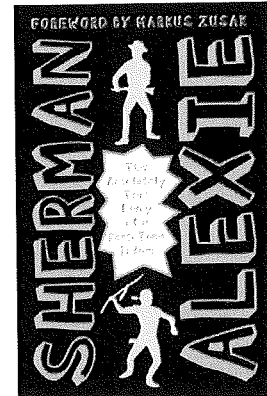


Sherman Alexie: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 2015 (2007)

Brief introduction to the text:

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie is a coming-of-age novel that follows Junior, a smart and artistic Native American teenager growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Determined to break free from the cycle of poverty and limited opportunities, Junior transfers to a mostly white high school in a nearby town. There, he meets new classmates like Roger and Penelope, while struggling to maintain his lifelong friendship with Rowdy back on the reservation. The story explores identity, belonging, and the challenges of living between two very different worlds.



Extracts:

1. Because Geometry Is Not a Country Somewhere Near France pp. 25-28
2. Hope against Hope, pp.42-43
3. Rowdy Sings the Blues, pp.48-53
4. Grandmother Gives Me Some Advice, pp.67-73
5. Slouching Toward Thanksgiving, pp.96-98
6. Hunger Pains, pp.104-110
7. Red Versus White, pp. 154-158
8. Valentine Heart, pp. 168-175

Group Work: Exploring Book Banning in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Each group has received a short extract from Sherman Alexie's novel. Use the following questions to prepare a short presentation (3-4 minutes) for the rest of the class. The theme is **book banning and censorship**.

1. What happens in your part of the book? Give a short summary.
2. What topics or issues are discussed? (e.g. racism, poverty, sexuality, alcoholism, identity)
3. Are there any moments that could be considered controversial? Why?
4. Why might this part of the book be considered inappropriate by some people?

5. What values or perspectives in this extract might challenge certain readers or institutions?
6. How does Sherman Alexie use humor or honesty to address tough topics?
7. What is the author trying to show through this part of the story?
8. How does this section contribute to Junior's personal growth or struggles?
9. Is censoring this content helpful or harmful to readers, especially young people? Why?
10. Can you think of a reason why this book is often banned or challenged in schools?
11. What might students *learn* from reading the parts that others want to ban?

In your presentation, the following must be included:

- What is your excerpt about?
- Choose a short quote that shows why this section is powerful or controversial.
- Comment on the language and the tone in the text
- What do you think about the excerpt?

~~I tell him about my fears.~~

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

~~I think so.~~

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

~~Let's do the math.~~

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

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

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

~~Nobody else comes anywhere close to that.~~

~~Trust me.~~

~~Rowdy and I are inseparable.~~

①

Because Geometry Is Not a Country Somewhere Near France ✱

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

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

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

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

Naked woman + right hand = happy happy joy joy

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

I'm proud of it.

I'm good at it.

I'm ambidextrous.

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

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

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

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

So I thank God for my thumbs.

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

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

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

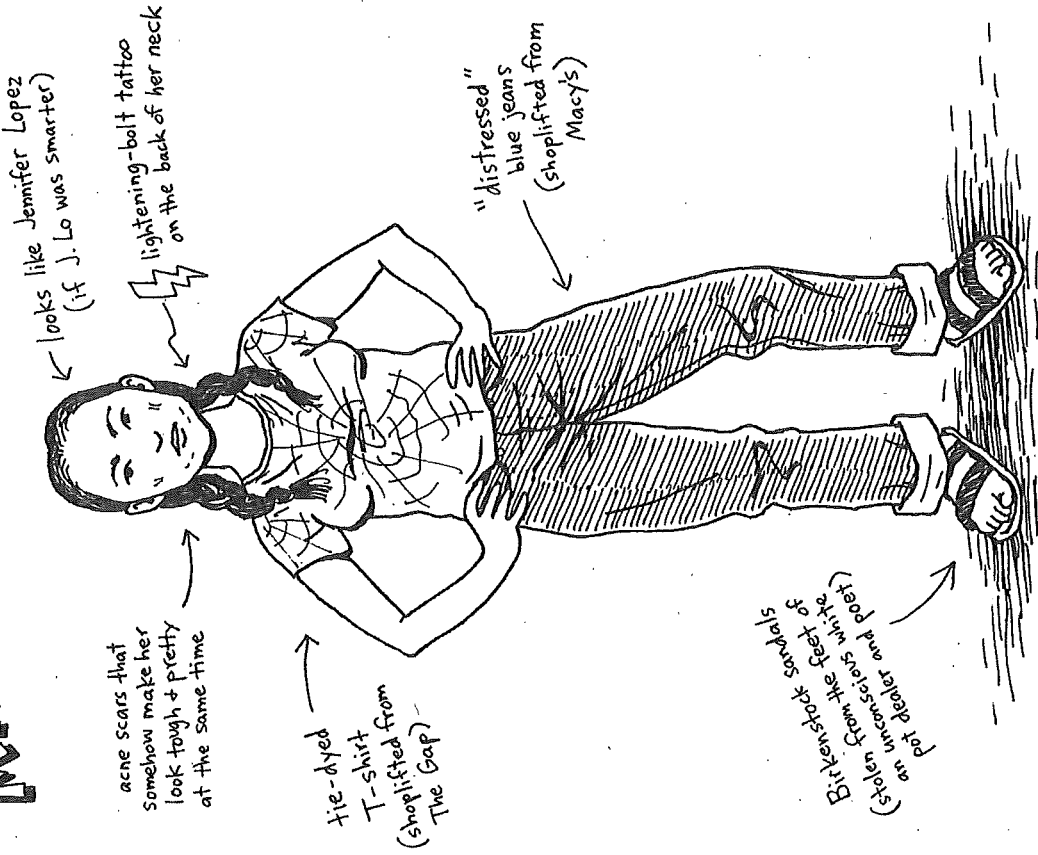
That ruined the whole closet thing.

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

My sister is good at ruining things.

After high school, my sister just froze. Didn't go to college, didn't get a job. Didn't do anything. Kind of sad, I guess.

MARY RUNS AWAY



But she is also beautiful and strong and funny. She is the prettiest and strongest and funniest person who ever spent twenty-three hours a day alone in a basement.

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

Rowdy and I are planning on playing high school basketball.

