

HOW TO FIGHT MONSTERS

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

"I'm scared," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

I would have been pummeled. Mutilated. Crucified.

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

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

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

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

"This is a great thing," he said. "You're so brave. You're a warrior." It was the best thing he could have said.

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

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

"Thanks, Dad," I said.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

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

So I stood alone on the sidewalk and watched my father drive away. I hoped he'd drive right home and not stop in a bar and spend whatever money he had left. I hoped he'd remember to come back and pick me up after school. I stood alone at the front door for a few very long minutes.

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

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

Most of the kids were my size or smaller, but there were ten or twelve monster dudes.

Giant white guys. They looked like men, not boys. They had to be seniors. Some of them looked like they had to shave two or three times a day.

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



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

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



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

I stayed outside.

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

Like a real Indian.

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

"Okay," I said to myself. "Here I go."

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

"Oh, you're the one from the reservation," the secretary said. "Yeah," I said.

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

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

"All, where is that?" I asked.

"We've only got one hallway here," she said and smiled. She had red hair and green eyes and was kind of sexy for an old woman.

"It's all the way down on the left."

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

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

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

Like I was bad weather.

"Take your seat," the teacher said. He was a muscular guy.

I walked down the aisle and sat in the back row and tried pore all the stares and whispers, until a blond girl leaned toward me. Penelope!



Yes, there are places left in the world where people are named Penelope! I was emotionally erect.

"What's your name?" Penelope asked.

"Junior," I said.

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

They were laughing at my name.

I had no idea that Junior was a weird name. It's a common name on my rez, on any rez.

You walk into any trading post any rez in the United States and shout, "Hey, Junior!" and seventeen guys will turn around. And three women.

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

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

"Arnold Spirit," the teacher said.

No, he yelled it.

He was so big and muscular that his whisper was probably a scream. "Here," I said as quietly as possible. My whisper was only a whisper. "Speak up," the teacher said.

"Here," I said.

"My name is Mr. Grant," he said.

"I'm here, Mr. Grant."

He moved on to other students, but Penelope leaned over toward me again, but she wasn't laughing at all. She was mad now. "I thought you said your name was Junior," Penelope said. She accused me of telling her my real name. Well, okay, it wasn't completely my real name. My full name is Arnold Spirit Jr. But nobody calls me that. Everybody calls me Junior. Well, every other Indian calls me Junior. "My name is Junior," I said. "And my name is Arnold. It's Junior and Arnold. I'm both." I felt like two different people inside of one body. No, I felt like a magician slicing myself in half, with Junior living on the north side of the Spokane River and Arnold living on the south. "Where are you from?" she asked.

QUESTIONS: CHOOSE THE CORRECT ANSWER

1) Why was the narrator scared?

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- a) He was afraid of the dark.
- b) He was scared of starting a new school.
- c) He didn't like driving with his dad.
- d) He lost his lunch money.

2) What did the narrator hope his dad would do after dropping him off?

☐

- a) Drive straight home.
- b) Visit a friend.
- c) Go to a bar.
- d) Stay and wait with him.

3) Who greeted the narrator in the school office?

☐

- a) The principal.
- b) The janitor.
- c) A secretary named Melinda.
- d) A teacher named Mr. Grant.

4) What did Penelope say about the narrator's accent?

☐

- a) It sounded nice.
- b) It was funny.
- c) It was like a bad poem.
- d) It was very quiet.

She was so pretty and her eyes were so blue. I was suddenly aware that she was the prettiest girl I had ever seen up close. She was movie star pretty. "Hey," she said. "I asked you where you're from." Wow, she was tough. "Wellpinit," I said. "Up on the rez, I mean, the reservation." "Oh," she said. "That's why you talk so funny." And yes, I had that stutter and lisp, but I also had that singsong reservation accent that made everything I said sound like a bad poem. Man, I was freaked. I didn't say another word for six days. And on the seventh day, I got into the weirdest fistfight of my life. But before I tell you about the weirdest fistfight of my life, I have to tell you:

THE UNOFFICIAL AND UNWRITTEN

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

SPOKANE INDIAN RULES OF FISTICUFFS:

