

What You Pawn I Will Redeem

By Sherman Alexie

NOON

One day you have a home and the next you don't, but I'm not going to tell you my particular reasons for being homeless, because it's my secret story, and Indians have to work hard to keep secrets from hungry white folks.

I'm a Spokane Indian boy, an Interior Salish, and my people have lived within a hundred-mile radius of Spokane, Washington, for at least ten thousand years. I grew up in Spokane, moved to Seattle twenty-three years ago for college, flunked out after two semesters, worked various blue- and bluer-collar jobs, married two or three times, fathered two or three kids, and then went crazy. Of course, crazy is not the official definition of my mental problem, but I don't think asocial disorder fits it, either, because that makes me sound like I'm a serial killer or something. I've never hurt another human being, or, at least, not physically. I've broken a few hearts in my time, but we've all done that, so I'm nothing special in that regard. I'm a boring heartbreaker, too. I never dated or married more than one woman at a time. I didn't break hearts into pieces overnight. I broke them slowly and carefully. And I didn't set any land-speed records running out the door. Piece by piece, I disappeared. I've been disappearing ever since.

I've been homeless for six years now. If there's such a thing as an effective homeless man, then I suppose I'm effective. Being homeless is probably the only thing I've ever been good at. I know where to get the best free food. I've made friends with restaurant and convenience-store managers who let me use their bathrooms. And I don't mean the public bathrooms, either. I mean the employees' bathrooms, the clean ones hidden behind the kitchen or the pantry or the cooler. I know it sounds strange to be proud of this, but it means a lot to me, being trustworthy enough to piss in somebody else's clean bathroom. Maybe you don't understand the value of a clean bathroom, but I do.

Probably none of this interests you. Homeless Indians are everywhere in Seattle. We're common and boring, and you walk right on by us, with maybe a look of anger or disgust or even sadness at the terrible fate of the noble savage. But we have dreams and families. I'm friends with a homeless Plains Indian man whose son is the editor of a big-time newspaper back East. Of course, that's his story, but we Indians are great storytellers and liars and mythmakers, so maybe that Plains Indian hobo is just a plain old everyday Indian. I'm kind of suspicious of him, because he identifies himself only as Plains Indian, a generic term, and not by a specific tribe. When I asked him why he wouldn't tell me exactly what he is, he said, "Do any of us know exactly what we are?" Yeah, great, a philosophizing Indian. "Hey," I said, "you got to have a home to be that homely." He just laughed and flipped me the eagle and walked away.

I wander the streets with a regular crew—my teammates, my defenders, my posse. It's Rose of Sharon, Junior, and me. We matter to each other if we don't matter to anybody else. Rose of Sharon is a big woman, about seven feet tall if you're measuring over-all effect and about five feet tall if you're only talking about the physical. She's a Yakama Indian of the Wishram variety. Junior is a Colville, but there are about a hundred and ninety-nine tribes that make up the Colville, so he could be anything. He's good-looking, though, like he just stepped out of some "Don't Litter the Earth" public-service advertisement. He's got those great big cheekbones that are like planets, you know, with little moons orbiting them. He gets me jealous, jealous, and jealous. If you put Junior and me next to each other, he's the Before Columbus Arrived Indian and I'm the After Columbus Arrived Indian. I am living proof of the horrible damage that colonialism has done to us Skins. But I'm not going to let you know how scared I sometimes get of history and its ways. I'm a strong man, and I know that silence is the best method of dealing with white folks.

This whole story really started at lunchtime, when Rose of Sharon, Junior, and I were panning the handle down at Pike Place Market. After about two hours of negotiating, we earned five dollars—good enough for a bottle of fortified courage from the most beautiful 7-Eleven in the world. So we headed over that way, feeling like warrior drunks, and we walked past this pawnshop I'd never noticed before. And that was strange, because we Indians have built-in pawnshop radar. But the strangest thing of all was the old powwow-dance regalia I saw hanging in the window.

“That’s my grandmother’s regalia,” I said to Rose of Sharon and Junior.

“How you know for sure?” Junior asked.

I didn’t know for sure, because I hadn’t seen that regalia in person ever. I’d only seen photographs of my grandmother dancing in it. And those were taken before somebody stole it from her, fifty years ago. But it sure looked like my memory of it, and it had all the same color feathers and beads that my family sewed into our powwow regalia.

