The Black Eye-of the-Month Club

I was born with water on the brain.

Okay, so that's not exactly true. I was actually born with too much cerebral spinal fluid inside my skull. But cerebral spinal fluid is just the doctors' fancy way of saying brain grease.

And brain grease works inside the lobes like car grease works inside an engine. It keeps things running smooth and fast. But weirdo me, I was born with too much grease inside my skull, and it got all thick and muddy and disgusting, and it only mucked up the works. My thinking and breathing and living engine slowed down and flooded.

My brain was drowning in grease.

But that makes the whole thing sound weirdo and funny, like my brain was a giant

French fry, so it seems more serious and poetic and accurate to say, "I was born with water on the brain."

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

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

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

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

First of all, I ended up having forty-two teeth. The typical human has thirty-two, right?
But I had forty-two.
Ten more than usual.
Ten more than normal.
Ten teeth past human.

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

And what's more, our white dentist believed that Indians only fell half as much pain as white people did, so he only gave us half the Novocain. What a bastard, huh?

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

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

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

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

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

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

And my skull was enormous.

Epic.

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

So obviously, I looked goofy on the outside, but it was the *inside* stuff that was the worst.
First of all, I had seizures. At least two a week. So I was damaging my brain on a regular basis. But the thing is, I was having those seizures because I *already* had brain damage, so I was reopening wounds each time I seized.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

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

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

Susceptible to seizure activity.
Doesn't that just roll off the tongue like poetry?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do you know what happens to retards on the rez?

We get beat up.
At least once a month.
Yep, I belong to the Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club.

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

Here's one of me:

I draw all the time.

I draw cartoons of my mother and father; my sister and grandmother; my best friend,

Rowdy; and everybody else on the rez.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

I draw because words are too unpredictable.

I draw because words are too limited.
If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

QUESTIONS: CHOOSE THE CORRECT ANSWER

1) What medical condition was the narrator born with?

- A) Hydrocephalus
- B) Blindness
- C) Heart disease
- D) Asthma

2) How did the dentist treat the narrator during his dental work?

- A) With extra care
- B) By giving him double the Novocain
- C) He gave him half the Novocain
- D) He did not treat him at all

3) How often did the narrator have seizures?

- A) Once a year
- B) Once a week
- C) At least two a week
- D) Never

4) What does the narrator believe is the only way for him to escape the reservation?

- A) By getting a job
- B) By becoming an artist
- C) By traveling
- D) By getting married

Why Chicken Means So Much to Me

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

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

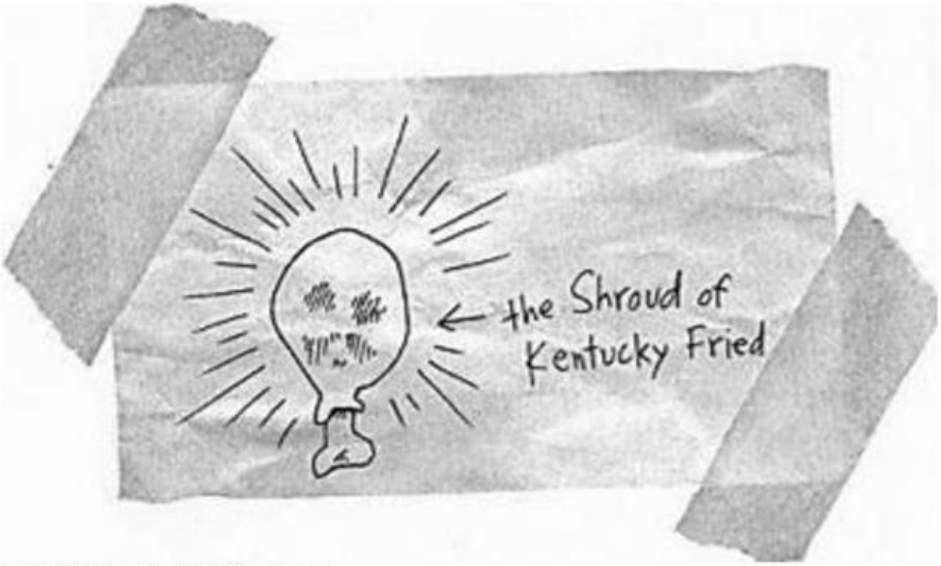
LIVEWORKSHEETS

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

Poverty = empty refrigerator + empty stomach

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

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



So hunger is not the worst thing about being poor.