1. IF SOMEBODY INSULTS YOU THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM.
2. IF YOU THINK SOMEBODY IS GOING TO INSULT YOU, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM.
3. IF YOU THINK SOMEBODY IS THINKING ABOUT INSULTING YOU, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM.
4. IF SOMEBODY INSULTS ANY OF YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS, OR IF YOU THINK THEY'RE GOING TO INSULT YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS, OR IF YOU THINK THEY'RE THINKING ABOUT INSULTING YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM.
5. YOU SHOULD NEVER FIGHT A GIRL, UNLESS SHE INSULTS YOU, YOUR FAMILY, OR YOUR FRIENDS, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HER.
6. IF SOMEBODY BEATS UP YOUR FATHER OR YOUR MOTHER, THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT THE SON AND/OR DAUGHTER OF THE PERSON WHO BEAT UP YOUR MOTHER OR FATHER.
7. IF YOUR MOTHER OR FATHER BEATS UP SOMEBODY, THEN THAT PERSON'S SON AND/OR DAUGHTER WILL FIGHT YOU.
8. YOU MUST ALWAYS PICK FIGHTS WITH THE SONS AND/OR DAUGHTERS OF ANY INDIANS WHO WORK FOR THE BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS.
9. YOU MUST ALWAYS PICK FIGHTS WITH THE SONS AND/OR DAUGHTERS OF ANY WHITE PEOPLE WHO LIVE ANYWHERE ON THE RESERVATION.
10. IF YOU GET IN A FIGHT WITH SOMEBODY WHO IS SURE TO BEAT YOU UP, THEN YOU MUST THROW THE FIRST PUNCH, BECAUSE IT'S THE ONLY PUNCH YOU'LL EVER GET TO THROW.

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

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

My all-time record was five wins and one hundred and twelve losses. Yes, I was a terrible fighter.

I was a human punching bag.

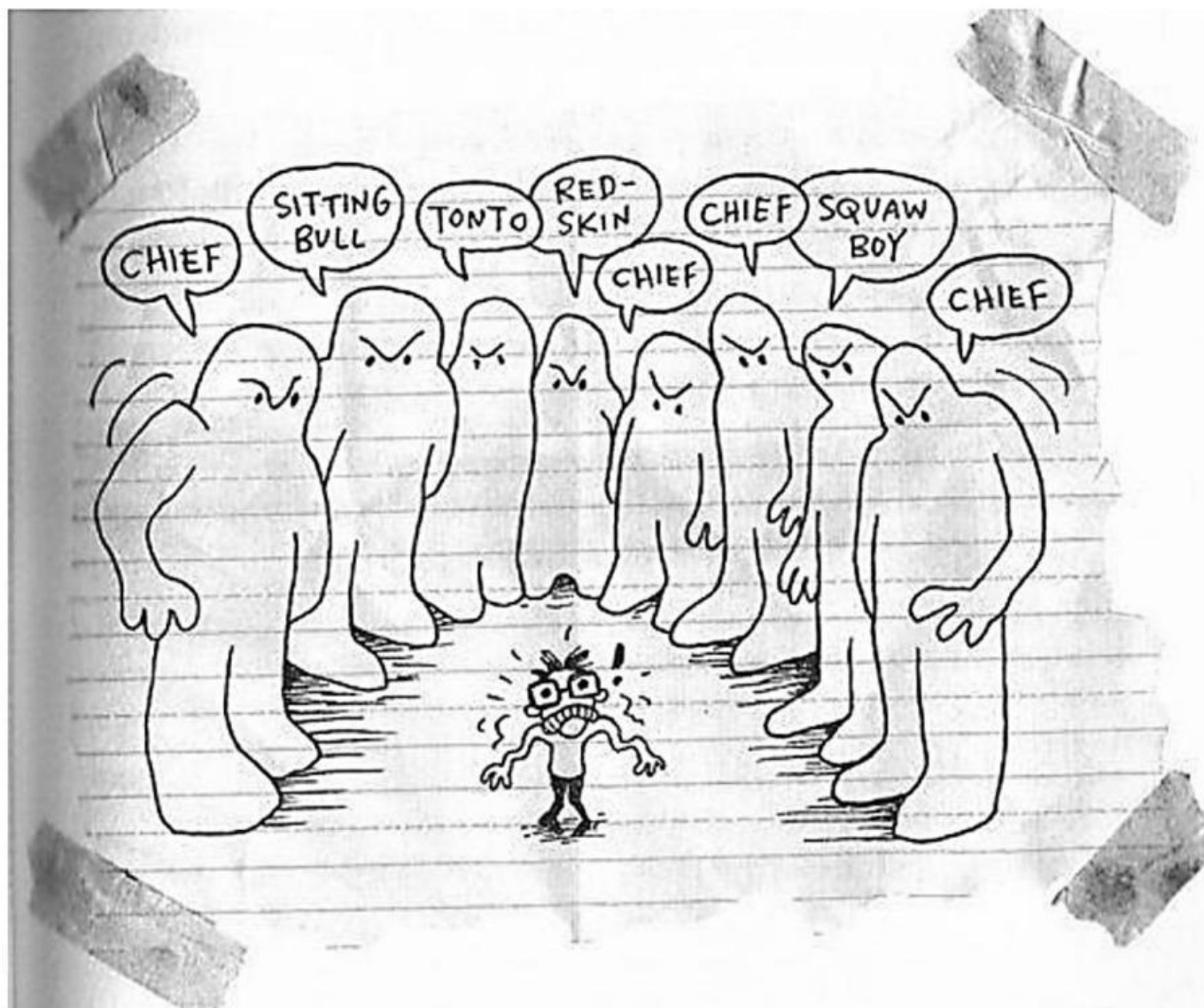
I lost fights to boys, girls, and kids half my age.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Roger the Giant and his gang of giants strutted over to me. "Hey, Chief," Roger said.

