Reservation Blues

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

Like the characters in *Reservation Blues*, Sherman Alexie grew up in the town of Wellpinit on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington. He was born hydrocephalic and suffered from seizures as a child, leading him to spend most of his time reading. When he was in eighth grade, he decided to attend high school in the nearby town of Reardan and played on the basketball team there—his book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* fictionalizes some of his experiences during this time. After trying out pre-med and pre-law studies at Gonzaga University, Alexie transferred in 1987 to Washington State University, where he began to write and study literature. His first collection of short stories and poetry was published in 1992, and since then, he has published more than fifteen books and received numerous awards. He lives in Seattle, Washington, with his wife and two sons.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Reservation Blues examines the way that the past sufferings of Native Americans contribute to the hard conditions of life on the reservation today, so the historical context of the novel really begins with the arrival of Christopher Columbus to America in 1492—the beginning of a slow but systematic genocide perpetuated by white Europeans against Native Americans. More specifically, though, the novel makes many references to the period of the Indian Wars, particularly those that took place west of the Mississippi River in the nineteenth century. The novel references battles involving General Philip Sheridan, who is rumored to have proclaimed that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," General George Wright, who fought against the Spokane tribe in the Pacific Northwest, and George Armstrong Custer, who is most famous for his participation in the Battle of Little Big Horn—these three figures appear in the book in the thinly-veiled guise of Cavalry Records executives, but experience flashbacks from their time in the wars. On a broader level, the book also underlines the sustained mistreatment of native peoples by the United States government, making reference to broken treaties and manipulative, insufficient welfare systems that have encouraged dependence, poverty, and alcoholism while quelling any resistance. Similarly, the tradition of the Blues (another important part of the book) also comes from a history of oppression and slavery—that of black Americans. Blues musician Robert Johnson (1911-1938), who is a character in the novel, was a real historical figure and one of the most important musicians in American history, influencing other blues and rock & roll artists for generations.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

On one level, Sherman Alexie's work could be placed in a tradition of other writers who deal with the experience of minority ethnic groups in America. Toni Morrison, the author of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, is one example of a writer who explores similar generational patterns of suffering and ingrained racism (and often uses fantastical elements in her work). Junot Diaz is another such writer, and his work also often uses magical realism and makes use of popular culture in a way that mirrors *Reservation Blues*. One central plotline, the myth surrounding the blues guitarist Robert Johnson, is drawn from the Faustian tradition (someone selling their soul to the devil in exchange for fame, skill, or knowledge)—incarnated most famously by Goethe in *Faust* and in Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*. Many of the themes in *Reservation Blues* are also drawn from the music of the Blues itself, including the figures that play some part within its cast of characters, like Son House and Robert Johnson.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Reservation Blues*
- **When Written:** 1995
- **Where Written:** Washington, U.S.A.
- **When Published:** 1995
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction, Native American Fiction
- **Genre:** Magical Realism, Native American Literature
- **Setting:** Wellpinit, Spokane Indian Reservation, WA
- **Climax:** The climax of Coyote Springs' underdog tale comes when the band is called upon to play at Cavalry Records, hoping to make it big—but it becomes more of an anticlimax as Victor's guitar rebels and the band falls apart.
- **Antagonist:** Unsupportive Tribe Members (like David WalksAlong), Racism, Alcoholism, and Poverty
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

ABA Honors. *Reservation Blues* won an American Book Award in 1996.

The Globe. Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, a condition that occurs when an excess of fluid builds up in the cranial cavity. Because his head was larger than other children his age, he was nicknamed "The Globe" in elementary school.

PLOT SUMMARY

Reservation Blues is the story of a group of Native Americans in Washington who, led by the reservation outcast and storyteller Thomas Builds-the-Fire and spurred on by the demonic magic of Robert Johnson's mystical **guitar**, decide to form a blues band that they name "Coyote Springs." The novel charts the rise and fall of Coyote Springs, and the individual struggles of each member of the band as they face the systemic suffering of Native American life.

In the novel's opening scene, Robert Johnson, an African-American stranger modeled after the real-life blues musician, appears on the Spokane reservation, waiting at the crossroads. Thomas Builds-the-Fire stops to talk with him, and ends up giving him a ride to the base of Wellpinit Mountain, sending Johnson to see Big Mom, who might be able to save him from the mysterious Gentleman who is chasing him. Johnson leaves Thomas his guitar, which seems to be imbued with magical powers. After a violent confrontation with longtime bully Victor Joseph and his best friend Junior Polatkin, the guitar—now broken, but not for long—tells Thomas that the three of them are destined to start a blues band, to give the reservation the music it needs.

The new band forms, with Junior on drums, Thomas as the lead singer, bassist, and songwriter, and Victor playing the mystical guitar. They call themselves "Coyote Springs" and practice in an abandoned grocery store in the small town, drawing small crowds of tribe members who watch as they rehearse covers of famous songs. As their fame grows, at least among Native Americans, they are invited to play their first paid gig at a bar on the Flathead reservation in Arlee, Montana. The show goes disastrously, since both Victor and Junior get very drunk early on in the performance. At the show Thomas meets the Warm Water sisters, Chess and Checkers. He sings a love song to Chess, and then pulls her onstage for a duet. The band crashes at sisters' house, and Thomas convinces everyone that the sisters should join Coyote Springs as backup singers and keyboardists. They stay in Montana for a week, playing a triumphantly redemptive second show at the same bar, the Tipi Pole Tavern.

The band returns to Washington and continues to improve, playing a successful show at the unlikely location of a cowboy bar in Ellensburg, Washington. Mistrust of the band begins to grow on their home reservation, however, as community members in the church speak out against the content of their music, and David WalksAlong, the Tribal Council Chairman who has an old grudge with Thomas' father, Samuel Builds-the-Fire, argues that they are disturbing the peace. Samuel, who is now a constant drunk following the death of his wife, then shows up passed out on Thomas' lawn. In the night, we see Junior's dreams of his own parents, who died in a drunk driving accident. Victor dreams of his mother and stepfather, who are both absent, and of a group of frightening men in black robes. We also see into the tragic past of Chess and Checkers' family, whose father, Luke Warm Water, became an alcoholic after the death of their younger brother, Bobby, causing their mother to commit suicide. Flashbacks from the life of Samuel Builds-the-Fire, who now lies unconscious on the kitchen table, reveal a dramatic, pride-fueled pick-up basketball match years ago that pitted Samuel and Lester FallsApart against the eight men of the Tribal Police, who were led by David WalksAlong. Samuel and Lester nearly prevailed against the odds, but ended up having their victory snatched away at the last minute in a nasty, dirty game.

The next morning, on-edge after staying up all night and fed up with Victor's insensitivity, Checkers attacks Victor violently in response to a rude comment about Thomas's father, Samuel. Thomas intervenes, and gets into a wrestling match with Victor himself. Outside after the fight, Chess convinces Thomas that they should kick Junior and Victor out of the band. At this moment, a package arrives with an invitation to play in Seattle for one thousand dollars, a huge payday for the struggling band. Checkers refuses to go along, but Chess, Thomas, Victor, and Junior begin the long road trip in uncomfortable silence.

When they arrive, they discover that in fact they have been invited to a "battle of the bands," a competition in which only the winner will receive the thousand dollar prize. With no other choice, they decide to sleep in the van before the competition. Back on the reservation, Checkers goes to the Catholic Church and meets Father Arnold, a white priest. Checkers talks to him about her deep desire as a child to be as "clean" as all the little white girls. She quickly falls in love with the understanding priest.

Miraculously, Coyote Springs wins the battle of the bands. We learn that two white women, Betty and Veronica, who have been following the band since the very beginning of their journey and have a physical relationship with Victor and Junior, sang backup. They all return to the reservation, but once there their luck runs out, along with the prize money. As a compromise with Chess, Thomas goes to church, but is unconvinced by the experience. A drunken Victor and Joseph are confronted by an enraged Michael White Hawk, the nephew of David WalksAlong. Michael beats them badly until a local drifter, the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota, hits him over the head with a two-by-four. The two band members slowly recover, as the money dries up—and no new gigs or record deals are coming in. Betty and Veronica return to Seattle, to the bookstore that they co-own.

One day, a Cadillac with two powerful executives from Cavalry Records, Phil Sheridan and George Wright, rolls onto the reservation. They offer Coyote Springs a possible record deal, inviting them to fly out to record a test in New York a week later. With this unexpected opportunity, the band feels pressure to perform the best they can. They make a pilgrimage

to Big Mom's house on Wellpinit Mountain and live there for a week, as she teaches them to play the chords full of suffering and pain that belong to all Indians, in spite of resistance from the ever-difficult Victor. At this point, all of the band's music is original.

As prepared as they can be, Coyote Springs takes the plane to New York—the first time that any of its members have flown. But when they reach the recording studio and begin to play for the chief executive, Mr. Armstrong, Victor's guitar suddenly rebels, burning him and bucking out of his hands. Armstrong leaves, and, enraged, Victor throws a tantrum in the studio, destroying some equipment. He and Junior leave to get drunk, while Chess, Checkers, and Thomas return to the hotel. Chess and Thomas decide to try and locate Victor and Junior, but it proves a nearly impossible task. Junior, meanwhile, stays sober and guides Victor home, haunted all the while by flashbacks of a white girl named Lynn, who he dated in college. She became pregnant, but chose to abort their baby, unwilling to marry an Indian. Alone in the hotel, Checkers is attacked by Phil Sheridan in a nightmare, and he reveals his true identity as a U.S. Army general from the Indian Wars.

Leaving their instruments behind, the band flies back to the reservation, where many tribe members wish to excommunicate them. Checkers confronts Father Arnold about their relationship, and he reveals that he is planning to leave both the reservation and the Church—but not to be with her. Defeated by tragedy and the memories of Lynn, Junior steals a rifle, climbs to the top of the water tower, and commits suicide. At his funeral, Chess and Thomas decide to get married and have children, but also to leave the reservation and move to Spokane. Checkers will go with them, leaving Victor alone. The night before Junior committed suicide, the guitar had come to Victor in a dream, telling him that it could make him famous if Victor would sacrifice the thing—or the person—that he loved most in the world. Racked with guilt, Victor has been sober since Junior's suicide. Junior later appears to him, and the two of them throw flask after flask of whiskey into Turtle Lake. Determined to do better in life, Victor goes to David WalksAlong to ask for Junior's old job, but WalksAlong crumples up his résumé, laughing. Defeated and despairing, Victor steals five dollars from WalksAlong's secretary and buys a six-pack of cheap beer, cracking one open with a sound that echoes the shot from Junior's rifle.

Chess, Checkers, and Thomas leave the reservation, stopping at a tribal feast along the way at the insistence of Big Mom. Big Mom takes a collection for them from the tribe, some of whom donate out of generosity, but many, like WalksAlong, out of a desire to see the three outcasts leave the reservation for good. They say their goodbyes and drive away to find new stories and new songs in Spokane. As they leave the reservation a herd of shadowy **horses** surrounds their van, running alongside them in the night.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Thomas Builds-the-Fire – Thomas is a Spokane Indian, and the reservation's unofficial storyteller. Much of the story's narration follows his perspective to some degree, which is attentive to small details and the spiritual resonances of the reservation. Thomas is somewhat of an outcast on the reservation, and considered strange by many. He becomes the lead singer and songwriter of Coyote Springs, as well as their bassist. Most of their meager funding and motivation also come from him. Junior and Victor have regularly bullied him since they were young, with Victor leading the charge, but Thomas is patient with their abuse. He falls in love with Chess Warm Water, singing her a love song at a concert on the Flathead reservation in Montana. Neither one of them drinks, and both are naturally quiet, but full of stories. At the end of the novel, the pair decides to get married and leave the reservation for Spokane. What hope remains in the novel goes with them, as they remain determined to give their children a better life with two Native American parents.

Junior Polatkin – A Spokane Indian and the (somewhat inept) drummer in Coyote Springs. Victor Joseph is his best friend, and the two stick close to one another to find meaning in the face of their difficult pasts. Junior is a handsome man who tries hard to be good, but is often led astray by Victor and haunted by the death of his parents in a drunk-driving accident. Before joining the band, he drives the water truck on the reservation—a model, relative to Victor at least, of stability and dependability. He went to college, briefly, in Oregon, but returned to the reservation after his white girlfriend, Lynn, decided to abort their child. Haunted by this and other defeats in his life, Junior commits suicide in the final chapter of the novel. This final defeat is a clear result of the patterns of suffering that haunt the reservation, and a blow to the community; Junior is a character who (as others recognize) ought to be doing better than he is, but who is constantly pulled back into destructive patterns.

Victor Joseph – A Spokane Indian and the guitar player in Coyote Springs. Junior Polatkin is his best friend. Victor is a bully and a drunk, whose rude behavior is partially a result of his upbringing—his father left at a young age, and his white stepfather mistreated him. Both events are individually tragic, but also part of a large pattern of suffering. In a dream, we learn that Victor was also abused by a Catholic priest as a boy while at summer camp, which might have contributed to his deep mistrust of authority. Before joining the band, he depends upon Junior for money, riding beside him in the water truck. With the magic of Robert Johnson's **guitar**, he becomes by far the best musician in the band. At the same time, however, he begins to hallucinate, seeing white women where there are none, and, ominously, dreaming that the guitar is asking him for a sacrifice

just before Junior's suicide.

Chess (Eunice) Warm Water – A Flathead Indian from Arlee, Montana, Chess becomes a back-up singer and keyboardist in Coyote Springs, and falls in love with Thomas Builds-the-Fire. She is very close with her sister, Checkers, of whom she is also fiercely protective. The two sisters earned their money fighting forest fires in Montana before joining the band. Chess is wise, and tells stories like Thomas. At the end of the novel, deeply frustrated by the death of Junior and the cycle of suffering that brought it about, she proposes to Thomas and the two decide to move to Spokane and have children together—children who will grow up with two "brown faces" looking down at them.

Checkers (Gladys) Warm Water – A Flathead Indian from Arlee, Montana, Checkers is described as perhaps the most beautiful Indian woman in all of America. She becomes a back-up singer in Coyote Springs, and falls in love with Father Arnold—she has a pattern of falling for older men, searching for stability within the precarious life of the reservation. Later she is haunted by dreams of Phil Sheridan, the time-traveling U.S. Army General, a figure of past suffering that haunts contemporary Native Americans. Checkers is very close with her sister, Chess, and the two sisters earned their money fighting forest fires in Montana before joining the band.

Big Mom – A heavily mythologized woman who lives on Wellpinit Mountain, watching over the Spokane tribe. According to tribal lore, she has the power to walk on water and read dreams, and can speak to animals. She is also an incredible musician, and, according to Alexie's telling of history, she has taught many of the greatest artists of the last century, including Elvis, Jimi Hendrix, and Janis Joplin. Coyote Springs spends one week with Big Mom before they fly to New York to audition for Cavalry Records, learning chords that she has adapted from the screams of dying **horses** during the Indian Wars. She is the champion fry bread cook on the reservation and a symbol of traditional Indian mysticism, mixed at every step with pragmatism and humor.

Robert Johnson – A famous blues guitarist who lived from 1911-1938. He died under mysterious circumstances, and legend has it that he made a Faustian bargain with the devil to be the best **guitar** player of all time. Alexie imagines that Johnson has been wandering all this time, trying to escape the Gentleman (a figure of the devil) who took his freedom. He finds refuge in Big Mom's house and, at the end of the novel, decides to stay on the reservation.

David WalksAlong – The Spokane Tribal Council Chairman, and uncle of Michael White Hawk. He holds a grudge against Thomas because although David was once a talented basketball player, Thomas' father, Samuel Builds-the-Fire, was a far better player than he ever was. WalksAlong is one of Coyote Springs' most vocal opponents on the reservation, and he attempts to excommunicate them from the tribe.

Father Arnold – The devoted Catholic priest on the reservation. Father Arnold loves his job, and preaching reminds him of what it was like to sing in a rock band after college. He also plays basketball and is relatively moderate in terms of religious dogma. He falls for Checkers, and, frightened by his feelings, decides to leave the Church and the reservation.

Betty – Co-owner of a bookstore in Seattle and a fan of Coyote Springs. She sleeps with Junior, and is fascinated by Native American culture. It is no coincidence that Alexie gave her the same name as an iconic white character from the Archie comic books. She is a super-fan of the band, and briefly sings back-up for them. Later, she and Veronica, who accompanies her everywhere, form a band that is signed by Cavalry Records and marketed as "Indian."

Veronica – Co-owner of a bookstore in Seattle and a fan of Coyote Springs. She sleeps with Victor and is fascinated by Native American culture. It is no coincidence that Alexie gave her the same name as an iconic white character from the Archie comic books. She is a super-fan of the band, and briefly sings back-up for them. Later, she and Betty, who accompanies her everywhere, form a band that is signed by Cavalry Records and marketed as Indian.

Phil Sheridan – An executive at Cavalry Records, who works with George Wright and under Mr. Armstrong. Sheridan is a perfect caricature of the slimy record executive, driven by commercial concerns and willing to compromise whatever morals necessary on the way to a successful signing. Like the other two Cavalry Records executives, he is also a modern version of a famous historical U.S. Army Officer implicated in the slaughter of Native Americans. Philip Sheridan (1831-1888) was a general who pioneered scorch earth tactics during the Civil War, and then oversaw the Indian Wars on the Great Plains. He is rumored to have said that the "only good Indian is a dead Indian." The personality of this historical general breaks through into the present in one scene, where Sheridan threatens Checkers in an intense nightmare.

George Wright – An executive at Cavalry Records, who works with Phil Sheridan and under Mr. Armstrong. Wright is beginning to feel remorse for the tactics of his fellow executives. Like the other two Cavalry Records executives, he is also a modern version of a famous U.S. Army Officer implicated in the slaughter of Native Americans. George Wright (1803-1865), commanded troops during the Battle of Spokane Plains near modern day Wellpinit, and hanged Chief Owhi and his son Qualchan in bad faith after inviting them to negotiate. Wright winds up leaving Cavalry Records, consumed by guilt, and going to rest at the grave of his historical predecessor in California.

Mr. Armstrong – The powerful chief executive at Cavalry Records, who manages George Wright and Phil Sheridan. He has little patience for the mistakes of Coyote Springs when

they play for him in New York, leaving the studio within minutes. Like the other two Cavalry Records executives, he too is a modern version of a famous U.S. Army Officer implicated in the slaughter of Native Americans. One of the better-known figures from that era, George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) fought in the Indian Wars until he was defeated at the Battle of Little Big Horn. Significantly for Alexie's novel, Armstrong once ordered his men to shoot 875 captured Indian ponies

The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota – An Indian man, not from the Spokane tribe, who spends all day standing outside the reservation's Trading Post, a much-frequented convenience store, announcing to whoever passes by that the end of the world is near. He is also the second best fry bread cook on the reservation, after Big Mom and before Bessie.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lester FallsApart – The friendliest drunk on the Spokane reservation. He is an old friend of Samuel Builds-the-Fire, having played with him in an epic basketball game against the Tribal Police. He is one of Coyote Springs' few supporters on the reservation.

Samuel Builds-the-Fire – Thomas' father, Samuel was once a hero of the reservation, and was Washington State High School Player of the Year in basketball. Now he is an inveterate alcoholic, who shows up passed out in Thomas' yard.

Simon – An odd old Indian man who only drives his pickup truck backwards, even on a long journey to the coast. Junior steals a rifle from his truck and uses it to commit suicide.

Bessie – The oldest Catholic on the reservation, whose fry bread is third best after Big Mom and the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota.

Lynn – An Irish girl, who had a relationship with Junior for a few months and then became pregnant. She rejected his marriage proposal, and ended up having an abortion. This haunts Junior and contributes to his depression.

Michael White Hawk – The nephew of David WalksAlong, he has just been released from prison after breaking his saxophone over the head of a white cashier. He is enormous, but mentally challenged, perhaps because his mother drank while he was in the womb. He is an infamous bully.

The Gentleman – A mysterious figure who haunts the **guitar** of Robert Johnson. The Gentleman is presumably the devil, with whom Johnson made a Faustian bargain – selling his soul in exchange for talent.

Luke Warm Water – The father of Chess and Checkers, and husband to Linda Warm Water. He becomes a violent alcoholic after the death of his young son, Bobby.

Linda Warm Water – The mother of Chess and Checkers, and wife to Luke Warm Water. She commits suicide after the death of her son, Bobby.

Bobby "Backgammon" Warm Water – Chess and Checkers' younger brother, who grew ill and died during a particularly harsh winter of their childhood.

Spokane Tribal Police Officer Wilson – A white police officer, who, because he has a bit of Indian heritage, is assigned to the reservation, but resents everyone on it. He pulls Samuel Builds-the-Fire over, and a confrontation between them leads to an epic game of pick-up basketball.

Barney Pipe – An old Blood Indian with false teeth who used to date Checkers.

Father James – A priest in the Catholic Church on the Flathead Reservation while Chess and Checkers were growing up.

Harold – Victor's stepfather, a white man that Victor's mother meets in a cowboy bar. In a dream, we watch as he leaves Victor behind on the reservation, taking his mother away.

Matilda – Victor's mother, who leaves with his stepfather in one of Victor's dreams.

Emery – Victor's real father, who died in Arizona years ago. A week passed before his body was discovered by his neighbors.

Ernie Lively – The owner of Toadstools, a cowboy bar in Ellensburg, Washington.

Eddie Tap Water – An old Indian alcoholic at the Pike Place market in Seattle, who knew Victor's grandfather. He changed his name from Spring Water to Tap Water when he became an "Urban Indian."

Dakota – A young white man whose **guitar** case Victor mistakes for his own at the baggage claim of the Spokane International Airport.

Son House – A famous bluesman and preacher, with whom Robert Johnson began his journey as a blues musician.

Marcus Whitman – A white missionary on the reservation, and Narcissa's husband.

Narcissa Whitman – A white missionary on the reservation, and Marcus' wife.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

At the core of Alexie's novel is an intense exploration of what it means to be a Native American living in America today. By writing a novel about Native Americans who form a blues and rock and roll

band (naming themselves "Coyote Springs"), Alexie is able to portray the complicated relationship between Native Americans and the country that surrounds them. As Americans, they are connected to the unique culture that produced the Blues. At the same time, the band is also implicitly connected to the *Black* Americans who originally created the blues—Black Americans who were (and are) systematically oppressed just like Native Americans. As a band seeking its fortune, Coyote Springs is furthermore embracing the hope of fame and wealth that is a part of the "American Dream," but also exposing themselves to the capitalist forces (in the form of Cavalry Records) that will seek to callously exploit them and the authentic cultural history that they bring to their music.

This complex situation then brings up the ideas of "cultural appropriation" and "cultural exchange." Cultural appropriation is when an oppressive culture borrows elements of an oppressed culture and uses them for its own benefit. This is often seen as something akin to theft or exploitation—using cultural elements and traditions while continuing to deny the value or humanity of the people who created that culture. A classic example of this is when white rock and roll artists (like Elvis Presley) appropriated black music (the blues, and early rock and roll) as their own, making it popular with white audiences and gaining enormous wealth and fame in the process. Cultural exchange, then, is a similar use of another culture's elements, but without the element of oppression or dehumanization. Alexie portrays Coyote Springs as a kind of cultural exchange—a Native-American blues band—that is a way for two historically oppressed groups (Native Americans and Black Americans) to draw strength and creativity from each other.

