

Indian Education

Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie was born in Washington in 1966 and grew up on the Wellpinit Indian reservation, about 50 miles from Spokane. Alexie's mother is a Spokane Indian; his father is from the Coeur D'Alene tribe. Alexie was born hydroencephalic (with water on the brain) and underwent surgery as a small child. He was not expected to survive, and when he did, his doctors predicted he would be mentally retarded. Despite this prediction he learned to read at age three and soon became an avid reader, reading novels on his own by age five.

Like the narrator of his story, Alexie attended an Indian school for the primary grades but made a conscious decision as a teenager to attend high school off the reservation, where he thought he would get a better education. He graduated from Washington State University and has written prolifically since then, publishing more than a dozen books including poetry, novels, and short stories. He is also the author of a movie script, for *Smoke Signals*, which was released in 1998 and won several awards. Alexie also reads his work on the poetry slam circuit, and won the World Heavyweight Poetry competition in 1998. This selection is taken from his collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993).

The history of Indian schools in America is a long, varied and complicated one. Over the course of its history from 1778 through 1871, the United States Government entered into over 370 treaties with the various Indian nations it displaced. These treaties included agreements that the United States government would provide various services to the Native American communities, including education.

The Indian schools were originally conceived as a way to assimilate young children and make them accept the white man's belief and value systems. Communities had little control over school curriculum and treatment of students was often harsh. Native languages and dress were forbidden, and there was little or no acknowledgment or understanding of Native traditions.

In more recent years, beginning in the early 20th century, there have been movements to make Indian schools more sensitive to Native American cultures and to use teaching methods and curricula adapted to the unique characteristics and needs of Native communities. Indian schools in America, however, still remain often underfunded and ignored.

FIRST GRADE

My hair was too short and my U.S. Government glasses were horn-rimmed, ugly, and all that first winter in school, the other Indian boys chased me from one corner of the playground to the other. They pushed me down, buried me in the snow until I couldn't breathe, thought I'd never breathe again.

They stole my glasses and threw them over my head, around my outstretched hands, just beyond my reach, until someone tripped me and sent me falling again, facedown in the snow.

I was always falling down; my Indian name was Junior Falls Down. Sometimes it was Bloody Nose or Steal-His-Lunch. Once, it was Cries-Like-a-White-Boy, even though none of us had seen a white boy cry.

Then it was a Friday morning recess and Frenchy SiJohn threw snowballs at me while the rest of the Indian boys tortured some other *top-yogh-yaught* kid, another weakling. But Frenchy was confident enough to torment me all by himself, and most days I would have let him.

But the little warrior in me roared to life that day and knocked Frenchy to the ground, held his head against the snow, and punched him so hard that my knuckles and the snow made symmetrical bruises on his face. He almost looked like he was wearing war paint.

But he wasn't the warrior. I was. And I chanted *It's a good day to die, it's a good day to die*, all the way down to the principal's office.

SECOND GRADE

Betty Towle, missionary teacher, redheaded and so ugly that no one ever had a puppy crush on her, made me stay in for recess fourteen days straight.

"Tell me you're sorry," she said.

"Sorry for what?" I asked.

"Everything," she said and made me stand straight for fifteen minutes, eagle-armed with books in each hand. One was a math book; the other was English. But all I learned was that gravity can be painful.

For Halloween I drew a picture of her riding a broom with a scrawny cat on her back. She said that her God would never forgive me for that.

Once, she gave the class a spelling test but set me aside and gave me a test designed for junior high students. When I spelled all the words right, she crumpled up the paper and made me eat it.

"You'll learn respect," she said.

She sent a letter home with me that told my parents to either cut my braids or keep me home from class. My parents came in the next day and dragged their braids across Betty Towle's desk.

"Indians, indians, indians." She said it without capitalization. She called me "indian, indian, indian."

And I said, *Yes, I am. I am Indian. Indian, I am.*

THIRD GRADE

My traditional Native American art career began and ended with my very first portrait: *Stick Indian Taking a Piss in My Backyard.*

As I circulated the original print around the classroom, Mrs. Schluter intercepted and confiscated my art.

Censorship, I might cry now. *Freedom of expression*, I would write in editorials to the tribal newspaper.

In third grade, though, I stood alone in the corner, faced the wall, and waited for the punishment to end.

I'm still waiting.

FOURTH GRADE

"You should be a doctor when you grow up," Mr. Schluter told me, even though his wife, the third grade teacher, thought I was crazy beyond my years. My eyes always looked like I had just hit-and-run someone.

"Guilty," she said. "You always look guilty."

"Why should I be a doctor?" I asked Mr. Schluter.

"So you can come back and help the tribe. So you can heal people."

That was the year my father drank a gallon of vodka a day and the same year that my mother started two hundred different quilts but never finished any. They sat in separate, dark places in our HUD house and wept savagely.

I ran home after school, heard their Indian tears, and looked in the mirror. *Doctor Victor*, I called myself, invented an education, talked to my reflection. *Doctor Victor to the emergency room.*

FIFTH GRADE

I picked up a basketball for the first time and made my first shot. No. I missed my first shot, missed the basket completely, and the ball landed in the dirt and sawdust, sat there just like I had sat there only minutes before.

But it felt good, that ball in my hands, all those possibilities and angles. It was mathematics, geometry. It was beautiful.

At the same moment, my cousin Steven Ford sniffed rubber cement from a paper bag and leaned back on the merry-go-around. His ears rang, his mouth was dry, and everyone seemed so far away.