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

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

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

"Sure," I said.

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

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

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

So I punched Roger in the face.

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

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

But they just stared at me.

They were shocked.

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

He sounded insulted.

He sounded like his poor little feelings had been hurt.

I couldn't believe it.

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

"You're an animal," he said.

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

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

"Why?" he asked.

I couldn't believe he was so stupid.

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

"You're crazy," Roger said.

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

I was absolutely confused.

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

"Wait," I called after Roger.

"What do you want?" Roger asked.

"What are the rules?"

"What rules?"

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

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

QUESTIONS: Answer the following questions:

1) Who made the narrator beat himself up?

.....

2) How many fights has the narrator won and lost in total?

.....

3) How did most of the white girls at Reardan treat the narrator?

.....

4) What did the narrator do after hearing Roger's joke?

.....

SLOUCHING TOWARD THANKSGIVING

I walked like a zombie through the next few weeks in Reardan.

Well, no, that's not exactly the right description.

I mean, if I'd been walking around like a zombie, I might have been scary. So, no, I wasn't a zombie, not at all. Because you can't ignore a zombie. So that made me, well, it made me *nothing*.

Zero.

Zilch.

Nada.

In fact, if you think of everybody with a body, soul, and in as a human, then I was the opposite of human.

It was the loneliest time of my life.

And whenever I get lonely, I grow a big zit on the end of my nose.

If things didn't get better soon, I was going to turn into one giant walking talking zit.

A strange thing was happening to me.

Zitty and lonely, I woke up on the reservation as an Indian, and somewhere on the road to Reardan, I became something less than Indian.

And once I arrived at Reardan, I became something less than less than less than Indian.

Those white kids did not talk to me.

They barely looked at me.

Well, Roger would nod his head at me, but he didn't socialize with me or anything. I wondered if maybe I should punch everybody in the face. Maybe they'd all pay attention to me then.



I just walked from class to class alone; I sat at lunch alone; during PE I stood in the corner of the gym and played catch with myself. Just tossed a basketball up and down, up and down, up and down.

And I know you're thinking, "Okay, Mr. Sad Sack, how many ways are you going to tell us how depressed you were?"

And, okay, maybe I'm overstating my case. Maybe I'm exaggerating. So let me tell you a few good things that I discovered during that awful time.

First of all, I learned that I was smarter than most of those white kids.

Oh, there were a couple girls and one boy who were little Einsteins, and there was no way I'd ever be smarter than then I but I was way smarter than 99 percent of the others. And not just smart for an Indian, okay? I was smart, period.

Let me give you an example.

