, and Lucy: a beacon of hope as a basketball star. While Moses contemplates loss, Arnold's arrival and the revelation that he skipped a fun trip in order to spend time with Moses and hear one of his stories signals a hopeful sense of community and devotion to storytelling and imagination.

Junior's mother hums a song and continues sewing. Junior asks her if she liked the story; in reply, she sings " a little louder." Junior considers the impending change in the weather, but decides that it is "in the future," and that "today [he] will drink what [he] has, eat what is left in the cupboard, while [his] mother finishes her quilt. Believe me," Junior says, "there is just barely enough goodness in all of this."

The importance of appreciating the gifts of the present, and of seizing upon moments of goodness in the face of such frequent, devastating loss, is underscored in the story's final passages.

THE FIRST ANNUAL ALL-INDIAN HORSESHOE PITCH AND BARBECUE

An unnamed narrator describes the events of The First Annual All-Indian Horseshoe pitch and barbecue. Somebody has forgotten the charcoal; Victor brings a secondhand piano and plays Bartok; the narrator and his "love" hold each other beneath a picnic table. "There is something beautiful," he says, "about an ordinary carnival." One man, Simon, wins the horseshoe pitch, the storytelling contest, and the one-on-one **basketball** tournament. He suggests that basketball should become the tribe's "new religion." All across the carnival, **dreams**, the narrator says, "crackle like campfire, put on a good jacket that smells of **fry bread**, [and] stay up late and talk stories."

Continuing in the vein of "A Good Story," this short narrative describes a "beautiful" and "ordinary" day at a carnival, a celebration of community, culture, and love. Symbolism is rife throughout the story—there is a basketball game, everywhere there is the comforting smell of fry bread, and dreams are personified, given weight and value.

IMAGINING THE RESERVATION

An unnamed narrator asks us to "imagine **Crazy Horse** invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C.; Imagine Columbus landed in 1492 and some tribe or another drowned him in the ocean." He wonders if such an event would have saved Indians from strife, pain, poverty, violence, and crime.

The story's title gives readers a way into the fragmented narrative of this story, in which vignettes (small scenes) showing imagination's importance in reservation life will be explored. Alexie demonstrates the necessity of imagination in the face of violence and cultural pain.

The narrator describes working the graveyard shift in a Seattle 7-11, "until one night a man locked [him] in the cooler and stole all the money [and] pulled the **basketball** shoes off [his] feet." Survival, the narrator says, is an equation; "Survival = Anger x Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation."

Imagination is not just a tool, Alexie's narrator posits, but a weapon. The narrator's basketball shoes symbolize his connection to an imagined version of his life; a life in which he is not working at 7-11, but has achieved success and status.

The narrator tells of an Indian child he and his friend "took to the bar" in order to "read futures by touching hands." The child told the narrator's friends and tribesmen of **visions** of missing relatives, and instructed the narrator to "break every mirror in [his] house and tape the pieces to [his] body." The narrator, upon returning home, does so, and when the child sees him, he laughs and laughs.

The visionary child—which may or may not be James Many Horses—encourages the narrator, after securing his trust through relating a series of visions, to literally destroy and make anew a reflection of himself. The reflection is, apparently, not good enough, and inspires the child's amusement.

The narrator wonders if "every Indian depend[s] on Hollywood for a twentieth-century **vision**." He remembers watching The Tonight Show on **television** with his sisters, eating potatoes with food coloring and dreaming of "the food [they] wanted most." "Imagination," the narrator says, "is the politics of dreams," and he imagines "a story that puts wood on the fireplace."

The narrator wishes stories could be good enough; could "put wood on the fireplace," so to speak. We've seen how stories and their power fall short, or go unrecognized, in the tales of Samuel and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and the ways in which they are good enough; in "A Good Story."

THE APPROXIMATE SIZE OF MY FAVORITE TUMOR

James Many Horses argues with his wife, Norma. He attempts to leave and drive off in a mixture of "victory and defeat," but forgets his car keys. He re-enters their home and jokes that he is home from the wars. His wife ignores him and pulls on a pair of cowboy boots. She tells him she is going dancing, and she takes the car out. James eats a lonely dinner, then gets dressed and hitchhikes down the tribal highway to the Powwow Tavern. A man named Simon gives him a ride, and asks why he's fighting with his wife. James replies that he "told her [he has] cancer everywhere inside." When he started joking about dying, his wife became enraged. James tells Simon that his "favorite" tumor is the size of a baseball, and that, upon seeing it, he asked his wife to call him Babe Ruth.