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

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

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

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

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

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

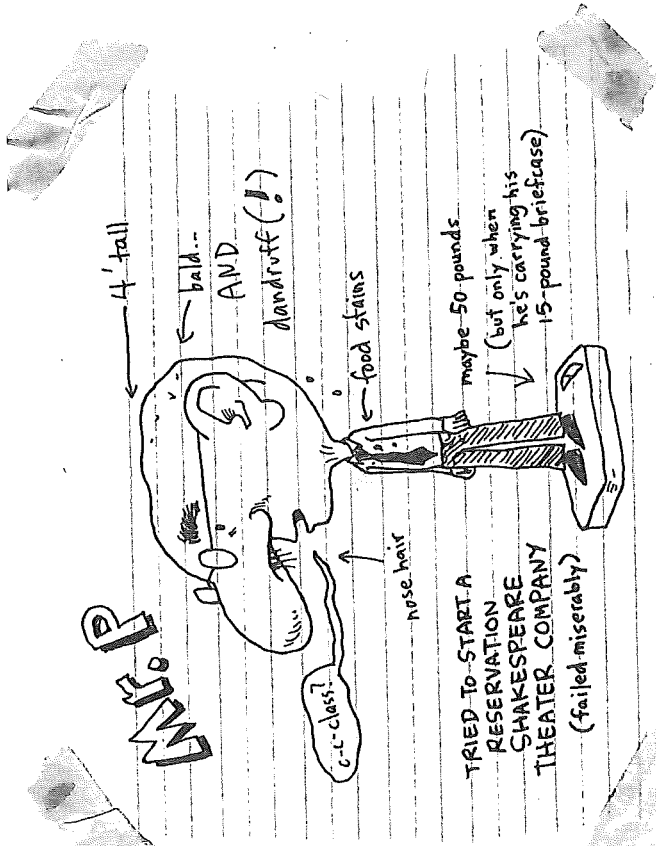
But I am more happy than scared.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

And yeah, I know it's weird, but the tribe actually houses all of the teachers in one-bedroom cottages and musty, old trailer houses behind the school. You can't teach at our school if you don't live in the compound. It was like some kind of

2

Mr. P: (teacher)

you something else. And you have to promise me you'll never repeat it."

"Okay," I said.

"Promise me."

"Okay, okay, I promise I won't repeat it."

"Not to anyone. Not even your parents."

"Nobody."

"Okay, then," he said and leaned closer to me because he didn't even want the trees to hear what he was going to say. "You have to leave this reservation."

"I'm going to Spokane with my dad later."

"No, I mean you have to leave the rez forever."

"What do you mean?"

"You were right to throw that book at me. I deserved to get smashed in the face for what I've done to Indians. Every white person on this rez should get smashed in the face. But, let me tell you this. All the Indians should get smashed in the face, too." I was shocked. Mr. P was furious.

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

"He doesn't hurt me."

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

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

Onions and garlic and hamburger and shame and pain.

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

Mr. P WAS CRYING

42

I couldn't believe it.

I'd never seen a sober adult cry.

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

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

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

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

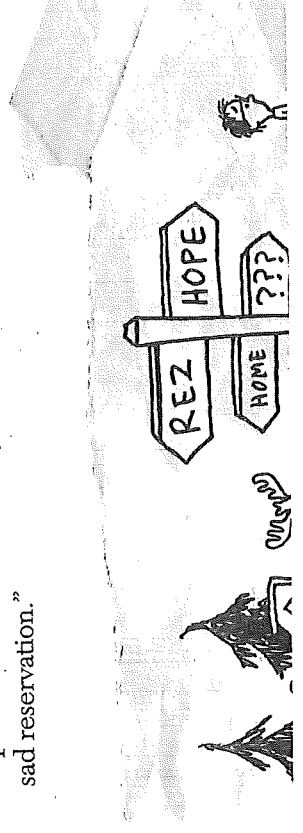
"I don't want to fight anybody," I said.

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

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

"Where is hope?" I asked. "Who has hope?"

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



43

3

him like crazy, but boys didn't say such things to other boys, and *nobody* said such things to Rowdy.

"Can I tell you a secret?" I asked.

"It better not be girly," he said.

"It's not."

"Okay, then, tell me."

"I'm transferring to Reardan."

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

"That's not funny," he said.

"It's not supposed to be funny," I said. "I'm transferring to Reardan. I want you to come with me."

"And when are you going on this imaginary journey?"

"It's not imaginary. It's real. And I'm transferring now. I start school tomorrow at Reardan."

"You better quit saying that," he said. "You're getting me mad."

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

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

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

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

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

Of course, losing isn't exactly fun.

Nobody wants to be a loser.

49

Rowdy Sings the Blues



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

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

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

"Kiss my ass," I said.

I wanted to tell him that he was my best friend and I loved him. I wanted to tell him that he was my best friend and I loved him.

48

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

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

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

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

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

During baseball season, Rowdy hit three home runs in the first game against Reardan and two home runs in the second but we still lost by scores of 17-3 and 12-2. I played in both losses and struck out seven times and was hit by a pitch once.

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

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

Yep, we answered one question correctly.

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

Those kids were *magnificent*.

They knew *everything*.

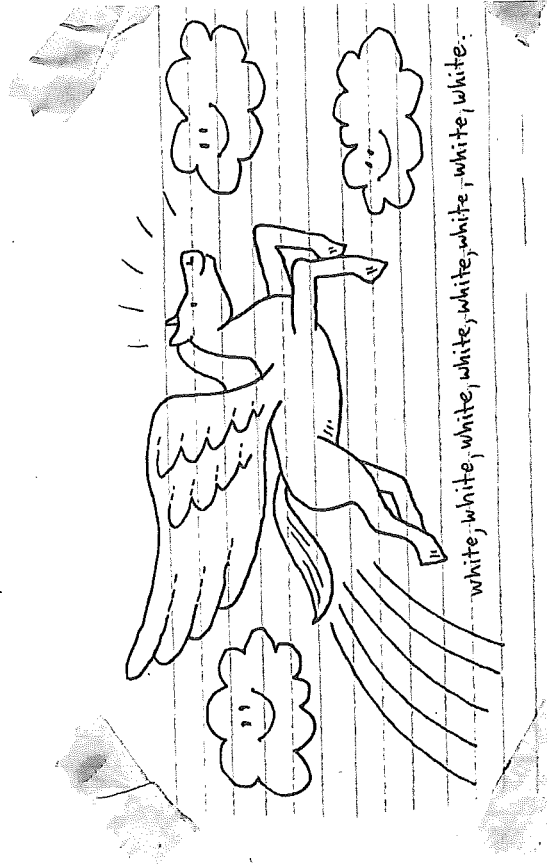
And they were *beautiful*.

They were beautiful and smart.

They were beautiful and smart and epic.

They were filled with hope.

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



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

"Rowdy," I said. "I am going to Reardan tomorrow."

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

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

"I'm going," I said.

"No way, you're a wuss."

"I'm doing it."

"You're a pussy."

"I'm going to Reardan tomorrow."

"You're really serious?"

"Rowdy," I said. "I'm as serious as a tumor."

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

"Don't touch me, you retarded fagi!" he yelled.

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

I started crying.

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

It was pain, pure pain.

"Rowdy, I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry."

He kept screaming.

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

Rowdy stopped screaming with his mouth but he kept screaming with his eyes.

"You always thought you were better than me," he yelled.