In geology class, the teacher, Mr. Dodge, was talking about the petrified wood forests near George, Washington, on the Columbia River, and how it was pretty amazing that wood could turn into rock.

I raised my hand.

"Yes, Arnold," Mr. Dodge said.

He was surprised. That was the first time I'd raised my hand in his class.

"Uh, er, um," I said.

Yeah, I was so *articulate*.

"Spit it out," Dodge said.

"Well," I said. "Petrified wood is not wood."

My classmates stared at me. They couldn't believe that was contradicting a teacher.

"If it's not wood," Dodge said, "then why do they call it wood?"

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't name the stuff. But I know how it works."

Dodge's face was red.

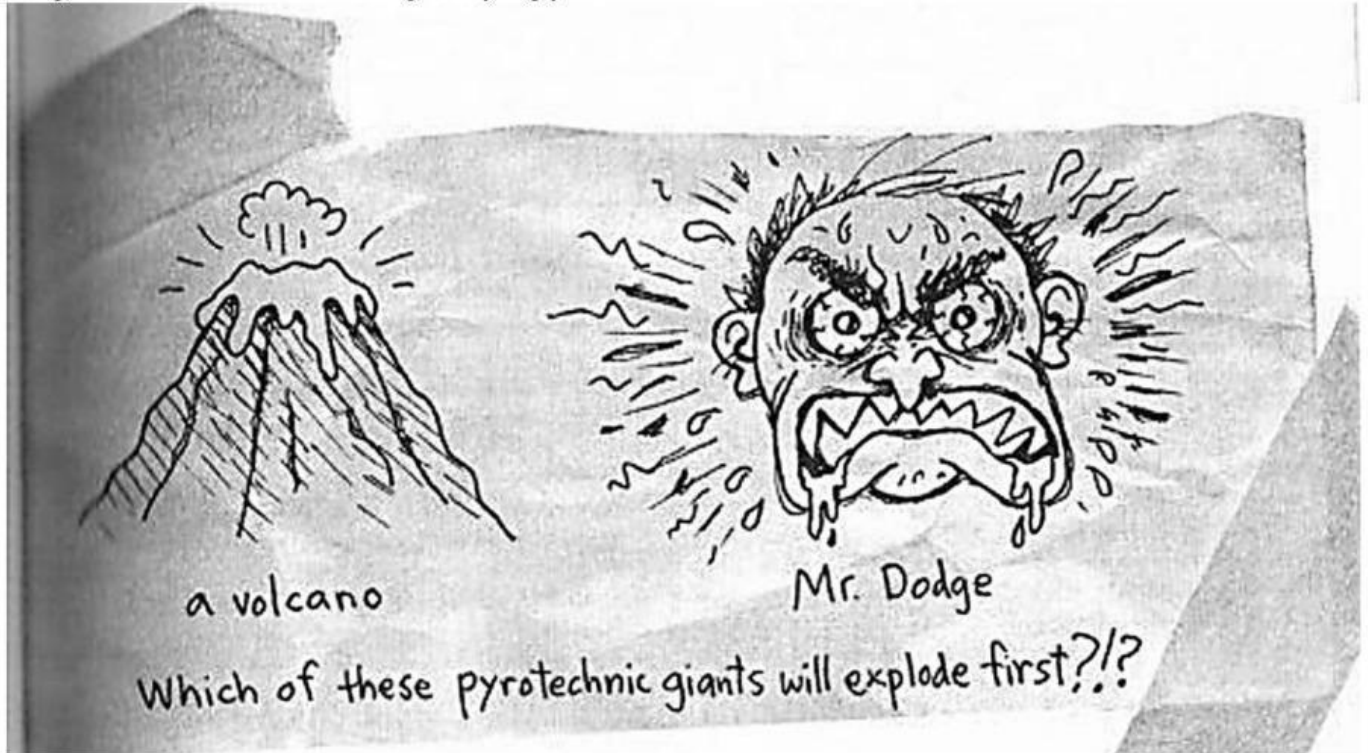
Hot red.

I'd never seen an Indian look that red. So why do they call us the redskins?

"Okay, Arnold, if you're so smart," Dodge said, "then tell us how it works."