“There’s only one way to know for sure,” I said.

So Rose of Sharon, Junior, and I walked into the pawnshop and greeted the old white man working behind the counter.

“How can I help you?” he asked.

“That’s my grandmother’s powwow regalia in your window,” I said. “Somebody stole it from her fifty years ago, and my family has been searching for it ever since.”

The pawnbroker looked at me like I was a liar. I understood. Pawnshops are filled with liars.

“I’m not lying,” I said. “Ask my friends here. They’ll tell you.”

“He’s the most honest Indian I know,” Rose of Sharon said.

“All right, honest Indian,” the pawnbroker said. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. Can you prove it’s your grandmother’s regalia?”

Because they don’t want to be perfect, because only God is perfect, Indian people sew flaws into their powwow regalia. My family always sewed one yellow bead somewhere on our regalia. But we always hid it so that you had to search really hard to find it.

“If it really is my grandmother’s,” I said, “there will be one yellow bead hidden somewhere on it.”

“All right, then,” the pawnbroker said. “Let’s take a look.”

He pulled the regalia out of the window, laid it down on the glass counter, and we searched for that yellow bead and found it hidden beneath the armpit.

“There it is,” the pawnbroker said. He didn’t sound surprised. “You were right. This is your grandmother’s regalia.”

“It’s been missing for fifty years,” Junior said.

“Hey, Junior,” I said. “It’s my family’s story. Let me tell it.”

“All right,” he said. “I apologize. You go ahead.”

“It’s been missing for fifty years,” I said.

“That’s his family’s sad story,” Rose of Sharon said. “Are you going to give it back to him?”

“That would be the right thing to do,” the pawnbroker said. “But I can’t afford to do the right thing. I paid a thousand dollars for this. I can’t just give away a thousand dollars.”

“We could go to the cops and tell them it was stolen,” Rose of Sharon said.

“Hey,” I said to her. “Don’t go threatening people.”

The pawnbroker sighed. He was thinking about the possibilities.

“Well, I suppose you could go to the cops,” he said. “But I don’t think they’d believe a word you said.”

He sounded sad about that. As if he was sorry for taking advantage of our disadvantages.

“What’s your name?” the pawnbroker asked me.

“Jackson,” I said.

“Is that first or last?”

“Both,” I said.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, it’s true. My mother and father named me Jackson Jackson. My family nickname is Jackson Squared. My family is funny.”

“All right, Jackson Jackson,” the pawnbroker said. “You wouldn’t happen to have a thousand dollars, would you?”

“We’ve got five dollars total,” I said.

“That’s too bad,” he said, and thought hard about the possibilities. “I’d sell it to you for a thousand dollars if you had it. Heck, to make it fair, I’d sell it to you for nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars. I’d lose a dollar. That would be the moral thing to do in this case. To lose a dollar would be the right thing.”

“We’ve got five dollars total,” I said again.

“That’s too bad,” he said once more, and thought harder about the possibilities. “How about this? I’ll give you twenty-four hours to come up with nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars. You come back here at lunchtime tomorrow with the money and I’ll sell it back to you. How does that sound?”

“It sounds all right,” I said.

“All right, then,” he said. “We have a deal. And I’ll get you started. Here’s twenty bucks.”

He opened up his wallet and pulled out a crisp twenty-dollar bill and gave it to me. And Rose of Sharon, Junior, and I walked out into the daylight to search for nine hundred and seventy-four more dollars.

1 P.M.

Rose of Sharon, Junior, and I carried our twenty-dollar bill and our five dollars in loose change over to the 7-Eleven and bought three bottles of imagination. We needed to figure out how to raise all that money in only one day. Thinking hard, we huddled in an alley beneath the Alaska Way Viaduct and finished off those bottles—one, two, and three.

2 P.M.

Rose of Sharon was gone when I woke up. I heard later that she had hitchhiked back to Toppenish and was living with her sister on the reservation.

Junior had passed out beside me and was covered in his own vomit, or maybe somebody else's vomit, and my head hurt from thinking, so I left him alone and walked down to the water. I love the smell of ocean water. Salt always smells like memory.