And now I'm sure you're asking, "Okay, okay, Mr. Hunger Artist, Mr. Mouth Full-of

Words, Mr. Woe-Is-Me, Mr. Secret Recipe, what is the worst thing about being poor?"

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

Last week, my best friend Oscar got really sick.

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

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

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

It was like his nerves were poking out three inches from Ids skin. I figured he'd be okay with some rest, but then he started vomiting, and diarrhea blasted out of him, and he had these seizures where his little legs just kicked and kicked and kicked.

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

Honestly, Oscar was a better person than any human I had ever known. "Mom," I said. "We have to take Oscar to the vet." "He'll be all right," she said.

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

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

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

LIVEWORKSHEETS

"Junior, sweetheart," Mom said. "I'm sorry, but we don't have any money for Oscar."

"I'll pay you back," I said. "I promise."

"Honey, it'll cost hundreds of dollars, maybe a thousand."

"I'll pay back the doctor. I'll get a job."

Mom smiled all sad and hugged me hard.

Jeez, how stupid was I? What kind of job can a reservation Indian boy get? I was too young to deal blackjack at the casino, there were only about fifteen green grass lawns on the reservation (and none of their owners outsourced the mowing jobs), and the only paper route was owned by a tribal elder named Wally. And he had to deliver only fifty papers, so his job was more like a hobby. There was nothing I could do to save Oscar.

Nothing.
Nothing.
Nothing.

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

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

And then Dad pulled down his rifle and bullets from the closet. "Junior," he said. "Carry Oscar outside."

"No!" I screamed.

"He's suffering," Dad said. "We have to help him."

"You can't do it!" I shouted.

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

I was hot mad. Volcano mad. Tsunami mad.

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

I wanted to hate him for his weakness.

I wanted to hate Dad and Mom for our poverty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She still reads books like crazy. She buys them by the pound. And she remembers everything she reads.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

She can recite whole pages by memory.

She's a human tape recorder. Really, my mom can read the newspaper in fifteen minutes and tell me baseball scores, the location of every war, the latest guy to win the Lottery, and the high temperature in Des Moines, Iowa.

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

When he gets drunk, he sings old country songs. And blues, too. And he sounds good.

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

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

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

LIVEWORKSHEETS

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

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

"I love you, Oscar," I said.

He looked at me and I swear to you that he understood what was happening.

He knew what Dad was going to do. But Oscar wasn't scared. He was relieved.

But not me.

I ran away from there as fast as I could.

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

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

QUESTIONS: The following statements are either true or false. Tick [√] the correct option, then justify it using rods as they appear in the text. Both parts are required for [1 mark]

1) The narrator says that hunger is the worst thing about being poor.

☐ **TRUE**
☐ **FALSE**

Justification: ……

……

2) The narrator's best friend, Oscar, is a human.

☐ **TRUE**
☐ **FALSE**

Justification: ……

……

3) The narrator's father dreamed of becoming a musician.

☐ **TRUE**
☐ **FALSE**

Justification: ……

……

4) The narrator blames his parents for the family's poverty.

☐ **TRUE**
☐ **FALSE**

Justification: ……

……

Revenge Is My Middle Name

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

But Rowdy talked me out of it.

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

Isn't that tough love?

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

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

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

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

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

LIVEWORKSHEETS

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

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

So I gut it out.

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

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

"It's war paint," Rowdy always says. "It just makes me look tougher."

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

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

He had a bandage over his left ear.

"What happened to your head?" I asked.

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

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

He doesn't believe in physical punishment; he believes in staring so cold at me that I turn into a ice-covered ice cube with an icy filling.
My house is a safe place, so Rowdy spends most of his time with us. It's like he's a family member, an extra brother and son.

"You want to head down to the powwow?" Rowdy asked.

"Nah," I said.

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

I wanted no part of it.

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

And I am always the most available loser.

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

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

Rowdy has protected me since we were born.