"Well, what happens is, er, when you have wood that's buried under dirt, then minerals and stuff sort of, uh, soak into wood. They, uh, land of melt the wood and the glue that phis the wood together. And then the minerals sort of take place of the wood and the glue. I mean, the minerals keep I same shape as the wood. Like, if the minerals took all the wood and glue out of a, uh, tree, then the tree would still be a tree, sort of, but it would be a tree made out of minerals. So, uh, you see, the wood has not turned into rocks. The rocks have replace the wood."

Dodge stared hard at me. He was dangerously angry.



"Okay, Arnold," Dodge said. "Where did you learn this fact? On the reservation? Yes, we all know there's so much amazing science on the reservation."

My classmates snickered. They pointed their fingers at me and giggled. Except for one.

Gordy, the class genius. He raised his hand.

"Gordy," Dodge said, all happy and relieved and stuff. "I'm sure you can tell us the truth."

"Uh, actually," Gordy said, "Arnold is right about petrified wood. That's what happens."

Dodge suddenly went all pale. Yep. From blood red to snow white in about two seconds.

If Gordy said it was true, then it was true. And even Dodge knew that.

Mr. Dodge wasn't even a real science teacher. That's what happens in small schools, you know? Sometimes you don't have enough money to hire a real science teacher. Sometimes you have an old real science teacher who retires or quits and leaves you without a replacement. And if you don't have a real science teacher, then you pick one of the other teachers and make him the science teacher.

And that's why small-town kids sometimes don't know the truth about petrified wood.

"Well, isn't that interesting," the fake science teacher said, "Thank you for sharing that with us, Gordy."

Yeah, that's right.

Mr. Dodge thanked Gordy, but didn't say another word to me.

Yep, now even the teachers were treating me like an idiot.

I shrank back into my chair and remembered when I used to be a human being.

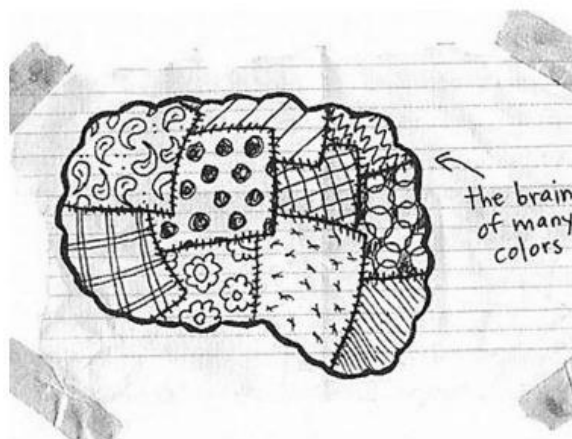
I remember when people used to think I was smart.

I remember when people used to think my brain was useful.
 Damaged by water, sure. And ready to seizure at any moment. But still
 useful, and maybe even a little bit beautiful and sacred and magical.

After class, I caught up to Gordy in the hallway.
 "Hey, Gordy," I said. "Thanks."
 "Thanks for what?" he said.
 "Thanks for sticking up for me back there. For telling Dodge the truth."
 "I didn't do it for you," Gordy said. "I did it for science."

He walked away. I stood there and waited for the rocks to replace my
 bones and blood.
 I rode the bus home that night.
 Well, no, I rode the bus to the end of the line, which was the reservation
 border.
 And there I waited.

My dad was supposed to pick me up. But he wasn't sure if I'd have enough gas money.
 Especially if he was going to stop at the rez casino and play slot machines first.
 I waited for thirty minutes.
 Exactly.
 Then I started walking.
 Getting to school was always an adventure.
 After school, I'd ride the bus to the end of the line and but for my folks.
 If they didn't come, I'd start walking.
 Hitchhiking in the opposite direction.
 Somebody was usually heading back home to the rez, so I'd usually catch a ride.
 Three times, I had to walk the whole way home.
 Twenty-two miles.
 I got blisters each time.



Anyway, after my petrified wood day, I caught a ride with a Bureau of Indian Affairs white guy and he dropped me off right in front of my house.

I walked inside and saw that my mother was crying.

I often walked inside to find my mother crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's your sister," she said.

"Did she run away again?"

"She got married."

