

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

Like the character of Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 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; *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; 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

Although Junior's story takes place in the present day, his experiences—particularly the hardships of life on the reservation—are very much informed by the historical oppression of Native Americans in the United States, and Junior and other characters make a few specific references to historical events. The slogan Mr. P recalls from his early teaching days, “kill the Indian to save the child,” was coined by Colonel Richard Pratt, who in 1879 established the first of many boarding schools for American Indian children that practiced the educational philosophy—including corporal punishment and harsh prohibitions on expressions of Indian culture—that Mr. P describes. Beginning in the late 19th century, thousands of children were taken from their families to attend these schools on and off the reservation, with enrollment reaching a peak in the 1970s before ongoing complaints and investigations into the schools led Congress to pass the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 and to many of these schools closing. Late in the novel, Junior also refers to the fact that reservations were first established as prisons: beginning with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the U.S. federal government systematically forced tribes off their ancestral lands into designated areas, with many reservations established by executive order throughout the 1850s and 1860s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian's coming-of-age themes and gritty realism, as well as its diary conceit and autobiographical qualities, make it similar to Jim Carroll's 1978 memoir *The Basketball Diaries*, which Alexie lists among his most important influences. (He received a copy of the book as a gift from his father when he was 15, and now considers it one of the reasons he began to write.) As a modern coming-of-age novel with a distinctive first-person narrative voice, *Absolutely True Diary* can also be compared to [The Catcher in the Rye](#), although Holden Caulfield's privileged background provides a stark contrast to Junior's impoverished one.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
- **When Written:** 2005-2006
- **Where Written:** Seattle, Washington
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction
- **Genre:** Coming-of-Age Novel, Semi-Autobiographical Novel
- **Setting:** Wellpinit, Spokane Indian Reservation, Washington, and Reardan, Washington, in 2006
- **Climax:** When Reardan defeats Wellpinit (or Junior defeats Rowdy) in basketball
- **Antagonist:** Rowdy, Angry Tribal Members, Racism, Alcoholism, and Poverty
- **Point of View:** First Person (Junior is the narrator)

EXTRA CREDIT

Most Banned. The novel's explicit language, frank references to masturbation, and other themes make it frequently banned in American school districts; the American Library Association named it the No. 1 most banned and challenged book of 2014.

Basketballness of Me. Alexie has explained his refusal to sell the movie rights of *Absolutely True Diary* by saying that it would be too hard to find a young Indian actor who could both act and play basketball well enough to portray Junior, who is essentially Alexie's younger self. What's more, between heritage and basketball, basketball would be more important: “I'd rather see myself played by a Puerto Rican or an Italian with a tan than have them ruin the basketballness of me,” he told the New York Times in 2009.



PLOT SUMMARY

Fourteen-year-old Junior, a Spokane Indian boy, was “born with

water on the brain” or hydrocephalus. This condition gave him a stutter, seizures, and a number of physical differences, such as a large head, that make him a frequent target for bullies on the reservation where he lives. As a result, Junior has spent a lot of his time alone, reading or drawing cartoons. He loves to draw, and thinks his cartoons pose his best chance of getting off the reservation and out of the poverty that has held his family and his tribe back for generations. He also loves spending time with his best friend, Rowdy, whose violent temper makes the other kids afraid of him. Rowdy always protects Junior, though, and the two boys share a special bond, telling each other their secrets and dreams.

On his first day of high school at Wellpinit (the school on the reservation), Junior is particularly excited for geometry class. But when the teacher, Mr. P, passes out textbooks, Junior realizes that the books are at least thirty years old. Suddenly furious that the reservation school is so poorly funded that it must use old and outdated books, Junior throws the textbook across the room—accidentally hitting Mr. P in the face and breaking his nose. As a result, Junior is suspended from school. Mr. P comes to visit him and tells Junior he forgives him, but advises him that he must leave the reservation. Otherwise, the culture of defeat, depression, and alcoholism on the reservation will force him to give up his dreams, just as his older sister Mary—who, Mr. P reveals, used to want to be a romance writer, but now spends all her time alone in the family’s basement—and the other adults in his life have done.

Because of Mr. P’s advice, Junior decides to transfer to the high school in Reardan, a wealthy white farm town twenty-two miles away. Junior’s parents support his decision, but warn him that most of the tribe will see him as a traitor. In particular, when Junior tells Rowdy he is changing schools and asks him to come along, Rowdy is angry and betrayed. He punches Junior in the face, screams that he hates him, and walks away. Junior is heartbroken, realizing that his best friend has become his worst enemy.

At the Reardan school, Junior is the only Indian besides the racist mascot, and he feels deeply alienated from the white students, who either ignore him or call him names. He also feels like his identity is divided between Reardan and the reservation, particularly because the white teachers call him by his given name, Arnold, instead of Junior. Gradually, though, Junior makes friends with some of his new classmates, including Gordy, a “genius” who teaches him how to really read books; Penelope, a beautiful, popular blond girl who becomes Junior’s “semi-girlfriend” after he discovers her eating disorder and lets her cry on his shoulder; and Roger, a star athlete who encourages Junior to join the basketball team. Much to his surprise, Junior excels on the team, impressing Coach with his shooting skills and his commitment. In the team’s first game against Wellpinit, Rowdy gives Junior a concussion, sparking a thirst for revenge that drives Junior to humiliate him in turn

later in the season—only to realize, after a crushing Reardan victory, that perhaps he shouldn’t be so proud given Reardan’s advantages.