Later in the novel, however, the evils of cultural appropriation appear through Cavalry Records—representatives of the power-wielding white majority. The record executives recruit the white women Betty and Veronica to sell Native American music, and this misuse of Native American identity feels like a mockery of the Spokane group and their culture, rather than a productive celebration of shared history. The oppression and abuse of Native Americans at the hands of the white majority, exemplified by Cavalry Records, is ever-present in the band's casually racist encounters with the outside world. These encounters give the reader a darkly humorous picture of the outside world's caricatured image of Native Americans.

Alexie further investigates the ways that the Native American minority interacts with the white majority through interracial relationships. Checkers struggles to accept the pairing of Victor and Junior with the white outsiders, Betty and Veronica, arguing that an Indian man needs an Indian woman. Meanwhile, Junior and Victor's reasons for being drawn to Betty and Veronica are not based on simple personal attraction or love. Rather, the attraction is based in large part because of the girls' whiteness—sleeping with a white woman is like a badge of honor, and maybe, Junior reflects, even an attempt at revenge against the "White Man." Likewise, Betty and Veronica are drawn to Victor and Junior by their own problematic love for the exotic, and the spiritualism that they assume is present in any Native American. Junior's history with interracial relationships is even more complex, though, than it seems at first—we learn that, while at college in Oregon, he dated a white student named Lynn, who became pregnant and then aborted their child. Lynn told Junior that she couldn't marry him because he was Indian, and her parents refused to even talk to him. The haunting memory of this rejection, not of Junior per se but of his entire race, is what drives him to despair and suicide at the book's conclusion. This investigation of interracial relationships, and each character's interaction with them, is also a reflection on their conflicted feelings toward their own cultural identity. To live as a Native American in America, Alexie makes clear, is to inherit a massive amount of cultural baggage that must be grappled with in forming one's identity.

HOPE, DESPAIR, AND THE BLUES

Throughout Alexie's novel, hope battles with despair in the lives of each member of the band and the reservation as a whole—and the Blues become a way of converting despair into something that can build, rather than destroy, community.

Hope survives, barely, in spite of sustained adversity. The story of this ragtag band of misfits is in many ways a classic underdog tale, but without the traditional happy ending. The community invests, against its better judgment, in the sort of desperate optimism that comes with forming a band—entering into a very competitive field with little hope for success, either in terms of fame or money. Thomas tirelessly drives the group forward with his optimistic belief in their potential. When, on the verge of success, they fail so completely, their failure feels expected—even inevitable. This underdog tale is mirrored in the memory of Samuel Builds-the-Fire's basketball match against the tribal police. Against all odds, and in line with the macho Native American drive toward heroism, Samuel nearly emerged victorious, but then he too was defeated. Now he lies on the table, drunk and defeated in a deeper sense: he totally succumbs to despair.

This fatal drive toward heroism displayed by the young Samuel is typical of other male characters on the reservation, and bitterly mocked by others. The novel's main female characters, Chess and Checkers, ascribe this drive in male Native Americans to the macho need to fit the image of the fearless Indian warrior. They are bitter about its effects on the men of the reservation, seeing this need to feign invincibility as part of what leads many to alcohol when they, inevitably, can't live up to the impossible ideal, and then as a result face a persistent sense of unfulfilled potential. Hope against all odds is also a

part of this reckless urge—so Alexie seems to argue that there should be a middle ground, somewhere between reckless hope and the other side of the equation: deep despair.

Despair pervades the past of each of the band's members, and also threatens to invade their present. Junior ultimately gives in to despair, after the memory of his aborted child comes back to haunt him when the band is flying home from New York in defeat. Victor, in response to the death of his best friend, tries at first to rise up and respond with a heroic sort of hope, formulating a tragically inept resume to offer to David WalksAlong in the hope of taking over Junior's job. When this resume is laughingly rejected, though, he falls back into deep despair, returning to the life of an alcoholic he had hoped to escape. Any humor and hope in Alexie's novel is always dark. This deep awareness of despair is another link between the song lyrics written out at the beginning of each chapter of *Reservation Blues* and the Blues genre itself, which is famous for its themes of longing and sadness (rising as it does from a history of slavery and oppression). Music and storytelling become one way to grapple with the reality of a despair-filled life, injecting hope and personality into the equation—and perhaps discovering a path toward that "middle ground" between unrealistic hope and despair.

ALCOHOLISM AND PATTERNS OF SUFFERING

Alcohol is presented as a normal, ever-present, and inescapable part of life on the reservation—a symptom of the poverty and sense of despair that surround Native American life after years of oppression and broken promises from the American government.

Alcoholism is a thread that weaves its way across life on the reservation, and directly affects the lives of each of Coyote Springs' members. At various points in the novel they are confronted, individually or collectively, with the painful memories of alcohol abuse that broke up each of their families, in a way that was simultaneously predictable and seemingly impossible to stop. Chess and Checkers' father, Luke Warm Water, became an alcoholic after his infant son died of a preventable illness when no medical help was available. Luke's drinking tore their family apart, leading to their mother's suicide, and both sisters are haunted by memories of their father's alcoholism. Thomas' father, Samuel Builds-the-Fire, was once a basketball-playing hero of the tribe, but after the death of his wife he became an alcoholic as well. The only special skill he has now is one that Thomas jokes belongs to all Native American fathers – the ability to show up drunk on their children's doorsteps, no matter where or how far they have gone away in an attempt to escape. Junior's parents were both killed in a drunk driving accident, and Junior himself has now fallen into the same pattern of drinking he had hoped to avoid, binging with Victor whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Junior, too, is haunted by dreams of his parents. Victor's drinking is in turn a reaction to another pattern of suffering—his nightmares reveal that he was sexually abused by a priest while still a young boy. Now, he is persistently verbally and physically abusive to those around him, and the most recklessly alcoholic member of the band.

The prevalence of alcohol's destructive influence in the past and present of each of these characters is a reflection of the general patterns of suffering that pervade life on the reservation. The origin of these patterns is, more often than, not, oppression handed down from the government. This pattern of government oppression is exemplified by the three white executives of Cavalry Records, who finally defeat the unlikely "underdog" hope of Coyote Springs after first rekindling that hope with a worthless string of promises and contracts. To drive his point home, Alexie names these executives Sheridan, Wright, and Armstrong, after famous U.S. Army Officers implicated in the slaughter of Native Americans. Philip Sheridan (1831-1888) was a general who pioneered scorch earth tactics during the Civil War, and then oversaw the Indian Wars on the Great Plains. George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) also fought in the Indian Wars and, significantly for Alexie's novel, once ordered his men to shoot 875 captured Indian **horses**. George Wright (1803-1865) commanded troops during the Battle of Spokane Plains near modern-day Wellpinit, and hanged Chief Owhi and his son Qualchan in bad faith after inviting them to negotiate.

The reservation's patterns of suffering are held in the memory of Big Mom and the stories of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and transformed into the music played by Coyote Springs. Big Mom's memory of the murder of Native horses and her transcription of their song of mourning and pain makes these ghostly horses a symbol of the suffering of Native Americans at the hands of the government. The novel in some ways chronicles the band members' desperate attempt to escape from the patterns of suffering that destroyed their respective parents—and it is this desire to escape that finally drives Thomas and Chess to move off the reservation.

STORYTELLING, HISTORY, AND THE SPIRITUAL

In Alexie's novel, overtones of magical realism create a heightened sense of myth and an awareness of history that seems native to life on the reservation—and especially to life as it is experienced by Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the protagonist. Although the novel is narrated from a third-person perspective, it most consistently follows Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who is infamous for his storytelling. His stories are said to creep relentlessly into the dreams of everyone who lives on the reservation, giving them a sort of spiritual power. This storyteller's lens leads the reader to accept moments of fantasy, or of reclaimed history in which

major rock stars are imagined to have found their true talent under the instruction of Big Mom.

History and the spiritual are linked in the life of the reservation, both within the Catholic Church and as a part of native beliefs and rituals. Big Mom is a magical figure, whose power comes in equal parts from the "powerful medicine" of the supernatural and from her role as a living archive of tribal history, the history of invasion, and even the history of music in America. The other home of spiritualism in the novel, the reservation's Catholic Church, is also tied—at least in Thomas's mind—to the bloody history of Catholicism's role in the early exploration and settlement of America, which came at the expense of Native American lives. Father Arnold—the face of Catholicism on the reservation—is a sympathetic and relatable character, however, whose influence on the community seems positive—he plays basketball, feels the temptation to love, and takes pride in the performance of his sermons in a way that is similar to the onstage thrill experienced by Coyote Springs in concert. This dissonance connects to the common theme of a past full of suffering that invades a present that contains hope, but is often pulled back by the patterns of the past.

These patterns are represented using moments of fantasy, as when Sheridan, one of the white record label executives named after a historical U.S. general who participated in slaughters of Native Americans, invades Coyote Springs' hotel room in New York to "apologize" to Checkers, and ends up drifting back in history and remembering the rape of an Indian woman. Alexie's fantastical story-telling choices become a means of exploring the ways that history remains alive and vivid, and of showing how past oppression echoes into and explains present suffering.

COMMUNITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND LOVE

Community plays a huge role in life on the reservation, since each of the individuals living there is bound together by the shared sense of identity that comes from their race—its past and present, as outlined above.

Community can be a force for good, as exemplified by the small acts of kindness and support displayed by many of those on the reservation, and the camaraderie that comes from being part of a shared struggle. Alexie demonstrates the way in which the community can also exert a harmful force, though. The reservation community tries to banish Coyote Springs after they don't live up to expectations, its structure helps to perpetuate the cycle of alcoholism and suffering that pains its members, and it often rewards corruption and hierarchy on the tribal council. When Chess and Thomas decide to leave the reservation, Big Mom convinces them to take up a collection at the tribal gathering, and this event yields a mix of these positive and negative elements. A sizeable sum is collected, but Alexie makes it clear that while some donate out of love and support, just as many do so out of spite and a desire to see the band leave for good.

Within the often-heartbreaking life of the reservation, personal bonds also become an important way to find meaning and a reason for survival. As a model of male friendship on the reservation, Junior's (arguably toxic) friendship with Victor is a constant feature of the novel from the moment of their first introduction to the reader. This friendship seems to be what gives each of them the strength to overcome their difficult pasts, even as it also draws both of them toward alcoholism. When the friendship breaks, so does Victor's will to continue struggling. Broken friendships—and more generally, broken hearts—are also a consistent theme of the Blues tradition.

Romantic love is another bond used by members of the band to survive the loneliness of reservation life. Checkers searches for meaning and stability in love, preferring older men for this reason. She falls in love with Father Arnold, and Chess's unsurprised reaction to this makes it clear that it's a pattern in her sister's life. There is hope in love, though—if any hope is left at the end of the book, it is all given to Chess and Thomas, who are leaving the reservation and planning to have a child. Love becomes a means of preserving identity and hoping for a better future, of fighting back against oppression and despair.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GUITARS

Guitars, and most prominently Robert Johnson's guitar (which in turn becomes Victor's guitar), represent the powerful temptations of fame and the sacrifices that must be made to attain it. There is a legend that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for becoming a great guitar player. As a black Blues musician in the American Old South, Johnson would have faced oppression and violence, and would have had very few civil rights, so his fame as a musician (which mostly came about after his death, unfortunately) was a way for him to escape and rise above this life of suffering. In the novel, then, Johnson's guitar acts similarly for the members of Coyote Springs, offering them the chance to escape the cycle of poverty and alcoholism on the reservation through musical fame and money. The guitar seems imbued with magical powers and to have a life of its own, bringing the band great success, but it is still linked to the devil (the Gentleman), and so in a way it is a cursed object. The guitar ultimately ruins the band's big moment when it "rebels" against Victor during their performance for Cavalry Records, thus showing how a "deal with the devil" always ends badly, and how fame can be a curse as well as a blessing. Coyote Springs brings

joy and meaning to the band members for a while, but it also causes them great suffering. Likewise the mystical guitar has the power to produce incredible, life-changing music, but always at a terrible cost to whoever plays it.

HORSES

Horses appear at key moments throughout the text as a reminder of the pain and injustice that American Indians have suffered over generations. Horses are linked to an episode in Big Mom's memory, when hundreds of Indian horses were captured and slaughtered after a battle. Big Mom takes the bones of the most beautiful horse and makes a flute, on which she plays a song of despair and mourning that she adapts from the horses' screams. These horses' screams then haunt George Wright—who is mysteriously both a Cavalry Record executive and the historical general from the Indian Wars—and make him feel remorse for his role in the wars.

Horses also appear at the end of the novel, running in the night alongside the van as Chess, Checkers, and Thomas drive away from the reservation and into an unknown future. Here they represent the powerful spirit and vitality of Native American people, despite all the suffering and oppression they have faced throughout history. The wild horses, like the Native Americans themselves, have almost disappeared from the land that was once theirs, but those horses that remain still retain their fierce spirit and freedom. Their presence helps the tragic novel end on a brief note of hope, as the characters ride forward surrounded by the horses of their people.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *Reservation Blues* published in 1995.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"This is a beautiful place," Johnson said.
"But you haven't seen everything," Thomas said.
"What else is there?"
Thomas thought about all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those government houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Related Characters: Robert Johnson, Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Here Thomas reflects on all the suffering embedded in the reservation, both historical and contemporary, and is left unable to adequately respond to Robert Johnson's praise of the landscape. It is, in fact, a beautiful place, at face value - but there are also years of built-up pain and despair that haunt the reservation, psychological and physical violence perpetuated against its inhabitants by the government that now builds their flimsy houses as meager recompense for their actions. The ghosts of these painful events, victims of the Indian War and the years of patterned suffering that have followed, lie in wait, hoping to break through and erode away the government-built houses. Just as prominent in Thomas' mind as the actual bodies are the murdered dreams, the hopeful fantasies that have each been extinguished, without fail, by circumstance; to be a Native American, Alexie implies, is to struggle forever with despair. Thomas takes on this struggle when he dares to hope that his little blues band can achieve success, but this dream too risks being murdered along with all of the others.

The colt shivered as the officer put his pistol between its eyes and pulled the trigger. That colt fell to the grass of the clearing, to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern, to the cold, hard coroner's table in a Veterans Hospital.

Related Characters: Big Mom

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Big Mom, the mystical matriarch of the Spokane who has just been introduced, reflects on the vivid image of a dying colt, killed by a U.S. officer during the Indian Wars. Horses become a symbol for the Native American spirit in Alexie's novel, and Big Mom is the guardian of the tribe's collective memories, chronicling the patterns of suffering that have beset the reservation throughout its history.

Here, Alexie offers a poetic representation of that suffering. He collapses time by connecting this moment of cruelty directed toward a Native American horse more than a

hundred years ago with the consequences of this brutal slaughter on the spirit of the reservation today: the alcoholism that causes many Spokane to fall "to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern," and the many other common causes of death - chief among them suicide, disease and car crashes - that might lead to the coroner's table. These consequences are the secondary, indirect violence that results from the initial - now historical - violence of war. The weapons of that war, between "mainstream" America and the "outsider: Native Americans, have changed over the years, but the psychological damage inflicted by the patterns of alcoholism, poverty, and suicide has a heavy casualty rate all the same, trapping the reservation and its culture in a dangerous cycle of despair.

❝ Thomas repeated stories constantly. All the other Indians on the reservation heard those stories so often that the words crept into dreams. An Indian telling his friends about a dream he had was halfway through the telling before everyone realized it was actually one of Thomas's stealth stories.

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Alexie begins to characterize Thomas as a born storyteller, and to set up the narrative's universe as one that is full of magical realist elements. Here, he introduces Thomas' role as the tribe's common story-teller, while also making it clear that this role is not one that endears him to his community; Thomas is an oddball, an outsider on the reservation to some degree. Still, his power is such that he can influence the dreams of those around him, suggesting that stories have a sort of magic here.

As the reader learns more about Thomas' stories, it becomes clear that his favorite topic is the land around him, the beautiful and bitter place he calls home and all of the creatures and people that inhabit or have inhabited this reservation. Thomas serves as a voice for the spirits of this place, and the utility of that voice is shown in the way that Alexie himself, as a spirit of this reservation, makes use of Thomas's voice to introduce fantastical elements into the novel.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ They did go home with Junior and Victor one night, and everybody on the reservation knew about it. Little Indian boys crept around the house and tried to peek in the windows. All of them swore they saw the white women naked, then bragged it wasn't the first time they'd seen a naked white woman. None of them had seen a naked Indian woman, let alone a white woman. But the numbers of naked white women who had visited the Spokane Indian Reservation rapidly grew in the boys' imaginations, as if the size of their lies proved they were warriors.

Related Characters: Veronica, Betty, Victor Joseph, Junior Polatkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Here Alexie discusses the reservation community's reaction to Betty and Veronica's fling with Junior and Victor. The boys of the town are entranced by the white women, who serve as a means of affirming their own macho identities - they all lie, shamelessly, to claim an easy familiarity with the sexual prize of the white woman. The fact that these young boys, who are without exception sexually inexperienced, believe that these claims bolster their image in the community, shows that interracial relationships are driven by a set of machismo politics instilled at a very young age.

Victor and Junior are heroes according to this logic, at the peak of the macho pyramid. In reality, though, neither has a very successful night with the visiting women, since their blindness to the women themselves, outside of their role as status-boosting trophies, has meant that neither has grown much in their understanding of romantic love since they themselves were young boys. The boys' need for a macho reputation is driven, Alexie suggest, by their desire to be seen as "warriors," striving to conform to an identity that the narratives governing their lives, both White and Native, associate with a glorious and brave past.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ As he slept in the Warm Waters' house, Thomas dreamed about television and hunger. In his dream, he sat, all hungry and lonely, in his house and wanted more. He turned on his little black-and-white television to watch white people live. White people owned everything: food, houses, clothes, children. Television constantly reminded Thomas of all he never owned.

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the broke and hungry Thomas dreams that he is sitting alone in front of the the television. Dreams are an important storytelling technique in Alexie's novel, and this one demonstrates that even in his dreams Thomas is confronted with the dreary injustice of a world in which the odds are stacked against him because of his race. He only has a small black-and-white television, because even in a dream he cannot escape the reality of his poor existence. On that television, he sees only the narratives of mainstream white America, reminding him that he is an outsider, the "other." The easy success of the people on TV only makes his own poverty harder to bear, confirming the power of art and storytelling to reinforce either positive or negative structures of inequality. Growing up on the reservation, Thomas was never offered a realistic vision of Native American success, either from within his community or from the television. He did not have even this fiction to help him escape his hunger, only mainstream America's cheerful reminders that he was alone in that poverty because of his race.

Coyote Springs created a tribal music that scared and excited the white people in the audience. That music might have chased away the pilgrims five hundred years ago... The audience reached for Coyote Springs with brown and white hands that begged for more music, hope, and joy. Coyote Springs felt powerful, fell in love with the power, and courted it.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79-80

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Alexie describes the atmosphere at Coyote Springs' second live concert in Montana, a return to the same stage with the addition now of the Warm Water sisters to the band. The true, powerful potential of the band is on display here, as their music begins to come together for the first time with the live energy of the audience, harnessing their collective experience of despair to inspire hope and passion. The power of this collective hope is almost religious in character, as later demonstrated by Father Arnold's admission that he used to play in a band, and feels a similar sense of power as a preacher to what he felt onstage.

This moment of togetherness unites the oppressed tribe members by giving them the hope of a common culture, just as the Blues functioned in African American communities. The presence of this new, collective pride in their identity, with its "tribal" undertones, scares the white audience members, who are now the outsider, confronted by a culture that also excites them because it is exotic and other. The power of that music, of that collective hope, might have united the tribes of America against the pilgrims if it had existed when they arrived, suggests Alexie, in another collapsing of history (a common device throughout the novel).

Chapter 4 Quotes

Junior and Victor shrugged their shoulders, walked into Thomas's house, and looked for somewhere to sleep. Decorated veterans of that war between fathers and sons, Junior and Victor knew the best defense was sleep. They saw too many drunks littering the grass of the reservation; they rolled the drunks over and stole their money.

Related Characters: Samuel Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph, Junior Polatkin, Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Junior and Victor react - or, rather, don't react - to the sight of Thomas' drunken father, Samuel Builds-the-Fire, passed out on Thomas's front lawn. Their shared indifference to the appearance of the drunken Samuel is a product of their extensive experience in the "war between fathers and sons" of which they are "decorated veterans," since alcohol destroyed both of their families as well. This experience has hardened them against suffering, making alcoholism the expected, normal state for fathers. They respond pragmatically to this abundance of alcoholism now, callously stealing whatever they can from the passed out members of the reservation when they come across them. The key component of this philosophy is despair; there is nothing else to be done but sleep, no hope for changing the habits of the reservation or escaping the pattern of suffering embedded in their culture. Thomas holds on to hope in some ways, but must also therefore continue to confront the sadness of an unchanging reality, since he

refuses to escape into sleep or drink like Victor and Joseph.

> Once outside, Thomas cried. Not because he needed to be alone; not because he was afraid to cry in front of women. He just wanted his tears to be individual, not tribal. Those tribal tears collected and fermented in huge BIA barrels. Then the BIA poured those tears into beer and Pepsi cans and distributed them back onto the reservation. Thomas wanted his tears to be selfish and fresh.

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas's frustration and sadness at the sorry state of his drunken father overflows, as Samuel Builds-the-Fire lies prone on his kitchen table, tended to by the Warm Water sisters. Thomas is very particular about showing his suffering to no one else - not because, as Junior or Victor would have been with their macho ethic, he is afraid to cry in front of the Warm Water sisters, but because he wants his tears to be "individual, not tribal." Thomas does not want to add to the stock of suffering built up in his culture, the patterns that have led to this moment. He has a clear sense that these patterns are encouraged and perpetuated by the BIA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a governmental organization that holds the reservation back even as it provides aid, by only offering a bare minimum to survive, and promoting dependence on alcohol or Pepsi, the two continual drinks of the tribe.

The sinister, fantastical image of tears collected into barrels and fermented into beer reinforces the sense that everything in the tribe members' lives is used against them by the unjust government with whom they are still, in some sense, at war. Tragedy leads to despair, which leads to alcohol and further tragedy. By keeping his tears to himself, and ensuring that they are "fresh," Thomas is trying to break free from this pattern of suffering by rejecting the recycled despair of his race, imposed by outsiders.

> "You never told us who won that game between your father and the Tribal Cops."
"Who do you think?" Thomas asked. "Who do you think won that game?"

Related Characters: Chess (Eunice) Warm Water, Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker), Samuel Builds-the-Fire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Here Alexie reveals the ending to the pick-up basketball game from years before when Thomas's father, Samuel Builds-the-Fire, took on the Tribal Cops in the ultimate underdog contest. There was no happy ending to the story - Samuel and his team lost. This cycle of impossible hope, driven, the Warm Water sisters would suggest, by the macho drive of would-be warriors in the tribe, leads inevitably to defeat and despair - such that Thomas does not even have to say outright that his father lost, because it is the obvious outcome to such a common story. Thomas' repeated question is tinged with defeatism and anger that this cycle is a part of his identity - the Tribal Cops, representatives on the reservation of the power of White America, have always won, and always will win against the marginalized Natives who dare to speak up or struggle against injustice, as Thomas' father did in his own way.

The story that Thomas tells is a powerful one, illustrating the history of struggle against the governmental powers that perpetuate a cycle of hopelessness. Thomas uses his gift as a storyteller to bring to life his father's effort once again, even as Samuel lies prone on the table in the present. If anything, this tale serves to underline the tragedy of his father's fall from glory to this moment, and to bristle against the seeming inevitability of that fall.