"No, no, I don't think I'm better than anybody. I think I'm worse than everybody else."

"Why are you leaving?"

"I have to go. I'm going to die if I don't leave."

I touched his shoulder again and Rowdy flinched.

Yes, I touched him again.

What kind of idiot was I?

I was the kind of idiot that got punched hard in the face by his best friend.

Bang! Rowdy punched me.

Bang! I hit the ground.

Bang! My nose bled like a firework.

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



4

mysterious rules where people apparently DID NOT GET INTO FISTFIGHTS.

"Wait," I called after Roger.

"What do you want?" Roger asked.

"What are the rules?"

"What rules?"

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

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

Grandmother Gives Me Some Advice



I went home that night completely confused. And terrified.

If I'd punched an Indian in the face, then he would have spent days plotting his revenge. And I imagined that white guys would also want revenge after getting punched in the face. So I figured Roger was going to run me over with a farm tractor or combine or grain truck or runaway pig.

I wished Rowdy was still my friend. I could have sent him after Roger. It would have been like King Kong battling

Godzilla.

I realized how much of my self-worth, my sense of safety, was based on Rowdy's fists.

But Rowdy hated me. And Roger hated me.

I was good at being hated by guys who could kick my ass. It's not a talent you really want to have.

My mother and father weren't home, so I turned to my grandmother for advice.

"Grandma," I said. "I punched this big guy in the face. And he just walked away. And now I'm afraid he's going to kill me."

"Why did you punch him?" she asked.

"He was bullying me."

"You should have just walked away."

"He called me 'chief.' And 'squaw boy.'"

"Then you should have kicked him in the balls."

She pretended to kick a big guy in the crotch and we both laughed.

"Did he hit you?" she asked.

"No, not at all," I said.

"Not even after you hit him?"

"Nope."

"And he's a big guy?"

"Gigantic. I bet he could take Rowdy down."

"Wow," she said.

"It's strange, isn't it?" I asked. "What does it mean?"

Grandma thought hard for a while.

"I think it means he respects you," she said.

"Respect? No way!"

"Yes way! You see, you men and boys are like packs of wild dogs. This giant boy is the alpha male of the school, and you're the new dog, so he pushed you around a bit to see how tough you are."

"But I'm not tough at all," I said.

MY GRANDMOTHER

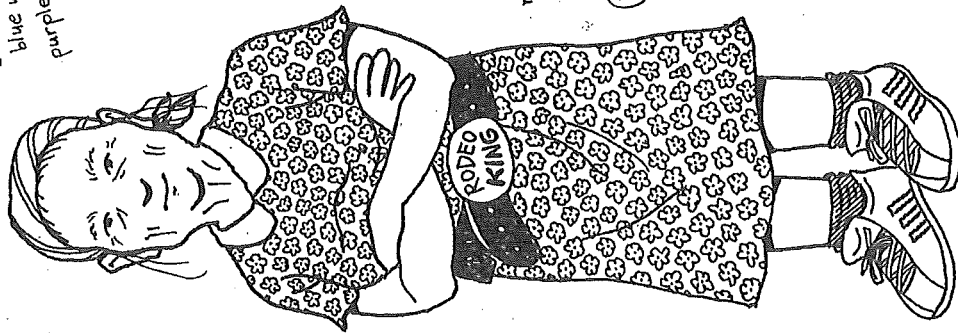
bandanna on her head, always
(Cred when she goes to powwows,
green around the house,
blue when she visits her friends,
purple when she goes to garage
sales)

Her best dish is SALMON
MUSH



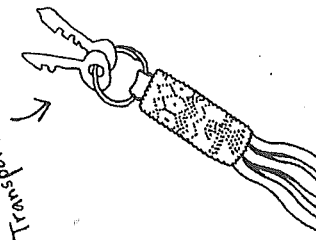
(much better than it sounds)

house dress
purchased in 1972
for \$10



belt used to belong to
my grandfather,
who died when I
was a baby

makes her living
selling beaded
keychains on eBay
(Highly Satisfying
Charity Swaps)



basketball sneakers
because "she's
got mad skills."

"Yeah, but you punched the alpha dog in the face," she said. "They're going to respect you now."

"I love you, Grandma," I said. "But you're crazy."

I couldn't sleep that night because I kept thinking about my impending doom. I knew Roger would be waiting for me in the morning at school. I knew he'd punch me in the head and shoulder area about two hundred times. I knew I'd soon be in a hospital drinking soup through a straw.

So, exhausted and terrified, I went to school.

My day began as it usually did. I got out of bed at dark-thirty, and rummaged around the kitchen for anything to eat. All I could find was a package of orange fruit drink mix, so I made a gallon of that, and drank it all down.

Then I went into the bedroom and asked Mom and Dad if they were driving me to school.

"Don't have enough gas," Dad said and went back to sleep.

Great, I'd have to walk.

So I put on my shoes and coat, and started down the highway. I got lucky because my dad's best friend Eugene just happened to be heading to Spokane.

Eugene was a good guy, and like an uncle to me, but he was drunk all the time. Not stinky drunk, just drunk enough to be drunk. He was a funny and kind drunk, always wanting to laugh and hug you and sing songs and dance.

Funny how the saddest guys can be happy drunks.

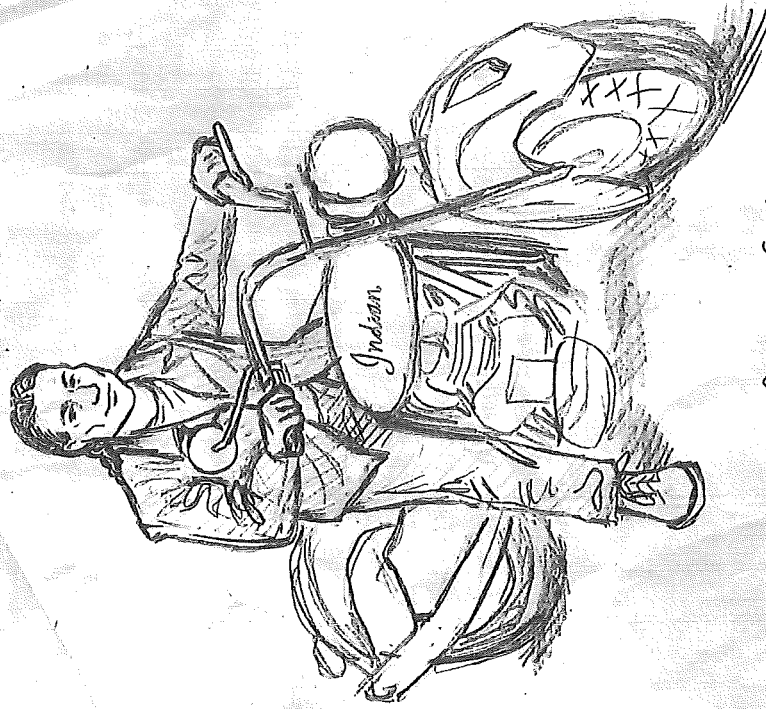
"Hey, Junior," he said. "Hop on my pony, man."