Junior’s first year at Reardan is also filled with many deaths on the rez, all of them related to alcohol. First, his beloved grandmother is killed by a drunk driver. Weeks later, his father’s best friend Eugene is shot during a drunken argument. Then, right after Reardan’s victory over Wellpinit, Mary dies when her trailer home burns down after a wild party. Junior is devastated, and blames himself for her death—she moved to Montana right after he decided to leave the reservation, and might never have left home if he hadn’t done it first. However, the sympathy from his classmates at Reardan makes him realize that he matters to them now, just as they matter to him. Later, when Junior and his parents go to the cemetery to care for Mary, Eugene, and Grandmother’s graves, he comes to a realization that he will be able to leave the reservation, and although he will be lonely, he won’t be completely alone—he actually can and will always be a member of many tribes, from the tribe of cartoonists to the tribe of people who have left their homes.

Shortly after the last day of school, Rowdy comes to see Junior and invites him to play basketball. Rowdy doesn’t apologize for everything he’s said and done, but he does tell Junior that he always knew he would leave the reservation, and that he looks forward to Junior’s travels and is happy for him. Junior hopes and prays that someday Rowdy and the rest of his tribe will forgive him for leaving—and that he will someday be able to forgive himself. The novel ends as Junior and Rowdy play a one-on-one game of basketball into the night, without keeping score.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) – The fourteen-year-old narrator and protagonist of the novel. Junior is frequently bullied because of his “weird” physical attributes, the result of the hydrocephalus he was born with. Though he is often lonely and thinks of himself as weak, invisible, and unable to fight back physically, other characters recognize him as a “warrior,” a smart, brave, and highly committed person who has been “fighting since [he was] born” to keep his hope despite the oppressive, depressing atmosphere of the reservation. Junior keeps up his hope by drawing cartoons, which to him represent both a chance to leave the reservation and a potential for universal understanding. He also loves playing basketball, discovering he has unexpected talent when he joins the Reardan team and receives the support of his coach and teammates. As his cartoons and his optimism would suggest, Junior’s narrative voice is funny, upbeat, and frank, if a little prone to a teenager’s

extreme statements. He is good at seeing and articulating the ridiculous elements of tragic and enraging situations, a trait that allows him to tell his story without sentimentality or melodrama while increasing the impact of sad facts.

Oscar – Junior’s dog. Junior sees Oscar as “the only living thing that I could depend on” and “a better person than any human I had ever known.” When Oscar gets sick early in the novel, Junior’s Dad has to kill him because there is not enough money to take him to the vet.

Mom – Junior’s mother. An avid reader with an extraordinary memory for information, she would have gone to college if given the chance. Mom is an “ex-drunk” who has become religious since she quit drinking. In the aftermath of Grandmother’s death, she suffers from depression and anxiety and sometimes needs Junior to stay home because she is scared for him to leave. Though she and Dad worry about their family splitting up, they want the best for their children and are very supportive of Junior’s decision to transfer schools.

Dad – Junior’s father, who sings when he gets drunk, treasures an old saxophone from high school, and could have been a talented musician. Dad is an alcoholic who will disappear for days to drink, often when—and because—there is very little money in the house. Unlike Rowdy’s father, however, he would never hit a member of his family, and mostly becomes depressed after his drinking binges. Dad’s pride in Junior is very important to him. It’s Junior’s dad who convinces him to try out for basketball, and also makes Junior realize the irony of celebrating Reardan’s win against Wellpinit.

Rowdy – Junior’s best friend from the reservation. Rowdy is the toughest kid on the rez and all the other kids are afraid of him, but he always protects Junior from bullies (or beats them up in return as revenge). In turn, Junior supports Rowdy as he deals with his abusive, alcoholic father. They were born within two hours of each other and are each other’s only friends. Rowdy loves kids’ comic books like *Archie* and *Caspar the Friendly Ghost*; secretly, he’s “a big, goofy dreamer,” and Junior loves to make him laugh. But when Junior leaves the reservation to attend high school in Reardan, Rowdy not only refuses to go with him, but also punches Junior, screaming that he hates him. Junior misses Rowdy desperately throughout the novel, but it isn’t until the final chapter that their friendship is restored. Rowdy is introduced as a kind of character foil to Junior—he’s the strongest kid on the reservation while Junior is the weakest, and he has trouble expressing any feelings other than anger, while Junior cries frequently and expresses himself easily in cartoons. In fact, though, the two boys’ differences are what make them similar: they are both ostracized for their respective violence and weakness, and Rowdy, with his hot temper, is as fragile emotionally as Junior is physically. In this way, their relationship plays into the theme of overlapping opposites, and parallels Junior’s sense of being a person split in two.

Mary Runs Away – Junior’s older sister, nicknamed “Mary Runs Away” because of her unpredictability. At the beginning of the novel, she has been living alone in her parents’ basement ever since she “froze” after graduating high school; Junior calls her “the prettiest and strongest and funniest person who ever spent twenty-three hours a day alone in a basement.” He learns from Mr. P that she is extremely smart and once dreamed of writing romance novels—a dream she takes up again after Junior’s leaving the reservation inspires her to leave as well, suddenly marrying a Flathead Indian man and moving to Montana. She is very happy there until she dies in an accidental fire started while she was drunk.