In this story, we see James Many Horses—the prophetic child orphaned in a fire—as an adult. However, he seems very different from the vaguely supernatural prodigy he supposedly was in his youth. He is now a man who mostly prides himself on his quick wit, and continually gets in trouble with his wife for his constant joking, even in the midst of dire situations. His advanced-stage cancer diagnosis is something he's chosen to make light of, rather than succumbing to pain, anger, isolation, or feelings of unstoppable loss; however, his wife, the stubborn and sensitive Norma, is not at all on the same page.

At the Tavern, James finds Norma. The two reconcile, and Norma tells him that if he "say[s] anything funny ever again," she will leave him. James takes her hand and tells a joke. Norma stands up and leaves him.

James tests the boundaries of his relationship with Norma and finds himself alone. Norma, fierce and in pain, torn between love and hatred, leaves James on the spot.

James recalls meeting Norma for the first time at the Powwow Tavern. The two connected instantly, and, after the tavern closed, they went back to James's house where they watched **television** and "kissed until the [TV] broke into white noise." After a while, James offered to take her home. She replied that she "thought [she] was at home," and, according to James, "lived there until the day [he] told her [he] had terminal cancer."

James and Norma connected deeply and instantly. Their first date in front of the television symbolizes their relationship's power to provide them each with imagination and escape. When the television fades to white noise, its interruption has no effect on them, symbolizing their ability to love each other in a grounded, present way.

James remembers his and Norma's wedding. One of his cousins, "**drunk** as a skunk," stood up in the middle of the ceremony and began to eulogize James, confusing the event for a funeral. James's cousin eventually passed out on the altar, and James and Norma "were married with his body draped unceremoniously over [their] feet."

Their relationship has always been framed by humor, and by laughing in the face of darkness or loss. James is perhaps recalling this anecdote out of an inability to understand why Norma has left him in the face of his joking.

Three months after Norma leaves him, James receives radiation treatments in a hospital in Spokane. The treatments are useless, and James's doctor tells him that he's still dying.

James is in pain, and is alone and isolated; no one but his doctor is there for him.

James remembers a specific day—January 22nd—when Norma, "the world champion **fry bread** maker," made her best fry bread ever. Shortly after their meal, the phone rang with news that Norma's mother had passed away. After receiving the news, James told the person on the other end "Thank you;" through tears, he and Norma laughed about the ridiculousness of the situation. Though Norma told James to stop laughing, he didn't—"then or now." Laughter, James says, "saved Norma and [him] from pain." Once, on their way to a movie and dinner in Spokane, James and Norma were pulled over by a bad cop, who threatened them and stole their money. Norma, James said, joined him in helping to bring humor into the horrible situation.

Again, we see two instances in which James's humor—and Norma's willingness to play along and participate in it—brought levity and light into painful, violent, isolating situations within their marriage and life in general. James's humor acts in a similar (but healthier) way that alcohol does for many of the other characters—it's a method of dealing with the often brutal and depressing realities of life.

Back in the present, James receives postcards from Norma as she travels to powwows all over the country. The hospital releases him to the "comfort" of his home, unable to do anything else to save him. Norma finally returns. She jokes with James, and reveals that she's been living with a "cousin" in Arlee. James asks if she means "cousin as in cousin, or cousin as in I-was-fucking-him-but-don't-want-to-tell-you-because-you're-dying?" Norma confesses that he was "more of that second kind of cousin." James says that "nothing ever hurt more. Not even [the] tumors the size of baseballs." James asks Norma why she returned. She tells James that her lover was "so fucking serious about everything," and that "someone needs to help [James] die the right way."

Norma's betrayal hurts James, but her return to him in the face of his death is welcome. Norma provides James with safety, security, and love; she arrives, in the end, to bear witness to his death, to ease his pain, and to provide him with love, community, and a wealth of shared stories, memories, and experiences.

INDIAN EDUCATION

In the first grade, Junior Polatkin, who narrates this story, is bullied, beat up, and called names: Junior Falls Down, Junior Bloody Nose, Junior Cries-Like-a-White-Boy. One day, though, Junior fights back; the "little warrior" inside of him comes to life, and he chants "'It's a good day to die' all the way down to the principal's office."

Junior is subjected to physical and emotional violence at the hands of his classmates, and eventually reaches his breaking point. He calls upon his inner "warrior," who represents fearlessness, strength, and initiative.

In second grade, Junior is subjected to hatred and cruelty at the hands of Betty Towle, a white missionary teacher who forces Junior to skip recess, to apologize for "everything" though he's done nothing wrong, and to hold heavy books in his outstretched arms. She gives Junior more difficult spelling tests and, when he passes them, she forces him to eat the paper. She repeatedly calls Junior "Indian" in a pejorative way—"without capitalization"—and Junior replies, "Yes, I am. I am Indian. Indian, I am."