So I hopped onto the back of Eugene's bike, and off we went, barely in control. I just closed my eyes and held on.

And pretty soon, Eugene got me to school.

We pulled up in front and a lot of my classmates just stared. I mean, Eugene had braids down to his butt, for one, and neither of us wore helmets for the other.

and neither of us wore helmets, for the other.



Dad's best friend, EUGENE,
+ his 1946 Indian Chief Roadmaster

I suppose we looked *dangerous*.

"Man," he said. "There's a lot of white people here."

"Yeah."

"You doing all right with them?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"It's pretty cool, you doing this," he said.

"You think?"

"Yeah, man, I could never do it. I'm a wuss."

Wow, I felt proud.

"Thanks for the ride," I said.

"You bet," Eugene said.

He laughed and buzzed away. I walked up to the school and tried to ignore the stares of my classmates.

And then I saw Roger walk out the front door.

Man, I was going to have to fight. Shit, my whole life is a fight.

"Hey," Roger said.

"Hey," I said.

"Who was that on the bike?" he asked.

"Oh, that was my dad's best friend."

"That was a cool bike," he said. "Vintage."

"Yeah, he just got it."

"You ride with him a lot?"

"Yes," I said. I lied.

"Cool," Roger said,

"Yeah, cool," I said.

"All right, then," he said. "I'll see you around."

And then he walked away.

Wow, he didn't kick my ass. He was actually nice. He paid me some respect. He paid respect to Eugene and his bike.

Maybe grandma was right. Maybe I had challenged the alpha dog and was now being rewarded for it.

I love my grandmother. She's the smartest person on the planet.

Feeling almost like a human being, I walked into the school and saw Penelope the Beautiful.

"Hey, Penelope," I said, hoping that she knew I was now accepted by the dog pack.

She didn't even respond to me. Maybe she hadn't heard me.

"Hey Penelope" I said again.

She looked at me and sniffed.

SHE SNIFFED!

LIKE I SMELLED BAD OR SOMETHING!

"Do I know you?" she said.

There were only about one hundred students in the whole school, right? So of course, she knew me. She was just being a bitch.

"I'm Junior," I said. "I mean, I'm Arnold."

"Oh, that's right," she said. "You're the boy who can't figure out his own name."

Her friends giggled.

I was so ashamed. I might have impressed the king, but the queen still hated me. I guess my grandmother didn't know everything.

The little dork could read minds, too. He was like some kind of Star Wars alien creature with invisible tentacles that sucked your thoughts out of your brain.

"You read a book for the story, for each of its words," Gordy said, "and you draw your cartoons for the story, for each of the words and images. And, yeah, you need to take that seriously, but you should also read and draw because really good books and cartoons give you a boner."

I was shocked:



"You should get a boner! You have to get a boner!" Gordy shouted. "Come on!"

We ran into the Reardan High School Library.

"Look at all these books," he said.

"There aren't that many," I said. It was a small library in a small high school in a small town.

"There are three thousand four hundred and twelve books here," Gordy said. "I know that because I counted them."

"Okay, now you're officially a freak," I said.

"Yes, it's a small library. It's a tiny one. But if you read one of these books a day, it would still take you almost ten years to finish."

"What's your point?"

"The world, even the smallest parts of it, is filled with things you don't know."

Wow. That was a huge idea.

Any town, even one as small as Reardan, was a place of mystery. And that meant that Wellpinit, that smaller, Indian town, was also a place of mystery.

"Okay, so it's like each of these books is a mystery. Every book is a mystery. And if you read all the books ever written, it's like you've read one giant mystery. And no matter how much you learn, you just keep on learning there is so much more you need to learn."

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," Gordy said. "Now doesn't that give you a boner?"

"I am rock hard," I said.

Gordy blushed.

"Well, I don't mean boner in the sexual sense," Gordy said. "I don't think you should run through life with a real erect penis. But you should approach each book — you should approach life — with the real possibility that you might get a metaphorical boner at any point."

"A metaphorical boner!" I shouted. "What the heck is a metaphorical boner?"

Gordy laughed.

"When I say boner, I really mean joy," he said.

"Then why didn't you say joy? You didn't have to say boner.

Whenever I think about boners, I get confused."

"Boner is funnier. And more joyful."

Gordy and I laughed.

He was an extremely weird dude. But he was the smartest person I'd ever known. He would always be the smartest person I'd ever known.

And he certainly helped me through school. He not only tutored me and challenged me, but he made me realize that hard work — that the act of finishing, of completing, of accomplishing a task — is joyous.

In Wellpinit, I was a freak because I loved books.

In Reardan, I was a joyous freak.

And my sister, she was a traveling freak.

We were the freakiest brother and sister in history.

My Sister Sends Me an E-mail *

-----Original Message-----

From: Mary

Sent: Thursday, November 16, 2006 4:41 PM

To: Junior

Subject: Hi!

Dear Junior:

I love it here in Montana. It's beautiful. Yesterday, I rode a horse for the first time. Indians still ride horses in Montana. I'm still looking for a job. I've sent applications

6

I put on my best If-I-Don't-Go-Now-I'm-Going-To-Explode face.

"Do you really have to?" the teacher asked.

I didn't have to go at first, but then I realized that yes, I did have to go.

"I have to go really bad," I said.

"All right, all right, go, go."

I headed over to the library bathrooms because they're usually a lot cleaner than the ones by the lunchroom.

So, okay, I'm going number two, and I'm sitting on the toilet, and I'm concentrating. I'm in my Zen mode, trying to make this whole thing a spiritual experience. I read once that Gandhi was way into his own number two. I don't know if he told fortunes or anything. But I guess he thought the condition and quality of his number two revealed the condition and quality of his life.

Yeah, I know, I probably read too many books.

And probably WAY too many books about number two.

But it's all important, okay? So I finish, flush, wash my hands, and then stare in the mirror and start popping zits. I'm all quiet and concentrating when I hear this weird noise coming from the other side of the wall.

That's the girl's bathroom.

And I hear that weird noise again.

Do you want to know what it sounds like?

It sounds like this:

ARGGHHHHHHHHSSSSPPPPPPCGGHHHHHHH
AAAAAARGHHHHHHHHHHHAGGGGHH!

It sounds like somebody is vomiting.

Nope.

It sounds like a 747 is landing on a runway of vomit.

I'm planning on heading back to the classroom for more

105

Hunger Pains



Our history teacher, Mr. Sheridan, was trying to teach us something about the Civil War. But he was so boring and monotonous that he was only teaching us how to sleep with our eyes open.

I had to get out of there, so I raised my hand.

"What is it, Arnold?" the teacher asked.