Mr. P – The Wellpinit geometry teacher, who advises Junior to leave the reservation. Mr. P is one of many “weird” and “lonely” characters in the novel, such as Mary, Junior, and Gordy, and is known in Wellpinit for frequently falling asleep and forgetting to come to school. Mr. P, who is white, has lived and taught on the reservation for many years, and confesses to Junior that he used to be part of a cruel education system designed to “kill the Indian to save the child,” for which he now feels he needs to atone. While the fact that he knew about, and encouraged, Mary’s secret hopes of becoming a writer suggests that he was once hopeful and competent enough to serve as a mentor, his other attributes as a teacher illustrate that he too has been absorbed into the reservation’s culture of depression and defeat. Importantly, however, he is the first adult to tell Junior that he deserves better than what he has.

Grandmother Spirit – Junior’s grandmother. (The text identifies her as Junior’s mother’s mother, although there seems to be a small discrepancy here: Grandmother’s last name is Spirit, the same as Junior’s, whereas his mother’s maiden name is Adams.) Junior is close to his grandmother, and turns to her for advice when he believes Roger is going to attack him. To Junior, Grandmother’s greatest gift is tolerance, part of an “old-time-Indian spirit” that celebrates weirdness rather than fearing it and approaches new people and experiences with a fair and open mind. She also doesn’t drink, since she believes alcohol would dull her experience of the world. She is “powwow-famous,” beloved by everyone who knows her, and after she dies about two thousand people, Indian and white, come to her funeral. Her last act is to ask her family to forgive Gerald, the drunk driver who killed her.

Penelope – Junior’s “translucent semi-girlfriend,” a beautiful and popular freshman at Reardan High School. Roger, a big-brother figure to her, calls her Penultimate. Penelope is the first Reardan student to speak to Junior, but generally ignores him until he discovers she is bulimic (a disorder that reminds him of his father’s alcoholism) and she ends up crying on his shoulder, beginning their “friends with potential” relationship. Like Junior, Penelope has big dreams and wants to leave the place where she came from, although some of her dreams are so grandiose that Junior finds them a little silly. With blond hair,

pale skin, and an all-white volleyball uniform, Penelope embodies both the hope and the unattainability that Junior associates with the color **white**.

Roger – A star basketball and football player and a popular senior at Reardan High School. Junior calls him “Roger the Giant.” When Junior first arrives in Reardan, Roger calls him “Chief” and tells him a racist joke, for which Junior punches him. After that, Roger, who is also friends with Penelope, respects Junior and they eventually become friendly, with Roger lending Junior money, driving him home, and reaching out to him as he tries out for the school basketball team.

Eugene – Dad’s best friend, who drinks constantly, rides a motorcycle, and works as an EMT for the tribal clinic. Junior implies that although Eugene is a happy drunk, he’s also deeply sad. Eugene encourages Junior when he transfers to the Reardan school and always tells him “You can do it!” whenever he’s playing any kind of game. Just after Grandmother dies, Eugene is also shot and killed in a drunken fight with his friend Bobby, who doesn’t realize what he’s done.

Gordy – Junior’s friend and the “class genius” at the Reardan school, who loves computers and books. Described as “an eighty-year-old literature professor trapped in the body of a fifteen-year-old” white farm boy from Reardan, Gordy teaches Junior how to take books seriously and also draw joy from them. He is “an extremely weird dude” and also the smartest person Junior has ever known.

Coach – The coach of Junior’s and Roger’s basketball team at Reardan High School. Pledging to treat his team with dignity and respect, and treating Junior’s tears and “yucking” (or pregame vomiting) with compassion and understanding, Coach becomes an important father figure for Junior. He admires Junior’s attitude of commitment and empowers him with his belief in Junior’s strength, talent, and potential.

Gerald – The drunk driver who strikes and kills Grandmother Spirit as she is walking home from a powwow. Through her last words to the doctor who treats her, Grandmother asks her family to forgive Gerald; he is sent to prison and moves to a reservation in California once he gets out.

Ted – A white billionaire who is “famous for being filthy rich and really weird.” Claiming to love Indian culture and “*feel* Indian in his bones,” he shows up at Junior’s grandmother’s funeral to return a powwow dance outfit that he believes once belonged to Grandmother Spirit—at which point Junior’s mom explains that her mother was never a powwow dancer.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Andruss Brothers – Thirty-year-old triplets who beat Junior up when he and Rowdy go to the powwow. Rowdy gets revenge by cutting off their braids when they are passed out.

Dawn – Junior’s first crush, an Indian girl from Wellpinit. When

Junior and Rowdy are twelve, Rowdy promises never to tell that Junior cried about loving the unattainable Dawn (who, Rowdy noted at the time, “doesn’t give a shit” about Junior).

Mr. Dodge – The Reardan geology teacher, who is filling in the position despite not having a background in science. Mr. Dodge deeply resents it when Junior corrects his statement about petrified wood, but thanks Gordy for saying the same thing.

Earl – Penelope’s father, a racist who warns Junior that he will disown Penelope if Junior gets her pregnant.