Chapter 5 Quotes

> "Those white women are always perfect, you know? When I was little and we'd go to shop in Missoula, I'd see perfect little white girls all the time. They were always so pretty and clean. I'd come to town in my muddy dress. It never mattered how clean it was when we left Arlee. By the time we got to Missoula, it was always a mess."

Related Characters: Checkers (Gladys) Warm Water (speaker), Father Arnold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Checkers here confesses her childhood pain to Father Arnold as a way of explaining her current feelings of anger toward the interloping Betty and Veronica. In her story, we see the young Checkers confronting her outsider identity, and feeling intensely jealous of the clean white girls that she saw in town, whose beauty was celebrated and idealized by the society they all lived in.

The white girls' beauty, which Checkers felt was unattainable for her, is tied both to their whiteness and their cleanliness - a proxy for their wealth. Checkers and Chess, who likely only own one or two dresses apiece, have to contend with the mud flung up by their horse-drawn carriage on the long ride into town, since they cannot afford a car and live in isolation on the reservation. They cannot access the wealth that provides these white girls with their clean dresses, and Checkers especially feels this lack as a fault in herself, a frustrating cycle that she cannot escape and over which she has no power. The mud, therefore, represents both the girls' poverty and their darker skin, neither of which can be easily washed away. Checkers' fascination with white ideals of beauty is also held up by religion in her life, since, as she tells Father Thomas, she always sees Jesus painted as a white man.

"I mean, I think they're all using each other as trophies. Junior and Victor get to have beautiful white women on their arms, and Betty and Veronica get to have Indian men... Look at them. They got more Indian jewelry and junk on them than any dozen Indians. The spotlights hit the crystals on their necks and nearly blinded me once. All they talk about is Coyote this and Coyote that, sweatlodge this and sweatlodge that. They think Indians got all the answers."

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker), Veronica, Betty, Victor Joseph, Junior Polatkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Thomas speaks to the radio interviewer after Coyote Springs wins a battle of the bands in Seattle, answering a question about the relationship between Junior and Victor, and Betty and Veronica, two groupies who have joined the band as back-up singers. Thomas takes a dim view of these couplings, seeing both the Native men and the white women as being fascinated more with the fact of one another's race than with one another's actual person. Each is a trophy to the other - Betty and Veronica are in search of the exotic, seeing in Native Americans a stereotypical, mystic and new age identity to be explored, while for Junior and Victor, the act of landing a white woman proves their masculine power and, as they discuss later, serves as a sort of revenge against the white power structures that hold them down in patterns of suffering.

"There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow. All those soldiers killed us in the name of God, enit? They shouted 'Jesus Christ' as they ran swords through our bellies. Can you feel the pain still, late at night, when you're trying to sleep, when you're praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter?"

Related Characters: Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker), Chess (Eunice) Warm Water

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas is speaking to Chess about the role of religion in her life, as she tries to convince him to come to church with her. For Thomas, it is impossible to separate the historical injustice and violence perpetrated by the Christian Church from any of its present-day spiritual teachings. These teachings were used to justify the slaughter of thousands of his own race, and so must be corrupt and evil, as far as he is concerned. He feels a real bond to every Native who was killed, a bond made stronger perhaps by his role as a storyteller, who listens to the voices of the reservation's many ghosts.

The fact that Catholicism still has such a strong hold on the reservation is, in Thomas' mind, only further proof that the white Christian desire to oppress the Natives, weeding out their traditional spiritual practices, has not left. Rather, according to Thomas's perspective, their continued presence serves to reinforce patterns of guilt and fear that isolate, rather than build community. Like alcohol, religion is another means by which those in power aim to pacify the just anger of the oppressed, giving them a false sense of happiness or hope while removing their will to change their current circumstances for the better by rising up against the structures that restrict them.

Thomas smiled.

"You know," he said, "I've always had a theory that you ain't really Indian unless, at some point in your life, you didn't want to be Indian."

"Good theory," Chess said. "I'm the one who told you that."

Related Characters: Chess (Eunice) Warm Water, Thomas Builds-the-Fire (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas and Chess speak about the struggle of Native American life, and arrive at the same conclusion: that self-hatred and a desire to escape one's Native identity is in itself an integral part of what it means to be Native. As she rightly reminds Thomas, it was Chess who came up with this pearl of wisdom first; it seems as though the female characters in the novel are more capable of taking this kind of perspective on their pain, while the male characters are often too trapped within the cycle of suffering to see its cause. That Thomas unconsciously echoes Chess is a sign of their growing love for one another, as they are beginning now to take refuge from all of this suffering by relying on each other.

This sort of lamenting of one's position in life that both characters describe is a key part of blues songwriting, which is inherently mournful, sometimes with a tinge of anger at the sorry conditions the singer finds him or herself trapped within. They express, and perhaps overcome this despair through song, which builds a community of support, of fellow-sufferers willing to hope for better.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Then the music stopped. The reservation exhaled. Those blues created memories for the Spokanes, but they refused to claim them. Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps. Those blues churned up generations of anger and pain: car wrecks, suicides, murders. Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous.

Related Characters: Robert Johnson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Robert Johnson, famous blues guitarist and singer, sings a short blues song on Big Mom's porch, where he has been in recovery, hiding from the diabolical Gentleman since he arrived on the reservation. The effects upon the reservation are intense, as this music speaks to its soul, stirring up all of the "anger and pain" bred from generations of suffering and historical oppression. This is a moment of magical realism, as the landscape is personified and given life by the spirit of those who have died there. The tribe members refuse the call of this music, though, stubbornly sticking to their "old maps" instead of letting themselves hear and understand the patterns of suffering that hold them back.

The community rejects this opportunity for growth, comfortable in its own fashion with the status quo, as full of despair as it is. They refuse the memories of suffering that cross cultures, from the African American Johnson to them. This cross-cultural exchange is based in a shared experience of oppression, and Alexie makes it clear that he believes Native Americans have a valid claim to the blues as a genre by calling Johnson's music "ancient, aboriginal, indigenous," three adjectives commonly attributed to the Native peoples.

"You want the good stuff of being Indian without all the bad stuff, enit? Well, a concussion is just as traditional as a sweatlodge... What did you New Agers expect? You think magic is so easy to explain? You come running to the reservations, to all these places you've decided are sacred. Jeez, don't you know every place is sacred? You want your sacred lands in warm places with pretty views. You want the sacred places to be near malls and 7-Elevens, too."

Related Characters: Chess (Eunice) Warm Water (speaker), Veronica, Betty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

Chess yells at Betty and Veronica when they decide to leave the reservation after Victor and Junior fight with White Hawk and are taken to the hospital. Chess's mounting frustration at the invasion of these white women comes to the fore here, as she berates the two outsiders for their limited, ultimately racist view of what it is to be Native American.

Betty and Veronica, argues Chess, are interested in Junior and Victor only as a means of touching the exotic, engaging

with a culture they see as holding a special, spiritual power. They misunderstand this power, says Chess, because they believe they can control it and make selective use of it, taking only the good without the bad and keeping all the conveniences and advantages of their white identities at the same time. The sacred is everywhere, in everything, and they are blind to it because it doesn't suit their exotic fantasy of what magic is. In fact, Chess goes on, the pain of violence driven by alcoholism, as exemplified by this recent fight, is an equal part of what it means to be a Native American, trapped within patterns of suffering that Betty and Veronica cannot begin to understand.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"Michael," Big Mom said, "you run around playing like you're a warrior. You're the first to tell an Indian he's not being Indian enough. How do you know what that means? You need to take care of your people. Smashing your guitar over the head of a white man is just violence. And the white man has always been better at violence anyway. They'll always be better than you at violence."

Related Characters: Big Mom (speaker), Michael White Hawk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Here Big Mom remembers a speech she gave to a young Michael White Hawk, before he went to prison for attacking a white cashier. He had been her student, and she hoped to head off his angry tendencies before they got out of hand - but she was unsuccessful.

In her attempt to convince White Hawk to choose a different path, Big Mom implies that the best way to beat the white man, since they will always be better at violence, is through means like art and music. As the living memory of the Spokane tribe, she speaks with the historical perspective of someone who has seen many like Michael fail in their foolish attempts to fight violence with violence. She berates White Hawk, who has no such perspective, for claiming the authority to decide what is "Indian" and what is not, equating Native identity with his misguided quest to be a warrior. Rather than judging and condemning his fellow Natives, Big Mom tells White Hawk to embrace and take care of them, building community, and escaping the patterns of violence that she has witnessed destroy so many macho young men with their wild hopes that give way to despair.

The old Indian women dipped wooden spoons into stews and stirred and stirred. The stews made of random vegetables and commodity food, of failed dreams and predictable tears. That was the only way to measure time, to wait. Those spoons moved in slow circles. Stir, stir. The reservation waited for Coyote Springs to fall into pieces, so they could be dropped into the old women's stews.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

The reservation's inhabitants await news about Coyote Springs' fateful trip to New York to play for a group of big time record executives. While most hometown communities might cheer for the potential success of their underdog heroes, the band's failure is a foregone conclusion in the minds of these waiting old women, so hardened to a lifetime of "failed dreams and predictable tears" that they no longer dare hope that anyone could break free from the pattern of suffering that has shaped their lives.

The old women, survivors of many tragedies on the reservation, are repositories for its memories and spirit, broken to despair by years of disappointment. This bitterness is transferred into the stew that they stir, the food that fuels the entire community, its contents determined by scrounging together the meager available resources. Coyote Springs, in the view of these women and the reservation, will inevitably return broken and defeated, further fuel to add to their bitter stew. The circular, repeated stirring motion of the old women is a sign of this cycle of disappointment, a pattern that is so difficult to escape.

Chapter 8 Quotes

Victor roared against his whole life. If he could have been hooked up to a power line, he would have lit up Times Square. He had enough anger inside to guide every salmon over Grand Coulee Dam. He wanted to steal a New York cop's horse and go on the warpath. He wanted to scalp stockbrokers and kidnap supermodels. He wanted to shoot flaming arrows into the Museum of Modern Art. He wanted to lay siege to Radio City Music Hall. Victor wanted to win. Victor wanted to get drunk.

Related Characters: Victor Joseph

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Victor reacts to the band's failure in the recording studio, a failure caused by his mystical guitar's sudden rebellion. Victor "roars," consumed with anger against the system, the society that has crippled his chances at success. His rage is a distinctly violent one, in the model of the warrior ancestors venerated by his tribe - he wants to enact traditional representations of Native American violence, from bow and arrows to scalping, on every symbol of mainstream American power that surrounds him in New York City: the stockbrokers and supermodels, museums and police.

The image of Victor riding on horseback down the streets of New York is equal parts absurd and tragic, a representation of the extent to which he has been trapped in the past, and is out of place in this modern world, unable to cope. He had dared to hope, dared to leave behind the despair that had dominated his life until this point - he wanted to win, for once, but has only lost once again. And, once again, he will turn to the only relief that many of his tribe have found for this repeated trauma: alcohol. This cycle of disappointment and the desperate search for relief is what has driven so many of his people to alcoholism, and the related suffering of family and community that accompanies that particular sickness.

"I remember once," he said, "when I killed this Indian woman. I don't even know what tribe she was. It was back in '72. I rode up on her and ran my saber right through her heart. I thought that was it. But she jumped up and pulled me off my mount. I couldn't believe it. I was so angry that I threw her to the ground and stomped her to death. It was then I noticed she was pregnant. We couldn't have that. Nits make lice, you know? So I cut her belly open and pulled that fetus out. Then that baby bit me. Can you believe that."

Related Characters: Phil Sheridan (speaker), Checkers (Gladys) Warm Water

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

Phil Sheridan, who is a record executive and, somehow, also an infamous Army officer from the Indian War, speaks to Checkers alone in her New York hotel room, where he has shown up unannounced. He describes in graphic detail a scene from a battle in 1872, when he killed a pregnant Native woman who fought back with remarkable ferocity before succumbing to his violent attack. Then he describes his cruel decision to kill her unborn child, since "nits make lice," a horribly callous justification for an unjustifiable act of cruelty that equates Native people to insects. At the same time, this decision shows Sheridan's awareness that violence and a desire for revenge are passed down through generations, a truth that has been borne out today, since the members of Coyote Springs are all still embroiled in the same suffering that was begun by this historical trauma.

By collapsing time in an act of magical realism, and bringing this historically real Army officer into contemporary New York to attack Checkers, Alexie makes the continued consequences of that racial violence abundantly clear. Sheridan is still in a position of power over Checkers, although his methods of violence have changed; he wields the power of capitalism as a record executive who killed their contract after trying to appropriate their culture, and now he has the power of a potential sexual aggressor.

Wright looked at Coyote Springs. He saw their Indian faces. He saw the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and bullets. He looked at his own white hands and saw the blood stains there.

Related Characters: George Wright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

George Wright, who is another record executive/historical army officer, finally confronts his guilt for the horrific events of the Indian War. Wright showcases the ways that violence and oppression can also have negative consequences for the oppressor. The fact that Wright looks at the members of Coyote Springs and sees the entire violent and tragic history of their race reinforces the notion that this history continues to have effects today, since the tribe has been

caught in cycles of violence and suffering ever since.

That Wright can see this history of the whole race in each of them, also raises the question: does every member of mainstream white American also carry a share of the guilt for their suffering? Wright's hands are figuratively stained with blood, because he was, somehow, present during the Indian Wars 150 years before or more, but do all white hands continue to share this guilt, at least until proper reparations have been made? There is, perhaps, an implicit argument that until the cycle of suffering and racism has been broken, all Native Americans will have this oppression as an unshakeable part of their identity - and all white Americans might have an equivalent guilt as a part of theirs, unless they work to undo the wrongs embedded in society's structure.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"These women have got the Indian experience down. They really understand what it means to be Indian. They've been there."
"Explain."
"Can't you see the possibilities? We dress them up a little. Get them into the tanning booth. Darken them up a bit. Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones. Get them a little higher, you know? Dye their hair black. Then we'd have Indians. People want to hear Indians."

Related Characters: Mr. Armstrong, Phil Sheridan (speaker), George Wright, Veronica, Betty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Sheridan pitches his repugnant idea for selling Betty and Veronica as a Native American band to Wright and Armstrong, the head of the record label. This is the negative form of cultural transfer, what one would call appropriation - and a particularly backhanded and deceptive instance of it, since Betty and Veronica would be masquerading as actual Native Americans. The fact that "people want to hear Indians" is another reminder of the appetite of the white mainstream majority for the exotic flavors of minority culture - and the fact that Betty and Veronica could satisfy this appetite shows that it is at its base a shallow and ignorant desire equivalent to the one that Betty and Veronica were pursuing in joining the band.

Every suggestion that Sheridan makes for transforming Betty and Veronica into passable Natives is callous, surface level, and deeply racist, from plastic surgery to a tanning booth. In no way do the pair actually "understand what it means to be Indian" - as Alexie's novel has made clear, the only people capable of truly understanding that identity are the Natives themselves, and to assert ownership over their identity is theft. Witnessing this new racism, a form of cultural violence that has lasted while the explicit violence of the Indian Wars has faded, George Wright finally decides that enough is enough, and he leaves Cavalry Records for good.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Chess looked around the graveyard, at all the graves of Indians killed by white people's cars, alcohol, uranium. All those Indians who had killed themselves. She saw the pine trees that surrounded the graveyard and the road that led back to the rest of the reservation. That road was dirt and gravel, had been a trail for a few centuries before. A few years from now it would be paved, paid for by one more government grant. She looked down the road and thought she saw a car, a mirage shimmering in the distance, a blonde woman and a child standing beside the car, both dressed in black.

Related Characters: Lynn, Junior Polatkin, Chess (Eunice) Warm Water

Related Themes:

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

Chess takes a moment to look over the reservation cemetery at the end of Junior's funeral, and she sees a mirage of the white woman Junior loved in college, and their unborn child. Surveying the rows of graves, Chess sees the race-driven violence behind each of the dead Natives, the patterns of suffering - alcoholism, cancer caused by uranium mining, and car accidents - that she believes are enforced by the racist policies of mainstream white America. She is nearly overwhelmed by the magnitude of this destruction, and by the many suicides who gave in to despair. The trees and the gravel road that "had been a trail for a few centuries before," are a piece of the old reservation, before the advent of white settlers, repositories of the history of Native Americans in this place that go beyond the graveyard. The trail will be paved over soon, erased by the government's money, a bandaid applied to the wrong wound. In the distance, the blond woman is a vision of what might have

been for Junior, a happy family with a child that Victor lied about, who was in fact aborted. If the racism that separated Junior from his college girlfriend, Lynn, had not existed, this family might.

WalksAlong didn't respond, and Victor left the office, feeling something slip inside him. He stole five dollars from WalksAlong's secretary's purse and bought a six-pack of cheap beer at the Trading Post.
"Fuck it, I can do it, too," Victor whispered to himself and opened the first can. That little explosion of the beer can opening sounded exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior's rifle made on the water tower.

Related Characters: Victor Joseph (speaker), David WalksAlong, Junior Polatkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

Victor is rejected by David WalksAlong after making his final desperate attempt to escape the pattern of suffering and despair that has guided his life so far, and that has claimed that of his best friend, Junior. WalksAlong, an elected leader of the tribe, chooses personal vengeance over his responsibility to Victor as a member of the community, mocking the poorly written resume that Victor had brought in search of a job.

This final blow is too much, and Victor, who had previously resolved to give up drinking after being visited by the ghost of Junior, turns immediately to the only relief he has ever known from the suffering that holds him back from success: alcohol. He is too poor to afford it on his own, stealing from WalksAlong's secretary in a small act of revenge that will only foster further discord in the community. The echo of Junior's rifle heard in the opening of the beer can is a not-so-subtle sign that this decision is an equivalent surrender to despair, a slower form of suicide that plays into the same pattern.

In the blue van, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers sang together. They were alive; they'd keep living. They sang together with the shadow horses: we are alive, we'll keep living. Songs were waiting for them up there in the dark. Songs were waiting for them in the city.

Related Characters: Checkers (Gladys) Warm Water, Chess (Eunice) Warm Water, Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which ends the novel, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers cross the borders of the reservation on their way to a new life, accompanied by a herd of shadowy horses. They have finally grown so frustrated with life on the reservation and among its community that they have decided that the only way to keep hope alive and break the pattern of suffering and despair is to build upon the smaller community of love they have created amongst themselves, in a new place. When making this decision, Thomas is sad to leave the stories of the reservation behind - but the shadowy ghost horses that appear to shepherd them across the border are a sign that the spirit and history of their culture will accompany them, and this gives Thomas and his companions hope that songs are "waiting for them in the city." They sing together now, using the blues as a means of overcoming there despair, and look to the future. There will be new stories, and new songs - and perhaps, this time, they will at long last have new endings.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Song lyrics precede each chapter, and this first one is a song about poverty and lack of choice. The action begins when a black stranger arrives in Wellpinit, Washington on the Spokane Indian Reservation, waiting with his **guitar** at the town's crossroads. Word of his arrival spreads rapidly, but no one has the courage to speak to him until Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a lonely, dark-skinned Indian man with the physique of an old-time salmon fisherman, introduces himself. The stranger refuses to shakes Thomas's hand, saying that he's afraid that "the Gentleman" might hear. Thomas is curious, but according to unwritten Spokane tradition, he doesn't ask questions.

The use of the blues as a framing device is most evident in the songs lyrics preceding each chapter, which often condense the main themes of a chapter. The first thing we learn about the reservation, through this song, is that it is a place where painful history and mistreatment have locked the community into a pattern of suffering that is difficult to break. The black stranger is a mystery, as is "the Gentleman." The tone already foreshadows the magical realism of the novel, which at times weaves a fantastical story to make its point.

The man introduces himself as Robert Johnson, and reveals that he has come in search of an old woman from his dreams who might be able to help him escape the Gentleman. Thomas sees the sickness and fatigue in Johnson, and recognizes the weight that he himself feels as a storyteller, enslaved in some ways by his art. He invites Johnson home to play some songs. Johnson, who has been on the run since he first faked his death to escape his deal with the Gentleman in 1938, shows him his scarred hands, and tells Thomas that he can never play again.

This fantastical tone continues, as the novel begins with a definite awareness of the odd ways that Thomas, as a storyteller, sees the world differently. Johnson's scarred hands are signs of a painful past, creating a sense of menace for what is to come as he enters the reservation. Robert Johnson was a real historical figure, a Blues musician who became hugely influential after his death. He was rumored to have sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in exchange for skill at the guitar. This suggests that Johnson's "Gentleman" in the novel is actually a figure of the devil, pursuing Johnson who (as Alexie imagines) has not died, but is on the run from the devil.

Thomas tells Johnson that Big Mom, who lives on top of the beautiful and mystical Wellpinit Mountain, may be the healing woman he is looking for. Johnson admires the reservation's beauty, but Thomas thinks of all the painful history buried just under the surface. He drives Johnson to the base of the mountain, but his van won't make the whole journey to Big Mom, so Johnson sets out alone, leaving his **guitar** behind.

Big Mom is the ultimate spiritual entity on the reservation, rivaling the power of the Catholic Church. Thomas can see the patterns of suffering and painful history that haunt this place, while Johnson is distracted by its beauty. The guitar, a significant object in the novel, is now passed on from Johnson to Thomas and his peers.

In the memory of Big Mom, 134 years earlier, the Indian **horses** scream. She thinks at first that they are singing, but knows this is unlike any song she has taught them. She memorizes the song, and then walks to the clearing, where she sees the horses shot and killed by soldiers in blue uniforms. An officer whispers in the last colt's ear, then shoots it between the eyes, and it falls to the grass, "to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern…" Big Mom weeps, and makes a flute from the bones of the most beautiful horse. Now she waits on the mountain, and greets different "horses" who come to her in need: Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, and many others. Now she watches as Robert Johnson makes his way to her.

Jumping in time unexpectedly, Alexie establishes that time is a fantastical, fluid thing for certain characters in the novel, including Big Mom, who is a supernatural part of history. The horses establish a symbol for the historical pattern of abuse and suffering that Native Americans endure at the hands of white governments past and present. Big Mom's instinct to use music as a way of memorializing their pain and combating despair is one that becomes a theme of the novel. The fantasy deepens, as Alexie incorporates these famous musicians into the universe of his novel.

Thomas talks to the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota, a man who spends all day outside the reservation's Trading Post. The man tells Thomas that the end of the world is near, and to be careful with music, which is dangerous. Thomas smiles. He steps past the new tribal slot machines and buys a microwave burrito at the Trading Post. Then Victor Joseph, who is tattered and angry, and Junior Polatkin, a "tall, good-looking buck with hair like Indians in the movies," interrupts his curbside meal to ask about the **guitar**. They are bullies—Victor is an "asshole," and Junior can be too, because "Victor [is] extremely contagious." Thomas tells them he is going to change the world with this guitar.

Everyone on the reservation knows one another; it is a tight-knit community, and the quirks of each member are known to all. The man's warning that music is dangerous falls on deaf ears, but the reader notes this warning of what is to come. The tribal slot machines are a small sign of suffering and despair in the face of wild, illegitimate hope. Victor and Junior's codependent friendship is introduced for the first time, and the macho character of the pair is highlighted.