When I got to the wharf, I ran into three Aleut cousins, who sat on a wooden bench and stared out at the bay and cried. Most of the homeless Indians in Seattle come from Alaska. One by one, each of them hopped a big working boat in Anchorage or Barrow or Juneau, fished his way south to Seattle, jumped off the boat with a pocketful of cash to party hard at one of the highly sacred and traditional Indian bars, went broke and broker, and has been trying to find his way back to the boat and the frozen North ever since.

These Aleuts smelled like salmon, I thought, and they told me they were going to sit on that wooden bench until their boat came back.

“How long has your boat been gone?” I asked.

“Eleven years,” the elder Aleut said.

I cried with them for a while.

“Hey,” I said. “Do you guys have any money I can borrow?”

They didn't.

3 P.M.

I walked back to Junior. He was still out cold. I put my face down near his mouth to make sure he was breathing. He was alive, so I dug around in his bluejeans pockets and found half a cigarette. I smoked it all the way down and thought about my grandmother.

Her name was Agnes, and she died of breast cancer when I was fourteen. My father always thought Agnes caught her tumors from the uranium mine on the reservation. But my mother said the disease started when Agnes was walking back from a powwow one night and got run over by a motorcycle. She broke three ribs, and my mother always said those ribs never healed right, and tumors take over when you don't heal right.

Sitting beside Junior, smelling the smoke and the salt and the vomit, I wondered if my grandmother's cancer started when somebody stole her powwow regalia. Maybe the cancer started in her broken heart and then leaked out into her breasts. I know it's crazy, but I wondered whether I could bring my grandmother back to life if I bought back her regalia.

I needed money, big money, so I left Junior and walked over to the Real Change office.

4 P.M.

Real Change is a multifaceted organization that publishes a newspaper, supports cultural projects that empower the poor and the homeless, and mobilizes the public around poverty issues. Real Change's mission is to organize, educate, and build alliances to create solutions to homelessness and poverty. It exists to provide a voice for poor people in our community.

I memorized Real Change's mission statement because I sometimes sell the newspaper on the streets. But you have to stay sober to sell it, and I'm not always good at staying sober. Anybody can sell the paper. You buy each copy for thirty cents and sell it for a dollar, and you keep the profit.

"I need one thousand four hundred and thirty papers," I said to the Big Boss.

"That's a strange number," he said. "And that's a lot of papers."

"I need them."

The Big Boss pulled out his calculator and did the math.

"It will cost you four hundred and twenty-nine dollars for that many," he said.

"If I had that kind of money, I wouldn't need to sell the papers."

"What's going on, Jackson-to-the-Second-Power?" he asked. He is the only person who calls me that. He's a funny and kind man.

I told him about my grandmother's powwow regalia and how much money I needed in order to buy it back.

"We should call the police," he said.

"I don't want to do that," I said. "It's a quest now. I need to win it back by myself."

"I understand," he said. "And, to be honest, I'd give you the papers to sell if I thought it would work. But the record for the most papers sold in one day by one vender is only three hundred and two."

"That would net me about two hundred bucks," I said.

The Big Boss used his calculator. "Two hundred and eleven dollars and forty cents," he said.

"That's not enough," I said.

"And the most money anybody has made in one day is five hundred and twenty-five. And that's because somebody gave Old Blue five hundred-dollar bills for some dang reason. The average daily net is about thirty dollars."

"This isn't going to work."

"No."

"Can you lend me some money?"

“I can’t do that,” he said. “If I lend you money, I have to lend money to everybody.”

“What can you do?”

“I’ll give you fifty papers for free. But don’t tell anybody I did it.”

“O.K.,” I said.

He gathered up the newspapers and handed them to me. I held them to my chest. He hugged me. I carried the newspapers back toward the water.

5 P.M.

Back on the wharf, I stood near the Bainbridge Island Terminal and tried to sell papers to business commuters boarding the ferry.

I sold five in one hour, dumped the other forty-five in a garbage can, and walked into McDonald’s, ordered four cheeseburgers for a dollar each, and slowly ate them.

After eating, I walked outside and vomited on the sidewalk. I hated to lose my food so soon after eating it. As an alcoholic Indian with a busted stomach, I always hope I can keep enough food in me to stay alive.