Bobby – Eugene’s friend, who mistakenly kills him in a drunken argument. Once in jail, Bobby is so overwhelmed with guilt that he hangs himself with a bedsheet; Junior says that Eugene’s loved ones “didn’t even have enough time to forgive” Bobby.

Mrs. Jeremy – The Reardan social studies teacher. When Mrs. Jeremy makes a snide comment about Junior’s frequent absences—many of which have been due to funerals and wakes—Gordy leads the class in a demonstration of defiance against her.

Miss Warren – The Reardan guidance counselor, who gives Junior the news of Mary’s death.



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.



IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND COMING-OF-AGE

Junior is hyper-conscious of his place within any social group. In addition to his awareness of what it means to be **white** versus what it means to be Indian, he worries about how to be a man (when men can cry, when boys have to stop holding hands with their friends) and how to fit in as a “freak” who is bullied by his peers and even by some adults. Beginning his story “I was born with water on the brain” (a reference to his own disability of hydrocephalus) and identifying his tough, hot-tempered best friend Rowdy as being “born mad,” Junior puts an emphasis on how people’s traits at birth define their characters, suggesting the he initially holds a slightly reductive vision of identity that doesn’t change much over time. However, by the time he gets to know Penelope, a girl at the Reardan high school who becomes Junior’s “almost-girlfriend,” he’s begun to see this kind of thinking as childish, finding it a bit melodramatic when she claims she was “born with a suitcase” ready to leave her hometown. A big part of his coming of age is trying to figure out the extent to which people are defined by their birth or their origins, as opposed to by their

own choices.

For Junior, this dilemma is most clearly laid out in terms of his choice to leave the reservation where he was born. This decision, which some Indians on rez see as a choice to become white, calls his identity into question and leaves him with two names: on the reservation, he's Junior, but when he goes to school in Reardan, people start calling him Arnold. At one point Penelope calls him "the boy who can't figure out his own name." Metaphorically, figuring out his own name—who he is, what his goals are, the kind of man he will become—is the goal of Junior's decision to go to school in Reardan, and one of the driving forces in this coming-of-age novel. By the end, he realizes that his identity is really composed of allegiances to many tribes—"the tribe of basketball players ... the tribe of cartoonists ... and the tribe of boys who really missed their best friends," to name a few—and that the fact of belonging to so many different communities, even the community of lonely people, means that he is going to be okay.



OVERLAPPING OPPOSITES

Junior often sees himself and his world in terms of strict dichotomies: **white** versus Indian, friends versus enemies, rich versus poor. In his double life in Reardan and on the reservation, he feels "like a magician slicing himself in half, with Junior living on the north side of the river and Arnold living on the south." Yet just as his true identity includes both Junior and Arnold, the divided extremes he describes often turn out to be blurred. Roger, the Reardan student who greets Junior in the schoolyard with a horribly racist joke, becomes a kind friend and role model; Rowdy is both Junior's best friend and his worst enemy, and hates him because he loves him so much. Things like the crumpled five-dollar bill Junior's alcoholic father gives him for Christmas are both ugly and beautiful, and the basketball game Reardan wins against Wellpinit becomes both a triumphant victory and a shameful moral loss for Junior when he realizes how many social and economic advantages his team has. Meanwhile, tragic events such as Junior's sister Mary's death have darkly comedic elements, and Junior's ability to address topics like bullying, poverty and racism with humor is a key characteristic of his voice. For Junior, not to mention his friends Rowdy and Penelope, part of growing up is recognizing that the world is more complicated than a strict division of opposites. Realizing that it's possible to be more than one thing—part of many different "tribes"—is what enables him to unify his split identity and, as someone destined to **travel** beyond the reservation, navigate the world both literally and figuratively.



RACISM, POVERTY, AND ALCOHOLISM

"I'm fourteen years old and I've been to forty-two funerals," says Junior after losing three loved ones in alcohol-related accidents. "That's really the

biggest difference between Indians and **white** people." For Junior, to be Indian and to live on the reservation means dealing not only with overt racism—going to a dentist who believes Indians only need half as much novocaine as white people do, or facing racist insults from his white classmates in Reardan—but also with the inherited disadvantages and forms of structural oppression that have held his community back for generations. There's the vicious cycle of poverty, in which "you start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor." There's the reservation school system, originally designed to "kill Indian culture" and now so poorly funded that students must use their parents' used and outdated textbooks. And there's "the fucking booze": the reason, according to Junior, that all Indian families are unhappy, with too many people dying young. Most of the adults in Junior's life, including his father and his father's friend Eugene, turn to alcohol as a way of dealing with the sense of despair and defeat brought on by poverty and a racist system that doesn't "pay attention to their dreams"—and become even further embedded in that system as a result. Alcohol has also been incorporated into Indian traditions such as powwows and wakes, so that ironically, even celebrating the lives of people who have died as a result of alcohol abuse can lead to further heartbreak.

All of these elements contribute to what Junior portrays, and his teacher Mr. P. describes, as a culture of depression, defeat, and hopelessness on the reservation, and they are what Junior tries to escape when he leaves for Reardan. Importantly, while these obstacles shape Junior's life and circumstances, they aren't treated as opportunities for character-building—after all, "poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor." Rather, they are presented as the simple and brutal realities of Junior's life, and the lives of all the Indians around him.