Thomas tells them the **guitar** has a secret name, and Victor pulls him into a sudden headlock to make him reveal it. These tussles are common on the reservation, full of frustrated, macho warriors who are treated like animals by the rest of world. Thomas does not struggle, but he will not speak. He and Victor make a deal: if Thomas can play a Patsy Cline song, he can go free—if not, Victor will beat him up and take the guitar. Junior remarks that the song can't be worse than Thomas's stories, which creep about and get into everything on the reservation, even dreams. Victor and Junior often try to shut Thomas up, but he never stops telling his stories.

The struggle of these macho "warriors" is another reference to the idea that the past is difficult to shake, and that its persistence leads to frustrated, wild hopes, disappointment, and corresponding patterns of suffering. Thomas' stubborn patience with the bullies is a sign of his careful character, as he responds to their violence with music, or with the stories that consume him and have a magic of their own. We see the dynamic of Junior and Victor's destructive friendship.

Suddenly, Victor smashes the **guitar** against the sidewalk, and then gives it to Thomas to play. Thomas, knowing that Junior and Victor are "fragile as eggs, despite their warrior disguises," carefully plays the song about falling to pieces. It is good, silencing the two bullies, and the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota interrupts to tell them that the end of the world is near. By now, Junior has to go to work delivering water, and the unemployed Victor tags along—so Thomas escapes the beating. He starts to cry, and the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota tells him that things will be better in the morning. Thomas notices his hands have small razor cuts on them, where he played guitar, and he drives home with the broken guitar.

Victor's sudden violence is an outgrowth of his painful past, as Thomas wisely recognizes, seeing past their "disguises" as confident warriors to the insecurity and sadness that haunt both Junior and Victor. The comedy of the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota's periodic announcements undercuts the emotional thrust of the moment, giving Thomas a moment to escape. Thomas cries, a distinctly un-macho reaction, distinguishing himself from Victor and Junior. The scars are another sign that there is some dark magic at work in this guitar.

Junior is driving the water truck to the West End, avoiding potholes, with Victor asleep beside him, twisting and turning from a nightmare. Junior remembers the Psych 101 course he took at college, and how Freud and Jung said dreams decide everything. Junior knew that this was true for Indians, especially, since all the Indians on television had visions that told them exactly what to do. Junior knows this fact (and how to drive) and little else, except for the "wanting"—the need for something more. Victor only seems to want money. Junior reaches out to calm Victor in his sleep.

The closeness of Junior and Victor, and Victor's dependence on Junior, becomes more apparent. Junior's reflection on the importance of dreams for Native Americans underlines the surreal, magical-realist tone of the story, while also making fun of racist white visions of Native Americans that assume they all have a deep, inherent spiritualism. There is something missing in Junior's life, and this already foreshadows his tragic end.

The two arrive at Simon's house and pump some water into the well, looking at the dusty lawn. Simon, whom Victor calls the "crazy backwards driving old man," offers them a drink, but all he has is Pepsi and coffee, and Victor wants a beer. Junior says he has to finish his work first, and shrugs his shoulders in response to Simon's question about the black stranger. Simon shrugs back in agreement. The two leave, and Junior insists that they finish the five houses remaining. He promises to buy Victor's drinks at the tavern.

Simon is an oddity on the reservation—not only because he drives backwards everywhere, but also because he does not drink. Junior's respectful manner contrasts sharply with Victor's rudeness. It is Junior who insists that they finish work before collapsing into their normal nighttime routine of drinking. He wants to be a good man in spite of Victor's negative influence.

Thomas plans to burn the broken **guitar** to smoke some salmon, but the instrument repairs itself overnight, and speaks to him in the morning, laughing at his plan to burn it. He tells Thomas that "the blues always make us remember," and Thomas thinks of his mother's singing when he was a child. The guitar plays him a sad song, the same song for hours, and Victor and Junior hear it too, passed out drunk in the water truck. The guitar tells Thomas the other two will be coming soon, and that the three of them are meant to play songs for their people, who "need the music." The reservation "drank deep" from the music of the guitar because it "tasted so familiar."

The magic of the instrument manifests itself in this act of self-repair, and it takes on a personality of its own. The fact that the blues are about memory—and painful memory in particular—makes them a natural fit for the reservation: something "so familiar." This begins the idea of "cultural exchange" via music. The Blues, a genre born of Black American suffering, also speaks to another oppressed group with a long history of persecution: Native Americans. The guitar's prophesy and the reservation's reaction to it continues the sense of a fantastical story mixed with gritty realism.

Junior and Victor are passed out in the water truck. Junior dreams of his two brothers, his two sisters, and his parents waiting at a bus stop in Spokane, during one of the short vacations his father was able to pay for every harvest season, when they would sit in the hotel and watch bad karate movies. Then he dreams of his parents' death. None of his siblings, by now scattered and poor, could afford to return for their funeral. Victor dreams of his white stepfather, a short man in a cowboy hat, and his real father, who died during a heat wave in Phoenix and rotted on the couch for a week before anyone discovered him.

Dreams are one tool that Alexie often uses to give the reader a glimpse into the painful pasts of his characters. The relative "luxury" of this tiny family vacation to a hotel in nearby Spokane underlines the poverty of the reservation. Victor's uneasy relationship to his stepfather gives the reader a first glimpse of the potential problems in some interracial relationships between whites and Native Americans, which will become a major point of concern later in the novel.

The sound of the **guitar**'s song washes over the reservation like rain, waking Victor and Junior, who, angry and hung over, drive toward Thomas to stop the music. The guitar tells Thomas they are coming, so he prepares peanut butter and saltine crackers to welcome them. While he waits, Thomas tells the guitar a story about Benjamin Pond and Turtle Lake—Jesus sipped from one lake, and Genghis Khan was attacked by turtles from the other. Legend has it that a tunnel connects the lakes, and that a woman can be heard crying there. Victor, Junior, and Thomas once saw Big Mom walk across the water, singing all the way, but Victor and Junior pretend they didn't see it. Thomas watched Victor learn to swim in Turtle Lake, when his stepfather threw him in as a child and listened to him scream. Junior's older brother fractured his skull on the dock at Benjamin Pond.

The storybook fantasy elements continue to multiply, as the guitar unleashes its magic upon the reservation. The reservation itself has magic, too, which is tied up in its history and made manifest in Thomas's stories. Big Mom is associated with this mythic quality, and again a distinction is drawn between Thomas, who is open to these mystical elements, and Victor and Junior, the non-believers. The quick glimpse of Victor's past reveals more about his uncomfortable relationship to his stepfather, which helps to explain his current character. Every place on the reservation has a history of pain or suffering.

Victor and Junior arrive, and Thomas invites them to join a band, offering Victor the **guitar**, which burns him slightly. Victor protests, but the guitar has him seduced already—Thomas sees it snuggle close to his body. Victor, who has never played guitar before, strums a chord, and smiles. Thomas claims the bass, and says that he will be the lead singer.

This is the origin of the blues band that will become Coyote Springs, as the mysterious and dangerous guitar finds its true partner: Victor. It is an unlikely trio, to say the least, since earlier in this chapter Victor and Junior were threatening to beat Thomas senseless—but they are united by a common heritage, a common history of suffering, and a common desire.

CHAPTER 2

The song that starts this chapter draws a comparison between the trust that is broken in romantic heartbreak, and the heartbreak of a broken treaty. Thomas, Junior, and Victor are rehearsing in an abandoned grocery store called Irene's. The electric bass and drum set that Thomas bought for himself and Junior are no match for the sound produced by Robert Johnson's mystical **guitar**. After a few days, crowds come to watch them rehearse—first Lester FallsApart (a friendly alcoholic), and then others, and they dance in the heat. Undercover CIA agents infiltrate the practices, and the reservation's Christians show up to protest the "devil's music." A chord from Victor knocks out their fillings from their teeth, and the reservation dentist is busy telling Catholics that there is no saint of orthodontics.

The opening song lyrics hint that love might be on its way, but always in the context of past wrongs committed against the Native American tribes. Thomas sponsors the crazy project of this band, who have no experience as musicians—but something magical drives them to hope. The community begins to gather around them, coming together in support or protest. The dark comedy of Victor's blow against the protesting Catholics' dental-work is a dig at the idea that rock and roll could be dangerous or the devil's music—even as devil seems to be truly haunting Victor's guitar.

Father Arnold, priest at the reservation's Catholic Church, tries to convince his parishioners that God has other concerns than whether or not someone is playing blues music, but with little success. He himself was in a rock band after college, and the lead singer. Now Father Arnold sings in church, after receiving the call to the priesthood at a McDonald's. His thoroughly ordinary life was at the time interrupted by a mysterious voice, and he obeyed it immediately, warning the priest at the Catholic church across the street that he was not a virgin. The priest told him it didn't matter, so long as he could be celibate from now on. Arnold wound up on the Spokane Reservation after seminary.

Catholicism on the reservation is one focus of the novel, and Father Arnold's progressive views and likeable personality help to balance out Thomas' firm stance against the atrocities committed by the Catholic Church in early America. Arnold is just as human as everyone else on the reservation, but his position as a white outsider and representative of the Catholic Church—the latest incarnation of an organization with a history of oppression—always affects his relationship to his "flock." Arnold's faith is real, though, and tied in his mind to his past as a small-time rock musician. There is something spiritual in rock and roll, too.

Sometimes Father Arnold feels that delivering a good homily (sermon) is like being a lead singer in a band. He is confident he is good at it, and enjoys performing. When Arnold arrived on the reservation, he was expecting to see buffalo, and was surprised his parishioners could speak English. The members of his church explained that buffalo belonged with the Sioux, that they fished salmon, and that you couldn't believe everything you saw on TV. They laughed, and he was impressed by their ability to laugh in spite of all of the poverty, alcoholism, and suicide they encountered. Mostly Arnold was impressed by their exotic beauty—especially their amazing eyes.

The purpose of religion and the purpose of music are similar—both build community, and work to transform suffering into strength or hope.. Arnold's stereotyping expectations of what life on the reservation will be like are a mockery of white America's obsession with Natives, who still manage to find a way to laugh in the face of this casual racism. This laughter is one way that they remain hopeful and sane in the face of the alcoholism, suffering, and despair that pervade their lives.

David WalksAlong, the Spokane Council Chairman and once a great basketball player, shows up to a band rehearsal and warns Thomas they are disturbing the peace. WalksAlong has hated the Builds-the-Fire family for a long time, ever since Thomas's father, Samuel, was a better basketball player than he was. WalksAlong storms away from the rehearsal and returns to Council Headquarters, where he finds his nephew, Michael White Hawk, who has just been released from jail. White Hawk is built like a monster after hours of weightlifting.

David WalksAlong will become one of the band's most outspoken critics, and the seeds of that dislike were sown in the past—in a confrontation with Samuel Builds-the-Fire (Thomas's father) that Alexie narrates later in the book. David is an example of the ways that communities can be negative (exclusive and oppressive) as well as supportive. White Hawk is a tragic figure of the fallen, macho Native warrior, a twisted product of alcoholism (since his mother drank while she was pregnant) and anger at the world.

White Hawk dropped out of school after eighth grade, and is unable to read or write. WalksAlong had raised him after his single mother died of cirrhosis when he was two—her drinking damaged his mental development, but he was still muscular, and a lifelong bully. Now, White Hawk shows off the dozens of crude, painful tattoos he got in prison, and asks why WalksAlong never came to visit him, telling him that being locked up hurt "in here" and pointing to his chest. The news of White Hawk's return spreads around the town, and no one seems very happy to hear it—particularly the members of the band, who end rehearsal early.

White Hawk is a terrifying figure, both violent and mentally damaged. The tragedy of his character lies in the painful patterns that he represents, patterns that seem to be a part of what it means to be Native American today: alcoholism, the macho need to fight and endure pain against impossible odds, the failure of inadequate education, friction with the police, and the way that all of these things are passed along from one generation to the next. The town knows how dangerous this product of their community truly is.

White strangers come to hear the band, "new agers" with crystals who are expecting ancient Indian wisdom, and are confused by the Sex Pistols covers. The band is improving at a frightening rate, and Victor, especially, is becoming a devastatingly good guitarist. The band's two most devoted white fans are Betty and Veronica, who come to every rehearsal and sleep in a car outside Irene's. They are blonde and wear silver feather earrings, turquoise rings, and beaded necklaces. They sing along with the band, and develop a following of curious Indian men, while the Indian women want to kick them off the reservation.

Again, Alexie mocks the exotic stereotypes that white Americans have of Native Americans, who are supposed to be spiritual and "other"—fundamentally disconnected from the culture of punk rock. Betty and Veronica are archetypes of these stereotyping white interlopers, their names pulled from the Archie comic books. They are caricatures of the fascination that white people feel with the exotic otherness of Native American—and the men's reaction to them is a sign of a tension for and against interracial relations that will reoccur in the novel.

Betty and Veronica go home one night with Junior and Victor, and little Indian boys swear they see the women them naked, as if "their lies proved they were warriors." Betty admits to Junior that he is the sixth or seventh Indian man she has been with, and they kiss and fall asleep. Victor, meanwhile, is having a coarse debate in the adjoining room with Veronica about how far they should go that night. The girls leave in the morning and drive back to Seattle, where they own a bookstore called "Doppelgangers."

For Junior, Victor, and even the boys, going home with Betty and Veronica is a macho badge of honor—while for Betty and Veronica it is a dip into the exotic idea that they have of Native American culture. Betty and Veronica are near copies of one other, making them, appropriately, "doppelgangers" who exist more as symbols than as characters.

The band's fame grows, and Indians from all over show up to watch rehearsals. Thomas decides they need a name. Victor suggests Bloodthirsty Savages, and Thomas counters with Coyote Springs. When Victor says "Fuck Coyote," lightning strikes the reservation, starting a small fire by the Uranium mine. Junior subsequently loses his job when his truck is transported inside an abandoned dance hall, and is too big to be taken out without being disassembled. In the face of these omens the band relents, and they become Coyote Springs—although Victor and Junior still threaten to quit every day.

The magical realism re-enters the story with Coyote (a mythological trickster in some Native cultures) and his fantastical assertion of his power, which is described in a matter-of-fact way. Victor's alternative suggestion for a band name, Bloodthirsty Savages, mocks the popular image of Native Americans but also reveals the ways that Victor and other men on the reservation feel pressure to rise to the warrior image the world presents to them.

Coyote Springs still just plays covers of famous musicians, but Thomas decides he will write new songs for them—he has power in the band, because he is the only one with any money, and money is power on the reservation. David WalksAlong, for example, was elected Councilman by one vote after paying Lester FallsApart a dollar for his vote. Thomas goes home to write, but can't find any inspiration and falls asleep watching the *Sound of Music*. He wakes up late at night and listens to the faint voices that haunt the reservation, which sound like **horses**. Thomas opens and closes his empty refrigerator, hoping food will appear in it—an old childhood game of his, the "immaculate conception of a jar of pickles."

Money is power on the reservation because there is so little of it—so little, in fact, that corruption within the community happens at a cost of only one dollar. This is also enabled by the fact that Lester FallsApart is an infamous alcoholic. Thomas uses humor, hope, and imagination to get through the pangs of hunger that have haunted him since childhood. The sound of horses recalls Big Mom's story of the slaughtered ponies, and their screams are a form of music that contains historical suffering—like the blues.

Thomas thinks of fry bread, a traditional Spokane food. Big Mom has won the fry bread-cooking contest for the past 37 years, descending from her mountain to cook, and The-Man-who-was-probably-Lakota usually came in second. Fry bread was a part of young Indian romances, and a symbol of survival and hope—but now the band is out of even this simple staple. Thomas writes the first song to the rhythm of his growling stomach, and calls it "Reservation Blues." Soon after, a half-crazy war veteran working for FedEx delivers an invitation for the band to play at the Tipi Pole Tavern in Montana.

Fry bread is another invention of necessity, a product of poverty, but one that, like music, inspires community and drives off despair. It is an integral and positive part of the shared culture on the reservation, a symbol of hope—and it makes sense that it should be involved in the writing of Thomas' first song, composed to the rhythm of his hunger. As if from nowhere, the band's hope is restored by this first invitation to play for money.

The band takes Thomas's worn blue van to the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana, and gets lost, stopping at a crossroads. They ask for directions from a Flathead grandmother and granddaughter in a government-built house that looks like those in Spokane. The women tell the men the Tavern is "over there," and "not too far." Finally, after asking who the lead singer is, the granddaughter tells Thomas how to get there. "Thanks cousin," says Thomas. Eventually they arrive, two hours later than scheduled, but the old man outside says they are still early, by Indian time.

The community of Native Americans in America carries over across borders, since different tribes are united by a shared culture, shared history, and shared patterns of suffering—in the novel, at least, they refer to one another as "cousins" and operate according to their own cultural script. Throughout the book, Thomas is singled out as the "lead singer" by minor characters.

After dark falls, the crowd shows up, and the owner of the bar—whose engraved belt buckle says JIMMY, although that is not his name—leads Thomas and the band into the bar. The bar fills up with Flathead Indians come to hear this all-Indian blues band, and the members of Coyote Springs step up to the stage for the first time. Victor says he is ready to be immortal. They mess up their first count, but then start again, playing four and then nearly five chords before Thomas steps up to the microphone.

The Native community is hungry for music, eager for a group of their own to succeed and give them a collective means of combating despair. Victor is interested only in fame, which the band is clearly not yet ready for—but they are, optimistically, taking a first brave step into the uncertain world of the difficult music industry.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter begins with a love song, and the reason becomes clear when Chess and Checkers Warm Water, Flathead Indian sisters, push their way to the front of the crowd. Checkers is possibly the most beautiful woman in all of Indian country, and prefers older men. Chess wears glasses, and she agrees with her sister when she says the band "ain't too good," but she thinks the lead singer, Thomas, is kind of cute. Chess and Checkers dance, even as the music deteriorates since Victor and Junior get drunk on free booze. The band takes a break, and Thomas discusses the Warm Water sisters with his band mates—he has fallen for Chess, and wants to sing her a song.

Love finds its way into the novel through the Warm Water sisters. Victor and Junior fall back into their old pattern of alcoholism, sabotaging any chance the band had of performing well at their first show. This pattern—engaging with a warrior hopefulness in some kind of heroic task, and then self-sabotaging with alcohol in a way that makes failure inevitable (or after one's inevitable failure)—is part of the cycle of despair that traps generations of Native Americans in the novel.

Victor confuses Thomas and Junior by talking about seeing white women, when there are none in the bar. He is very drunk. He has been an alcoholic since his father moved to Phoenix and gave Junior his first drink at his high school graduation. Junior had sworn never to drink because of his parents' boozing, but he accepted the beer and drank it easily, crashing down loudly to earth. Thomas's father, Samuel, is a quieter, more desperate drunk, who staggers around the reservation.

Victor's hallucination underlines the fascination Indian men have with white women, and suggests that the guitar, in addition to the alcohol, might be influencing Victor's mind. Alcohol is a force that pervades the reservation, entering Junior's life all too easily through the bad influence of his friendship with Victor, and destroying the lives of each of their parents.

Victor's **guitar** pulls him back on stage with Junior and Thomas, and Thomas announces that the next song is for Chess. He points at her in the crowd, and everyone chants her name. Thomas sings the love song over and over, and the crowd goes crazy, pushing Chess onstage, where she ends up singing a duet with Thomas, telling her sister that she is only falling for this maneuver "a little bit."

This is the beginning of Chess and Thomas' love story, and the first hint that Chess and Checkers might join the band. Their connection is forged through the music, which in this moment fulfills its potential as a force for hope and community building, since the Flathead tribe cheers their romance.

A local review later pans the band, saying that it "made up in pure volume what it lacked in talent," and noting that Victor and Junior were "drunk as skunks." The night of the show, Chess and Checkers helped Thomas pack the gear, since Victor and Junior were passed out in the van. Thomas is entranced by the idea of Montana, which has always been the mythical home of Indians in his mind, and also by the beautiful Chess Warm Water. Chess doesn't feel beautiful, but is comfortable with her appearance. She has dark, "Indian grandmother eyes that stayed clear and focused for generations," and seems to have a sort of inner wisdom. Checkers is surprised that a suitor chose her sister over her, but doesn't miss the attention as she sees Thomas's awkward first attempt at courtship.

The review underlines the role of alcohol in the band's failure. The positive outcome of the show, though, is the connection to the Warm Water sisters, who are pragmatic and charming. Betty and Veronica act as stand-ins for all white women, but Chess and Checkers are more carefully drawn individuals. Chess's "grandmother eyes" highlight the history of their race that has brought her here—a connection to the past reminiscent of the grandmother and granddaughter who gave directions earlier in the chapter.

Chess invites Thomas back to their house to spend the night, and although he feels a bit shy about the offer, he agrees to come and drink a coffee before the long drive ahead. The lights in the Warm Water House are blazing, and Thomas asks if they live with their parents, but Checkers tells him their parents are gone. They leave Victor and Junior to sleep in the car, and Checkers goes to bed, so Chess and Thomas are alone in the kitchen. Thomas is shy, so he asks Chess about herself.

The romance between Chess and Thomas continues to develop, slowly but surely. The lights in the Warm Water house suggest the sisters are haunted by something in their past, putting on a brave face—and the abrupt reference to their parents suggests they have a similar dark family background to Junior, Victor, and Thomas, aligning with the pattern of broken families.

Chess tells Thomas that they grew up in a little shack in the hills with their parents, Luke and Linda Warm Water, and their baby brother Bobby. Bobby died one winter, sick and far from the reach of any doctor. Thomas reveals that his mother died when he was ten, and his father is a drunk. Chess tells him that her father used to play piano, when the trees were so cold they cracked like gunfire, and he taught her and Checkers how to sing. The night Bobby died, Luke went out into the snow to find help, knowing that none could be found, and Linda kissed his fingertips on the way outside.

Thomas and Chess bond over the patterns of suffering that both have seen and survived. The way that Chess tells stories, with careful reference to poetic details, is reminiscent of Thomas's own storytelling. The love between Chess's father and mother initially seemed to be a bond that held them together in the face of poverty and inadequate medical care, a thing that, like music, brings hope in the face of despair.

Chess begins to cry, and takes a moment to herself in the bathroom. Thomas asks about Checkers, who is listening in the next room and crying a little herself. She remembers her father storming back in, cursing "like a defeated warrior," and then screaming until colors flowed out of him. They buried Bobby in a grave Luke Warm Water dug over three days in the frozen ground. Then he began to drink, and the sisters spent most days outside in the woods, close enough to hear when their mother Linda played the mournful music on the piano, music that spread across the reservation like a rain of tears.

Chess's father, Luke, was unable to face the tragedy of this particular defeat—the death of his son. He saw it as a personal failure (like so many of the "warriors" in the novel), and so collapses into despair, falling back on the alcoholism that features so prominently in reservation life. Linda's music becomes a secret means of channeling the family's sadness and pain. Chess and Checkers survived by clinging to their sisterly bond.

Thomas smiles at Chess when her story is finished—she is the first Indian he has found who tells stories like his. He decides to sleep on the couch, and savors the feeling of Chess's toothbrush—he's already in love. Chess covers him with a quilt her mother made, and tells him, when he asks, that her mother Linda died of cancer—a lie. Thomas says that his mother died of cancer, too. Chess kisses him on the cheek, a magical kiss, and says goodnight, but she cannot sleep and is haunted by memories. She remembers the good sounds of her parents' lovemaking before Bobby died, and how they changed after, when Linda no longer consented to Luke's advances, and, when he was drunk, he forced himself on her, roughly. Their fighting became intense, until Chess used to wish her parents would die so that she could learn to love them again in death.