"I have to go the bathroom."

"Hold it."

"I can't"

104

scintillating lessons from the history teacher. But then I hear that noise again.

ARGCGHHHHHHHSGHSLLSKSSSHHSDKFD
JSABCDEFHGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Okay, so somebody might have the flu or something. Maybe they're having, like, kidney failure in there. I can't walk away.

So I knock on the door. The girls' bathroom door.

"Hey," I say. "Are you okay in there?"

"Go away!"

It's a girl, which makes sense, since it is the girls' bathroom.

"Do you want me to get a teacher or something?" I ask through the bathroom door.

"I said, GO AWAY!"

I'm not dumb. I can pick up on subtle clues.

So I walk away, but something pulls me back. I don't know what it is. If you're romantic, you might think it was destiny.

So destiny and me lean against the wall and wait.

The vomiter will eventually have to come out of the bathroom, and then I'll know that she's okay.

And pretty soon, she does come out.

And it is the lovely Penelope, and she's chomping hard on cinnamon gum. She'd obviously tried to cover the smell of vomit with the biggest piece of cinnamon gum in the world. But it doesn't work. She just smells like somebody vomited on a big old cinnamon tree.

"What are you looking at?" she asks me.

"I'm looking at an anorexic," I say.

A really HOT anorexic, I want to add, but I don't.

"I'm not anorexic," she says. "I'm bulimic."

She says it with her nose and chin in the air. She gets all

arrogant. And then I remember there are a bunch of anorexics who are PROUD to be skinny and starved freaks.

They think being anorexic makes them special, makes them better than everybody else. They have their own fricking Web sites where they give advice on the best laxatives and stuff.

"What's the difference between bulimics and anorexics?" I ask.

"Anorexics are anorexics all the time," she says. "I'm only bulimic when I'm throwing up."

Wow.

SHE SOUNDS JUST LIKE MY DAD!



There are all kinds of addicts, I guess. We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make the pain go away.

Penelope gorges on her pain and then throws it up and flushes it away. My dad drinks his pain away.

So I say to Penelope what I always say to Dad when he's drunk and depressed and ready to give up on the world.

"Hey, Penelope," I say. "Don't give up."

Okay, so it's not the wisest advice in the world. It's actually kind of obvious and corny.

But Penelope starts crying, talking about how lonely she is, and how everybody thinks her life is perfect because she's pretty and smart and popular, but that she's scared all the time, but nobody will let her be scared because she's pretty and smart and popular.

You notice that she mentioned her beauty, intelligence, and popularity twice in one sentence?

The girl has an ego.

But that's sexy, too.



How is it that a bulimic girl with vomit on her breath can suddenly be so sexy? Love and lust can make you go crazy.

I suddenly understand how my big sister, Mary, could have met a guy and married him five minutes later. I'm not so mad at her for leaving us and moving to Montana.

Over the next few weeks, Penelope and I become the hot item at Reardan High School. Well, okay, we're not exactly a romantic couple. We're more like friends with potential. But that's still cool.

Everybody is absolutely shocked that Penelope chose me to be her new friend. I'm not some ugly, mutated beast. But I am an absolute stranger at the school.

And I am an Indian.

And Penelope's father, Earl, is a racist.

The first time I meet him, he said, "Kid, you better keep your hands out of my daughter's panties. She's only dating you because she knows it will piss me off. So I ain't going to get pissed. And if I ain't pissed then she'll stop dating you. In the meantime, you just keep your trouser snake in your trousers and I won't have to punch you in the stomach."

And then you know what he said to me after that?

"Kid, if you get my daughter pregnant, if you make some charcoal babies, I'm going to disown her. I'm going to kick her out of my house and you'll have to bring her home to your



mommy and daddy. You hearing me straight, kid? This is all on you now."

Yep, Earl was a real winner.

Okay, so Penelope and I became the hot topic because we were defying the great and powerful Earl.

And, yeah, you're probably thinking that Penelope was dating me ONLY because I was the worst possible choice for her.

She was probably dating me ONLY because I was an Indian boy.

And, okay, so she was only semi-dating me. We held hands once in a while and we kissed once or twice, but that was it.

I don't know what I meant to her.

I think she was bored of being the prettiest, smartest, and most popular girl in the world. She wanted to get a little crazy, you know? She wanted to get a little smudged.

And I was the smudge.

But, hey, I was kind of using her, too.

After all, I suddenly became popular.

Because Penelope had publicly declared that I was cute enough to ALMOST date, all of the other girls in school decided that I was cute, too.

Because I got to hold hands with Penelope, and kiss her good-bye when she jumped on the school bus to go home, all of the other boys in school decided that I was a major stud.

Even the teachers started paying more attention to me.

I was mysterious.

How did I, the dorky Indian guy, win a tiny piece of Penelope's heart?

What was my secret?

I looked and talked and dreamed and walked differently than everybody else.

I WAS NEW

If you want to get all biological, then you'd have to say that I was an exciting addition to the Reardan gene pool.

So, okay, those are all the obvious reasons why Penelope and I were friends. All the shallow reasons. But what about the bigger and better reasons?

"Arnold," she said one day after school, "I hate this little town. It's so small, too small. Everything about it is small. The people here have small ideas. Small dreams. They all want to marry each other and live here forever."

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I want to leave as soon as I can. I think I was born with a suitcase."

Yeah, she talked like that. All big and goofy and dramatic. I wanted to make fun of her, but she was so earnest.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked.

"Everywhere. I want to walk on the Great Wall of China. I want to walk to the top of pyramids in Egypt. I want to swim in every ocean. I want to climb Mount Everest. I want to go on an African safari. I want to ride a dogsled in Antarctica. I want all of it. Every single piece of everything."

Her eyes got this strange faraway look, like she'd been hypnotized.

I laughed.

"Don't laugh at me," she said.

"I'm not laughing at you," I said. "I'm laughing at your eyes."

"That's the whole problem," she said. "Nobody takes me seriously."

"Well, come on, it's kind of hard to take you seriously when you're talking about the Great Wall of China and Egypt and stuff. Those are just big goofy dreams. They're not real."

"They're real to me," she said.

"Why don't you quit talking in dreams and tell me what

.....

7

They can just BLEND into their chairs. They become their chairs.

So, okay, I'm not all goofy-eyed in love with white people, all right? Plenty of the old white guys still give me the stink eye just for being Indian. And a lot of them think I shouldn't be in the school at all.

I'm realistic, okay?

I've thought about these things. And maybe I haven't done enough thinking, but I've done enough to know that it's better to live in Reardan than in Wellpinit.

Maybe only slightly better.

But from where I'm standing, slightly better is about the size of the Grand Canyon.

And, hey, do you want to know the very best thing about Reardan?

It's Penelope, of course. And maybe Gordy.

And do you want to know what the very best thing was about Wellpinit?

My grandmother.