Junior here encounters a very different type of cruelty from that of his grade-school classmates; he learns firsthand the debilitating, painful experience of being discriminated against because of his race and his heritage. Junior learns, though, to declare himself an Indian with pride, and to defy the cruel Betty and her attempts to isolate and wound him.

In the third grade, Junior is caught drawing a "stick Indian taking a piss," and the art is confiscated. He is sent to stand alone in the corner, and he "faces the wall and [waits] for the punishment to end." Junior notes, in the present, that he is "still waiting."

The "punishment" Junior is eternally waiting out might be cultural pain, isolation, or discrimination—or a combination of all three.

One of Junior's fourth-grade teachers tells him he should be a doctor, "so [he] can heal people." Junior recalls that fourth grade was "the year [his] father drank a gallon of **vodka** a day and the same year [his] mother started two hundred quilts but never finished any." Junior returns home after school and hears his parents crying in separate rooms. He imagines himself as a doctor and plays in the mirror alone.

The opportunities that Junior's teachers encourage him to pursue seem impossibly far away; nonetheless, he engages with his imagination, creating a vision of his future in which others' hopes for him are possible.

In fifth grade, Junior plays **basketball** "for the first time." He misses his first shot, but the ball in his hands feels "beautiful" and full of "possibilities." Meanwhile, Junior's cousin "sniff[s] rubber cement from a paper bag." Junior, in the present, ruminates on the "sweet, almost innocent choices Indian boys [are] forced to make."

Here we see the different routes of escape that Junior and his cousins experiment with. Junior attempts to find an outlet through basketball, while his friends, at an early age, abuse substances.

In the sixth grade, a new Indian kid from a white neighborhood comes to school. His name is Randy and, within an hour of walking into the reservation school, he gets in a fight and breaks another kid's nose. Junior says that Randy was his "soon-to-be first and best friend," who taught him "the most valuable lesson about living in the white world: 'Always throw the first punch.'"

As we'll later see, Junior's forays into the world beyond the reservation prove difficult and trying. Here, we see him reflecting upon an important piece of knowledge about life off the reservation, one that he learned early on—and one that he may or may not have put to good use.

In seventh grade, Junior kisses a white girl, and feels he is saying "good-byes to [his] entire tribe." When he opens his eyes, he says, he experiences a **vision** in which "she was gone from the reservation, and I was gone from the reservation, living in a farm town where a beautiful white girl asked [my] name." He answers her, and "after that, no one spoke to [him] for another five hundred years."

Again, the pull Junior feels toward a life away from the reservation rears its head much more clearly in his memories. He experiences feelings—premonitions and recollections alike—of isolation and separation from his community in the name of love, escape, and pursuit of a brand-new future.

In eighth grade, Junior transfers to a junior high school in a white farm town. From the boys' bathroom, he can hear white girls forcing themselves to vomit in the girls' bathroom next door. The sound, Junior says, is familiar "after years of listening to [his] father's **hangovers**." On the reservation, Junior stands in line for food with his mother, "happy to have food even the dogs wouldn't eat." Junior notes that "there is more than one way to starve."

The problems Junior's classmates face in his "white farm town" school are very different problems than the dire issues of poverty, loss, and pain that his family and friends on the reservation face. Here Junior struggles to reconcile the validity of both struggles, and both kinds of "starving."

In ninth grade, Junior plays a long, tiring **basketball** game in an overheated gym. Later that night, there is a dance held in that same gym, and Junior passes out at it. His friends "revive" him, and he reveals that later that night "doctors would diagnose [him with] diabetes." Meanwhile, though, a Chicano teacher approaches Junior and asks him what he's been **drinking**. "Indian kids," the teacher says, "start drinking real young." Junior learns that "sharing dark skin doesn't make two men brothers."

Again, Junior faces racism, emotional violence, and isolation at the hands of a figure who is supposed to be supporting and looking out for him. Junior, having hoped for a sense of community with this teacher, instead experiences profound isolation and disappointment.

In tenth grade, Junior gets his driver's license on the same day that one of his neighbors commits suicide by driving his car into a tree. "Everything looks like a noose if you stare at it long enough," Junior says.

Junior views this coincidence as a reminder that the things that once seemed to provide freedom can eventually prove isolating or entrapping.

The morning after losing a **basketball** game for his eleventh-grade team, the Indians, Junior reads the sports page of the local newspaper: "INDIANS LOSE AGAIN," it says.

Loss calibrates Junior's life, and the life of so many on the reservation. Indians, in Alexie's portrayal, are perpetually "losing again."

Junior graduates from twelfth grade as valedictorian of his "farm town high school," and has trouble fitting his graduation cap over his hair, which is "longer than it's ever been." While people take photographs of him he looks toward the future. Back on the reservation, Junior **imagines** his former classmates' graduation: he imagines them "look[ing] back toward tradition." The tribal newspaper "runs [his] photograph and the photograph of [his] former classmates side by side."