CONFESSIONS, REVENGE, AND FORGIVENESS

Confessions, revenge, and forgiveness are central to the plot of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Junior decides to transfer to the school in Reardan because of a conversation with Mr. P., a **white** teacher whose nose he has broken by throwing a textbook across the room. Mr. P. forgives Junior for breaking his nose, but asks for forgiveness in return: he has been part of a system that forced Indians to give up, and he sees encouraging Junior to free himself as a kind of atonement. Later, Junior's grandmother, in her dying words, asks her family to forgive the drunk driver who killed her. Her belief in tolerance, love, and forgiveness is presented as her "greatest gift" and a direct contrast to racist hatred; according to Junior, tolerance is a trait that Indians lost

as a result of oppression by whites. Not all confessions deserve to be met with forgiveness, however: at Junior's grandmother's funeral, a white billionaire named Ted makes a "confession" that the Indians meet with ridicule. His theatrical—and patronizing—attempt to "return" a powwow outfit that was clearly made by another tribe reveals his own fetishism and cultural insensitivity much more than any real attempt to make reparations.

Most importantly, one of the main conflicts in the novel is Junior's search for forgiveness from his best friend Rowdy, who feels betrayed by Junior's decision to leave the reservation and hates him as a result. Although each boy tries to get revenge on the other—Rowdy gives Junior a concussion during a basketball game, and Junior humiliates him at their next game in retaliation—their friendship is finally restored when they play together without keeping score, metaphorically supporting and forgiving each other without trying to keep track of wrongs. Junior's "absolutely true diary" can be read as his own confession, which closes with his hopes and prayers that Rowdy, his family, and his tribe "would someday forgive me for leaving them ... that I would someday forgive myself for leaving them."



HOPE, DREAMS, AND LOSS

It may seem contradictory to include hope, dreams, and loss in the same category, but in fact, in Junior's experience, they're very closely connected. At the beginning of the novel, Junior understands dreams and hopes primarily as lost opportunities: his mother and father, for example, "dreamed about being something other than poor, but they never got the chance to be anything because nobody paid attention to their dreams." The same thing is true for his sister, Mary, who had plans and potential when she was in high school, but gave up and began living in her parents' basement—a kind of symbolic burial. To Junior, the *loss* of hope is part of what it means to live on the rez and be Indian.

In the book, following one's dreams, finding a place where hope can thrive, means leaving the reservation. Both Junior and Mary—whose nickname, Mary Runs Away, foreshadows her decision to leave—attempt to do this, although Mary's death just after she'd begun to have hope again becomes yet another illustration of lost dreams and opportunities. Even for Penelope, who is **white** and thus, from Junior's point of view, has hope as part of her birthright, having dreams means wanting to leave the place she came from. But the element of loss in hope is much stronger for Junior, whose decision to leave is seen as a betrayal by his friend Rowdy and many other members of the reservation community. It's a denial of his heritage, a negation of identity almost like a death. By the end of the novel, Rowdy and others have made peace with Junior's decision to go off in search of hope like "an old-time nomad"—that is, like one of his Indian ancestors. Even so, when

Junior lists the people he will "always love and miss," he includes Rowdy, his reservation, and his tribe as well as his loved ones who have died—a telling indication that in some ways, following his hopes and dreams ultimately means the loss of his friends, his family, and his home.



DRAWING, WRITING, AND JUNIOR'S CARTOONS

One unique aspect of *Absolutely True Diary* is the way that images are incorporated into the text.

Junior is an aspiring cartoonist who uses his drawings to tell his story, and the cartoons work throughout the novel in several different and important ways. Sometimes they are integrated seamlessly with the written narrative, providing dialogue or visual information that isn't shown elsewhere; for instance, the moment when Junior throws his geometry book and breaks Mr. P.'s nose is shown in a picture rather than told in a sentence, as if Junior's feelings are too strong to articulate in words. Some reveal Junior's attitude toward other characters; he takes special care in sketching his friends Rowdy, Gordy, and Penelope, and these portraits help to characterize both the artist and the subjects. Still others, like "Junior Gets to School" or "Who My Parents Would Have Been If Somebody Had Paid Attention to Their Dreams," are like self-contained diagrams or infographics; they explain what's going on in the text in a different, visual way. As Junior explains, "I draw because I want to pay attention to the world. And I want the world to pay attention to me."

At the beginning of the novel, Junior sees his cartoons, and his skill as an artist, as his one chance of leaving the reservation: "tiny little lifeboats" in a world of "broken dams and floods." In a similar way, his older sister Mary once dreamed of writing romance novels; Junior sees it as tragic that she gives up on those dreams after she graduates high school. Words become even more important to him after he gets to Reardan, and his new friend Gordy teaches him to read seriously and joyfully—an approach that, Junior notes, should apply both to books and life. Mary's romance novels are more complicated, though. When she suddenly gets married, moves to Montana, and begins writing a memoir, her life seems to be unfolding like something out of one of her stories—until she dies in a tragic, senseless accident, suggesting that the possibility of a better life might sometimes be just a fantasy and that the connection between books and life cannot be so straightforward.