She was amazing.

She was the most amazing person in the world.

Do you want to know the very best thing about my grandmother?

She was tolerant.

And I know that's a hilarious thing to say about your grandmother.

I mean, when people compliment their grandmothers, especially their Indian grandmothers, they usually say things like, "My grandmother is so wise" and "My grandmother is so kind" and "My grandmother has seen everything."

And, yeah, my grandmother was smart and kind and had traveled to about 100 different Indian reservations, but that had nothing to do with her greatness.

My grandmother's greatest gift was tolerance.

Now, in the old days, Indians used to be forgiving of any kind of eccentricity. In fact, weird people were often celebrated.

Epileptics were often shamans because people just assumed that God gave seizure-visions to the lucky ones.

Gay people were seen as magical, too.

I mean, like in many cultures, men were viewed as warriors and women were viewed as caregivers. But gay people, being both male and female, were seen as both warriors and caregivers.

Gay people could do anything. They were like Swiss Army knives!

My grandmother had no use for all the gay bashing and homophobia in the world, especially among other Indians.

"Jeez," she said. "Who cares if a man wants to marry another man? All I want to know is who's going to pick up all the dirty socks?"

Of course, ever since white people showed up and brought along their Christianity and their fears of eccentricity, Indians have gradually lost all of their tolerance.

Indians can be just as judgmental and hateful as any white person.

But not my grandmother.

She still hung onto that old-time Indian spirit, you know?

She always approached each new person and each new experience the exact same way.

Whenever we went to Spokane, my grandmother would talk to anybody, even the homeless people, even the homeless guys who were talking to invisible people.

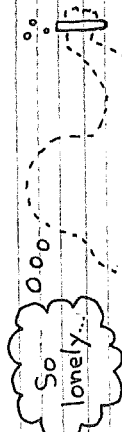
My grandmother would start talking to the invisible people, too.

Why would she do that?

"Well," she said, "how can I be sure there aren't invisible

people in the world? Scientists didn't believe in the mountain gorilla for hundreds of years. And now look. So if scientists can be wrong, then all of us can be wrong. I mean, what if all of those invisible people ARE scientists? Think about that one."

So I thought about that one:



Invisible Mountain Gorilla Scientist

After I decided to go to Reardan, I felt like an invisible mountain gorilla scientist. My grandmother was the only one who thought it was a 100 percent good idea.

"Think of all the new people you're going to meet," she said. "That's the whole point of life, you know? To meet new people. I wish I could go with you. It's such an exciting idea."

Of course, my grandmother had met thousands, tens of thousands, of other Indians at powwows all over the country. Every powwow Indian knew her.

Yep, my grandmother was powwow-famous. Everybody loved her; she loved everybody.

In fact, last week, she was walking back home from a mini powwow at the Spokane Tribal Community Center, when she was struck and killed by a drunk driver.

Yeah, you read that right.

She didn't die right away. The reservation paramedics kept her alive long enough to get to the hospital in Spokane, but she died during emergency surgery.

Massive internal injuries.

At the hospital, my mother wept and wailed. She'd lost her mother. When anybody, no matter how old they are, loses a parent, I think it hurts the same as if you were only five years old, you know? I think all of us are always five years old in the presence and absence of our parents.

My father was all quiet and serious with the surgeon, a big and handsome white guy.

"Did she say anything before she died?" he asked.

"Yes," the surgeon said. "She said, 'Forgive him.'"

"Forgive him?" my father asked.

"I think she was referring to the drunk driver who killed her."

Wow.

My grandmother's last act on earth was a call for forgiveness, love, and tolerance.

She wanted us to forgive Gerald, the dumb-ass Spokane Indian alcoholic who ran her over and killed her.

I think my dad wanted to go find Gerald and beat him to death.

I think my mother would have helped him.

I think I would have helped him, too.

But my grandmother wanted us to forgive her murderer.

Even dead, she was a better person than us.

The tribal cops found Gerald hiding out at Benjamin Lake.

They took him to jail.

And after we got back from the hospital, my father went over to see Gerald to kill him or forgive him. I think the tribal cops might have looked the other way if my father had decided to strangle Gerald.

But my father, respecting my grandmother's last wishes, left Gerald alone to the justice system, which ended up sending him to prison for eighteen months. After he got out, Gerald moved to a reservation in California and nobody ever saw him again.

But my family had to bury my grandmother.

I mean, it's natural to bury your grandmother.

Grandparents are supposed to die first, but they're supposed to die of old age. They're supposed to die of a heart attack or a stroke or of cancer or of Alzheimer's.

THEY ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO GET RUN OVER AND KILLED BY A DRUNK DRIVER!

I mean, the thing is, plenty of Indians have died because they were drunk. And plenty of drunken Indians have killed other drunken Indians.

But my grandmother had never drunk alcohol in her life. Not one drop. That's the rarest kind of Indian in the world.

I know only, like, five Indians in our whole tribe who have never drunk alcohol.

And my grandmother was one of them.

"Drinking would shut down my seeing and my hearing and my feeling," she used to say. "Why would I want to be in the world if I couldn't touch the world with all of my senses intact?"

Well, my grandmother has left this world and she's now roaming around the afterlife.