Bearing witness and imagination are both key in this passage. Junior is able to look toward the future because of his decision to isolate himself from his community; however, the reservation community remains, in its way, isolated and stagnant. Both paths, in Alexie's estimation, are fraught in their own way.

THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO FISTFIGHT IN HEAVEN

In the middle of the night, unable to sleep, Victor, again the narrator, walks through the streets of Spokane. He heads for the 7-11 to get a Creamsicle, and "the company of a graveyard-shift cashier." He remembers his own time working at a 7-11 in Seattle, where he was robbed and locked in the cooler. When Victor enters the 7-11, the cashier greets him, and gives him a long look, "so he could describe [Victor] to the police." Victor says the look is a familiar one. "One of [his] old girlfriends said [he] started to look at her that way, too, not long [before] she left [him.] When one person starts to look at another like a criminal," Victor says, "the love is over."

Victor is living away from the reservation, plagued by insomnia and memories of a failed relationship. He exists not in the realm of imagination and vision, as he has in other stories, but of memory and recollection. Themes of community versus isolation and love versus hatred dominate this story, which more or less rounds out Victor's arc throughout the text (and gives the book its title), as Alexie explores some large and explosive emotions through his character.

Victor reminisces about his ex, a white woman he used to live with in Seattle. They fought terribly and often and, in the wake of their fights, Victor would get into his car and drive aimlessly. He started taking the late night shifts at 7-11, he says, to spend as little time with her as possible.

Victor's restlessness and ambivalence are at the forefront of much of his decision-making in his memories of his time in Seattle. He feels isolated and full of pain, and longs for an escape.

Victor takes a Creamsicle from the refrigerator. He can tell that the clerk is nervous to have him in the store. When Victor approaches the counter to pay for his ice cream, the clerk makes some nervous small talk. Victor thinks he seems lonely. Victor baits the clerk a little bit, trying to increase his nervousness, but then he lets him off the hook with a joke. The clerk gives Victor the Creamsicle for free, and Victor leaves. He walks home and lets the Creamsicle melt in his hands, trying to act "as young as [he] want[s]. There [is] no one around to ask [him] to grow up."

The 7-11 clerk treats Victor suspiciously, judging him entirely by the color of his skin. However, Victor knows that the two of them are more alike than it seems—he remembers his own time as a 7-11 clerk, and he is eventually able to connect (somewhat) with an individual who was attempting to judge and isolate him. Victor then tries to find solace in a vague escape back to childhood.

Victor flashes back to Seattle, where, during intense fights with his ex, he "broke lamps." His ex-girlfriend would replace the lamps when the fights were still new and infrequent, but eventually she gave up, and the two of them, Victor says, would "argue in the dark." The two never hurt each other physically, Victor says, but their fights proved "just as damaging" as if they had. They insulted each other often; Victor teased her about her job as a kindergarten teacher, and she berated his **drinking**. Victor began having disturbing **dreams**, and often saw himself as a doomed war chief, or witnessed horrible acts of violence perpetrated by whites against Indians and Indians against whites. After one particularly awful dream, Victor left in the middle of the night. As he did, his ex told him that she loved him, and that she never wanted him to come back. Victor returned home to the Spokane Indian Reservation.

The repetitive lamp-breaking, though a frightening, violent, and very real act, is nonetheless symbolic of a continual dimming of understanding and truth in the relationship, until both are "in the dark." Victor is a character often very attuned to and sometimes ruled by dream logic, and here we see how his dreams affected a major decision in his life—to return to the Spokane reservation of his youth and escape a violent, difficult, isolating situation.

Victor finishes his Creamsicle and arrives home. He is still unable to sleep, so he picks up an old newspaper and reads about war, bombings, and crime.

Victor is unable to sleep because of disturbing dreams, both in the past and present; his reality is no less full of violence and loss.

When Victor arrived home on the reservation after leaving his girlfriend, his family was unsurprised by his return. Listless and sad, he did little at first but watch **television**. When he got tired of watching TV so much, he started playing **basketball** again, shooting hoops alone. After a few weeks of solo practice, he joined a game at the gym, where he was beaten by a white man. The next day, Victor drove to Spokane to get a job, and has been working at the high school exchange program "ever since." One day, a few months after he started the job, his ex-girlfriend called. He told her he'd been sober for almost a year, and apologized for all that happened between the two of them.

Victor, home and still suffering from pain and isolation, sought escape through television and basketball. He eventually realized more tenable escapes, such as obtaining a rewarding job, becoming sober, and even attempting to amend a broken relationship.