Thomas is entranced by Chess's storytelling, and by how much they have in common—even if it is untrue that both of their mothers died of cancer. Their parents' presence in their lives is palpable, even as they are absent, as represented by the quilt that Chess finds for Thomas, crafted by her mother Linda. As Chess finds herself falling in love. She is haunted by memories of her parents' love, and the ways that it was ruined by the suffering imposed upon them by an unjust world. Alcohol and despair transformed Luke into an abusive husband, and both Chess and Checkers were deeply affected by listening to their parents' fighting.

One day Linda walked into the woods "like an old dog and found a hiding place to die." Luke quit drinking, determined to find her, not believing she was dead—he convinced himself she had run away with another man. He brought Chess and Checkers small gifts whenever he returned from searching. One time, he brought each sister a Pepsi from Missoula. They buried them in the snow so they would be cold, but the bottles exploded, and Luke yelled at the sisters, shaking Checkers for ruining the special treat. Chess noticed the brown snow was sweet, though, and the sisters ate it in handfuls, and then held each other by the fire until their father returned.

Linda's suicide is part of a larger pattern that will later consume Junior as well; Linda is overwhelmed by the suffering in her past and the sense of despair that pervades her present. The macho response of Luke Warm Water, who assumes she has run off with another man, is a jealous reflex that avoids the harsh truth. His anger is passed down, as in moments he is abusive toward the sisters as well, but they cling to one another to survive his abuse.

Asleep, Thomas dreams of television and hunger, scrolling through black and white channels to find only images of white people with plentiful food. Finally he finds evidence of Indians, in a film where three cowboys confront the Sioux nation. They tell three Indians who dismount from their **horses** that they "come in friendship," and then electrocute all three on the telegraph wire they are stringing up, so that the Sioux ride off in a panic. This reminds Thomas of the summer that Junior and Victor killed snakes by draping them over an electric fence, forcing Thomas to watch. Once Victor tried to make Thomas grab a dead rattlesnake, and, when he threw it at Victor, held it in his face and then threw it against the fence, where it danced in the electricity and came back to life, sending the boys scrambling.

Thomas's dream highlights the lack of representation of Native Americans in popular culture, and the domination of the white majority. The only example he finds is a caricatured one, where the savage Indians are electrocuted by cowboys who claim to come in friendship, showcasing the lies that have eroded trust between whites and Native Americans for generations. This tragedy is recreated in a flashback featuring Junior and Victor, whose cruelty to the snakes feels like a direct reaction to the cruelty in their past—the kind of cruelty that Thomas wishes to escape.

The dream continues: now Thomas, Victor, and Junior are practicing, and Thomas says he hopes they don't make it big, because it might ruin them. He holds Robert Johnson's **guitar** in the dream, and plays it, feeling sweet pain, until Victor shouts at him. He then wakes up to find the real Victor above him, searching for the guitar—Thomas had brought it inside so that it didn't get cold. Victor cooks an omelet, surprising everyone. Chess leaves the kitchen after Victor farts, and Thomas follows her. Victor and Junior are left alone with Checkers. They compliment her crudely, but she makes it clear that neither of them has a chance with her.

Thomas's fear that fame will change them for the worse is born of a sense that poverty is all any of them has ever known. The guitar is emblematic of the temptations and dangers of fame and success. Victor's brief moment of commendable behavior is immediately undercut by his childish reversion to farting and making crude comments toward Checkers—who shows her strong will in shutting down the pair of macho Indian men without hesitation.

Thomas tells Chess that the band is better than they sounded last night, blaming Victor and Junior being drunk. He tells her he does not drink, and she smiles: this is a very important qualification in a potential mate. She has had many Indian boyfriends, each disappointing in his own way, and is prepared to be let down. Thomas, though, has no kids, does not drink, and has never been married. Pleased, Chess observes that Victor is a jerk with terrible clothes who bosses around the kindlier Junior. Thomas explains that Victor is broke—they all are, and that's why the band exists. Chess and Checkers are poor too, fighting fires for the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) in the summer to make money.

That the mere fact that Thomas does not drink, has no kids, and has never been married is enough to render him an attractive suitor in Chess's eyes is a comment on the sorry state of most men on the reservation, where alcoholism and other patterns of suffering are nearly impossible to avoid. Thomas's apology for Victor suggests (again) that Victor's rude behavior is partly a response to his desperate situation. Thomas still believes in the band, despite this first poor showing—he is a hopeful character.

Struck with an idea, Thomas invites Chess and Checkers to join the band as singers. Chess is skeptical, unwilling to leave home. Victor objects to the idea, but when Thomas suggests they vote, Junior unexpectedly votes with Thomas. The sisters are still unconvinced, so they begin to play music. Victor resists, but the **guitar** speaks to him in a strange voice and he joins in, shredding on a solo so intensely that his hands blister and sparks cause a fire that Chess and Checkers, veteran firefighters, have to douse. They are dumbstruck, and sign on immediately.

This is the first time that Junior has split from Victor in any decision-making, and it takes him by surprise, suggesting that he has more of an independent opinion than it might seem at first. At any rate, fate has decided the question for them, as the guitar's demonic magic takes hold of Victor, setting a fire that the Warm Water sisters must douse in a moment of comedic understatement.

The band stays with the Warm Water sisters for a week, rehearsing until their discord and disorder begins to meld into something worth hearing, and then they reach out to the owner of the Tipi Pole Tavern once again. The band rocks their return show, playing classics with a fervor that turns the songs into "tribal music that scared and excited the white people in the audience." The audience goes wild, begging for more "music, hope, and joy." After the show, Chess, Checkers, and Thomas find Victor and Junior naked and drunk in the back of the van with an equally naked Betty and Veronica.

This is the next step in the classic underdog tale—after a first defeat, a period of training and transformation leads to a triumphant return. The music has begun to transform as well, becoming more distinctly Indian, and energizing the Indian crowd, filling them with hope and a renewed sense of community. After this triumph, however, Victor and Junior's alcoholic ways return, and their obsession with white women goes a step further with Betty and Veronica.

Checkers goes to sleep on the pool table inside, while Chess and Thomas sit on a bench and talk. Chess tells Thomas that Victor and Junior hanging out with white women feels like a betrayal. The race needs to be preserved, but Indian men also need Indian women, she thinks. Thomas asks whether she likes him or just his DNA, and she tells him she likes both. Thomas agrees with what Chess is saying, but also feels that love should be celebrated wherever it's found, and he feels bad for "half-breed" kids who are often mistreated even worse than he was. Chess admits that her grandmother was part German and hated being Indian, so much that she ran away from her family on the reservation.

Here, the issue of interracial relations is discussed explicitly. Victor and Junior's actions with Betty and Veronica are, in some sense, a betrayal, since they threaten the survival of the already fragile culture of Native Americans. The second part of Chess's argument is subtler though—she thinks that Indian women are the only ones capable of dealing with Indian men, since they alone can understand the particular patterns of suffering that have formed them. Interracial relationships also created mixed children, who often suffer their own set of hardships.

Thomas responds with the story of two boys, an Indian named Beaver and a white boy named Wally. They both competed in fancydance contests, but whenever Wally won the Indian boys beat him up—all except Beaver. And Wally never stopped dancing. Chess correctly guesses that the two were half brothers. When she asks what the story means, Thomas says he doesn't know, but maybe it means that "drums make everyone feel like an Indian."

This story captures one of the particular sufferings of being the child of an interracial relationship—while drawn to both parent cultures, the child may never feel at home with or be accepted by either. In fact, many of the mixed-race people on the reservation are looked down upon or abused by the full-blood Indians, who resent the opportunities they have.

The Wellpinit paper reports that Coyote Springs has returned home with the addition of two Flathead sisters. The article quotes Michael White Hawk badmouthing the band. The band members are asleep throughout Thomas's house. Chess dreams of a small unpainted Indian man on a pale horse, who rides alone and sad into a cavalry fort where many other Indians are waiting. He has come to negotiate, but pulls a knife when he sees bars on the windows of his room, and he is killed by an angry Indian and a white soldier's bayonet. A tall Indian from the crowd carries the dying visitor to a lodge, where the Indians sing mourning songs. A doctor comes and goes. The man's father arrives, and he and the tall Indian watch the unpainted man die.

The community continues to turn against Coyote Springs, resenting in some way the hope that they represent, since they assume it will be a failed one, and also united against the addition of the "foreign" Chess and Checkers. Chess's dream is almost a tribal memory, a short but compelling illustration of the ways that Native Americans were betrayed by lying soldiers, or by one another. There is a deep dignity in the way that the dying man is mourned. All of this historical pain shapes the place where the band's members find themselves now.

Chess wakes up in the dark, frightened, and calls for Thomas, finding him in the kitchen working on a song. He tells her everything is okay, and she kisses him full on the mouth, so that he nearly falls over in his chair. They make love tenderly and awkwardly. Afterwards, they lie together and listen to a faint sound haunting the reservation air.

In the face of this suffering and despair, Chess turns to her new loving bond with Thomas in search of hope. This act of love unites them, though they are already united in the past that they share. The sound that they hear is a mystical echo of this past, a hint of the horses from earlier.

The band's first non-reservation gig is at a cowboy bar in Ellensburg, Washington. To get there they drive the faded blue van, which is old enough that Victor says they should get a new rig. Thomas tells him they must respect their elders, but then the car breaks down. They push the van twenty miles, into Vantage, where a cop finds them. He asks them where they're from, and goes to make a call. Victor and Junior discuss "taking him out," but when he returns, the cop tells them his cousin is coming to tow them to the bar, Toadstools, where they will be playing. As he's leaving, he asks who the lead singer is, and Thomas raises his hand. Junior says that if he finds any silver bullets lying around, he's going to pass out.

The clash of the cowboy bar with the Indian blues band is a comic juxtaposition. The helpful policeman surprises everyone with his contribution—a fact that underlines the extent to which the police are generally a hostile force in the minority experience. The repetition of the "lead singer" joke underlines the absurdity of this moment. Junior's quip is a reference to the Lone Ranger, an important figure in popular representations of the American West, and, therefore, of Native Americans.

The Ellensburg paper publishes a review of the show, calling Coyote Springs "professional" and praising their passion. The bar's owner, Ernie Lively, is quoted saying that he was nervous about hiring Indians, but that it went well. The highlight was when "those Indians sang 'Mommas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys,'" and everyone sang along.

Alexie mocks the casual racism of the cowboy bar's owner, Ernie. "Those Indians" highlight the irony of their presence at the cowboy bar by singing the warning about growing up to be a cowboy, which has a very different historical resonance coming from them *than in the song's original version.*

The van has been repaired by a mechanic now, and a few stories have been whispered into its engine by Thomas. They band members are driving back to the reservation, everyone asleep but Chess and Thomas, who listen to Hank Williams on the radio. The music rises up into the night, banging into the Big Dipper and bouncing off the moon, and it keeps howling "until Coyote Springs became echoes." Thomas and Chess listen, and drive all the way home through the night.

The magic of Thomas's stories continues to play a key role in the novel, and is intertwined with the magic of music. Coyote Springs is only an echo of the universal blues, the music of suffering and loneliness that recurs throughout history. Thomas and Chess are both attuned to this music, and increasingly intertwined with one another as well.

CHAPTER 4

This chapter begins with a song for a father, and the story continues with the headlights of the blue van illuminating an old Indian man passed out on Thomas's lawn. Victor asks Junior which of their dads it is, and Junior replies that it can't be either, since both are dead. They roll him over, and discover that it is Samuel, Thomas's father. Thomas has lost count of the number of times he has saved his drunken father. Victor and Junior, too, are jaded to this sight, and they go inside. Chess and Checkers help Thomas lift his father into the house and lay him on the kitchen table. They tell him that their own father Luke is "gone" like so much of the reservation, which is just a shell of its former self.

The family backgrounds of the members of Coyote Springs are all similarly tragic—and alcohol played a major part in their painful pasts. Victor and Junior's casual approach to death and Thomas's drunk father illustrates to what extent these tragedies seem normal, since they are so common. Alcoholism and its consequences have created a pattern of suffering that is no longer surprising to any of them. This, then, is the hidden sadness of the reservation and its community, invisible to outsiders.

Thomas tells the story of his father, Samuel. He used to be a binge drinker only, and was sober most of the time. Before that he was the Washington State High School Basketball Player of the Year in 1956. He was small and awkward, but an amazing player—interviewed once by Walter Cronkite. He became a hero on the reservation, which expected too much, wanting him to "change a can of sardines into a river of salmon." His father earned these expectations, but after basketball was over, he had nothing left to be good at. Now, looking at him on the table, Chess and Checkers are surprised he ever played: he is dirty and overweight. Checkers says that sometimes she hates being Indian, and Chess remarks that you aren't a real Indian unless at some point you don't want to be.

Samuel Builds-the-Fire has an underdog story himself, as a small, awkward teen who nevertheless became a hero on the reservation by virtue of his incredible basketball skills. He was a symbol of hope, but as with many of the "warrior-figures" on the reservation, when he failed to do the impossible and live up to an unrealistic ideal, he turned to alcohol. Chess's remark highlights the extent to which self-loathing and discomfort with one's heritage is a persistent part of Native American identity.

Checkers thinks of the Indian beggars who have asked her for money, calling her sister or cousin. She has always been afraid of the Indian beggar men who wandered the streets, drunk: she calls them zombies. They sat on street corners wrapped in quilts, quiet like Samuel is now, and held out their hand for money. Once she saw a white man spit into a zombie's open palm. He wiped the spit away and offered his hand again, and the white man spat once more. After the white man left, Checkers ran up and gave the Indian beggar her last piece of candy. He smiled.

These beggars are tied together into a sort of family by their shared culture, and their shared experience of the patterns of suffering that the culture has inherited. These drunk "zombies" have been beaten down and literally spat on by a racist society that mistreats them, until they give in to despair—or cling to alcohol as a release from pain. They are a reminder to the young Checkers of the trials that await her as a Native American.

Thomas pours them all a glass of commodity grape juice, and Chess remarks that their cousins drink this mixed with rubbing alcohol. They fall silent, and then Chess and Checkers sing a Flathead song of mourning, for a wake, and Thomas sings with them, as he knows the song from the reservation jukebox. Then he leaves them in the kitchen, goes outside, and cries. He wants his tears to be individual, not tribal, since tribal tears are collected by the BIA and poured into beer and Pepsi cans. He says hello to the sky, he says help to the ground. He wants to make his **guitar** sound like a waterfall, "like a spear striking salmon," but it only sounds like a guitar. Thomas wants the songs, the stories, "to save everybody."

Even grape juice reminds Thomas, Checkers, and Chess, who all purposefully avoid drinking alcohol, of the alcoholism that is rampant in their community. Music becomes a means of transforming suffering into hope, or at least community. Thomas, in his individual suffering, turns to spiritualism and storytelling, grounded in nature and the past, for an answer, but his music fails to provide the imaginative hope that it normally does. He feels bitter resentment toward the government and the painful patterns it contributes to.

A flashback shows Samuel picking up Lester FallsApart in his Chevy. Lester slaps him on the back in congratulations for having a child on the way, and Samuel swerves, causing Tribal Police Officer Wilson, a white cop on the reservation, to appear. He asks if they've been drinking, and Lester says he's been drinking since he was five: kindergarten is hard. They trade insults, and Wilson challenges them to a game of two-on-two—but Samuel says that they will take on all six of the policeman at once. They head to the courts. David WalksAlong, future Tribal Chairman, is the chief of police, and point guard. Samuel steals the ball from him and scores first.

The theme of alcoholism continues, as we see Lester FallsApart admit to drinking since kindergarten. Officer Wilson is a figure of white authority, out of place on the reservation, and angry to be stuck there. Samuel's bravado leads to this macho challenge, setting up the ultimate underdog situation that pits Samuel's blindly hopeful heroics against the six hulking cops, headed by a young David WalksAlong—who is still, in the present, a sign of the ways that authority can be corrupted and misused, and represents how some oppressed people are tempted to collude with their oppressors to hurt their own people in exchange for personal power.

Chess and Checkers wait for Thomas in the kitchen, jealously watching Samuel sleep. Checkers tells Chess she knows Chess is falling in love with Thomas, and they reminisce about an ex-boyfriend of Checkers' named Barney, who was so old he had false teeth that once bit her from his shirt pocket while they were dancing. They remember Barney's three pairs of cowboy boots, and look at Samuel's ragged tennis shoes, remarking that if Indians took better care of their feet they would be a lot better off. They begin to brush Samuel's hair, singing old hymns they learned at the Catholic Church on the Flathead reservation. At the church they used to compete over who would sing the lead part, and would joke with the sleeping body of their drunk father on their way out Sunday mornings. Chess was in love with God, and Checkers was in love with the priest, Father James.

The sisters' discussion shows how each turns to bonds of love as a means to escape the kind of instability and suffering epitomized by the drunken Samuel. Barney, the comically old Indian man, represents the stability of relative wealth, while Thomas is stable insofar as he never drinks. Samuel's ragged shoes are an example of how poverty affects all parts of one's life. Chess and Checkers have been coping with this poverty and alcoholism for years, turning to laughter, singing, religion, and one another to keep hope alive. Checkers' crush on Father James is a hint of what is to come with Father Arnold.

In the basketball game from the past, Samuel scores a thirty-foot jumper, saying, "For Crazy Horse." He tells WalksAlong that the only way he'll stop him is with a pistol. Victor, meanwhile, dreams of his stepfather, Harold, throwing his mother, Matilda into the trunk of his car along with the body of his real father, Emery. Victor had sworn never to say their names again, but in the dream he cannot escape. He asks Harold where they are all going, but Harold says Victor can't come—he doesn't want an Indian kid hanging around. Victor runs into the house to find his suitcase, and chases the leaving car down the road.

Samuel is a heroic figure of hope, fighting for the pride of his culture against unjust authority. Victor's white stepfather is one such unjust authority, taking Victor's mother away from him—a rejection that helps explain Victor's perpetually rude behavior now. This nightmare is an example of the ways in which past tragedies invade the present moment for each of the band members, forming their personalities.

Suddenly (still in the dream) Victor's head is shaved, and a huge white man in a black robe leads him down many stairs, carrying him on his shoulders even though Victor tells him not to. The "black robe" shows Victor his favorite painting, a battle scene showing two armies. Victor rubs his head and feels blood. The black robe dabs Victor's head with a handkerchief, and then swallows the bloody cloth. Then he leads Victor to a room where other black robed men are shoveling long black hair into the fire. Victor runs until he collapses, and he tries to dig down into the earth to where his father, Emery, and his mother, Matilda, are waiting "on a better reservation at the center of the world."

Victor's memory slides further into nightmare logic now, growing more disturbing and less directly comprehensible. The "black robe" has a sinister tone, and a definite religious association. Victor's shaved head, and the black hair being burned, recall the idea of scalping ones enemies, mixed with an image of burning that almost recalls the Holocaust. Black hair is a key part of Native American identity. Victor tries in vain to escape his dream, and to rejoin his parents in death—or in the afterlife he hopes he will find.

Meanwhile in the past basketball game, Samuel scores another basket, dedicating it to the poor Indians who get traffic tickets from these cops. Officer Wilson throws an elbow and breaks Lester's nose, then scores an easy basket. WalksAlong calls no foul. Back in the present Junior, who is across the house from Victor, dreams he is in the backseat of his parents' car outside Powwow Tavern. He is sharing a sleeping bag with his four siblings, but cannot remember their names. They beg him to turn the heat on, but he knows they have to save gas to get home. Their parents emerge, bringing Pepsi and potato chips, and then half-dance back to the bar. Junior remarks that they love each other, and he distributes the food evenly. Then he starts to cry, as his siblings run away from the car on all fours, running to other reservations never to return.

Samuel continues his heroic, hopeful crusade against the authorities, but they begin to strike back—as we know they will, inevitably. History continues to intertwine with the present as Junior takes his own journey into the past, dreaming of looking after his younger siblings in a Tavern parking lot. Their poverty is evident, as is the presence of alcoholism as a major force in their lives. Junior looks up to his parents' love, but it is a selfish, dangerous one love that drives his siblings away, literally (in the dream) turning them into animals focused only on their hunger and pain.

Junior's nameless parents return, and then they drive off in search of their children, crying, blaming Junior in the backseat, drinking beer, and going faster and faster until the car goes out of control and rolls twenty times. Junior drags their bodies across the grass into a strange house and lays them down on the bed. This process takes years (in the dream). He kneels to pray, but cannot speak. He turns up the music from the radio as loud as it will go, and his parents dance wildly in the bed, pulling each other.

The fact that Junior's parents have no names may be a suggestion that their behavior is representative of many unfortunate Native families destroyed by alcohol. Junior witnesses their death, and is still driven to do good—to take care of them, to pray, etc. He finally, despairingly, turns to music as a distraction, and his parents' dance is then a sign of the patterns that have destroyed them, and the potential harm of unhealthy relationships.

Meanwhile the score of the basketball game is 5-3, with the Tribal Cops on top. WalksAlong suggests that Samuel sing "I Fought the Law and the Law Won" after the game. Samuel says he doesn't know it, but can try "I Shot the Sherriff." The cops score again. Back in the present, in the kitchen, Thomas asks Chess if she ever drank, and she and Checkers reply that they never did—they were too scared. They think of Samuel, and of their father, Luke. Checkers thinks of the "Super Indian" men, "pseudo-warriors" who chased big hats, big boots, big belt buckles, who chased her, and then cried to her in the morning when their big things were lost and stolen. Thomas says that he hates his father.

The tide has begun to turn in favor of the authorities, but Samuel maintains his macho bravado in this exchange with WalksAlong, refusing to give an inch. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers have all avoided alcohol because they watched their fathers being destroyed by it. Their fathers, and the other "Super Indians" like them, suffer from the same sense of foiled hope, of being too large for the small, poverty-stricken reservation with its many limits to hold them back. This deluded, macho hope is dangerous, as we will see.

Chess and Thomas remember an argument they witnessed a few days earlier in Spokane—a drunk white couple whose near-violence had transported them to all the drunken arguments of their own pasts. They knew that pain was universal, and watched as the couple made up, holding each other on the brink of violence. Thomas had wept in the parking lot afterward. Chess tries to tell Thomas that he doesn't really hate Samuel. She tries to hold up a mirror and show him they are nothing alike, and that Thomas has beautiful hands. Thomas is beyond comfort, though, angry at the suffering more than at his father.

Alcohol is a common factor in the pasts of these characters, creating patterns of suffering that are universal, both on the reservation and outside of it, as this white couple demonstrates. It is linked, also, to domestic violence, which never really leaves those who experience it. Thomas's anger has morphed, not directed at his father, but at the systems of suffering that seem to drag everyone on the reservation down toward despair.

In the past, Samuel scores twice, but the cops respond with two baskets of their own. From there the game becomes "a real war," with hard fouls and fresh wounds. WalksAlong refuses to call fouls, so Samuel runs over him. The cops score again, and now it is 9-5: game point. Samuel responds with a huge two-handed dunk, "for every one of you Indians like you Tribal Cops... for all those Indian scouts who helped the U.S. Cavalry... for both the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X... and for Jimi Hendrix." Lester then scores his first and last basket: 9-7.

Sport becomes a place of battle, recalling the war-like representations of Native Americans that dominate in popular culture. Samuel's heroism is a sort of blind hope that campaigns on behalf of the underdog, and those who have suffered past and present injustices. Again, Alexie draws a parallel between the struggle of black minorities and Native Americans by invoking Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Jimi Hendrix.