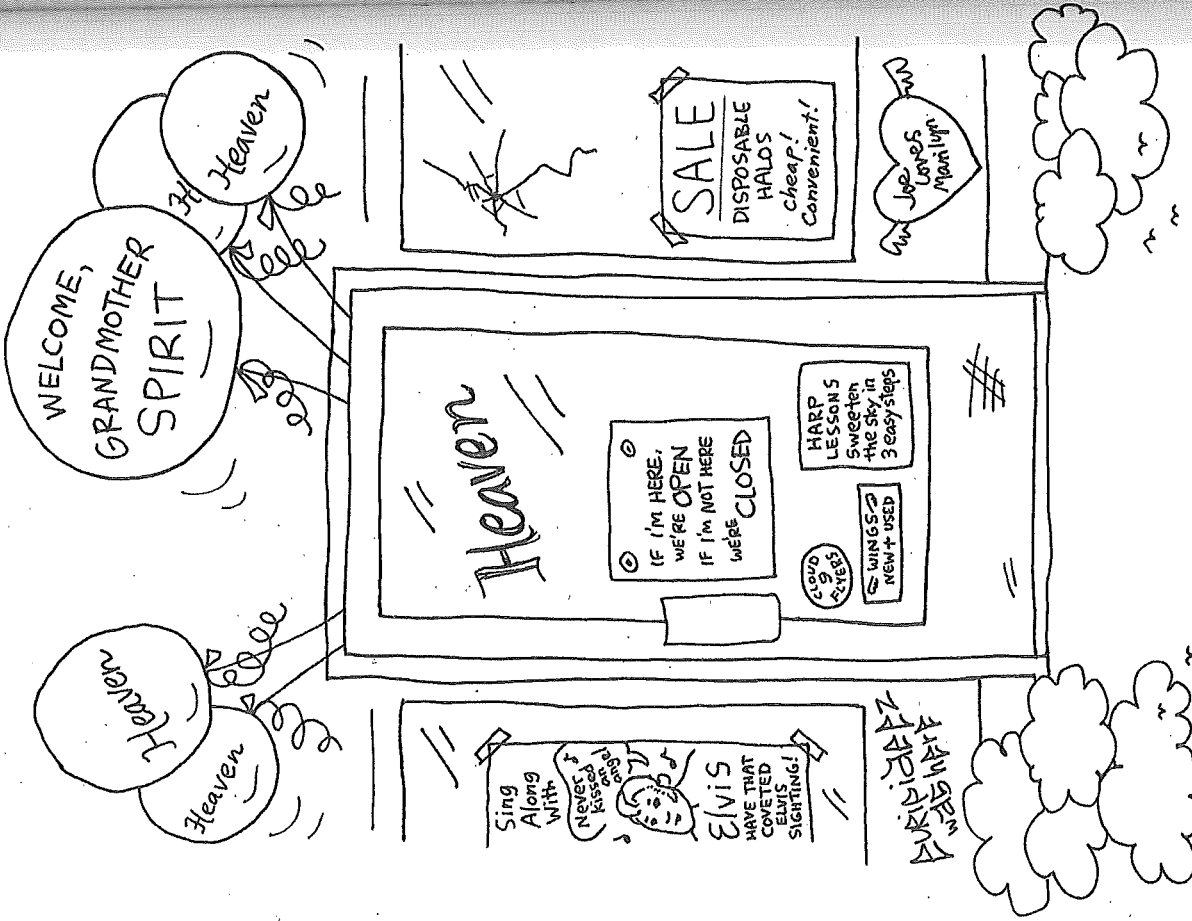
Wake



We held Grandmother's wake three days later. We knew that people would be coming in large numbers. But we were stunned because almost two thousand Indians showed up that day to say good-bye.

And nobody gave me any crap.

I mean, I was still the kid who had betrayed the tribe. And that couldn't be forgiven. But I was also the kid who'd lost his grandmother. And everybody knew that losing my grandmother was horrible. So they all waved the white flag that day and let me grieve in peace.



Valentine Heart



A few days after I gave Penelope a homemade Valentine (and she said she forgot it was Valentine's Day), my dad's best friend, Eugene, was shot in the face in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven in Spokane.

Way drunk, Eugene was shot and killed by one of his good friends, Bobby, who was too drunk to even remember pulling the trigger.

The police think Eugene and Bobby fought over the last drink in a bottle of wine.

When Bobby was sober enough to realize what he'd done, he could only call Eugene's name over and over, as if that would somehow bring him back.

A few weeks later, in jail, Bobby hung himself with a bedsheet.

We didn't even have enough time to forgive him.

He punished himself for his sins.

My father went on a legendary drinking binge.

My mother went to church every single day.

It was all booze and God, booze and God, booze and God.

We'd lost my grandmother and Eugene. How much loss

were we supposed to endure?

I felt helpless and stupid.

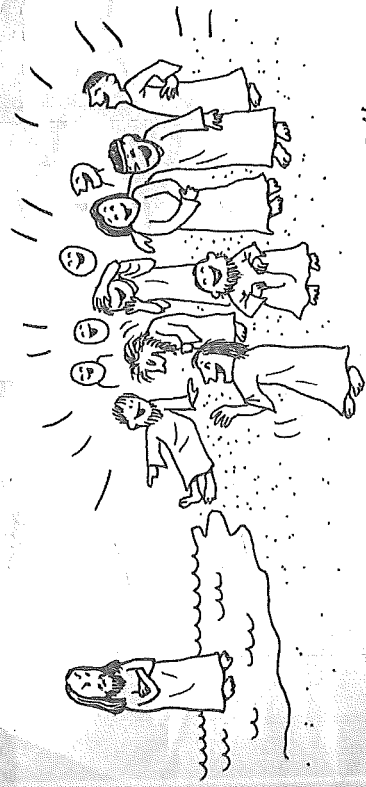
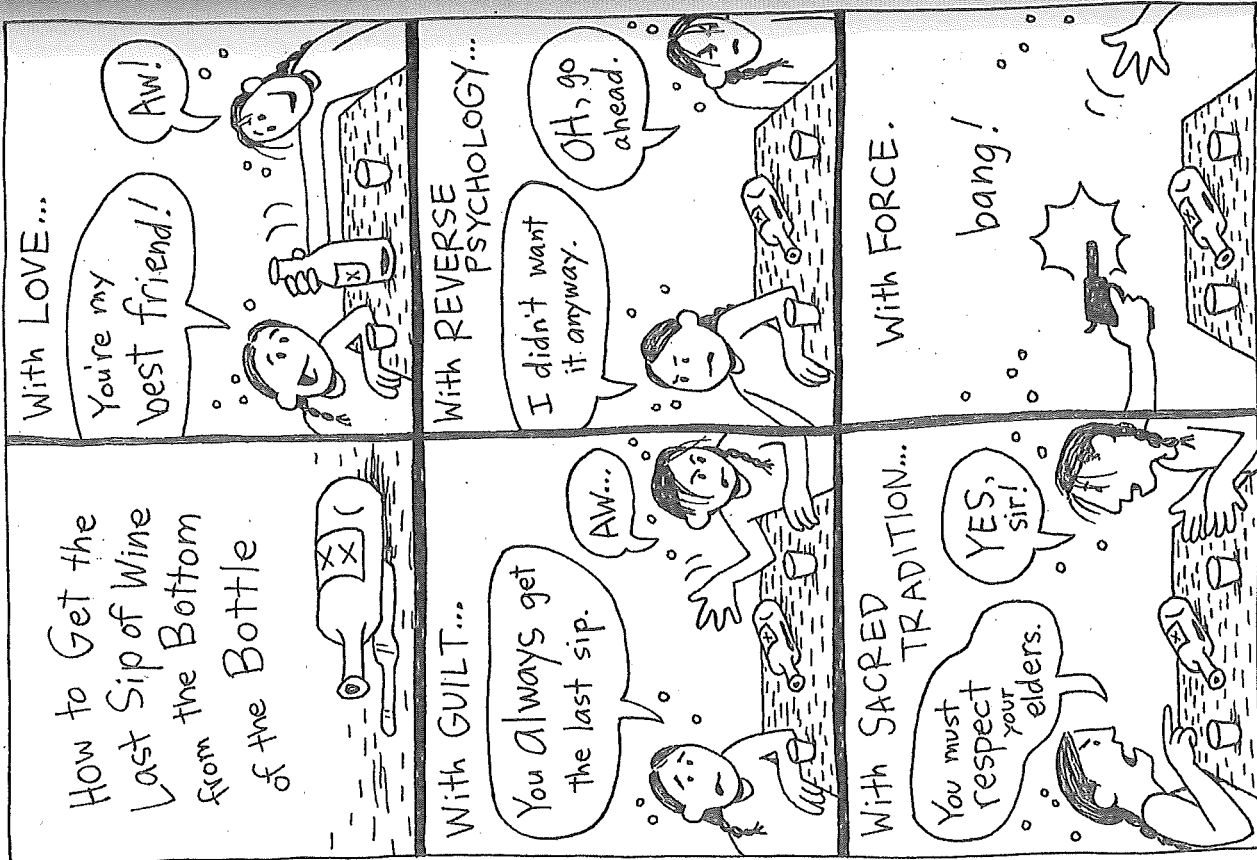
I needed books.