In the present, Victor wishes he lives "closer to the river, to the falls where ghosts of salmon jump." A chronic insomniac, Victor wishes he could sleep, but accepts his condition. "I know how all my **dreams** end anyway," he says.

Victor recalls Thomas's vision of his father's ghost in the Spokane falls as he explains that his place in life will stay the same. He feels like any attempt to change will end the same way his relationship in Seattle did: in failure.

FAMILY PORTRAIT

An unnamed narrator recalls his childhood; the first thing he remembers is that "the **television** was always too loud." He mishears the words he can hear coming out of it, and the TV's overwhelming, ever-present volume "distort[s and] fragment[s]" his own family's conversations.

The television in this story is more important than in any other in the collection. Here it drowns out the narrator's past, distorting the way he encounters his own memories.

The narrator is unnerved by the quick passage of time and the dissolution of his memories, able to remember little but the **television**. He has one memory of a time "the reservation disappeared" during a game of playing pretend with this brother and sisters. His father, he remembers, stumbled **drunk** off the bottom step of the porch and "came back years later with diabetes and a pocketful of quarters."

The dreamlike, highly stylistic atmosphere of this story is highlighted in the symbolic language and action in this passage. The metaphorical "disappearance" of both the reservation and the narrator's father represent a disengagement or disassociation from memories of both.

The narrator and his brother have a shared memory of all of their siblings combining the scraps that dropped off their plates during dinner and then "scrap[ing] the food into their open mouths." Their parents and sisters to this day insist that the memory is false, but the narrator and his brother "cannot deny the truth of [their] story."

Again, the reliability of memory is called into question here. Memory is fickle, but the "truth" of memories can calibrate one's entire life.

The narrator was ill as a child, and his family tells him stories of his seizures, during which his mother "wanted to believe" he was able to have **visions** of the future. The narrator recalls dancing to music frequently with his siblings and parents, "fighting waking nightmares" only to fall asleep into horrible **dreams**.

The narrator's illness, a source of worry and pain, provided his mother with a mode of escapist thinking that allowed her to project a hope for visionary powers onto her son.

The narrator remembers "the summer of sniffing gas," when he and his brother and sisters inhaled fumes from their family's lawnmower and idle BIA vehicles. The narrator wonders "how much we remember of what hurts us most," and wonders how a glimpse of bright sunlight might have distorted their family's portrait—how it might have changed how they posed for the photograph.

The narrator here contemplates the effects of pain and happiness alike on how memory is encountered later in life.

The narrator remembers his father teaching him how to drive while describing the story of "the first **television** he ever saw," and how he and his friends would walk again and again to the store window where it was perched just to stare at it. The narrator then remembers his own family's television, its volume, and how "every emotion was measured by the half hour." He describes his brother and sisters and parents as "open mouths," and recalls that all they wanted was "to survive."

Television and survival are intimately entwined throughout this story. TV provides an escape, a safe place, and a way to enter a realm of storytelling and imagination rather than remaining stagnant in an otherwise bleak reality. Television enabled this family's survival, and the mythic place it still holds in the narrator's memory is palpable from the story's first lines to its last.

SOMEBODY KEPT SAYING POWWOW

Junior Polatkin describes his friendship with Norma, noting that he knew her long before she knew her husband James. He knew Norma, he says, "back when there was good **fry bread** to be eaten at the powwow, before the old women died. Sometimes," Junior says, "it feels like our tribe is dying a piece of bread at a time. But Norma was always trying to save it." Norma, though young, was at that time nicknamed "grandmother" by her friends and other members of the tribe.

Norma has been shown throughout the text so far to be a supportive figure for the difficult men around her. As a young woman, she saved Thomas from Victor's bullying, and after leaving her husband, James, she returns to his side to help him "die the right way." Norma, Junior says, has spent her life trying to "save" the tribe and its culture, too.

At a powwow, Norma and Junior sit and talk; everyone, he notes, wants to spend time with Norma. Norma, he says, believes that "everything matters," and that "Indians are the most sensitive people on the planet." She teaches Junior that "watching automatically makes the watcher part of the happening," and she lives her life, Junior says, "like we all should do." She does not drink or smoke, and she is a joyous dancer. After the powwow, Norma drops Junior off at home, and he has a **dream** about her. He dreams of her "a hundred years ago," riding bareback and shouting something Junior can't understand.

Norma is frequently representative of one of the larger narrative's major themes: bearing witness. She explains the implications of "watching" to Junior, and has also borne witness to Thomas's suffering and her husband's decline. Norma is not a passive witness, though. She has a firm place in the text and a direct influence on those around her—she represents the act of bearing witness as an active, generous, even healing one.