Thomas, Chess, and Checkers talk about Thomas's mother, who died of cancer. Thomas tells them that she drank, too, but quit completely after a bad New Year's Eve party, when Samuel took all the furniture out on the front lawn and burned it. His mom drove Thomas up to her sister's in Colville, but she wasn't home. They sat at an all-night diner until the sun came up, and then drove home, and she never drank again. She kicked Samuel out of the house and went to work for the Tribe, driving the Senior Citizens' van and going traditional with all of the powwows she took them to. Thomas remembers that a pair of Indians played blues at the New Year's party. Junior's parents died in a drunk driving accident on the way home from that party.

The painful pasts of these characters are linked by alcohol, but also by real experiences and overlapping tragedies. This revelation that Junior's parents died after a party at Thomas's house underlines the small community of the reservation, where everyone is closely acquainted with everyone else's tragedies. Thomas's mother's reaction to this tragedy and to Samuel's crazy antics represent an attempt to take refuge in the positive side of that community: the history and tradition carried forward by its elders.

Chess remembers that her father Luke used to rave about being a radioman in World War II, one of the Navajo code talkers. He said that he killed Hitler. Thomas laughs, remembering that Samuel always said he was the one who killed Hitler, imagining that they must have been on the same mission. He tries to remember the music the Indian blues players played, but cannot. Back in the flashback, Samuel aches, but he defiantly closes his eyes and drives blindly to the basket, scoring. Lester says the shot was vain, and Samuel replies that it "was the best story [he] ever told." 9-8.

These two Native fathers shared a common fantasy, of macho heroism on the battlefield—and a common downfall, since both were ultimately defeated by alcoholism. That two men from different reservations shared this "mission" suggests that its cause lies in the patterns of historical suffering shared by all Native Americans. The blues and Samuel's basketball days—and the fact that he considers his triumph there as a "story"—suggest that music and art are ways to overcome or challenge these patterns.

At six in the morning the man-who-was-probably-Lakota begins to chant that the end of the world is near, as he always does. Victor and Junior stumble into the kitchen, looking for food, but there is only applesauce. Victor jokes that they should stick an apple in Samuel's mouth and roast him, and Checkers slaps him. She begins to struggle against him, until Victor throws her down. Then Chess intervenes, and Thomas tackles Victor. The two wrestle, until Junior finally interrupts them. Thomas leaves the house with Chess following him, enraged. She tells them they should kick Junior and Victor out of the band and leave. The **horses** scream.

That this prediction of the coming apocalypse is the habitual wake-up call for the reservation is darkly comedic. Today, though, the depressing life of the reservation has become too much for Checkers to laugh at, and she takes out her anger on Victor. The band is close to falling apart now, as Thomas joins the fray, his own frustration overwhelming his usually patient, peaceful nature. Chess sees this as giving in to the macho instinct that drove all of the men in their lives to alcoholism.

Thomas and Chess return to the house to announce their decision. Junior is under the table with Checkers, while Victor eats all of the applesauce himself. The announcement is interrupted by the crazy Fed Ex guy, who gives Thomas a letter containing an offer to play in Seattle. It says they will be paid 1,000 dollars. Victor and Junior celebrate, but the sisters fight about whether to go or not. They need the money, but Checkers refuses. They vote, and decide that Checkers will still get her share of the money even if she doesn't go—despite the vote of Junior and Victor. In the basketball game, Samuel flies forward, heroically laying the ball gently over the rim. He misses. Officer Wilson rebounds, and then WalksAlong takes a shot.

Just as the band is again on the brink of disaster, hope is kept alive by this offer to play in Seattle. Because of their poverty, the money this gig offers overwhelms the disagreement—although the sisters will now be split up for the first time. Back in the ever-present past, it seems as though Samuel will, as the underdog is meant to, overcome all odds and defeat the mass of Tribal Cops, earning a victory for Native Americans everywhere. But at the height of this magical moment, even as he flies forward, he is still destined to fail. The system arrayed against him is too strong.

In the present, the van leaves and Checkers waves goodbye to everyone but Victor. She is planning to go to church, to meet Father Arnold and sing there. In the van, the band members ignore Victor. They drive toward Seattle, stopping at the Indian John Rest Area. In the bathroom, a little white boy stares at Junior and Victor, asking if they are real Indians, and then calling his father to look. Junior prepares to run—this is the white man's territory, America, where the white man "was legion." The man asks if they know that the rest stop is named after an Indian, and Victor tells him that they are the grandsons of Indian John himself—Indian Victor and Indian Junior. The white man storms away. His wife asks the man what took them so long, and he responds "Just some Indians." The little boy repeats the phrase.

The result of Checkers' meeting with Father Arnold can be predicted based on what Alexie has just revealed about her pattern of falling in love with priests and older men. When Coyote Springs ventures off the reservation, they encounter the racism of mainstream American at this rest stop, where Victor and Junior brush up against the power of the majority in the form of this white man. The child's curiosity highlights how rare Native Americans are in this country that was once their own, and his repetition of his father's racist dismissal shows how these prejudices and opinions pass through generations.

Victor and Junior drink coffee while Thomas and Chess discuss Seattle—how it's named after an Indian Chief, but that they got the name wrong. Chess tells him that the Chief's granddaughter lived in some old shack downtown before she died, forgotten. Chess asks where Samuel went, since they never saw him leave, and Thomas says he doesn't know. Then she asks who won the basketball game with the Tribal Cops. "Who do you think won that game?" Thomas responds.

Just like the "Indian John" rest area, Seattle itself is named after a Native American—and misnamed, showing the easy historical disregard of white America for Natives. Samuel's disappearance seems typical of the parents of all of the band members. Thomas's revelation about Samuel's game is expected by now—despair and defeat are part of the pattern.

CHAPTER 5

The song lyrics here refer to religious persecution by the "black robes" from Victor's dream, with the refrain "My God has dark skin." Back in the narrative, the van refuses to go faster than 40 mph. The band members find a Super 8 Motel and look at the city sights, amazed by the sheer number of white people. "No wonder the Indians lost," says Junior. They debate how many rooms to get, deciding that the club that invited them, Backboard, should pay for it. Victor heckles the clerk, while Thomas, as the lead singer, calls Backboard. He returns with bad news: what they have been invited to play in is a contest, and only the winner gets the thousand dollars. They have to pay for their own rooms, but they can't afford to, so they sleep in the van, eating bologna sandwiches.

The news that the one thousand dollars is the prize in a competition, rather than a guaranteed payment, deflates the hopeful band members once again, setting them back to their subsistence in the back of the van and setting up another moment of underdog struggle. The band's awe at the sheer number of white people in Seattle shows that they are outsiders in mainstream America, members of a minority group that feels out of place among the majority. The song lyrics also suggest that religion and spirituality will play a major role in this chapter.

Back at the reservation, Checkers dresses up to go to the Catholic Church and meet Father Arnold. She wears Nikes, remembering when her father Luke used to send her and Chess to buy cheap plastic tennis shoes in the Spokane supermarket. Now Checkers always buys Nikes, even though she can't afford them. She kneels to pray in the pews, and when she has finished Father Arnold is waiting for her. Checkers smiles at the handsome priest. They talk about her faith, and Checkers remembers her baptism, and a moment in her teens when she survived a forest fire after the damp touch on her forehead seemed to return and save her.

Checkers' shoes are another outward sign of the ways that her painful past, like living without much money to speak of, forms the way she acts in the world now. Her fateful meeting with Father Arnold already contains all the seeds of a future romance. The revelation that this miraculous moment in the forest fire is at the heart of Checkers' spirituality shows that her belief is deep and an important part of her identity.

Checkers begins to tell Father Arnold about Junior and Victor having sex with Betty and Veronica. She explains that this makes her hate both white women and Indian men. White women, she feels, are always perfect, always desired. She remembers shopping in Missoula and seeing the white girls' clothes, so clean compared to her muddy dresses, which were ruined by the wagon ride from Arlee. The sisters tried to hide under blankets, but dirt got everywhere. Checkers says that she used to get so dark that people thought she was a black girl. She would follow the white girls around, wanting to be just like them. Chess told her they were better than the white girls any day, but Checkers never believed her.

Checkers' views on interracial relationships continue the tensions that exist between Native Americans and the white majority. Everything in mainstream American culture suggests that the ideal of beauty is white, clean, and rich. This confused and saddened the young Checkers, who felt forever inadequate, dirty, dark, and undesirable. The "dirt" that Checkers cannot escape is a sign of both her poverty and her race, neither of which she feels she can escape, though she wanted desperately to conform to that white ideal of beauty.

Checkers remembers when Father James brought his white nieces to the reservation for a visit. They were supposed to all be friends, and once she, Chess, and the two white girls helped with Communion. In the storage closet, one of the nieces pushed Checkers, and she spilled wine all over the floor and her dress. The nieces laughed, and then cried when Father James came running, so that Father James scolded Checkers and Chess and wouldn't let them help with Communion for a long time. Even after that, though, Checkers used to play with the white girls, teaching them how to climb trees. Sometimes she could play with their dolls, but other times she would wait outside their house until after dark and then walk home alone.

The deep insecurity that Checkers feels because she is not white, and therefore does not match society's idea of what it means to be a beautiful girl, is played out in this tragic scene from the sisters' past. Father James takes the side of his white nieces, and the sisters feel the injustice of their punishment deeply. Checkers, though, cannot help but be drawn to the nieces, even though they mistreat and abuse her, because she is so desperate to belong to the world they inhabit, and has always been conditioned by society to see whiteness as superiority.

When the white nieces left, Chess and Checkers saw them off at the train, and Checkers wanted so desperately to go with them, to be like one of their dolls, to escape the dirt of the reservation. She wanted to be white like them, because Jesus was white and blond in all of the pictures. Father Arnold reminds her that Jesus was Jewish, but she says she never saw him painted that way. Checkers remembers that, as she hugged the nieces goodbye, one of them pinched her nipple, and she started to cry. Father James then hugged her, telling her that it would be all right, and that he knew how much she would miss his nieces. Telling the story, Checkers cries, and Father Arnold holds her, asking what's going on.

Even after the white nieces' continual cruelties toward her, Checkers wants very badly to become like them, and is even willing to debase herself to do so. She reveals to Father Arnold that this desire stems in part from having only seen Jesus painted as white, and thus having a white man portrayed as the ultimate good in her life. Father James, who doesn't witness this final cruelty of the nieces, highlights how hard it is to understand this type of insecurity as a member of the mainstream majority.

In the van, Coyote Springs sleeps fitfully, frightened by the city. Chess is still awake, though, and she listens to the men's nightmares. Junior dreams of **horses**, that he is leading warriors who try in vain to attack a steamship, and then are ambushed by invisible cavalry. When only Junior is left, the men tear Junior from his horse and beat him. One soldier shoot Junior's pony, and when Junior he asks who he is, the soldier introduces himself as General George Wright. Junior is then bound and seated at a table across from the General, where they wait in silence for General Sheridan to arrive.

Again Alexie uses nightmares to create a window into the past that has formed his characters. Junior's dreams transport him through history to a scene that underlines the powerlessness of the Indian warriors in the face of the technology of the white man, and the cruelty of white soldiers. The reader is here introduced to George Wright, who will reappear later in the story in an unexpected way—as an executive at a modern record label.

When Sheridan, a second, larger white man, arrives, he offers Junior his hand, but then realizes his hands are bound and smiles. He charges Junior with the murder of eighteen settlers. Junior pleads not guilty, but Sheridan condemns him to be hanged. Sheridan offers to save him if he will sign a clean white paper, but Junior throws away the pen, which revolves in slow motion while the sun rises and sets, and snow falls and then melts. Sheridan tells him to pray, and Junior begins to sing his death song, but before he can finish the gallows platform drops. Junior wakes up with a shout that rouses Thomas as well.

Sheridan, who will also reappear as an executive at the record label, almost mockingly offers Junior his hand—a reminder, along with the skewed justice of this "trial" and the blank confession to be signed, of the many false contracts negotiated between Native Americans and the U.S. government. The distortion of time only emphasize the magical and fantastical elements of this moment. The soldiers show complete disregard for the way that Junior chooses to pray.

Junior falls back asleep, but Thomas stays up with Chess. They discuss religion. Thomas tells her he was baptized Catholic, but quit the church at nine when he found everybody burning records and books. As an avid reader already, he mourned their loss. When the bellowing priest asked him to help, he grabbed a book of magic tricks from the burning pile and ran away. Chess tells him that Checkers is planning to go and see Father Arnold, and that Chess herself is thinking about joining the church on the reservation as well.

Thomas has rejected religion because of what he sees as its close-mindedness, the same instinct that leads certain members of the Catholic community on the reservation to reject the music of Coyote Springs. Instead, he chooses the world of books, and the magic of storytelling. For Chess and Checkers, though, religion—even a "white" religion like Catholicism—is a vital part of their identity.

Victor, meanwhile, is dreaming of his summer at Mission School when he was nine—a Catholic summer camp. He was homesick, and cried constantly for the first few weeks. In his memory, a priest interrupts him daydreaming while mopping the floor. Victor spills the bucket of water, then stands, shivering, at attention. The priest asks if he is afraid of God, and Victor nods. He then nods faster when the priest asks if he is afraid of *him*. The priest tells him there is nothing to be afraid of, and he helps him clean the mess. He touches Victor's newly shaved head, and tells him that he is a beautiful boy. Victor smiles at the priest, and the priest smiles back. Then he kisses Victor "full and hard on the mouth."

Victor's mind has also turned toward religion, and specifically to a traumatic memory of abuse that he suffered as a young child. This too, goes some way toward explaining Victor's constantly thorny attitude. He is terrified of the authority that the priest's religion and race afford him, and then, at the moment when he allows himself to trust the priest for the first time—with a small smile—the priest betrays that trust in a horrible way, surely changing Victor's relationship to trust and intimacy forever.

In her journal, Checkers writes that she has fallen in love with Father Arnold, and she thinks he might love her back. This is the reason, she thinks, why she had the fight with Victor: God was planning for her to meet Father Arnold. Back in the van, the band wakes up, smelling the ocean air. They go to Pike Place, and start to notice brown people mixed in with the white. They are also dumbfounded to see two men holding hands in the street. They see old Indian men, drunks, who kept talking to Victor and Junior like they are in a secret club. One, addressing Victor as "nephew," turns out to have known Victor's grandfather. His name is Eddie Tap Water—his name was changed from "Spring Water" when he became "Urban Indian."

Checkers is returning to her usual pattern of falling in love with the reservation priest—a secure, white figure with a privileged place in a religion that Checkers has admired since childhood. In Seattle, the band members start to notice their fellow minorities, and their fellow Indians. These primarily drunk old men feel a special kinship with Victor and Junior, perhaps because they are all tied together by the same generational suffering, and drawn to the same release: alcohol. This is Alexie's first introduction of the "Urban Indian."

Victor is drawn to the drunks that frighten Junior and the others. Lester FallsApart, the "most accomplished drunk on the Spokane Reservation," is a hero, and there is one such gentle drunk on every reservation. Thomas realizes they've let too much time pass, and they have to leave for the band's sound check—but now Victor is missing. Suddenly they hear a beautiful voice singing, accompanied by a **guitar**. They find Victor playing with an old Indian singer who has bandaged and bloody hands. Victor uses the man's guitar, which looks as though it's made of cardboard but sounds perfect. The duo draws a crowd, earning maybe two hundred dollars. The band waits an hour, watching them play. Finally, Thomas pulls Victor away from the guitar, which starts to burn, and they race to the sound check.

Alcoholics are a normal feature of life on the reservation, something that everyone must deal with in one way or another. There is no longer anything exceptional about alcoholism, and it is sometimes even celebrated. The encounter between Victor and the old Indian singer is a mystical one, as the man's bandaged hands suggest that he is linked to the same devilish pact that tormented Robert Johnson, and that now affects Victor, gifted with great musical power but at a significant cost. Their duet is otherworldly, magical, and dangerous, transporting them away from reality.

In his journal, Thomas outlines the ten commandments of the reservation as given by the United States government to the Spokane Indians. These are darkly comic revisions of the Biblical commands, i.e. "you shall not steal back what I have already stolen from you," or "you shall not misuse my name or my symbols, for I will impale you on my flag pole." On the reservation, Checkers dreams of Father Arnold—the two of them are naked, and he lies beside her, smelling of smoke and Communion wine. She fantasizes that he is touching her, and that he whispers, "I forgive you" as he starts to have sex with her.

This dark satire from Thomas underlines the ways that religion has been used as a tool by various white governments to control Native Americans, and makes dark comedy of the unjust abuses that Natives have suffered at the hands of those governments. Checkers' explicit dream about Father Arnold highlights the extent to which the things about him that attract her are tied up in his religious association—the Communion wine, incense, and confession.

A radio interview with Thomas after the "battle of the bands" reveals that Coyote Springs won the competition. Thomas discusses his songwriting, and the two white women (Betty and Veronica) who sang backup unexpectedly. Thomas has mixed feelings about them—he doesn't want Indian people to think the band members are all white. After all, he says, "an Indian woman invented the blues a day before Columbus landed and rock 'n' roll the next day." Thomas tells the interviewer that he and Chess voted against the two white women, but Junior and Victor voted them in with a coin toss. He says he feels they are all using one another as trophies, that the couples won't last, and he tells the announcer that he and Chess are in love.

The intrusion of Betty and Veronica is another chance for Thomas to mull over the potential problems of interracial relationships. He states clearly here that Betty, Veronica, Victor, and Junior are motivated more by a quest for "trophies" rather than real love. There's also the sense that the white women's presence will devalue the efforts of the Indian group, that they will take credit or render the band's music less powerful, since they do not have the same background of suffering that drives the creation of the band's particular blues style.

The interviewer asks about Checkers, and Thomas tells him she stayed behind to sing in the Church choir. He says that Chess is also religious. The interviewer asks Thomas whether this seems odd, and Thomas tells him that God is a long ways up, so we need to be loud so he can hear us—and "what's louder than rock 'n' roll?" He says he doesn't know if God is a man, or a woman, or an armadillo.

Thomas addresses his stance on religion honestly here, emphasizing how little he knows for certain. While he resents the Catholic Church for their violent history and the certainty they claim, he still feels a basic reverence for some higher power, which his music addresses.

On the reservation, Checkers sings in the choir, watching longingly as Father Arnold conducts the service. She steps past the communion wine, remembering her own father's smell. At the end of the service Arnold introduces her to the congregation and announces an upcoming potluck and basketball tournament against the other churches on the reservation. Checkers stays behind to speak with him, flirting, and kisses him on the cheek. He smiles as she runs away.

Checkers' religious reverence is tied to her love for Father Arnold. Her avoidance of the communion wine is a reminder of the role that alcoholism played in her painful personal past. The flirtation between Checkers and Father Arnold almost seems to reduce her age, so that she is nervous and flighty like a teenage girl—she is looking for a father figure, according to her usual pattern.

Father Arnold falls asleep in his office, and dreams that he is preaching to a huge congregation of Indians. He is powerful, with a red phone line to God, but no one listens to him. The Indians speak in their own languages, and burn sage rebelliously. Just as he is about to give up, the local missionaries, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, enter, bow to him, and hold out two black boxes toward the Indians menacingly. Suddenly the Indians calm down, and Arnold delivers his best sermon ever. Afterwards he asks the Whitmans what's in the boxes, and they tell him "Faith." When they open the boxes, he sees they are empty, and the missionaries tell him that the Indians believe the boxes are full of smallpox, and that faith and fear are different words for the same thing.

Father Arnold's dream offers a glimpse into the dark past of the Catholic Church's relationship to Native Americans, and the abusive, fear-based tactics that early missionaries used to gain new "converts." Father Arnold is caught between a sincere desire to break through to his "rebellious" parishioners (and to be appreciated as a captivating "performer") and misgivings about the tactics of the missionary couple. The dream helps explain Thomas's inability to separate religion from the history of suffering and abuse it spawned.

Thomas and Chess take turns driving the victorious band home, with Junior, Victor, Betty, and Veronica in the back seat. Chess asks Thomas if he'll come with her to church on Sunday, and tells him that Checkers probably has a crush on Father Arnold by now. After a while, Thomas asks how she can go to a church that killed so many Indians. She tells him it requires faith, but Thomas lists the evil men—from Hitler to Custer—that make it so much easier to believe in the devil than God. Chess responds by listing examples of good Christians: Crazy Horse and Martin Luther King. This is a mystery of faith, she says—and look at creation, how can it be accidental?

Chess's revelation to Thomas of Checkers' crush underlines the extent to which this is a pattern in her sister's life—searching for stability and validation in older men, especially priests. The two debate religion, with Thomas's cynical view of religious abuses and the presence of evil in the world countered by Chess's faith in the good. Creation, the natural beauty that both she and Thomas feel very acutely, is the chief proof of God's existence for her.

Thomas admits that he doesn't believe the world is all an accident, and he thinks of the simple beauties of the reservation, and thinks of his stories. He closes his eyes and tells Chess a story about how they were both slaughtered at Wounded Knee, that there was "a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow." The soldiers shouted "Jesus Christ" as they killed them. Thomas imagines Chess running like a shadow, until a young white soldier shoots her and tears her apart like a coyote, all in the name of God. When Thomas opens his eyes Chess is crying. She tells him that God didn't kill the Indians, that it was the result of free will. They have to choose the good—and white people aren't evil either, as they want to be like the Indians. From the backseat, Betty agrees, but Chess snaps at her.

The mystery of creation is what convinces Thomas that the world must be a result of the action of some higher power, but he still cannot escape a deep awareness of the historical evils that have been perpetrated in the name of Christianity, in particular against their Native ancestors. Thomas's graphic story illustrates this evil, which Chess feels deeply, but chooses to attribute to the free will of bad people, not to God. Good must be chosen, and evil is not a basic feature of any person—even the white people who have abused Native Americans.

Thomas smiles, and tells Chess his theory that you aren't really Indian unless at some point you didn't want to be. Chess reminds him that this theory came from her. They cross into Wellpinit, and Chess tells Thomas there's no such thing as an Indian atheist. She asks how Indians were able to survive if there wasn't a God who loved them, and who also brought the two of them together. Faith, she says, is love. Nervous and resistant, Thomas finally relents, agreeing to go with Chess to church. They pull into the driveway, seeing Checkers silhouetted against the bright lights of the house. Chess runs to greet her, and Thomas closes his eyes.

This repetition of Chess's point earlier, that regret and pain are a part of what it is to be Indian, underlines its universality. Another part of being Indian, she argues, is believing in some spiritual power, something that must have watched over them if they have survived until now. Love is her chief evidence for good in the world, and in particular the love between herself and Thomas. Thomas relents in the face of this claim, since he too believes in love's power.

CHAPTER 6

The song that starts this chapter is about an independent Indian woman, and the story picks up on Big Mom's front porch with Robert Johnson. Johnson remembers his time with the **guitar**, how he would escape for weeks at a time before the guitar found him again—but it always did, even when he buried it. He had considered suicide, and had sworn off music. Now he feels free again, but guilty that he left his burden with another person. Johnson sings a short blues song, and the reservation holds its breath against the music that is "ancient, aboriginal, indigenous." In his bed, Thomas hears Johnson's voice, and hears the generations of pain attached to it—he sees a hut on a slave plantation and white men laughing at the music. Thomas listens, but the other Spokanes ignore the song, and ignore their pain.