6 P.M.

With one dollar in my pocket, I walked back to Junior. He was still passed out, and I put my ear to his chest and listened for his heartbeat. He was alive, so I took off his shoes and socks and found one dollar in his left sock and fifty cents in his right sock.

With two dollars and fifty cents in my hand, I sat beside Junior and thought about my grandmother and her stories.

When I was thirteen, my grandmother told me a story about the Second World War. She was a nurse at a military hospital in Sydney, Australia. For two years, she healed and comforted American and Australian soldiers.

One day, she tended to a wounded Maori soldier, who had lost his legs to an artillery attack. He was very dark-skinned. His hair was black and curly and his eyes were black and warm. His face was covered with bright tattoos.

“Are you Maori?” he asked my grandmother.

“No,” she said. “I’m Spokane Indian. From the United States.”

“Ah, yes,” he said. “I have heard of your tribes. But you are the first American Indian I have ever met.”

“There’s a lot of Indian soldiers fighting for the United States,” she said. “I have a brother fighting in Germany, and I lost another brother on Okinawa.”

“I am sorry,” he said. “I was on Okinawa as well. It was terrible.”

“I am sorry about your legs,” my grandmother said.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” he said.

“What’s funny?”

“How we brown people are killing other brown people so white people will remain free.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“Well, sometimes I think of it that way. And other times I think of it the way they want me to think of it. I get confused.”

She fed him morphine.

“Do you believe in Heaven?” he asked.

“Which Heaven?” she asked.

“I’m talking about the Heaven where my legs are waiting for me.”

They laughed.

“Of course,” he said, “my legs will probably run away from me when I get to Heaven. And how will I ever catch them?”

“You have to get your arms strong,” my grandmother said. “So you can run on your hands.”

They laughed again.

Sitting beside Junior, I laughed at the memory of my grandmother’s story. I put my hand close to Junior’s mouth to make sure he was still breathing. Yes, Junior was alive, so I took my two dollars and fifty cents and walked to the Korean grocery store in Pioneer Square.

7 P.M.

At the Korean grocery store, I bought a fifty-cent cigar and two scratch lottery tickets for a dollar each. The maximum cash prize was five hundred dollars a ticket. If I won both, I would have enough money to buy back the regalia.

I loved Mary, the young Korean woman who worked the register. She was the daughter of the owners, and she sang all day.

“I love you,” I said when I handed her the money.

“You always say you love me,” she said.

“That’s because I will always love you.”

“You are a sentimental fool.”

“I’m a romantic old man.”

“Too old for me.”

“I know I’m too old for you, but I can dream.”

“O.K.,” she said. “I agree to be a part of your dreams, but I will only hold your hand in your dreams. No kissing and no sex. Not even in your dreams.”

“O.K.,” I said. “No sex. Just romance.”

“Goodbye, Jackson Jackson, my love. I will see you soon.”

I left the store, walked over to Occidental Park, sat on a bench, and smoked my cigar all the way down.

Ten minutes after I finished the cigar, I scratched my first lottery ticket and won nothing. I could only win five hundred dollars now, and that would only be half of what I needed.

Ten minutes after I lost, I scratched the other ticket and won a free ticket—a small consolation and one more chance to win some money.

I walked back to Mary.

“Jackson Jackson,” she said. “Have you come back to claim my heart?”

“I won a free ticket,” I said.

“Just like a man,” she said. “You love money and power more than you love me.”

“It’s true,” I said. “And I’m sorry it’s true.”

She gave me another scratch ticket, and I took it outside. I like to scratch my tickets in private. Hopeful and sad, I scratched that third ticket and won real money. I carried it back inside to Mary.

“I won a hundred dollars,” I said.

She examined the ticket and laughed.

“That’s a fortune,” she said, and counted out five twenties. Our fingertips touched as she handed me the money. I felt electric and constant.

“Thank you,” I said, and gave her one of the bills.

“I can’t take that,” she said. “It’s your money.”

“No, it’s tribal. It’s an Indian thing. When you win, you’re supposed to share with your family.”

“I’m not your family.”

“Yes, you are.”

She smiled. She kept the money. With eighty dollars in my pocket, I said goodbye to my dear Mary and walked out into the cold night air.