Junior tells Norma about his dream, and they talk about horses. Norma, Junior says, is a "rodeo queen." She hangs out with cowboys and sometimes sleeps with them, and they sing songs in her honor. Most nights, though, Junior notes that Norma goes "home alone and [sings] herself to sleep." Junior always thought that Norma would settle down with Victor, "since she was so good at saving people and Victor needed more saving than most anybody," but he says that Norma and Victor never got along. Victor was a bully as a youth, and Junior doubts Norma ever forgave him.

Norma is never quite a savior figure, though she encroaches on that territory. Though Victor "needs saving," she is not the one to do it—nor does she "save" her husband or Junior. She appears to have rescued Thomas in their shared youth, but, as we see later on, Thomas is a tragic figure who in the end is unable to be rescued from forces beyond his control.

Norma, Junior says, used to be the sports reporter for the tribal newspaper. He saved a clipping of a story she wrote about a winning **basketball** game he played in high school, and keeps it tucked in his wallet to this day. In the article, Norma describes Junior's victory and implies that "for just a second [Junior] was **Crazy Horse**."

It is apt that Norma, as a bearing-witness figure, served as a reporter for the tribal newspaper. She bolsters Junior's confidence through the witnessing of his talent, and comparing him to Crazy Horse, the idealized strong warrior and leader.

Norma lives her whole life on the reservation, but when Junior returns from college, she wants to know what the world "out there" is like. Junior describes it as "a bad **dream** you never wake up from."

There are some things that Norma cannot bear witness to, and requires others, like Junior, to see for her.

Norma asks Junior what the "worst thing [he] ever did" was, and he describes a college **basketball** game during which he chanted hateful things at a player from another team who'd at one time been incarcerated. After Junior tells her this story, he notes that "she treat[s] him differently." After a while, things go back to normal. Norma nicknames Junior Pete Rose, because "after all that greatness, he's only remembered for the bad stuff, [and it] ain't right."

Here, Norma bears witness to an act of violence and meanness from Junior's past. She absolves him, though, after a time, and her ability to witness his mistakes and forgive them lends him strength, and allows him to feel seen, supported, and even loved.

WITNESSES, SECRET AND NOT

It is 1979, and the young unnamed narrator is "learning how to be thirteen." He is trying to figure out what it means to be a boy, a man, and an Indian. "And of course," he says now—narrating from twelve years into the future—"I had to understand what it meant when my father got a phone call [from the Secret Witness Program in Spokane] one night out on the reservation." Someone has turned the narrator's father's name into the police, along with the knowledge that he might have answers about the ten-years-passed disappearance of a man named Jerry Vincent.

The disappearance of Jerry Vincent throughout this story works as a sort of red herring—there's no answer to the mystery, but the cyclical fallout from his death plagues the narrator's father and, by proxy, the narrator himself. The father is called upon to serve as witness to an event that he may or may not have actually been witness to, and the gray area in between is full of shattered memories and years of inherited pain.

The next day, on the drive into Spokane, the narrator asks his father a barrage of questions. His father reveals that he was in the same bar as Jerry on the night of his disappearance. The two were "mostly" friends, he says, and "nobody knows for sure" what happened to him. The narrator's father tells him that Jerry "wasn't the first one to disappear like that," citing relocation programs that "sent reservation Indians to the cities" and sometimes "swallowed [them] up." The narrator's father admits that he left the reservation for a few years as part of one of these programs and that, when he returned, "everybody [had] heard [he] was dead [or] disappeared."

The narrator's father's memories of Indians being "swallowed up" by a system that did not take care of them reveals a great deal of pain and isolation. The ease with which the narrator's father's friends and family had accepted his disappearance shows the willingness of their community to accept a loss or mystery without a second glance—probably because of how prevalent such losses have become.

The narrator's father hits a patch of ice, and their car skids wildly, but doesn't crash. The narrator wonders "if a near accident is an accident, if standing next to a disaster makes you part of the disaster." The narrator and his father continue talking about Jerry Vincent. His father insists that he has told the police the same story many times, and that though he knows how Jerry Vincent died—shot in the head in an alley behind a bar—he does not know who killed him, and he only knows the story of his death "because every Indian knows the story." The narrator notes that his father "has the whole thing memorized."

Similar to Norma telling Junior that being a watcher makes you a part of the thing you're watching, the narrator here muses whether his father's adjacent position to Jerry Vincent's disappearance does in fact make him a part of it. The narrator's father's memorization of Jerry's death speaks to rote acceptance of loss and violence, and the ways in which he has been called upon to recall it again and again throughout the years, in another cycle of loss and pain.

On the drive into Spokane, the narrator and his father see an Indian man they know—they call him Jimmy Shit Pants. He is **drunk**, and the narrator and his father give him some money, then "dr[ive] off and [leave] Jimmy to make his own decisions. That's how it is. One Indian doesn't tell another what to do. We just watch things happen."