Here, the mystical powers of the guitar are given more definite form in Johnson's tale. Music is tied inextricably to magic, and the music of Johnson and this guitar—the blues—is an extension of the oppressed native culture of the reservation. The vision that Thomas sees of Johnson's slave ancestors underlines the ways that African American suffering is similar to Native suffering—tied up in generational patterns and imposed by the white majority. Thomas is sensitive to this link and the music's magic, but the others ignore its power.

An open letter from David WalksAlong published in the Wellpinit paper speaks out against Coyote Springs' ability to represent the tribe. It takes issue with Betty and Veronica, names Victor and Junior as drunks, calls out Chess and Checkers for being Flathead (not Spokane) Indians, and calls Thomas a "crazy storyteller." It would be better for everyone, WalksAlong writes, if the rest of the band quit like Checkers and started attending church.

The community's members are starting to turn more definitely against Coyote Springs, creating division by emphasizing everything about the band that comes from outside. Instead of coming together to celebrate this product of their reservation, the community closes itself off and divides itself further.

On Sunday morning, Thomas accompanies Chess and Checkers to the Catholic church, fighting the urge to run away. Chess holds his hand as the service begins, and Thomas observes Checkers' adoring gaze at Father Arnold. Thomas drifts into a hot dream, where Father Arnold asks why he has come. Suddenly he is in a sweat lodge, where he is asked to pray but refuses, knowing that someone is there, watching, to steal their traditional songs. An animal brushes past him, and he follows it outside, through the forest. Then Thomas trips, falls, and awakens in the church. An old woman greets him, saying she is glad he has decided to quit the band, and that rock and roll is sinful. She tells him that the whole community is against Coyote Springs now, ever since they left. Thomas palms his communion wafer instead of eating it, and crumbles it to pieces outside.

Thomas, out of his love for Chess, makes an attempt to rejoin this religion that he cannot see as separate from its violent history and abuse of his people. His dream is a rebellion, a stirring-up of the native spirituality that he identifies with more strongly, which is condemned and endangered by the rise of Christianity—the force he feels watching him in the sweat lodge, perhaps. The old woman is another reminder of the close-mindedness that Thomas ran away from years ago when he witnessed a book burning at the church. He returns his communion wafer to the earth, which he feels more spiritually connected to than this symbol.

Victor and Junior are drunkenly working their way through their share of the prize money, as Betty and Veronica follow them around. Michael White Hawk is at the Trading Post when the two go to buy beer, and he knocks the beer out of their arms onto the sidewalk outside. He claims that they think they're better than the rest of the tribe because they're with white women. Junior offers White Hawk a beer, but he won't be appeased. He beats on Junior and Victor, who are too drunk to fight back, and a crowd forms to cheer him on. Betty and Veronica try to intervene and are knocked back. Suddenly the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota steps up and knocks the raging White Hawk out with a two-by-four.

After their short-lived triumph in Seattle, Victor and Junior have fallen back into their pattern of alcoholism. Michael White Hawk, a more direct product of alcoholism (since his mother drank while pregnant with him), gives physical form to the community's increasing anger at Coyote Springs, which is made worse by the intrusion of the white women. This burst of violence seems normal to the community, and is cheered by its members—it is part of the macho "warrior" attitude of many on the reservation.

White Hawk, Victor, and Junior are taken to Spokane for medical attention. The Indian EMT lies to the doctor, telling him there was a car wreck. White Hawk is Dave WalksAlong's nephew, and the white people's laws are to be kept off the reservation. Betty and Veronica pack up and ask for a ride to Spokane. Chess berates them for wanting the good but not the bad of being an Indian, telling them they don't understand about magic, and that every place is sacred. Thomas intervenes and gives them a ride to town. In the car, Betty and Veronica ask him what is wrong with the reservation. Thomas only smiles, reminding them that there is nothing wrong here that isn't wrong everywhere else, with white people too. He drops them at the Greyhound station.

The nonchalance of the Indian EMT's lie reveals the extent to which this type of violence is a pattern for which there are established rules and procedures. It also underlines the divide between life on the reservation and life outside. This divide is part of what drives away Betty and Veronica, who are no longer so happy with their exotic human trophies, having seen the reality behind the curtain of "spirituality." Thomas's assertion that what is wrong on the reservation is wrong everywhere is a reminder that alcoholism and violence are not Indian attributes, but human ones.

The members of Coyote Springs are truly outcasts now, holed up in Thomas's house and greeted by silence when they venture out. Led by WalksAlong, the tribe nearly votes to excommunicate them all. They are out of money, living on their monthly stipend of commodity food, and record companies aren't interested in them. Taverns won't hire them either, since they "cause trouble." At their most desperate moment, a Cadillac appears on the reservation, asking the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota to get in the car and lead them to Coyote Springs. He runs along in front of them instead, past the smell of Old Bessie's fry bread, and stops in front of Thomas's house. He asks if they know that the end of the world is near. The men in the Cadillac call him "Chief," replying that they've "been there and back."

The community has now turned entirely against Coyote Springs, led by the vengeful David WalksAlong. This is the lowest point for the band members, as they sink back into the rhythms of poverty that have governed their whole lives. Just as they hit bottom, though, hope returns from an unlikely source—two white record executives whose absurd arrival at the reservation underlines how out of place they are. There is something larger-than-life and fantastical about these men, who have been to the end of the world and back again.

Two white men, short and stocky with huge moustaches, get out of the car and knock on the door. They introduce themselves to Thomas as Phil Sheridan and George Wright, executives from Cavalry Records in New York City. A fax from the pair to their boss, Mr. Armstrong, gives a review of the band, suggesting that they have a lot of potential and describing them in commercial terms. Chess and Checkers, for example, would attract men with their "exotic animalistic woman thing." Junior is "ethnically handsome," making up for Thomas's goofiness and the fact that Victor looks like "a train rain him over in 1976." They list the band members' particularly "Indian" traits: dark skin, big noses, scars, long hair. They suggest dressing them up with war paint, feathers, etc., and recommend flying them to New York for some studio work.

These absurd figures turn out to be fantastical reincarnations of famous U.S. Army Officers who fought in the Indian Wars, now helming "Cavalry Records" ("cavalry" is the term for soldiers on horses). The contents of the fax are blatantly racist and commercially driven, making it clear that the villains of Native American history are equally villainous in their modern roles as record executives. The men are clearly interested in exploiting the exoticism of the band, appropriating their unique features for their own profit. The suggestion that they dress the band up in war paint underlines just how direct this exploitation of their image will be.

Checkers searches for Father Arnold, and finds him cleaning generations of Indian graves in the Catholic cemetery. She tells him that she has rejoined the band, and he takes her hand and smiles as she apologizes. Checkers says they need the money, and Arnold tells her that Jesus didn't have any money. She responds that Jesus could turn one loaf of bread into a thousand, and she can't. They kneel together to pray for the band's safety. Arnold tells her it will be okay, and Checkers leans forward to kiss him on the lips. He is surprised, and then kisses her back, clumsily, before pushing her away and closing his eyes to pray.

Checkers' growing infatuation with Father Arnold comes to a head here, with this kiss. She doesn't know where to turn, and his offer of Jesus as a sign of moral stability and comfort is not enough to meet her real needs of food, money, and security. The cycle of poverty constricts her choices, since she doesn't have Jesus's miraculous ability to turn one loaf of bread into a thousand.

Wright and Sheridan are on the phone with Armstrong, who tells them to go check out a pair of "hot white chicks" in Seattle and then come back and pick up "the Indians." Somewhere, the **horses** scream. Wright tells Sheridan he has always been a good soldier, as they drink from a hundred-year-old flask. They give the band a few hundred dollars to hold them over for the week. They spend this on Doritos and Hershey's, and a stock of beer for Junior and Victor. The next day, Thomas receives a letter from Big Mom, telling him that without her help, they will have no chance of landing a contract, and that Robert Johnson is waiting for him. Big Mom invites the band to visit her at her home.

The "hot white chicks" in Seattle—a term that underlines the extent to which these capitalist executives reduce people to objects—could only be Betty and Veronica, but this is only a hint of what is to come. The scream of the horses and the hundred-year-old flask signal the rip in time that has pushed these Army figures into the present. The casual gift of a few hundred dollars shows the vast inequality between these figures of white power and the band members, and is an echo of past examples of white authority figures making big promises to compromised Native Americans.

CHAPTER 7

This chapter begins with a song about Big Mom. Coyote Springs is headed up Wellpinit mountain toward her house with all of their equipment. Big Mom is a mythical figure—a million stories are told about her, but some refuse to believe that she even exists. Junior and Victor, who are "damn good at denial," once saw her walk across Benjamin Pond, but erased it from their memory. Thomas says that she is "the most powerful medicine."

Big Mom is the focal point of magical realism in the novel, representing all of the spiritual practices of Native American and the power of a good story. This pilgrimage up the mountain toward her is a classic part of the hopeful underdog's journey in literature, as the heroes go in search of their mystical mentor figure.

Rumors about Big Mom include that she taught Elvis Presley—and many other famous musicians—everything they know, and that you can hear them thank her on their favorite records if you strain hard enough. She is a musical genius, and shaped the history of music. Musician and guitar builder Les Paul took the original blueprint for the electric **guitar** from her home, and she taught Paul McCartney the song "Yesterday." Many of her students broke her heart when they burned out early on drugs and drinking—but they did this so successfully that she made them honorary members of the Spokane Tribe: Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Elvis. She sang a mourning song for them, and even the birds stopped to listen—she had taught them to sing too, of course.

Stories swirl around Big Mom, whose magic translates into immense musical talent. In Alexie's rewriting of history, much of the best music of the last century came from Big Mom's students, all of whom made the pilgrimage that Coyote Springs are making now. All this music, and all these musicians, share a common heritage in Alexie's tale, and learn something essential about how to play blues or rock and roll from the mystical transformation of oppression and suffering that Big Mom offers with her experience as a Native American.

"Ya-hey," says the towering figure of Big Mom when they reach her blue house. She tells Thomas that Robert Johnson is gone looking for wood to build a new **guitar**. She tells Victor that, if he wants, she can throw his guitar away for him. He says he'd like to see her try, and claims he doesn't believe in magic. Big Mom tells him that he should forgive the priest who hurt him as a child, and that forgiveness is magic too. She then turns to Junior, laughing at his fear, and hands him two huge drumsticks. She calls Chess and Checkers by their real names, Eunice and Gladys, and leads them to a sweat lodge, leaving the men behind.

Big Mom offers Victor a way out of the devilish pact he has fallen into by accident by accepting this guitar, but he refuses, still denying her abilities. In response, she reveals something about his painful past that he has probably never told anyone, and thus demonstrates her real supernatural powers. She reads secrets in Chess and Checkers too, revealing their real names, and forging a bond with these female members of the band.

In Checkers' journal, she writes that it felt like Big Mom could read inside her head. They all sang together in the steam, and came out sounding better than ever. Checkers is scared Big Mom will be angry about Father Arnold, because it feels like Big Mom comes from "a whole different part of God." Later, trying to figure it all out, Thomas says that Big Mom is not God, but just a part of God—like all of them, but a bigger part than most.

Checkers' journal offers a glimpse of the sisters' mystical time in the sweat lodge with Big Mom. Checkers grapples with how to reconcile the spiritual power she feels so overwhelmingly in Big Mom with her Catholic beliefs, and Thomas offers an answer—God is big enough to encompass both Catholicism and Native religion.

Victor doesn't understand how Big Mom can help them play, since she's "just some old Indian woman." At that moment, from the other room, Big Mom plays the "loneliest chord" they've ever heard on a **guitar** made from "a 1965 Malibu and the blood of a child killed at Wounded Knee in 1890." She plays it over and over, and the band members are knocked to the ground. Big Mom explains that it is the chord created especially for Indians. Victor continues to question her, and he is not the first—Michael White Hawk once came to her wanting to play the saxophone like a warrior, and not like a healer. She warned him that the white man will always be better at violence, but he ended up in jail after smashing his saxophone over the head of a white cashier in Spokane. Big Mom was unsurprised at this, and asks why all Indian heroes have to be warriors, and also have to be men. Her stubborn male students always wind up betrayed by their music, and crawl back to her for healing.

Big Mom cuts right through Victor's stubborn denial with a chord that resounds with Native Americans' history of pain and suffering. This is the chord that Big Mom learned from the screams of the dying horses, those killed by U.S. soldiers—the chord that transforms despair, magically, into the expressive form of blues music. The revelation that Michael White Hawk, the slow-witted reservation bully, was once a prodigious saxophone player, is unexpected, but makes his character all the more tragic. He couldn't escape slipping into the stereotype of the violent, macho warrior created by generations of abuse and misrepresentation. Big Mom sees this aggression as a distinctly male fault, and wishes for more female heroes.

At the end of a long day of rehearsal, Victor resists playing the chord again. Robert Johnson listens, wincing, from the bushes. Thomas tells Victor to keep going, and they play once more through the song. That night, Thomas and Chess talk in their sleeping bag. Thomas tells a story, imagining that Coyote Springs is opening for Aerosmith at Madison Square Garden, winning over the crowd. He is scared—he has been ignored his whole life, and he doesn't know what it will be like if someone actually listens. Chess is scared too, of all the men in whose shadow she has lived her life, and the pressure to be everyone's perfect lover. Thomas asks what they are supposed to do, and she responds that all they can do is "sing songs and tell stories." The Indian **horses** scream.

Johnson's winces from the bushes predict a painful end to the band's experiment with fame (and the devilish guitar). Thomas senses this danger, but is also thrilled by the possibility of being heard, and enraptured enough to concoct this story of the band winning over Madison Square Garden. The answer to Chess's fears, and to the despair that chases all of them, lies somewhere in the music and stories that they create together as a way of transforming pain into something positive.

Big Mom listens to the band's last rehearsal. Their whole set is original now, and she pronounces them as ready as they'll ever be. Thomas wants to keep practicing, and he says that the community won't let them back on the reservation unless they are heroes, or rock stars. Thomas calls for Robert Johnson, who hears but doesn't answer, knowing that the band is entering dangerous territory. Thomas continues to worry about what will become of them if they fail.

Big Mom's warning that the community will reject them unless they return as heroes, raises the stakes of the band's upcoming test. Johnson's continuing silence is a bad omen, as are all the previous "underdog" failures (like Samuel's basketball game) of the reservation.

In a letter, Junior thanks Big Mom for the drumsticks, and tries to apologize for Victor. He explains that Victor has always been his bodyguard, beating up anybody who touched him since they were only boys, hanging out with him when both their dads were gone. When Junior flunked out of college, Victor was the one who came to pick him up. Victor can be a jerk, but sometimes he is good as well. Junior asks Big Mom to forgive him.

Junior's letter goes some way toward explaining his extreme loyalty to Victor in spite of Victor's many faults. It also demonstrates Junior's selflessness, since he is concerned above all with defending the image of his friend—who, he explains, has taken care of him in his own way since they were both very young.

Big Mom watches them walk down the mountain, not sure what will happen next. She had told them they may get famous, like many of her students, or they may not—they would make their own choices. They all had said goodbye, and even Victor managed a "thank you." At the airport, as they are boarding, Victor nearly refuses to get on the plane—none of them have flown before. Finally he relents, deciding to get drunk, but still refusing the eagle feather Thomas has offered him. Victor is fine during take-off, but when the plane hits turbulence, he asks Thomas for the feather, and whispers a prayer. Thomas produces a feather for each of them, and Chess tells Thomas she loves him. As they fly away, the reservation waits, collectively, for their return. Coyote Springs have only this one chance to be heroes, and the old Indian women are already predicting their defeat.

The tension rises as everyone is waiting to see what will happen to the band—Big Mom, and all the members of the reservation community. Victor's uneasiness about the plane highlights the extent to which these characters have lived an isolate life, outside of mainstream American culture. Thomas's eagle feathers are an anchor to the past, to their community, and to the particular Indian spirituality that they have been basking in with Big Mom—and it makes sense that Thomas, the storyteller, is the one most in tune with that spirituality. As they roll the dice with this journey, there is a mixture of breathless hope and inevitable despair in the air.

CHAPTER 8

This chapter's song is about an urban Indian who dreams of the reservation. At Cavalry Records, the band warms up nervously. Sheridan and Wright are nervous for Mr. Armstrong's decision, hoping these Indians can make them money. Armstrong arrives, fat and powerful, and the band counts off as, somewhere, **horses** scream. At first, all is well, and then suddenly Victor's **guitar** begins to rebel, bucking in his arms, and he feels a razor slice his palms. They begin once more, but his guitar falls to the ground. Armstrong announces that "they don't have it," and leaves the studio. Sheridan and Wright argue heatedly behind the glass, and band stands, dismayed.

The scream of the horses is another omen that this test will go poorly—and it does nearly immediately. The demonic guitar, which has always served Victor with an air of future menace, rebels violently against him at the most vital moment—showing how "deals with the devil" never work out in the end. The band members are barely given the chance to prove themselves before Armstrong walks away. Like Samuel's loss in the basketball match against the Tribal cops, it seems their defeat was inevitable.

An article in the local paper shows Victor's aggressive optimism on his way to the plane the day before, as well as David WalksAlong's pessimistic prediction that they are "done for." Junior says he just wants to be good at something. Back in the studio, Wright and Sheridan return, suggesting Coyote Springs may be able to try again in a couple of months. Victor is furious, throwing his **guitar** and harming studio equipment. He then attacks the executives, who are angry that the "Indians" are rejecting their generous help. Chess and Checkers throw Sheridan's money back in his face. Outside, Victor continues to rage, wanting to attack all of the symbols of New York. He and Junior then leave to get drunk.

Victor's aggressive hope loses out in the face of WalksAlong's cynicism and despair—and most crushing of all is Junior's gentle but persistent desire to be good, which is also foiled. Victor's violence, and the response of the white executives—who cannot see why these "lowly Indians" should be so upset and reject their generosity so fully—is an echo of negotiations over reservation land during the Indian Wars. Junior and Victor decide to handle this defeat in the usual way: with alcohol.

Chess, Checkers, and Thomas wait in their hotel lobby worrying about Victor and Junior—they want to find them, but there are too many thousands of bars. Chess marshals the three, sending Checkers to the room to wait and taking Thomas with her to hit every bar, beginning with the "A"s in the phonebook. Meanwhile Junior and Victor are in their fourth bar of the night, having already been kicked out of three. The New York bars are not so different from those on the reservation. Victor is drunk, calling everyone a liar, and going on about the beautiful white women. When Junior asks why he is so obsessed, Victor responds that, "bucks prefer white tail." Junior sits in silence, eating peanuts. He has always thought of getting a white woman as the "best kind of revenge against white men," but knows this explanation is too easy.

The band members are even more lost within the mainstream than they felt when first visiting Seattle, now overwhelmed to be so far from their home. Still, they face up against the impossible task of checking every bar in the city, clinging to the stubborn hope that has characterized their whole adventure. Alcohol is an equalizing force, and Victor is falling back into his element: getting drunk and chasing after white women. Junior's musing that getting a white woman is the "best kind of revenge against white men" is part of the answer to why the two are drawn to Betty and Veronica, but it also ignores the real possibility of love.

Junior remembers meeting his first white woman, Lynn, in college, in Oregon. They were both stuck on campus over break. Lynn told Junior he was pretty, and he said she was too. After hours of talking, she kissed him. Back in the bar, Victor interrupts Junior's reverie. A police report records that Thomas and Chess have reported the pair as missing now. Checkers falls asleep in the hotel room, and dreams that Sheridan has come to apologize, waving a cigarette like a saber and telling her that the U.S. Army was the Indians' best friend, but the Indians ruined it. Sheridan then begins to yell and pushes Checkers to the ground, telling her he never wanted to hurt anybody, but the Indians just won't surrender. He tells her about a pregnant Indian woman he killed in '72, and how her unborn fetus bit him. In the dream Sheridan admires Checkers' tribal beauty, but she rejects him, telling him she is only dreaming, and that he is a ghost. He squeezes her face until she cries out.

Junior has felt both love and heartbreak with Lynn, as Alexie will soon reveal. Their beginning seems pure enough, but Junior's memories are interrupted by Victor's antics. Checkers' nightmare about Sheridan makes his link to the infamous U.S. Army officer more explicit. Sheridan's graphic account of murdering a pregnant Indian woman (in 1872), followed by his ghostly present self's violent attack on Checkers, is a reminder of the very real ways that past suffering and abuse continue to cause pain to generations of Native Americans alive today. This violence was not a singular event, but the beginning of a pattern that can still be seen all over the reservation.

Chess and Thomas enter yet another bar, asking the pretty waitress about Victor and Junior. She says she's never seen a real Indian before, a "bow-and-arrow Indian"—only Indians from India. She asks the cook, who says he's pretty sure there aren't Indians around at all anymore. When Chess and Thomas tell the pair that they themselves are Indian, the cook looks at them, saying that they don't look like Indians in the movies—they look Puerto Rican. He asks if they speak English, and they leave to go home.

Chess and Thomas are outsiders in this world, rare specimens to be gawked at. The waitress's reaction and the cook's claim that there aren't Indians around at all anymore reveals the extent to which Native Americans are not at all represented in mainstream white culture, except in ways that are false or outdated, as "bow-and-arrow Indians."

In Junior's memory, Lynn reveals that she is pregnant a few months into their relationship. In the present, in the sixth bar of the night, Victor laughs, drunk, as Junior announces his pregnancy to the room. "Am I the father?" Victor asks. In Junior's memory, he proposes, and Lynn tells him that she can't marry him, because he is Indian. Her parents wouldn't even talk to him when they came to visit campus. Junior remembers walking away, heartbroken. "Nothing as white as the white girl an Indian boy loves," he says aloud, and then asks Victor if he knows that the end of the world is near. Victor says he does, and passes out. Junior carries him out of the bar.

Junior is sinking back into his memories, and into the pain of his past with Lynn. His attempt to be "be good"—to marry her and raise their child—is bluntly refused on account of his race, an insurmountable barrier between them. The whiteness of the women pursued by Indian men goes beyond the physical; it is a symbol of everything that they cannot have because of their race, of a wild and impossible hope. Junior is giving in to despair now, and the phrase "the end of the world is near"—previously a comic interruption by The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota—becomes more tragic and sinister when Junior says it.

In Checkers' nightmare, Sheridan tells her that he has known her and dreamed of her for centuries, and she says she does not believe in monsters. He slaps her, but she insists that he is only another white guy telling lies. Sheridan kisses Checkers and pulls at her clothes, but George Wright's knock on the door interrupts them. Hearing Checkers scream, Wright throws his shoulder against the door.

Sheridan's sexually predatory stance is a reflection on all of the white men who have preyed violently on minority women because of their position of powerlessness. The fact that Wright is the one who intervenes is a sign that change for the better might be possible even in seemingly evil people—even if it takes centuries.

In a letter in Junior's memory, Lynn reveals that she has had an abortion. She tells him that she hummed a little song and then it was over, and to remember that she loves him, but that it is all over now. In the present, as the sun rises, Thomas and Chess return to the lobby and "discover America," finding Victor asleep on a couch while Junior reads *USA Today*. The three of them carry Victor up to the room. Junior reveals that he has only been drinking orange juice all night, since somebody had to take care of Victor.

The tragic ending of Lynn's relationship with Junior swirls in his memory, driving him closer to despair. The irony of these two Natives "discovering America,"—a feat always misattributed to Columbus, who "discovered" the continent for Europeans—is a dark joke that caps an evening full of despair and pain. Junior has been responsible in defense of his alcoholic friend.