8 P.M.

I wanted to share the good news with Junior. I walked back to him, but he was gone. I heard later that he had hitchhiked down to Portland, Oregon, and died of exposure in an alley behind the Hilton Hotel.

9 P.M.

Lonesome for Indians, I carried my eighty dollars over to Big Heart's in South Downtown. Big Heart's is an all-Indian bar. Nobody knows how or why Indians migrate to one bar and turn it into an official Indian bar. But Big Heart's has been an Indian bar for twenty-three years. It used to be way up on Aurora Avenue, but a crazy Lummi Indian burned that one down, and the owners moved to the new location, a few blocks south of Safeco Field.

I walked into Big Heart's and counted fifteen Indians—eight men and seven women. I didn't know any of them, but Indians like to belong, so we all pretended to be cousins.

“How much for whiskey shots?” I asked the bartender, a fat white guy.

“You want the bad stuff or the badder stuff?”

“As bad as you got.”

“One dollar a shot.”

I laid my eighty dollars on the bar top.

“All right,” I said. “Me and all my cousins here are going to be drinking eighty shots. How many is that apiece?”

“Counting you,” a woman shouted from behind me, “that's five shots for everybody.”

I turned to look at her. She was a chubby and pale Indian woman, sitting with a tall and skinny Indian man.

“All right, math genius,” I said to her, and then shouted for the whole bar to hear. “Five drinks for everybody!”

All the other Indians rushed the bar, but I sat with the mathematician and her skinny friend. We took our time with our whiskey shots.

“What's your tribe?” I asked.

“I'm Duwamish,” she said. “And he's Crow.”

“You're a long way from Montana,” I said to him.

“I'm Crow,” he said. “I flew here.”

“What's your name?” I asked them.

“I'm Irene Muse,” she said. “And this is Honey Boy.”

She shook my hand hard, but he offered his hand as if I was supposed to kiss it. So I did. He giggled and blushed, as much as a dark-skinned Crow can blush.

“You’re one of them two-spirits, aren’t you?” I asked him.

“I love women,” he said. “And I love men.”

“Sometimes both at the same time,” Irene said.

We laughed.

“Man,” I said to Honey Boy. “So you must have about eight or nine spirits going on inside you, enit?”

“Sweetie,” he said. “I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”

“Oh, no,” Irene said. “Honey Boy is falling in love.”

“It has nothing to do with love,” he said.

We laughed.

“Wow,” I said. “I’m flattered, Honey Boy, but I don’t play on your team.”

“Never say never,” he said.

“You better be careful,” Irene said. “Honey Boy knows all sorts of magic.”

“Honey Boy,” I said, “you can try to seduce me, but my heart belongs to a woman named Mary.”

“Is your Mary a virgin?” Honey Boy asked.

We laughed.

And we drank our whiskey shots until they were gone. But the other Indians bought me more whiskey shots, because I’d been so generous with my money. And Honey Boy pulled out his credit card, and I drank and sailed on that plastic boat.

After a dozen shots, I asked Irene to dance. She refused. But Honey Boy shuffled over to the jukebox, dropped in a quarter, and selected Willie Nelson’s “Help Me Make It Through the Night.” As Irene and I sat at the table and laughed and drank more whiskey, Honey Boy danced a slow circle around us and sang along with Willie.

“Are you serenading me?” I asked him.

He kept singing and dancing.

“Are you serenading me?” I asked him again.

“He’s going to put a spell on you,” Irene said.

I leaned over the table, spilling a few drinks, and kissed Irene hard. She kissed me back.

10 P.M.

Irene pushed me into the women's bathroom, into a stall, shut the door behind us, and shoved her hand down my pants. She was short, so I had to lean over to kiss her. I grabbed and squeezed her everywhere I could reach, and she was wonderfully fat, and every part of her body felt like a large, warm, soft breast.

MIDNIGHT

Nearly blind with alcohol, I stood alone at the bar and swore I had been standing in the bathroom with Irene only a minute ago.

"One more shot!" I yelled at the bartender.

"You've got no more money!" he yelled back.

"Somebody buy me a drink!" I shouted.

"They've got no more money!"

"Where are Irene and Honey Boy?"