Both of us were pushed into the world on November 5, 1992, at Sacred Heart Hospital in

Spokane. I'm two hours older than Rowdy. I was born all broken and twisted, and he was born mad.

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

He really hasn't changed much since then.

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

LIVEWORKSHEETS

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

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

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

"What's wrong with you?" he yelled.
"Everything!" Rowdy yelled back.
Rowdy fought everybody.
He fought boys and girls.
Men and women.
He fought stray dogs.
Hell, he fought the weather.
He'd throw wild punches at rain.
Honestly.

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

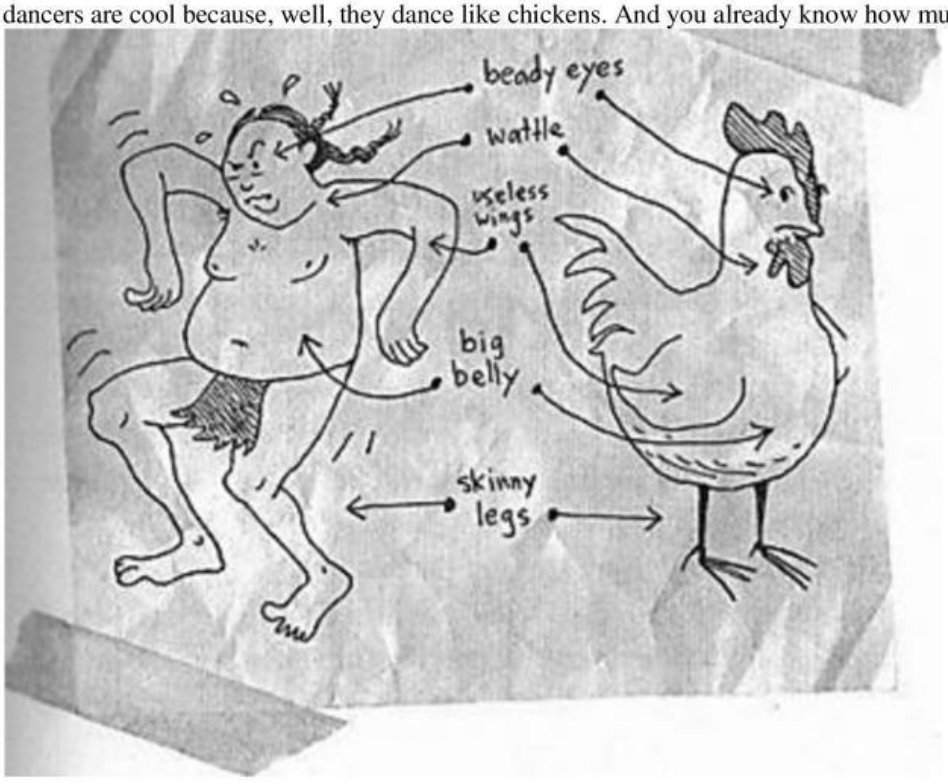
"What if somebody picks on me?" I asked.
"Then I'll pick on them."
"What if somebody picks my nose?" I asked.
"Then I'll pick your nose, too," Rowdy said.
"You're my hero," I said.
"Come to the powwow," Rowdy said. "Please."
It's a big deal when Rowdy is polite.
"Okay, okay," I said.

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

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

"I should have worn my coat," I said.
"Lighten up," Rowdy said.
"Let's go watch the chicken dancers," I said.

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



LIVEWORKSHEETS

"This crap is boring," Rowdy said.

"We'll just watch for a little while," I said. "And then we'll go gamble or something."

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

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

"Hey, let's go buy some bootleg whiskey," Rowdy said. "I got five bucks."

"Don't get drunk," I said. "You'll just get ugly."

"I'm already ugly," Rowdy said.

He laughed, tripped over a tent pole, and stumbled into a minivan. He bumped his face against a window and jammed his shoulder against the rearview mirror. It was pretty funny, so I laughed.

That was a mistake.

Rowdy got mad.

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

Glass broke everywhere.

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

Smash! Boom! Bam!

He dented the doors and smashed the windows and knocked off the mirrors. I was scared of Rowdy and I was scared of getting thrown in jail for vandalism, so I ran.

That was a mistake.