Here we see the flip side of witness-bearing; instances in which a blind eye is turned to those in pain, in danger, or in need. A cultural code of disengagement creates an atmosphere in which accountability and security alike are compromised.

The narrator's father is not due at the police station for another hour, so he takes his son to get some food. While eating, the narrator asks his father whether he would tell the police if he knew who killed Jerry Vincent. the narrator's father says he wouldn't, because "they [don't] care much anyway [and would just make more trouble for Indians." The narrator asks his father if he has ever killed anyone. His father says that once, in a car crash, he killed a white driver accidentally. Because the man was **intoxicated**, and the narrator's father was sober, he bore no responsibility in the man's death.

The narrator probes his father more deeply as to the true nature of his involvement—or lack thereof—in Jerry Vincent's disappearance, and learns that his father has been involved in some other stranger's death. His minimal involvement mirrors the act of bearing witness, while the situation of a sober Native driver and a drunk white driver flips the prominent narrative of many of the other stories.

The narrator and his father arrive at the police station, and the narrator' father tells him to wait in the car. The narrator watches his father as he walks into the station, and thinks he "look[s] as Indian as you can get; off the reservation, among all the white people, every Indian gets exaggerated." The narrator imagines what his father is doing inside the police station, and eventually, spurred by boredom and the cold, gets out of the car and goes inside, where his father is still waiting to meet with the police.

Off the reservation, the narrator experiences feelings of isolation and scrutiny. Continuing with the story's theme of bearing witness, we watch as the narrator begins to bear witness to what he and his father look like to those who are not a part of their community, and considers himself from a different point of view.

A detective arrives and greets the narrator and his father. He takes them into an office, and proceeds to question the narrator's father, who has nothing new to add, and who tells the detective that he's been questioned "annually." The detective offers the narrator candy, but his father intervenes, explaining to the detective that he and his son are both diabetics. With nothing else to ask, the detective dismisses the narrator and his father.

The detective continues to seek a witness for a crime that has long since past. His discrimination against the narrator's father leads readers to wonder how many other members of the Spokane tribe are subjected to similar scrutiny in regards to the Jerry Vincent murder (or other murders).

On the drive home, the narrator recalls, there "wasn't much to say," and wonders "at what point do we just re-create the people who have disappeared from our lives." He thinks that "sometimes it seems like all Indians can do is talk about the disappeared." When the narrator and his father arrive home, the narrator's mother has **fry bread** waiting for them to eat. The narrator's brothers and sisters watch **television** and play cards. The narrator's father sits at the table and cries into his food while his family watches.

The re-creation of Jerry Vincent's memory every year due to the narrator's father's journey to the police station ties in themes of storytelling and imagination, as well as loss and isolation. The fry bread dinner should symbolize comfort and a return to home, but the narrator's father is so broken and distraught that he cannot be comforted.

FLIGHT

A young Indian man, John-John, counts dollar bills he's been saving in a shoebox. He counts out two hundred stacks of ten dollars each, and wonders "How much is enough?" He packs his money into a suitcase along with clean underwear, a toothbrush, and a worn photograph of his older brother, Joseph, in "full military dress in front of an American flag." John-John remembers receiving a letter which informed his parents that Joseph, a jet pilot, had been taken prisoner during a military operation.

This story, entrenched in dream logic and hazy, fantastical visions, unpacks themes of storytelling and imagination and how they intersect with memory. John-John dreams incessantly of his brother's return, and of escape from the reservation—two things that seem impossible or intangible. Not also the bitter irony of Joseph fighting (and possibly dying) for a flag that, arguably, represents much of the oppression and suffering Native people have historically faced.

John-John recalls waiting at the window "for years" after his brother's disappearance. While his friends lived their lives—grew up, married, had children—he "lived" by the window. John-John waits on the porch with his suitcase, "watching the sky for signs." He then has a **vision** of a jet "ripp[ing] through the sound barrier," and he can "see vapor trails stretched across the sky."

John-John is consumed by a deep sense of loss, pain, and isolation in the wake of his brother's disappearance. He retreats into dreams and visions, imagining that his brother's return is always just around the corner.

John-John runs down the highway, chasing the jet; it touches down in front of him. He wonders if Christopher Columbus has come back. John-John sees his brother Joseph climbing from the jet, and his brother removes his helmet to reveal his scarred face. Joseph does not remember John-John, and John-John cries, thinking that "memory [is] like a coin trick; like an abandoned car."

John-John's comparison of memory to "coin tricks" and "abandoned cars" cements the idea or theme of memory as ethereal and difficult to hold onto. Memories trip Alexie's characters up, intrude on their lives, and reinforce the cyclical nature of violence and loss on the reservation.