"Long gone!"

2 A.M.

"Closing time!" the bartender shouted at the three or four Indians who were still drinking hard after a long, hard day of drinking. Indian alcoholics are either sprinters or marathoners.

"Where are Irene and Honey Boy?" I asked.

"They've been gone for hours," the bartender said.

"Where'd they go?"

"I told you a hundred times, I don't know."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"It's closing time. I don't care where you go, but you're not staying here."

"You are an ungrateful bastard. I've been good to you."

"You don't leave right now, I'm going to kick your ass."

"Come on, I know how to fight."

He came at me. I don't remember what happened after that.

4 A.M.

I emerged from the blackness and discovered myself walking behind a big warehouse. I didn't know where I was. My face hurt. I felt my nose and decided that it might be broken. Exhausted and cold, I

pulled a plastic tarp from a truck bed, wrapped it around me like a faithful lover, and fell asleep in the dirt.

6 A.M.

Somebody kicked me in the ribs. I opened my eyes and looked up at a white cop.

“Jackson,” the cop said. “Is that you?”

“Officer Williams,” I said. He was a good cop with a sweet tooth. He’d given me hundreds of candy bars over the years. I wonder if he knew I was diabetic.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“I was cold and sleepy,” I said. “So I lay down.”

“You dumb-ass, you passed out on the railroad tracks.”

I sat up and looked around. I was lying on the railroad tracks. Dockworkers stared at me. I should have been a railroad-track pizza, a double Indian pepperoni with extra cheese. Sick and scared, I leaned over and puked whiskey.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Officer Williams asked. “You’ve never been this stupid.”

“It’s my grandmother,” I said. “She died.”

“I’m sorry, man. When did she die?”

“Nineteen seventy-two.”

“And you’re killing yourself now?”

“I’ve been killing myself ever since she died.”

He shook his head. He was sad for me. Like I said, he was a good cop.

“And somebody beat the hell out of you,” he said. “You remember who?”

“Mr. Grief and I went a few rounds.”

“It looks like Mr. Grief knocked you out.”

“Mr. Grief always wins.”

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get you out of here.”

He helped me up and led me over to his squad car. He put me in the back. “You throw up in there and you’re cleaning it up,” he said.

“That’s fair.”

He walked around the car and sat in the driver’s seat. “I’m taking you over to detox,” he said.

“No, man, that place is awful,” I said. “It’s full of drunk Indians.”

We laughed. He drove away from the docks.

“I don’t know how you guys do it,” he said.

“What guys?” I asked.

“You Indians. How the hell do you laugh so much? I just picked your ass off the railroad tracks, and you’re making jokes. Why the hell do you do that?”

“The two funniest tribes I’ve ever been around are Indians and Jews, so I guess that says something about the inherent humor of genocide.”

We laughed.

“Listen to you, Jackson. You’re so smart. Why the hell are you on the street?”

“Give me a thousand dollars and I’ll tell you.”

“You bet I’d give you a thousand dollars if I knew you’d straighten up your life.”

He meant it. He was the second-best cop I’d ever known.

“You’re a good cop,” I said.

“Come on, Jackson,” he said. “Don’t blow smoke up my ass.”

“No, really, you remind me of my grandfather.”

“Yeah, that’s what you Indians always tell me.”

“No, man, my grandfather was a tribal cop. He was a good cop. He never arrested people. He took care of them. Just like you.”

“I’ve arrested hundreds of scumbags, Jackson. And I’ve shot a couple in the ass.”

“It don’t matter. You’re not a killer.”

“I didn’t kill them. I killed their asses. I’m an ass-killer.”

We drove through downtown. The missions and shelters had already released their overnighters. Sleepy homeless men and women stood on street corners and stared up at a gray sky. It was the morning after the night of the living dead.

“Do you ever get scared?” I asked Officer Williams.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, being a cop, is it scary?”

He thought about that for a while. He contemplated it. I liked that about him.

“I guess I try not to think too much about being afraid,” he said. “If you think about fear, then you’ll be afraid. The job is boring most of the time. Just driving and looking into dark corners, you know, and seeing nothing. But then things get heavy. You’re chasing somebody, or fighting them or walking around a dark house, and you just know some crazy guy is hiding around a corner, and hell, yes, it’s scary.”