But it felt good, that buzz in his head, all the colors and noises. It was chemistry, biology. It was beautiful.

32 Oh, do you remember those sweet, almost innocent choices that the Indian boys were forced to make?

SIXTH GRADE

33 Randy, the new Indian kid from the white town of Springdale, got into a fight an hour after he first walked into the reservation school.

34 Stevie Flett called him out, called him a squawman, called him a pussy, and called him a punk.

35 Randy and Stevie, and the rest of the Indian boys, walked out into the playground.

36 "Throw the first punch," Stevie said as they squared off.

37 "No," Randy said.

38 "Throw the first punch," Stevie said again.

39 "No," Randy said again.

40 "Throw the first punch!" Stevie said for the third time, and Randy reared back and pitched a knuckle fastball that broke Stevie's nose.

41 We all stood there in silence, in awe.

42 That was Randy, my soon-to-be first and best friend, who taught me the most valuable lesson about living in the white world: *Always throw the first punch.*

SEVENTH GRADE

43 I leaned through the basement window of the HUD house and kissed the white girl who would later be raped by her foster-parent father, who was also white. They both lived on the reservation, though, and when the headlines and stories filled the papers later, not one word was made of their color.

44 *Just Indians being Indians*, someone must have said somewhere and they were wrong.

45 But on the day I leaned through the basement window of a HUD house and kissed the white girl, I felt the good-byes I was saying to my entire tribe. I held my lips tight against her lips, a dry, clumsy, and ultimately stupid kiss.

46 But I was saying good-bye to my tribe, to all the Indian girls and women I might have loved, to all the Indian men who might have called me cousin, even brother.

47 I kissed that white girl and when I opened my eyes, she was gone from the reservation, and when I opened my eyes, I was gone from the reservation, living in a farm town where a beautiful white girl asked my name.

48 "Junior Polatkin," I said, and she laughed.

49 After that, no one spoke to me for another five hundred years.

EIGHTH GRADE

50 At the farm town junior high, in the boys' bathroom, I could hear voices from the girls' bathroom, nervous whispers of anorexia and bulimia. I ... 11

hear the white girls' forced vomiting, a sound so familiar and natural to me after years of listening to my father's hangovers.

"Give me your lunch if you're just going to throw it up," I said to one of those girls once.

I sat back and watched them grow skinny from self-pity.

Back on the reservation, my mother stood in line to get us commodities. We carried them home, happy to have food, and opened the canned beef that even the dogs wouldn't eat.

But we ate it day after day and grew skinny from self-pity.

There is more than one way to starve.

NINTH GRADE

At the farm town high school dance, after a basketball game in an overheated gym where I had scored twenty-seven points and pulled down thirteen rebounds, I passed out during a slow song.

As my white friends revived me and prepared to take me to the emergency room where doctors would later diagnose my diabetes, the Chicano teacher ran up to us.

"Hey," he said. "What's that boy been drinking? I know all about these Indian kids. They start drinking real young."

Sharing dark skin doesn't necessarily make two men brothers.

TENTH GRADE

I passed the written test easily and nearly flunked the driving, but still received my Washington State driver's license on the same day that Wally Jim killed himself by driving his car into a pine tree.

No traces of alcohol in his blood, good job, wife and two kids.

"Why'd he do it?" asked a white Washington State trooper.

All the Indians shrugged their shoulders, and looked down at the ground.

"Don't know," we all said, but when we look in the mirror, see the history of our tribe in our eyes, taste failure in the tap water, and shake with old tears, we understand completely.

Believe me, everything looks like a noose if you stare at it long enough.

ELEVENTH GRADE

Last night I missed two free throws which would have won the game against the best team in the state. The farm town high school I play for is nicknamed the "Indians," and I'm probably the only actual Indian ever to play for a team with such a mascot.

67 This morning I picked up the sport page and read the headline: INDIANS
LOSE AGAIN.

68 Go ahead and tell me none of this is supposed to hurt me very much.

TWELFTH GRADE

69 I walk down the aisle, valedictorian of this farm town high school, and my cap
doesn't fit because I've grown my hair longer than it's ever been. Later, I stand as
the school board chairman recites my awards, accomplishments, and scholarships.

70 I try to remain stoic for the photographers as I look toward the future.

71 Back home on the reservation, my former classmates graduate: a few can't
read, one or two are just given attendance diplomas, most look forward to the
parties. The bright students are shaken, frightened, because they don't know
what comes next.

72 They smile for the photographer as they look back toward tradition.

73 The tribal newspaper runs my photograph and the photograph of my former
classmates side by side.

POSTSCRIPT: CLASS REUNION

74 Victor said, "Why should we organize a reservation high school reunion?
My graduating class has a reunion every weekend at the Powwow Tavern."

EXERCISES

Some of the Issues

1. What is the significance of the narrator's glasses in the first-grade scenario?
2. What can you assume from the narrator's first-grade school? Who were his fellow classmates?
3. What does the narrator mean when he tells us that his teacher said "Indian" without capitalization (paragraph 15)? What is the significance of the narrator's response?
4. What does the narrator mean by the line "I'm still waiting" in paragraph 21?
5. What effect does kissing the white girl have on the narrator in seventh grade? Why does he say after that "no one spoke to me for another five hundred years"?
6. The narrator switches to a new school for junior high. What is different about the new school?
7. How do you interpret the line "There is more than one way to starve" (paragraph 55)?
8. What stereotypes do the teachers in the story have of Native Americans?