I wanted books.

And I drew and drew and drew cartoons.

I was mad at God; I was mad at Jesus. They were mocking

me, so I mocked them:



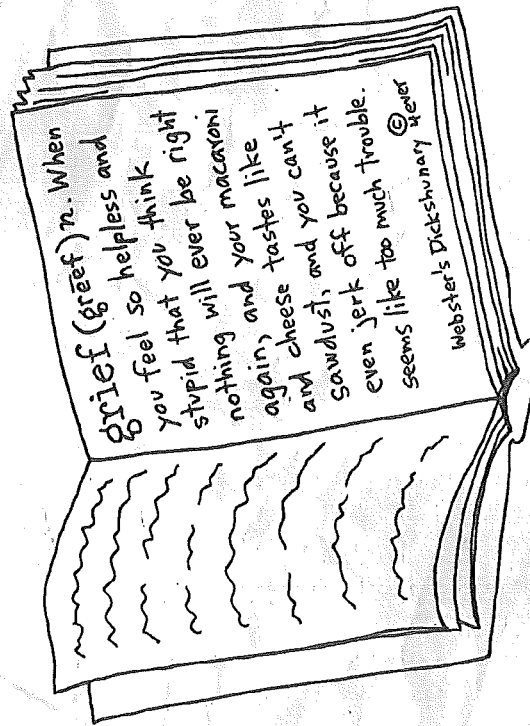
Jesus farteth and burpeth in harmony! MIRACULOUS!!
John 11:35am

I hoped I could find more cartoons that would help me. And I hoped I could find stories that would help me.

So I looked up the word "grief" in the dictionary.

I wanted to find out everything I could about grief. I wanted to know why my family had been given so much to grieve about.

And then I discovered the answer:



Okay, so it was Gordy who showed me a book written by the guy who knew the answer.

It was Euripides, this Greek writer from the fifth century BC.

A way-old dude.

In one of his plays, Medea says, "What greater grief than the loss of one's native land?"

I read that and thought, "Well, of course, man. We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING. We lost our native land, we lost our languages, we lost our songs and dances. We lost each other. We only know how to lose and be lost."

But it's more than that, too.

I mean, the thing is, Medea was so distraught by the world, and felt so betrayed, that she murdered her own kids.

She thought the world was that joyless.

And, after Eugene's funeral, I agreed with her. I could have easily killed myself, killed my mother and father, killed the birds, killed the trees, and killed the oxygen in the air.

More than anything, I wanted to kill God.

I was joyless.

I mean, I can't even tell you how I found the strength to get up every morning. And yet, every morning, I did get up and go to school.

Well, no, that's not exactly true.

I was so depressed that I thought about dropping out of Reardan.

I thought about going back to Wellpinit.

I blamed myself for all of the deaths.

I had cursed my family. I had left the tribe, and had broken something inside all of us, and I was now being punished for that.

No, my family was being punished.

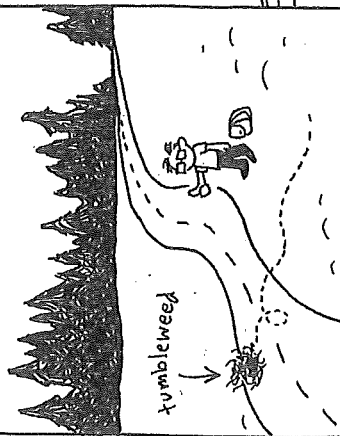
I was healthy and alive.

Then, after my fifteenth or twentieth missed day of school, I sat in my social studies classroom with Mrs. Jeremy.

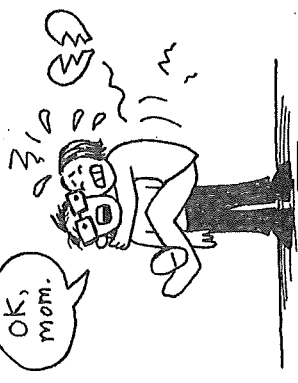
Mrs. Jeremy was an old bird who'd taught at Reardan for thirty-five years.

Why I Did Actually Miss a Lot of School

② Couldn't find a ride.



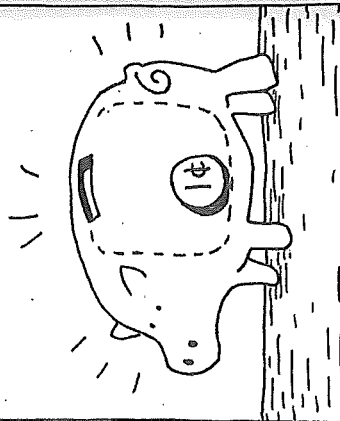
④ Mom wanted me to stay home because she was scared.



① Wakes and funerals.



③ No money in the house.



⑤ Mom & I had to go search for my father so we could bring him home & keep him safe.



I slumped into her class and sat in the back of the room. "Oh, class," she said. "We have a special guest today. It's Arnold Spirit. I didn't realize you still went to this school, Mr. Spirit."

The classroom was quiet. They all knew my family had been living inside a grief-storm. And had this teacher just mocked me for that?

"What did you just say?" I asked her.

"You really shouldn't be missing class this much," she said. If I'd been stronger, I would have stood up to her. I would have called her names. I would have walked across the room and slapped her.

But I was too broken.

Instead, it was Gordy who defended me.

He stood with his textbook and dropped it.

Whomp!

He looked so strong. He looked like a warrior. He was protecting me like Rowdy used to protect me. Of course, Rowdy would have thrown the book at the teacher and then punched her.

Gordy showed a lot of courage in standing up to a teacher like that. And his courage inspired the others.

Penelope stood and dropped her textbook.

And then Roger stood and dropped his textbook.

Whomp!

Then the other basketball players did the same.

Whomp! Whomp! Whomp! Whomp! Whomp!

And Mrs. Jeremy flinched each and every time, as if she'd been kicked in the crotch.

Whomp! Whomp! Whomp! Whomp! Whomp!

Then all of my classmates walked out of the room.

A spontaneous demonstration.

Of course, I probably should have walked out with them.