“My grandfather was killed in the line of duty,” I said.

“I’m sorry. How’d it happen?”

I knew he’d listen closely to my story.

“He worked on the reservation. Everybody knew everybody. It was safe. We aren’t like those crazy Sioux or Apache or any of those other warrior tribes. There’ve only been three murders on my reservation in the last hundred years.”

“That is safe.”

“Yeah, we Spokane, we’re passive, you know. We’re mean with words. And we’ll cuss out anybody. But we don’t shoot people. Or stab them. Not much, anyway.”

“So what happened to your grandfather?”

“This man and his girlfriend were fighting down by Little Falls.”

“Domestic dispute. Those are the worst.”

“Yeah, but this guy was my grandfather’s brother. My great-uncle.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah, it was awful. My grandfather just strolled into the house. He’d been there a thousand times. And his brother and his girlfriend were drunk and beating on each other. And my grandfather stepped between them, just as he’d done a hundred times before. And the girlfriend tripped or something. She fell down and hit her head and started crying. And my grandfather kneeled down beside her to make sure she was all right. And for some reason my great-uncle reached down, pulled my grandfather’s pistol out of the holster, and shot him in the head.”

“That’s terrible. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, my great-uncle could never figure out why he did it. He went to prison forever, you know, and he always wrote these long letters. Like fifty pages of tiny little handwriting. And he was always trying to figure out why he did it. He’d write and write and write and try to figure it out. He never did. It’s a great big mystery.”

“Do you remember your grandfather?”

“A little bit. I remember the funeral. My grandmother wouldn’t let them bury him. My father had to drag her away from the grave.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I don’t, either.”

We stopped in front of the detox center.

“We’re here,” Officer Williams said.

“I can’t go in there,” I said.

“You have to.”

“Please, no. They’ll keep me for twenty-four hours. And then it will be too late.”

“Too late for what?”

I told him about my grandmother’s regalia and the deadline for buying it back.

“If it was stolen, you need to file a report,” he said. “I’ll investigate it myself. If that thing is really your grandmother’s, I’ll get it back for you. Legally.”

“No,” I said. “That’s not fair. The pawnbroker didn’t know it was stolen. And, besides, I’m on a mission here. I want to be a hero, you know? I want to win it back, like a knight.”

“That’s romantic crap.”

“That may be. But I care about it. It’s been a long time since I really cared about something.”

Officer Williams turned around in his seat and stared at me. He studied me.

“I’ll give you some money,” he said. “I don’t have much. Only thirty bucks. I’m short until payday. And it’s not enough to get back the regalia. But it’s something.”

“I’ll take it,” I said.

“I’m giving it to you because I believe in what you believe. I’m hoping, and I don’t know why I’m hoping it, but I hope you can turn thirty bucks into a thousand somehow.”

“I believe in magic.”

“I believe you’ll take my money and get drunk on it.”

“Then why are you giving it to me?”

“There ain’t no such thing as an atheist cop.”

“Sure, there is.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not an atheist cop.”

He let me out of the car, handed me two fivers and a twenty, and shook my hand.

“Take care of yourself, Jackson,” he said. “Stay off the railroad tracks.”

“I’ll try,” I said.

He drove away. Carrying my money, I headed back toward the water.

8 A.M.

On the wharf, those three Aleuts still waited on the wooden bench.

“Have you seen your ship?” I asked.

“Seen a lot of ships,” the elder Aleut said. “But not our ship.”

I sat on the bench with them. We sat in silence for a long time. I wondered if we would fossilize if we sat there long enough.

I thought about my grandmother. I’d never seen her dance in her regalia. And, more than anything, I wished I’d seen her dance at a powwow.

“Do you guys know any songs?” I asked the Aleuts.

“I know all of Hank Williams,” the elder Aleut said.

“How about Indian songs?”

“Hank Williams is Indian.”

“How about sacred songs?”

“Hank Williams is sacred.”

“I’m talking about ceremonial songs. You know, religious ones. The songs you sing back home when you’re wishing and hoping.”

“What are you wishing and hoping for?”

“I’m wishing my grandmother was still alive.”

“Every song I know is about that.”

“Well, sing me as many as you can.”