SYMBOLS

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



WHITE

"I don't know if hope is white," Junior states, thinking about the hopefulness of the white students in Reardan. "But I do know that hope for me is like some mythical creature: white, white, white, white, white, white, white, white." He illustrates this with a cartoon of a winged horse, flying past fluffy, smiling clouds. For Junior, whiteness, both in the sense of skin color and more broadly, symbolizes hopes and dreams: things that are both desirable and seemingly unattainable, or even, perhaps, unreal. He wants the advantages and opportunities that the white students seem to have by birthright, but (at the beginning of the novel) doubts his ability to achieve or deserve them. He also feels guilty for having that desire, since it seems to require him to betray his tribe and falsely act as something he is not. Similarly, Junior's blond-haired, blue-eyed semi-girlfriend Penelope is described as "all white on white on white, like the most perfect kind of vanilla dessert cake you've ever seen." She's the most popular girl in the Reardan freshman class, and Junior thinks everything about her is sexy, but she's also an unattainable girl who doesn't return his Valentine—and as Rowdy's and Gordy's comments on Junior's obsession with her suggest, his love for this white girl may not be entirely pure, since it objectifies and partly reduces her to what she represents. Meanwhile, Penelope's own wild dreams of travel are, in Junior's eyes, "just big goofy dreams. They're not real." The color white thus symbolizes the complicated nature of dreams in this novel: inspiring and aspirational, but also, like Mary's life of romance, sometimes false, and not always to be trusted.



TRAVEL

In this coming-of-age novel, traveling is a symbol for growing up. Mary breaks out of her "frozen" state by moving to Montana to live in a mobile home. Penelope's idea of adulthood and freedom involves a plan "to swim in every ocean ... to climb Mount Everest ... to go on an African safari ... to ride a dogsled in Antarctica." Gordy uses the language of travel to talk about life, saying books and comics can help to "navigate the river of the world." And a cartoon inserted after Mr. P tells Junior to leave the reservation shows Junior standing by a road sign, beginning a journey from "Home" toward "Hope" and "???" Just as growing up means leaving the safe, known, comforting world of childhood, traveling means leaving home behind to explore unknown places. Thus, when Rowdy wishes Junior happiness in his nomadic travels, he means it literally, but also symbolically; Junior has passed out of the childhood they shared, and into a life of his own.



CHICKEN

The passage on chicken in Chapter 2 is very short, but very important: it reveals a lot about the dynamics of Junior's family and the values he grew up with. In a chapter titled, "Why Chicken Means So Much to Me," he explains that, "sure, sometimes, my family misses a meal, and sleep is the only thing we have for dinner, but I know that, sooner or later, my parents will come bursting through the door with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. ... And believe me, a good piece of chicken can make anybody believe in the existence of God." Chicken thus demonstrates and symbolizes the fact that Junior's mom and dad, in spite of their poverty and his dad's alcoholism, will always be there to love and support him in the same way that they'll always come home with food after a while. The image of return is also important; when Junior hopes and prays at the end of the novel that he'll be able to see his family and Rowdy after he leaves, and that they will forgive him for leaving, one answer might be that in Junior's family, you can always trust that somehow, people will always come home.



PETRIFIED WOOD

As Junior explains to Mr. Dodge and his classmates, **petrified wood** is formed when a piece of wood is buried under dirt and minerals "kind of melt the wood and the glue that holds the wood together. And then the minerals sort of take the place of the wood and the glue. ... Like, if the minerals took all the wood and glue out of a, uh, tree, then the tree would still be a tree, sort of, but it would be a tree made out of minerals." This description applies also to what happens to Junior in Reardan, or at least to what he and other members of his tribe are afraid will happen: if Junior, an Indian, is immersed in an all-**white** community like a tree under dirt, his Indian identity will gradually deteriorate, replaced by white values and white culture. He'll still be an Indian, sort of, but only in body, just as the tree is only a tree in shape; the integral things that make him Indian will be gone. This is a much darker narrative than Mr. Dodge's explanation—"it was pretty amazing that wood could turn into rock"—and it pushes back against the optimistic but too-simplistic story of transformation that Junior himself expected when he first came to Reardan. He might have thought before that he could turn into a new version of himself, but is now discovering that can't happen without some kind of loss. Even so, it's important to note that this symbolism speaks more to Junior's frame of mind at this particular moment in the novel than it does to the final outcome. Though a gradual change in his own identity seems impossible to Junior now, by the end of the novel he will understand that his Reardan and reservation identities can coexist.



BASKETBALL

For Junior, who has grown up knowing that his race and his poverty, not to mention his physical disability, have put him at a disadvantage in the world—being, as he puts it, “a loser Indian son living in a world built for winners”—**basketball** represents a much fairer, meritocratic system in which everyone starts off equally and people succeed thanks to their own hard work and skill. Unlike the wider world, where a smart woman like Junior’s mom or a great basketball player like Eugene can’t go to college because they can’t afford the tuition and don’t have the preliminary education to get there, and unlike the classroom, where Mr. Dodge ignores Junior’s contribution because he’s Indian, the basketball court is a place where Junior’s commitment and shooting talent make him one of the most valuable players on the team, even though he is shorter and skinnier than all the other boys. It’s when he’s playing basketball that Junior hears and believes the words “You can do it”—this is one place where all his hopes and dreams really are within his reach. Meanwhile, the excitement people feel over basketball transcends class and race—Junior’s dad hugs and kisses the **white** man next to him “like they were brothers” after Junior’s big three-pointer against Wellpinit—and Coach pledges to treat all of his players with dignity and respect, directly counter to forces like poverty and racism that specifically deny people those qualities.

and his humor let us know that this is something he seems to have mostly overcome, despite its lingering effects on his appearance.