John-John, having fallen asleep, **dreams** of all the ways his brother might return to him. Upon waking, he revels in memories of their childhood, and the jokes they told. He waits a little while more at the window. He eventually goes back to sleep and "dreams of flight," and of finding Joseph in the woods. Upon waking, he returns to the window. He watches vapor trails form in the sky, counts his dollar bills, and dreams of "escape."

John-John becomes mired in dreams, which, for him, are a form not of forward-thinking imagination but of inability to escape from memories. Longing for escape and feelings of isolation drive John-John further into the recesses of his dream world.

JUNIOR POLATKIN'S WILD WEST SHOW

Junior Polatkin has recurring **dreams** of being a gunfighter named Sonny Six-Gun. In his dreams he speaks Spokane and guns down legends like Wild Bill Hickok and Billy the Kid. Junior is "the only Indian" at Gonzaga University in Spokane. It is a small Jesuit school, and "hardly any" of the students are from Spokane, let alone Washington State. It is early December, and Junior, seated in history class, stares at a "beautiful blond woman" in the front of the room. Her name is Lynn, and Junior, after hearing her speak up about "mythologizing the [Wild] West," falls "nearly in love." After class, Junior follows Lynn to the cafeteria. He stands to close to her, and she confronts him, asking "what the fuck [he] want[s.]" Junior grows tongue-tied, and stops following her.

Junior's active imagination and dream life fills in for his isolated existence at college. He feels alone, until he sees a peer in Lynn. His initial advances toward her are not received well, and he remains isolated. Junior, we know, carries the baggage of being "the one who made it out," after graduating valedictorian of his predominantly white, "farm town" high school. Feelings of loss of community and cultural isolation have then followed him to college and made his life there more difficult.

A few weeks later, it is Christmas break, and Junior has stayed behind in the Gonzaga dorms, where he lives in solitude, checks his mail obsessively, and reads "a book a day." He doesn't want to return to the reservation "and endure the insults that would be continually hurled at him." A few days after Christmas, Junior goes to the mailboxes and finds Lynn there. They formally introduce themselves, and go together to a nearby restaurant.

Junior is caught between two words, and he does not fit into either, so retreats into the realm of dreams, imagination, and storytelling. His chance meeting with Lynn, though, inspires hope within him.

Lynn tells Junior that she notices he **drinks** a lot at parties. She asks him if it is "lonely" being the only Indian at the university. Junior is shocked by the personal nature of her questions, but "somehow or other trust[s] Lynn immediately." Junior imagines that their ongoing, hours-long conversation is one out of a **movie**. Lynn and Junior flirt, leave the restaurant, and, outside, they kiss.

Even though he seems to connect deeply with Lynn, Junior cannot help framing their interaction as a fantasy and holding it at arm's length. His kiss with Lynn recalls his first kiss with a white girl when he was younger and in school—and the vision that followed it in which Junior was abandoned by his tribe.

Junior imagines that he and Lynn are starring in a Western; they return to his dorm room, where they have sex. Lynn seems regretful almost immediately, afraid that she's gotten pregnant and admitting that "she'd just wanted some company." Lynn misses her next two periods, and then confronts Junior with the news that she is indeed pregnant. Not wanting to get married, have an abortion, or give the child up for adoption, Lynn decides to carry the child and keep it. She cries in Junior's arms, and he cries too.

Lynn's almost prophetic feeling that she's become pregnant indicates her connection to imagination and visions, just as Junior is connected to those things. When she realizes that she is in fact pregnant, she and Junior, rather than finding a sense of love and community in one another, experience instead profound isolation.

Lynn gives birth to a boy "with dark skin and blue eyes." She names him Sean Casey, and he talks at one and reads at three. Junior, however, "only learn[s these] details through the mail, random phone calls, and timed visits." Lynn's parents "refuse" to acknowledge that their grandson has "Indian blood," but Lynn reads the baby books about Indians and teaches him Spokane words. Junior drops out of school a year after Lynn leaves to have the baby. He calls Lynn to tell her and, though she begs him not to return to the reservation, he does anyway. As he walks down the highway, he "want[s] to imagine walking into the sunset, into a happy ending," but he knows that "all along the road there [are] reservation drive-ins showing a new and painful sequel to the first act of his life."

Junior continues to experience deep isolation; he is kept from his child because of Lynn's racist, discriminatory parents. Unable to succeed in school, Junior returns to the reservation, where he will be isolated from his tribal community because of the journey he took in "the first act of his life." Junior imagines his future as a series of "painful sequels," indicating the deep pain he feels within—both cultural and personal. This also echoes pessimistic ending of the final story of Victor's narrative arc, in which he feels that he always knows how his dreams will end.

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