The Aleuts sang their strange and beautiful songs. I listened. They sang about my grandmother and about their grandmothers. They were lonesome for the cold and the snow. I was lonesome for everything.

10 A.M.

After the Aleuts finished their last song, we sat in silence for a while. Indians are good at silence.

“Was that the last song?” I asked.

“We sang all the ones we could,” the elder Aleut said. “The others are just for our people.”

I understood. We Indians have to keep our secrets. And these Aleuts were so secretive they didn’t refer to themselves as Indians.

“Are you guys hungry?” I asked.

They looked at one another and communicated without talking.

“We could eat,” the elder Aleut said.

11 A.M.

The Aleuts and I walked over to the Big Kitchen, a greasy diner in the International District. I knew they served homeless Indians who’d lucked into money.

“Four for breakfast?” the waitress asked when we stepped inside.

“Yes, we’re very hungry,” the elder Aleut said.

She took us to a booth near the kitchen. I could smell the food cooking. My stomach growled.

“You guys want separate checks?” the waitress asked.

“No, I’m paying,” I said.

“Aren’t you the generous one,” she said.

“Don’t do that,” I said.

“Do what?” she asked.

“Don’t ask me rhetorical questions. They scare me.”

She looked puzzled, and then she laughed.

“O.K., Professor,” she said. “I’ll only ask you real questions from now on.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you guys want to eat?”

“That’s the best question anybody can ask anybody,” I said. “What have you got?”

“How much money you got?” she asked.

“Another good question,” I said. “I’ve got twenty-five dollars I can spend. Bring us all the breakfast you can, plus your tip.”

She knew the math.

“All right, that’s four specials and four coffees and fifteen per cent for me.”

The Aleuts and I waited in silence. Soon enough, the waitress returned and poured us four coffees, and we sipped at them until she returned again, with four plates of food. Eggs, bacon, toast, hash-brown potatoes. It’s amazing how much food you can buy for so little money.

Grateful, we feasted.

NOON

I said farewell to the Aleuts and walked toward the pawnshop. I heard later that the Aleuts had waded into the salt water near Dock 47 and disappeared. Some Indians swore they had walked on the water and headed north. Other Indians saw the Aleuts drown. I don't know what happened to them.

I looked for the pawnshop and couldn't find it. I swear it wasn't in the place where it had been before. I walked twenty or thirty blocks looking for the pawnshop, turned corners and bisected intersections, and looked up its name in the phone books and asked people walking past me if they'd ever heard of it. But that pawnshop seemed to have sailed away like a ghost ship. I wanted to cry. And just when I'd given up, when I turned one last corner and thought I might die if I didn't find that pawnshop, there it was, in a space I swear it hadn't occupied a few minutes ago.

I walked inside and greeted the pawnbroker, who looked a little younger than he had before.

"It's you," he said.

"Yes, it's me," I said.

"Jackson Jackson."

"That is my name."

"Where are your friends?"

"They went travelling. But it's O.K. Indians are everywhere."

"Do you have the money?"

"How much do you need again?" I asked, and hoped the price had changed.

"Nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars."

It was still the same price. Of course, it was the same price. Why would it change?

"I don't have that," I said.

"What do you have?"

"Five dollars."

I set the crumpled Lincoln on the countertop. The pawnbroker studied it.

"Is that the same five dollars from yesterday?"

"No, it's different."

He thought about the possibilities.

"Did you work hard for this money?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

He closed his eyes and thought harder about the possibilities. Then he stepped into the back room and returned with my grandmother's regalia.

"Take it," he said, and held it out to me.

"I don't have the money."

"I don't want your money."

"But I wanted to win it."

"You did win it. Now take it before I change my mind."

Do you know how many good men live in this world? Too many to count!

I took my grandmother's regalia and walked outside. I knew that solitary yellow bead was part of me. I knew I was that yellow bead in part. Outside, I wrapped myself in my grandmother's regalia and breathed her in. I stepped off the sidewalk and into the intersection. Pedestrians stopped. Cars stopped. The city stopped. They all watched me dance with my grandmother. I was my grandmother, dancing.

Published in The New Yorker, April 21, 2003.

Accessed at http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/04/21/030421fi_fiction?printable=true