Wow, I was freaked. But my mother and father were absolutely freaked. Indian families stick together like Gorilla Glue, the strongest adhesive in the world. My mother and father both lived within two miles of where they were born, and my grandmother lived one mile from where she was born. Ever since the Spokane Indian Reservation was founded back in 1881, nobody in my family had ever lived anywhere else. We Spirits stay in one place. We are absolutely tribal.

For good or bad, we don't leave one another. And now, my mother and father had lost two kids to the outside world.

I think they felt like failures. Or maybe they were just lonely. Or maybe they didn't know what they were feeling.

I didn't know what to feel. Who could understand my sister?

After seven years of living in the basement and watching TV, after doing *absolutely nothing* at all, my sister decided she needed to change her life.

I guess I'd kind of shamed her.

If I was brave enough to go to Reardan, then she'd be brave enough to MARRY A FLATHEAD INDIAN AND MOVE TO MONTANA.

"Where'd she meet this guy?" I asked my mother.

"At the casino," she said. "Your sister said he was a good poker player. I guess he travels to all the Indian casinos in the country."

"She married him because he plays cards?"

"She said he wasn't afraid to gamble everything, and that's the kind of man she wanted to spend her life with."

I couldn't believe it. My sister married a guy for a damn silly reason. But I suppose people often get married for damn silly reasons.

"Is he good-looking?" I asked.

"He's actually kind of ugly," my mother said. "He has this hook nose and his eyes are way different sizes."

Damn, my sister had married a lopsided, eagle-nosed, nomadic poker player.

It made me feel smaller.

I thought I was pretty tough.

But I'd just have to dodge dirty looks from white kids while my sister would be dodging gunfire in beautiful Montana. Those Montana Indians were so tough that white people were scared of them.

Can you imagine a place where white people are scared of Indians and not the other way around?

That's Montana.

And my sister had married one of those crazy Indians.

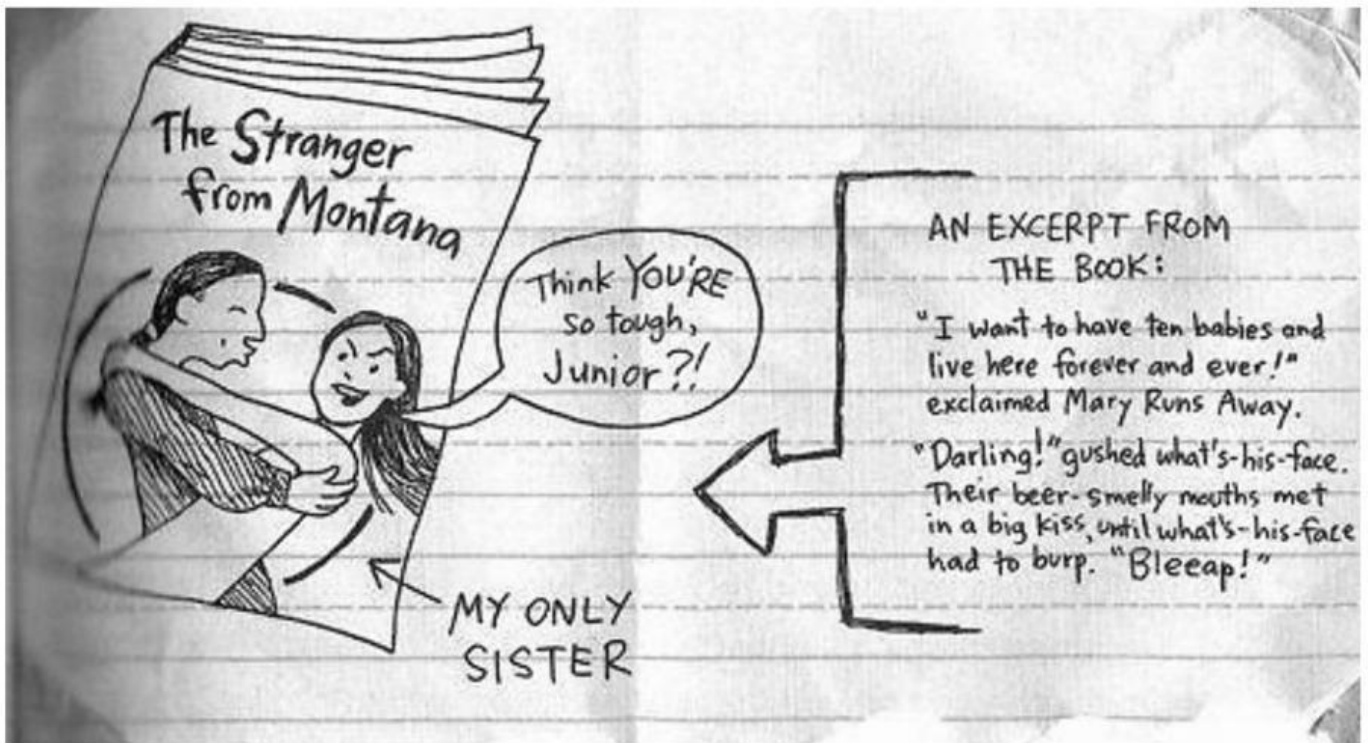
She didn't even tell our parents or grandmother or me before she left. She called Mom from St. Ignatius, Montana on the Flathead Indian Reservation, and said, "Hey, Mom, I'm a married woman now. I want to have ten babies and live here forever and ever."