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

"Hey, look," one of them said. "It's Hydro Head."

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

"Nah, he ain't Hydro," said another one of the brothers. "He's Hydrogen."

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

"Hydromatic."
"Hydrocarbon."
"Hydrocrack."
"Hydrodynamic."
"Hydroelectric."
"Hydro-and-Low."
"Hydro-and-Seek."

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

I fell down again, holding my tender crotch, and tried not scream. The Andruss brothers laughed and walked away.

Oh, by the way, did I mention that the Andruss triplets are thirty years old? What kind of men beat up a fourteen-year-old boy?

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

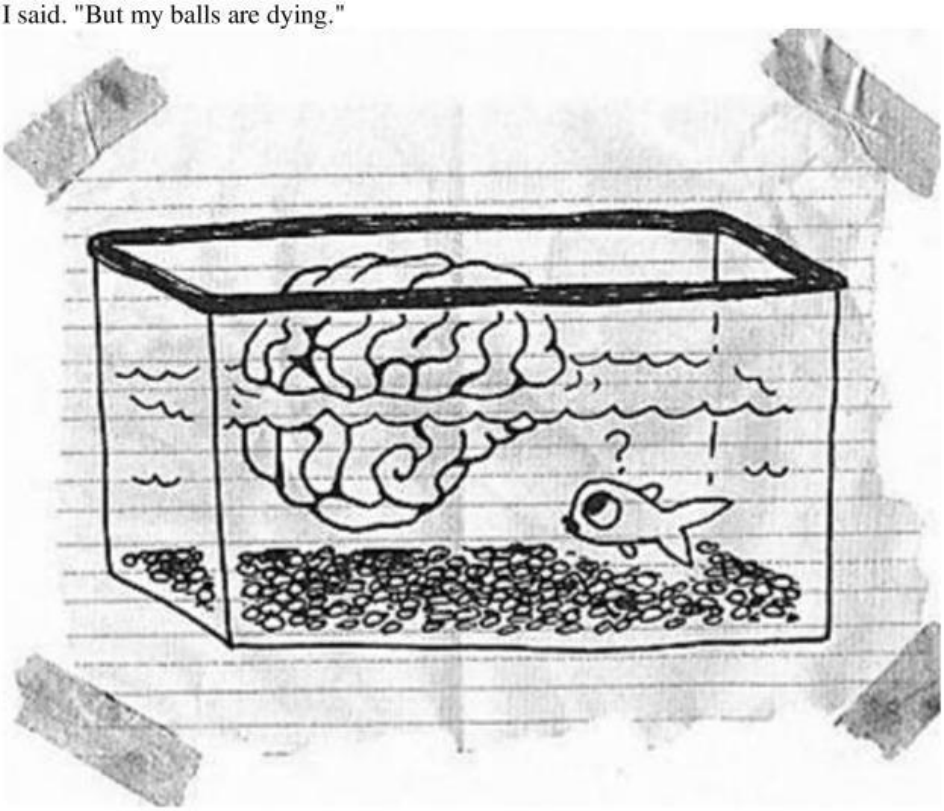
LIVEWORKSHEETS

"Who did this to you?" he asked.

"The Andruss brothers," I said.

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

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



"I'm going to kill those bastards," Rowdy said.

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

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

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

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

"You can't trust them whale hunters," Rowdy said. "They'll do anything."

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

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

Rowdy isn't a fast reader, but he's persistent. And he'll just laugh and laugh at the dumb jokes, no matter how many times he's read the same comic.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

I like the sound of Rowdy's laughter. I don't hear it very often, but it's always sort of this avalanche of ha-ha and ho-ho and hee-hee. I like to make him laugh. He loves my cartoons.

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

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

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

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

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

Let's do the math.

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

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

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

Nobody else comes anywhere close to that.

Trust me.

Rowdy and I are inseparable.

QUESTIONS: Answer the following questions:
1) Why does Rowdy never admit to missing the narrator?

……..……

LIVEWORKSHEETS

2) How does the narrator feel about being at the powwow?

……

3) What kind of comic books does Rowdy love to read?

……

4) Why does the narrator draw cartoons for Rowdy?

……

LIVEWORKSHEETS