From this opening passage we know that Junior is someone who considers an important characteristic of himself that he is different from others – weird, even – and also that he understands himself to be someone who is able to overcome hardship, even against great odds. From this passage we also learn that Junior has a sense of humor, even in the face of difficulty, and he’s a careful observer of the world. It makes sense that Junior is a good student and a dedicated cartoonist, because his precision with words shows that he is someone who wants to communicate his experiences to others.

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

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This poetic metaphor that Junior chooses to represent the world illustrates a lot about his personality. First of all, Junior clearly sees the world as a place of hardship and even despair, since he calls it a place of “broken dams and floods.” We get the sense that Junior has been through a lot, particularly for how young he is, and that he has been deeply affected by living in an environment full of hopelessness and suffering.

However, Junior has developed a strategy for keeping himself from being consumed by his environment: making cartoons. When he compares his cartoons to lifeboats, he indicates that they have the potential to save him from the despair around him, and even from the fates of his family and peers. He says that his cartoons could get him off the rez by making him famous, but it’s clear that they also save him in more everyday ways by giving him an outlet for his emotions and a source of hope.

●● My parents came from poor people who came from poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people. Adam and Eve covered their privates with fig leaves; the first Indians covered their privates *with their tiny hands*.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● My brain was drowning in grease. But that makes the whole thing sound weirdo and funny, like my brain was a giant French fry, so it seems more serious and poetic and accurate to say, “I was born with water on the brain.”

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Junior introduces himself to readers as someone who is up against many obstacles to success. Before even touching on race and poverty, he lets us know that he has a birth defect that affected his brain. However, his command of language

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

One of the central themes of the novel is the cyclical nature of poverty and how difficult it is to escape from it. Here, Junior is explaining that it's not his parents' fault that their family is poor; they didn't make stupid decisions about money, they just never had any to begin with. Junior ties this poverty in with race, too. As Indians, his family has, for generations, not had the same opportunities as white families, and that has meant that nobody could escape from poverty and thereby create better opportunities for future generations.

Junior tends to make jokes about the things that are most painful to him, so he quips that even as far back as Adam and Eve there were class disparities, since Adam and Eve had fig leaves to cover their privates and the Indians only had their hands. From this passage, we get a sense of the extent of the hopelessness on the rez. If a family has been stuck in poverty for that many generations, then there is both very little opportunity to escape and, therefore, very little reason for anyone to hope for a better life.

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

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Something that Junior wants readers to understand is that poverty is not only cyclical, but it is inseparable from race. Together, racism and poverty form a vicious knot that deflates self-esteem and makes it difficult to see a way towards a better life. Junior illustrates this by walking readers through the thoughts he has when he is feeling bad about himself. We see that he conflates poverty with being Indian and being stupid and ugly.

This is a telling set of thoughts because it illuminates some of the less concrete ways (not related directly to his housing or access to medicine, for instance) that being an Indian living in poverty affects Junior. For example, Junior's thought that Indians are ugly shows the ways in which the standards of beauty centered on whiteness, which are ubiquitous in the American media, harm minorities. Junior doesn't seem to have an image in his mind of Indian beauty – he thinks of white people as being the ones who are attractive, and because of that he cannot imagine himself as being anything but ugly. This self-deprecation feeds into his despair about the cycle of poverty his family is caught in, because, just as he doesn't have an image of Indian beauty, he doesn't have many role models of Indians who aren't poor. Here, racism and poverty are presented as psychological obstacles in addition to being material ones. The combination makes it hard to imagine and work towards a better life.

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

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, Junior attempts to dispel what he sees as pervasive myths about being poor. Part of the mythology of the American dream is the notion that anyone, with sufficient hard work, can work their way out of poverty, and that lessons learned through living with poverty (hard work, perseverance) will lead to success later on. Junior clearly does not believe this, and thinks that such beliefs are both ridiculous and dangerous in that they perpetuate the idea that poverty is anything other than an affliction.

Instead, Junior gives a frank assessment of the world around him, saying that he only sees poverty teaching people to be poor. By this, Junior refers to the fact that poverty prevents social mobility rather than bolsters it (as the American dream would have you believe). Poor people are cut off from the resources that foster social mobility (like education, healthcare, loans, etc.) and often lack role models and mentors who themselves got out of poverty. This is apparent in Junior's community; people don't seem to have realistic ideas about how to get out of poverty, and not many young people are being steered towards

achievable goals that might better their lives.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ “It’s not like anybody’s going to notice if you go away,” he said. “So you might as well gut it out.”

Related Characters: Rowdy (speaker), Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This is a moment that encapsulates the dynamic of Rowdy and Junior's friendship. Junior is remembering when his beloved dog died and his grief led him to want to go away from everyone. Rowdy didn't comfort Junior or tell him it would be okay; he gave him a tough-love response that acknowledged that Junior leaving wouldn't accomplish anything and nobody would notice so it made sense for him to just stay where he was.