How weird is that? It's almost *romantic*.

And then I realized that my sister was trying to LIVE a romance novel.

Man, that takes courage and imagination. Well, it also took some degree of mental illness, too, but I was suddenly happy for her.

And a little scared.



Well, a lot scared.

She was trying to live out her dream. We should have all been delirious that she'd moved out of the basement. We'd been trying to get her out of there for years. Of course, my mother and father would have been happy if she'd just gotten a part-time job at the post office or trading post, and maybe just moved into an upstairs bedroom in our house.

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) Arnold spent his lunch breaks surrounded by friends.

☐
☐

TRUE
FALSE

Justification:

2) Mr. Dodge was happy that Arnold contradicted him in class.

☐
☐

TRUE
FALSE

Justification:

3) Arnold's sister said she wanted to have ten babies.

☐
☐

TRUE
FALSE

Justification:

4) Arnold felt entirely upset about his sister's decision to leave.

☐
☐

TRUE
FALSE

Justification:

But I just kept thinking that my sister's spirit hadn't been killed. She hadn't given up. This reservation had tried to suffocate her, had kept her trapped in a basement, and now she was out roaming the huge grassy fields of Montana.

How cool!

I felt inspired.

5 Of course, my parents and grandmother were in shock. They thought my sister and I were going absolutely crazy.

But I thought we were being warriors, you know?

And a warrior isn't afraid of confrontation.

So I went to school the next day and walked right up to Gordy the Genius White Boy.

10 "Gordy," I said. "I need to talk to you."
 "I don't have time," he said. "Mr. Orcutt and I have to tie bug some PCs. Don't you hate PCs? They are sickly and fragile and vulnerable to viruses. PCs are like French people living during the bubonic plague."
 Wow, and people thought I was a freak.

15 "I much prefer Macs, don't you?" he asked. "They're so poetic."
 This guy was in love with computers. I wondered if he was secretly writing a romance about a skinny, white boy genius who was having sex with a half-breed Apple computer.
 "Computers are computers," I said. "One or the other, it's all the same."
 Gordy sighed.

20 "So, Mr. Spirit," he said. "Are you going to bore me with your tautologies all day or are you going to actually say some thing?"
 Tautologies? What the heck were tautologies? I couldn't ask Gordy because then he'd know I was an illiterate Indian idiot.
 "You don't know what a tautology is, do you?" he asked.
 "Yes, I do," I said. "Really, I do. Completely, I do."
 "You're lying."
 25 "No, I'm not."
 "Yes, you are."
 "How can you tell?"
 "Because your eyes dilated, your breathing rate increased a little bit, and you started to sweat."

30 Okay, so Gordy was a human lie detector machine, too.
 "All right, I lied," I said. "What is a tautology?"
 Gordy sighed again.
 I HATED THAT SIGH! I WANTED TO PUNCH THAT SIGH IN THE FACE!
 "A tautology is a repetition of the same sense in different words," he said.