They are all surprised when George Wright answers their knock on the hotel room door. He explains that Checkers just had a nightmare, and wanted him to wait up with her until they returned. Chess goes to check on her, while Thomas and Junior try to look threatening. Wright tells them he came to apologize, and that he wants to help them because he owes them. They ask him why he owes them, and he looks into their faces, seeing millions of beaten, scarred, and diseased Indians, split open by bayonets and bullets. He then looks down at his white hands and sees the bloodstains on them.

Wright's repentance seems genuine, if unexpected, and is another signal that evil is not native to any race or religion, but is rather a choice. The immense guilt that Wright feels is a sign that repentance is possible. It's also a way of representing the idea that, because of the abuses that Native Americans have suffered at the hands of whites over generations, the white majority is in many ways now responsible for making things right.

CHAPTER 9

This song, "Small World," is about the tragedies that build up on the reservation. It is followed by the news that one week after Coyote Springs' return from Manhattan, Junior stole a rifle from Simon's pickup truck, climbed up on the empty water tower, looked out over the reservation and the gathering crowd, and then shot himself. The night before, Checkers had climbed out a window of Thomas's house, hiding to avoid death threats and the danger from the now even more mentally disturbed White Hawk. Sheridan has continued to haunt Checkers' dreams, and she creeps fearfully through the night toward the Catholic church.

The tragedy of Junior's suicide is reported abruptly and definitively, emphasizing the despair that Junior felt and the extent to which suicide is just one more pattern of suffering on the reservation, whose community gathers to watch the death. Junior was haunted by his past, and Checkers now feels haunted by the collective pain of her people's history, as embodied by Sheridan. She creeps toward the church, toward religion but also toward romantic love, as a means of escaping this pattern.

Checkers finds Father Arnold kneeling in the front of the church, crying. She approaches him, leaving muddy footprints on the floor. He tells her that he cannot be with her, and that he is leaving the reservation after five years of careful ministry. He remembers the dream catcher that Bessie, the reservation's oldest Catholic, had given him at his first service, decorated with rosary beads, and how he had treasured it. Now he is leaving the Church. Checkers tells him that she loves him, and he says he loves her too, but not like that.

Checkers' muddy footprints are a reminder of the story from her childhood, when the mud was a sign of her poverty and outsider status relative to the white girls in town. Father Arnold, who has an instinct for blending native tradition and Catholic doctrine that Big Mom and even Thomas might approve of, is too shaken by his feelings for Checkers to continue his work. He has the privilege and ability—unlike Checkers—to just run away.

Checkers is devastated: everything is failing. The band hadn't even bothered to take their instruments home from New York. On the plane, Thomas and Chess had revealed their plans to leave the reservation. Junior had sat and thought of Lynn, of the plane crashing, and of the thin flute music he would follow into the next life. Victor had cried, silently, mourning the loss of his **guitar**. In the church, Checkers tells Father Arnold he can't leave her alone. He admits that he dreams about her, but he wishes the dream catcher would catch his dreams. He wishes he could resist her, because he belongs to God. He leaves her alone in the church, rocking back and forth.

Failure has surrounded Checkers her whole life, but the band and Father Arnold seemed to provide some hope of escape—but neither has worked out. Telescoping back through time from Junior's suicide, we see him in despair on the plane, anticipating death. Victor's tears, the first sign of :weakness" he has allowed himself to show in the novel, are for the guitar, which made him exceptional and heroic in a way he had never been before and might never be again. Arnold chooses religion over love, and though he is well-intentioned, he ends up being another white man leaving a broken Native woman behind him—just like Sheridan.

The night before the episode in the church, Victor dreams of music that will not stop playing, while the band talks to the Tribal Cops outside. Victor follows the music to the basement and finds the **guitar** waiting. Before the guitar lets itself be taken, though, it tells Victor that he can be anything he wants to be, if he trades what he loves the most—or *who* he loves the most. Outside, Junior turns, hearing his name spoken in Victor's voice.

Victor is haunted by the sound of the mystical, demonic guitar, and here its dangerous potential takes its fullest form. He is asked to sacrifice what he loves most in return for the guitar's obedience, and he speaks Junior's name. The implication is that Junior's suicide was perhaps influenced by the dark powers of the guitar, making this also a deep betrayal on Victor's part.

On the night before that, Thomas and Chess discuss their future while Checkers sleeps on the floor beside their bed, escaping from her nightmares of Sheridan. Chess wants to return to Arlee, the Flathead reservation, but Thomas cannot imagine leaving his home, even though the community has turned against them—he makes excuses for their anger. Chess suggests a compromise: that they go west, to Spokane.

Home, and in particular the tribal home of this community of Spokane Indians, is a huge part of Thomas's identity and the way that he connects to his past. The decision to leave thus implies a final rejection of the patterns of suffering in this community, and a belief in love as an alternative.

Earlier again, as the band arrives at the Spokane airport, they wait for Victor's luggage. Just before they decide to abandon it, a **guitar** case slides down the carousel. Victor grabs it, but a young white man runs back in and claims that the guitar is his, that his name is on the side. They look, and see that his name is Dakota—he explains that his dad is "way into the Indian thing," since he has some portion of Cherokee blood. Chess tries to explain that Cherokee and Dakota are different tribes, but he doesn't understand. Dakota takes the guitar and, walking away, tells them that he isn't stealing anything—it's his guitar, and his name.

This fake-out with the guitar, which gives Victor a glimmer of hope that collapses quickly back into despair, is another casually racist encounter with the white majority. Dakota is another example of how white America thinks of Native American culture as exotic and desirable—even while considering Native Americans themselves to be worthless. Dakota is right—this is not his fault, per se, but rather the "fault" of wider structures of racism and misrepresentation that he is an unwitting part of.

Chess and Thomas finally decide they will go to Spokane. The two of them and Checkers share cups of powdered milk for breakfast, hating it. The day before this decision, Robert Johnson sits on Big Mom's porch and watches the reservation. The two discuss the tragedy of White Hawk, who now marches around the baseball diamond without cease. Johnson remembers his own beginnings, when the bluesman Son House let him play harmonica with him from time to time. Johnson wanted to play **guitar**, but couldn't. He then left town and disappeared at a crossroads. Now, Johnson has given up on the idea of building a new guitar. He watches Big Mom as she carves a piece of wood.

Powdered milk, another incarnation of the terrible government-provided food, is a sign of the cycle of poverty that Chess and Thomas aim to escape by leaving the reservation. Johnson's origin story here is a reminder that the character is a retelling of real-life blues guitarist Robert Johnson, who died mysteriously. He was just a naïve and ambitious young musician once, and has since been changed by the demonic guitar's influence.

Robert Johnson watches as members of the reservation protest Coyote Springs, carrying large signs. He remembers meeting the Gentleman at the crossroads, and how the Gentleman wore a pressed black wool suit in the Mississippi heat. In his memory, Johnson tells the Gentleman he wants to play the **guitar** better than anybody ever. When the Gentleman asks him what he loves the most—what he will trade in exchange for this wish—Johnson remembers his slave ancestors, and responds "Freedom." The **horses** scream. Thinking that this was just a mirage, Johnson returns to Robinsville and Son House, but he is told that he has been gone for a whole year. Johnson absorbs this news, sits onstage, and starts to play the guitar, better than anybody ever. Now, watching Victor's dreams, Johnson feels guilty about passing on the guitar. Big Mom keeps carving the wood, which turns into a harmonica.

This is the first physical appearance of the mysterious "Gentleman," and his wool suit in the hot weather immediately sets him apart as magical in some way. He is meant to be a figure of the devil, striking a Faustian bargain with Johnson in exchange for freedom and talent. The mystical circumstances of his disappearance and return are part of the magical realist style that Alexie employs throughout the novel. The fame that Johnson found only caused him pain and made him lose his freedom, however, but now Big Mom is trying to heal him.

On the reservation, the day before, Father Arnold calls the Bishop and tells him that he doubts that he is being effective, and suggests the people of the reservation need a new perspective. The Bishop says he knows that the Indians are difficult, a lost people, but that they need Arnold. There are not enough priests, he says, to replace him on the reservation. Already, another priest serves three reservations at once. The Bishop tells him to focus more on study, and less on basketball. Arnold cannot bring himself to talk about Checkers, so he ends the call.

The Bishop's response, which is barely attentive to Arnold's plea and generalizes about the tribe's religious life, shows Alexie's qualms about the Catholic Church as an entity, even if he makes Father Arnold a sympathetic, kind character. In the face of the Bishop's general apathy and disconnection from the facts on the ground, Arnold cannot tell the truth about his illicit love for Checkers.

The day after Coyote Springs returns to the reservation, and a day before Father Arnold's decision, Betty and Veronica sit in Cavalry Records' recording studio in Manhattan. Armstrong arrives to listen to them play, as Sheridan explains his plan. Because Betty and Veronica are a tiny bit Indian, the label can use them to replace Coyote Springs—if they tan them, dye their hair, and maybe perform plastic surgery to raise their cheekbones. Disgusted by his partner, Wright leaves, catching a cab driven by an old white woman with bright blue eyes. He asks her to take him home, and she takes him to a cemetery in California. He stands before a monument to General George Wright, and there speaks to his wife, who rises and comforts him as he weeps, remembering the **horses** screaming in the field while Big Mom watched.

Here the violence being perpetrated is cultural, as Betty and Veronica, with the encouragement of Armstrong and Sheridan, become a means for Cavalry Records to appropriate the sound and spirit of Coyote Springs and Native music more generally. Sheridan's plan to transform them into a "Native" band is disgustingly racist, and finally drives Wright away from the company. The Native American characters playing black blues music was cultural exchange, *as both groups share a history of oppression, but this robbery of Native American music by white authorities is cultural* appropriation. *The mystical cab driver is another seemingly mystical figure, and this pilgrimage to Wright's burial monument is an ending of at least part of the hatred that arose from the Indian Wars. Violence haunts both sides of the battle.*

Armstrong and Sheridan call Betty and Veronica into the control booth and explain their plan to sell them as Indians. Betty and Veronica protest at first, but Sheridan tells them that in this business, the "dream business," a little sacrifice is needed to make the dream come true. Betty and Veronica look at one another, hearing the sound of drums. A couple of hours after landing, Coyote Springs return to the reservation hidden under a tarp in Simon's pickup. Simon drives them home in reverse after warning them that the reservation doesn't want them.

The "dream business," which requires a sacrifice—of moral integrity, it seems—in order to generate fame and fortune, is a direct reflection of the kind of deal with the devil that Robert Johnson made, and that Victor makes before Junior's suicide. That the band must sneak back into the reservation—their childhood and historical home—shows the extent to which community can be treacherous at times.

CHAPTER 10

The song that begins this chapter is about the endless funerals of the reservation, and the way that drunkenness and suicide seem to be passed down through the generations. Few people cared enough to attend Junior's wake, which took place in Thomas's house on the kitchen table. A few sent flowers, and Simon drove backwards off the reservation, never to return, since Junior used his gun to commit suicide. Victor is angry with the reservation members, remembering how they watched as Junior did it. Lester FallsApart comes, and gives them three dogs: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

This song is an artful telling of the ways in which the sufferings of the reservation are a generational cycle, and thus create an environment where tragedy feels normal—so much so that few community members bother to attend Junior's funeral. Lester does come, and his three dogs are a comedic undermining of Catholic ideals. Victor's anger is aimed at the ways that the community seems to have added to rather than relieved Junior's despair.

The dogs howl, and Big Mom hears them as she cries on her porch. Another of her students has died, and she feels a deep sadness—the bodies, of both musicians and **horses**, may finally have "been stacked too high inside her." Robert Johnson tells her that they need her, and that she saved him. She gives him the cedar harmonica she carved, and walks down the mountain. She finds Father Arnold packing his bags, and asks him about Checkers. He tells her that he loves her, but is too scared and uncertain. Big Mom tells him that she is, too. She invites him to come and help mourn Junior, telling him that he can do the Catholic stuff, and she'll do the traditional Indian things. He won't need his collar or cassock, she says—he's wearing a very powerful t-shirt.

The howling of the dogs is an echo of the screaming of the horses, both representing the generations of suffering and sadness that Big Mom has witnessed. She is a healing force, having given Johnson music again as a harmonica player, and her healing powers are needed now. She first forms a partnership with the uncertain Father Arnold, showing a level of humility and an open-minded approach to spirituality and religion that Alexie seems to promote. The "powerful t-shirt" is a dig at the stiffness and self-importance of "pure" Catholicism.

They bury Junior in the Spokane Tribal cemetery, near his mother and father. Big Mom and Father Arnold take turns leading the service, while Checkers, Chess, Victor, and Thomas watch. Lester and the three dogs are also present. The dogs howl, only falling silent when Big Mom murmurs to them. Victor surprises everyone by speaking, saying that Junior never hurt anybody on purpose. Thomas says that he tried very hard to be good. Victor lies and tells everyone that Junior had a half-breed son. He had discovered Lynn's note in Junior's wallet after his death. Big Mom sings a mourning song, and Checkers whispers a prayer.

The blended spiritualism of this service presents one way forward for those, like Chess and Thomas, who find both good and bad things in different styles of religion. That Junior never hurt anybody on purpose and tried very hard to be good only confirms the extent to which the circumstances of his life on the reservation—the painful patterns of suffering, and the cycle of hope and despair into which he was born—shaped his fate. Victor lies to help his friend "save face," and to make it seem to others that Junior at least left something behind him.

Chess looks around the graveyard at all the Indians "killed by white people's cars, alcohol, uranium," at all the suicides. She imagines a mirage of a blonde woman and child dressed in black. Chess runs toward them, asking why she loved Junior, "that broken Indian man," wanting to explain that her son would always be half crazy, at war with himself. The only solution is to keep breeding away the Indian blood. The son will never be accepted by Indians, or by whites. Chess closes her eyes, and when she opens them, the mother and son have disappeared. Turning to Thomas, who is waiting for her, she tells him that they should get married, and that she wants kids. She wants to have brown babies who will look up and see two brown faces. Thomas smiles and says, "Okay."

The graveyard, with its rows of headstones, is a visible representation of the abstract pattern of suffering imposed by the white majority and the cruelty of history upon the native community. Again, the difficulty of interracial relationships comes to the fore, as Chess's awareness of this generational suffering and what it means for her identity and the identity of Junior's son (who does not in fact exist) comes crashing into her brain. To escape this, or to make it better, she turns to the one source of hope in her life—her love for Thomas.

Checkers goes straight to bed after the funeral. Chess asks her if she's still bothered by nightmares of Sheridan, and Checkers explains that now she is haunted by memories of their father Luke, who cries and stands in the doorway, drunk. Chess tells her she and Thomas are leaving for Spokane, and that she found a job as a phone operator. At this moment, Big Mom enters with Father Arnold, who wants to speak to Checkers.

Although the cruelty of the outside world, represented by Sheridan, has faded from Checkers' nightmares, now she is haunted by the effects of that cruelty in the alcoholism and suffering that afflict the reservation. These are the things that are driving Chess and Thomas away, to seek refuge in the hope love provides.

Checkers refuses to speak to him alone, insisting that Chess stay with them. Arnold apologizes, but Checkers tells him it doesn't matter, and that she is leaving with Chess. Checkers returns a bottle of communion wine that she had stolen before Junior shot himself. Checkers tells Arnold that she isn't sure she can forgive him yet, and that he doesn't know more than she does. Arnold agrees, knowing that he has been just like all other performers wanting to be loved and trusted. He says that, with discipline, perhaps he can be good again. Arnold tells Chess he can't believe she stole the wine, and that he doesn't know how she could have drank it anyway, since it tastes terrible. She responds, jokingly: "discipline," and they all laugh awkwardly.

Now that Father Arnold is here to apologize Checkers has to confront the fact that this older, more "stable" white religious figure is actually almost just as lost as she is herself. Stealing the communion wine was a desperate act for Checkers, whose life has been so negatively affected by the alcoholism of her father. Checkers turns to humor, and to her relationship with Chess, to cope with the pain of this revelation.

Victor drives to Turtle Lake and sits in the van. Junior appears to him with a rifle hole in his head and they both scream. Junior asks if Victor will miss him, and Victor says he will miss getting drunk with him. Junior offers him a silver flask of whiskey that someone left in his coffin. Victor hesitates, telling Junior that he's been thinking about quitting—he hasn't had a drink since the suicide. Victor asks why Junior shot himself. Junior dodges the question once to reminisce about Betty and Veronica, but then responds, "because life is hard." He explains that when he closed his eyes like Thomas, he saw nothing—"no stories, no songs." Victor throws the flask out the window and into the lake. Junior hands him another, telling him they better get to work, and they throw countless silver flasks into the lake.

The apparition of Junior's ghost is a surprise to Victor, who has denied all of the mystical things happening around him throughout the novel. Victor's decision to give up alcohol could be a major turning point in his life, and a chance to escape the cycle of suffering. Junior's reason for committing suicide is a deep despair, driven partly by the reminder that Betty and Veronica were reminiscent of his relationship with Lynn. He does not have the stories or the music that allow Thomas to transform his despair into something magical. The silver flasks are inherited from the U.S. cavalrymen, a clear link between historical cruelty and the particular suffering of Natives today.

Big Mom lights sage, and Chess, Checkers, and Thomas get ready to pray, for everybody, as Big Mom puts on a record. Victor goes to David WalksAlong looking for a job. WalksAlong is shocked to see him, after everything that Coyote Springs has done, but Victor humbly persists and hands over his résumé. WalksAlong reads it, crumples it up, and throws it at Victor. Victor picks it up and folds it neatly, his hands shaking. He tries once more, saying that he "thought this was the way it worked." He says that he wants to drive the water truck like Junior did, but WalksAlong does not respond. Something seems to break inside of Victor, and he steals five dollars from the secretary's purse and buys a six-pack of cheap beer. He pops the first can open with a sound that is exactly like a smaller version of the explosion of Junior's rifle.

The mingling of religion or spirituality and music is another reminder that the two are intertwined in this world. Victor's mission to David WalksAlong requires a humility and desire to change that Victor has not displayed once in the novel until this point. This fact then makes the laughing rejection with which WalksAlong greets his request so deeply tragic. Instead of supporting Victor's desire to break free from the cycles of alcoholism, depression, and poverty on the reservation, WalksAlong, who is in a position of power, just drives Victor back toward alcoholism and despair, sealing his fate. Alexie really drives home the symbolism here, as alcohol is essentially "suicidal" for Victor, and represents him succumbing to despair just as Junior did.

The local paper reports that Father Arnold led the Catholics to victory in the annual basketball tournament. A few days later, the crazy FedEx guy arrives with a package for Thomas addressed from Cavalry records. It contains a letter from Betty and Veronica, thanking Coyote Springs for their help, and also has a cassette recording of the first song on their debut CD. Thomas pauses and then puts it in, hearing an Indian drum, a warrior's flute, a cedar flute, and then Betty and Veronica singing about Mother Earth and Father Sky. The chorus says "my hair is blonde/but I'm Indian in my bones." Thomas ejects the cassette and stomps on it, then slices the tape into pieces. He runs around the house collecting photos, worried that someone will come to steal them next.

The arrival of this package from Cavalry records represents the ultimate stab in the back to Coyote Springs. Betty and Veronica, briefly back-up singers for the band, have swooped in and usurped their place at Cavalry Records, using bland and racist Native American images and sounds to sell records. These white women do not have the same rich cultural heritage or background of suffering and oppression that lends power to Coyote Springs' music, and to the blues more generally. This is pure theft, in Thomas's view—a deep cultural violence perpetrated for profit, reminiscent of whites stealing Native American land throughout history.

We then see Victor's résumé, which is littered with misspellings. Coyote Springs is gone. Victor wanders around the reservation with the three dogs, while Thomas, Chess, and Checkers prepare to leave for Spokane. Thomas tells Chess he isn't worried about saying goodbye to his dad, Samuel, since with his "Indian father radar" Samuel will eventually show up at their place in Spokane at three in the morning. They drive away, and Thomas feels a tightness in his chest. Down the road, they come across Big Mom, who hitches a ride to a community feast at the Longhouse and then convinces them to come inside with her, to eat and possibly to take a collection.

The misspellings are another sign of the ways that the reservation members are sabotaged by the system; a lack of education traps them in the cycle of poverty, as they aren't given the tools they need to succeed. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers are determined to escape this cycle, even as the thought of leaving the reservation breaks Thomas's heart. Big Mom has anticipated their departure with her uncanny, supernatural ability to read their intentions..

The group sits waiting for food for a long time, until Big Mom walks into the kitchen and discovers there is not enough fry bread. She tells the cook to take out the rest of the food and leave the fry bread to her. The cook is scared, remembering the last time there was a fry bread riot. The mob chants for fry bread, until Big Mom walks out with a huge bowl. She admits that there is only half as much fry bread as they need, and the crowd mills around, restless and combative. She explains that she can feed them all by ancient Indian secrets. Then she holds a piece of bread over her head and tears it in two. The crowd cheers.

This episode with the fry bread is the sort of thing that will spawn stories of Big Mom's prowess. In reality, we see that this prowess is much more practical than magical—her breaking of the bread is an echo of the Christian story of Jesus, who feeds thousands with only a few loaves of bread, but Big Mom's wry method is much more pragmatic and mathematical, grounded in the grim reality of the world but also a sense of community.

Robert Johnson is walking through town when he sees the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota. They walk together toward the Longhouse. Thomas is amazed when Johnson arrives—he looks like a different person. Johnson tells them that he is planning to stay on the reservation, that he feels at home there, and that the people might need his music. As Chess, Checkers, and Thomas start to leave, Big Mom takes up a collection for them from the tribe. Some, like David WalksAlong, donate out of spite to get them off the reservation, while others give out of guilt, and a few from kindness. They file out to the parking lot and say their goodbyes, with Johnson playing chords on the harmonica while the man-who-was-probably-Lakota plays the drum and chants that "the end of the world is near."

Johnson feels at home on the reservation for the same reason that the genre of the blues found a home with Coyote Springs: a shared experience of suffering and oppression. This collection, spearheaded by Big Mom, is a picture of the positive and negative sides of the community—they support this effort of one of their own to escape, but more often out of spite or guilt than genuine kindness. Johnson has rediscovered his original music, away from the lure of fame and fortune—a hopeful sign.

As they drive away in silence, Chess, Checkers, and Thomas think about the future. They finally admit that they are scared, and they hold their breath as they drive over the reservation border, but nothing disastrous happens. Suddenly the shadows beside the van take shape, and becoming running **horses**. Chess and Checkers roll down the windows and reach out to touch them, hot and wet. In a dream, the three of them sit with Big Mom at the powwow while she teaches the Spokane Indians a new song, the shadow horses' song, the screaming "song of mourning that would become a song of celebration." Big Mom plays a note on her horse-bone flute for every horse that died, and then for every Indian. In the van, Chess, Checkers, and Thomas sing together with the shadow horses: "we are alive, we'll keep living." They hold tightly to the horses' manes outside the blue van and drive forward to the city, where new songs await.

It is unclear at first whether this escape is a sign of despair for life on the reservation, or hope for the future, but in this lyrical final moment, as the fantastical horses (symbols of Native American history and spirituality) arrive to accompany Thomas, Chess, and Checkers on their journey to Spokane, there is at last a sense of hope and beauty in the face of all of the suffering they have endured. Music will transform mourning into celebration, with guidance from Big Mom, so that death is transformed into surviving and flourishing life. New adventures and new songs await this small new family unit away from the reservation, but their history and community will remain with them forever.

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