35 "Oh," I said.
 What the hell was he talking about?
 "It's a redundancy."
 "Oh, you mean, redundant, like saying the same thing over and over but in different ways?"
 "Yes."
 40 "Oh, so if I said something like, 'Gordy is a dick without ears and an ear without a dick,' then that would be a tautology."
 Gordy smiled.
 "That's not exactly a tautology, but it is funny. You have a singular wit."
 I laughed.
 Gordy laughed, too. But then he realized that I wasn't laughing WITH him. I was laughing AT him.

45 "What's so funny?" he asked.
 "I can't believe you said 'singular wit.' That's sounds like fricking British or something."
 "Well, I am a bit of an Anglophile."
 "An Anglophile? What's an Angophile?"
 "It's someone who loves Mother England."

50 God, this kid was an eighty-year-old literature professor trapped in the body of a fifteen-year-old farm boy.
 "Listen, Gordy," I said. "I know you're a genius and all. But you are one weird dude."
 "I'm quite aware of my differences. I wouldn't classify them as weird."
 "Don't get me wrong. I think weird is great. I mean, if you look at all the great people in history—Einstein, Michelangelo, Emily
 55 Dickinson—then you're looking at a bunch of weird people."
 "I'm going to be late for class," Gordy said. "You're going to be late for class. Perhaps you should, as they say, cut to the chase."
 I looked at Gordy. He was a big kid, actually, strong from bucking bales and driving trucks. He was probably the strongest geek in the world.
 "I want to be your friend," I said.

60 "Excuse me?" he asked.
 "I want us to be friends," I said.
 Gordy stepped back.
 "I assure you," he said. "I am not a homosexual."
 "Oh, no," I said. "I don't want to be friends that way. I jus I meant regular friends. I mean, you and I, we have a lot in common."
 65 Gordy studied me now.
 I was an Indian kid from the reservation. I was lonely and sad and isolated and terrified.
 Just like Gordy.

And so we did become friends. Not the best of friends. Not like Rowdy and me. We didn't share secrets. Or dreams. No, we studied together. Gordy taught me how to study.

Best of all, he taught me how to read.

"Listen," he said one afternoon in the library. "You have to read a book three times before you know it. The first time you read it for the story. The plot. The movement from scene to scene that gives the book its momentum, its rhythm. It's like riding a raft down a river. You're just paying attention to the currents.

Do you understand that?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Yes, you do," he said.

"Okay, I do," I said. I really didn't, but Gordy believed in me. He wouldn't let me give up.

"The second time you read a book, you read it for its history. For its knowledge of history.

You think about the meaning of each word, and where that word came from. I mean, you read a novel that has the word 'spam' in it, and you know where that word comes from, right?"

"Spam is junk e-mail," I said.

"Yes, that's what it is, but who invented the word, who first used it, and how has the meaning of the word changed since it was first used?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, you have to look all that up. If you don't treat each word that seriously then you're not treating the novel seriously."

I thought about my sister in Montana. Maybe romance novels were absolutely serious business. My sister certainly I bought they were. I suddenly understood that if every moment of a book should be taken seriously, then every moment of a life should be taken seriously as well. "I draw cartoons," I said.

"What's your point?" Gordy asked.

"I take them seriously. I use them to understand the world. I use them to make fun of the world. To make fun of people. And sometimes I draw people because they're my friends and family. And I want to honor them."

"So you take your cartoons as seriously as you take books?"

"Yeah, I do," I said. "That's kind of pathetic, isn't it?"

"No, not at all," Gordy said. "If you're good at it, and you love it, and it helps you navigate the river of the world, then it can't be wrong."

Wow, this dude was a poet. My cartoons weren't just good for giggles; they were also good for poetry. Funny poetry, but poetry nonetheless. It was seriously funny stuff.

"But don't take anything too seriously, either," Gordy said.

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.
 115 "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
 120 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.

 125 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 I look 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."
 130 "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
 135 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 metaphorical boner?"
 Gordy laughed.
 "When I say boner, I really mean joy," he said.
 140 "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
 145 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.

QUESTION: To whom or to what o the underlined words refer? Answer using words as they appear in the text.

They are sickly and fragile (line 12)

It's someone who loves Mother England (line 49)

If you're good at it, and you love it, and it helps you navigate the river of the world... (line 97)

He would always be the smartest person I'd ever known. (line 143)