Rowdy's advice is helpful in that it keeps Junior from doing anything rash and regrettable, and it also shows that the two know each other very well and care for each other. This also points to the fact that Rowdy seems to have internalized the tough environment of the rez more than Junior. Rowdy can be mean and he's opposed to any dreams about the future because they seem, to him, unrealistic (and, therefore, indulging in such dreams would make you vulnerable to them inevitably not coming true). Junior, on the other hand, is a more openly compassionate friend, and he's prone to more eccentric dreams and impulses, like escaping the rez.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ After high school, my sister just froze. Didn't go to college, didn't get a job. Didn't do anything. Kind of sad, I guess. But she is also beautiful and strong and funny. She is the prettiest and strongest and funniest person who ever spent twenty-three hours a day alone in a basement.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Mary Runs Away

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

For Junior, Mary is a sort of cautionary tale for the future. Junior looks up to Mary and believes that she is smart and capable enough to do something important with her life. However, Mary "froze" after high school and moved into their parents' basement, refusing to pursue her dreams. This underscores Junior's sense that the Indians living in poverty have few ways to make a better life. He sees his sister as having the personal qualities (smart, pretty, strong, funny) that might allow her to escape the reservation, but she doesn't.

Since he can't chalk this "failure" up to Mary's personal failings, Junior finds it emblematic of a social reality in which Indians don't have the kinds of opportunities that white kids take for granted. And this feeling of Junior's is substantiated by the realities he sees around him: other kids on the rez, including Mary, get substandard educations and don't go to college; don't get jobs and, in fact, often can't find good jobs because there aren't many ways to make an income on the rez.

There's a sense throughout the book that Junior feels that the world is sending him the message that he doesn't have a future to look forward to as he grows up, and Junior is rebelling by having hope and making radically different choices than his community to see if they result in a different outcome.

☞ And let me tell you, that old, old, old, decrepit geometry book hit my heart with the force of a nuclear bomb. My hopes and dreams floated up in a mushroom cloud. What do you do when the world has declared nuclear war on you?

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

This is a pivotal moment in the book because finding the geometry book that once belonged to his mother is a concrete example for Junior of the ways in which he, as a poor Indian, is being denied opportunities that he would have had were he white. His education is demonstrably substandard if the math books in his school haven't been upgraded since his mom was in school thirty years before, and education is one of the most effective ways to escape

poverty.

So Junior isn't being melodramatic when he feels that the world has "declared nuclear war" on him – from where Junior is sitting, it seems that the world, in fact, is conspiring to keep him down. This is especially poignant because Junior is so consumed by his hopes and dreams, which we see from his dedication to his cartoons.

When he sees his mother's name in the book, Junior feels that his precious hopes are being crushed, which explains the violence of his reaction. Alexie is demonstrating here that the anger many minorities feel about the obstacles they face is not disproportionate to the unfair reality in which they live.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ “You’ve been fighting since you were born,” he said. “You fought off that brain surgery. You fought off those seizures. You fought off all the drunks and drug addicts. You kept your hope. And now, you have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope.”

Related Characters: Mr. P (speaker), Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Once Junior has been suspended from school for throwing the geometry book at his teacher, Mr. P comes to see him and gives him, perhaps, the best gifts possible: forgiveness, and an outlet for the hope that had been crushed by finding the geometry book. Mr. P reminds Junior that he has already struggled through and overcome tremendous obstacles and that if he wants to live a better life he needs to take matters into his own hands and get himself off the rez to a world that might be able to offer him the resources and hope that could carry him out of poverty.

This lecture sticks with Junior and leads him to his decision to transfer to a white high school where he will have more opportunities. This part of the book shows how important it is to have mentors who can remind you to believe in yourself and give you advice about how to move forward. That this mentorship comes only in an extreme situation, and that the community's reaction to Junior's decision is so severe, suggests that the kids on the rez are not generally being told that they have access to these choices and resources. This is an example of the way poverty keeps

people down, of how hopelessness can create a kind of cycle where those without hope actively work against those within a community who still have hope, and would have kept Junior down had Mr. P not intervened.

At the same time, it's important to note that Mr. P, a white person, is telling Junior that his only hope is to escape from his own people. Mr. P may be right, but it is an indictment of the world that has made the rez such a hopeless place that Junior is forced to choose between himself and his community if he wants to find a more hopeful future.

☝☝ “You always thought you were better than me,” he yelled. “No, no, I don’t think I’m better than anybody. I think I’m worse than everybody else.”
“Why are you leaving?”
“I have to go. I’m going to die if I don’t leave.”

Related Characters: Rowdy, Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Rowdy's friendship with Junior is one of the primary plot arcs of the book, and this is the moment in which it begins to fray. When Junior tells Rowdy he is changing schools, Rowdy takes it personally, suggesting that Junior's choice is an implicit judgment of everyone else and a rejection of Rowdy. Junior tries to explain that this is a choice not made out of superiority or arrogance, but one made because he feels desperate – he doesn't think he can make it, doesn't think he'll survive, if he stays on the rez.

Junior's assertion that he will die if he doesn't leave is a dramatic one, but the book proves its truth. So many people in Junior's life die over the course of the book, and most of them are senseless deaths due to conditions on the reservation. This drives home just how dire the poverty that Junior lives in is; it could literally kill him if he doesn't go to another school, so he has to make a choice that alienates his best and only friend in order to take a chance that he might find a better life elsewhere.

“My name is Junior,” I said. “And my name is Arnold. I’m Junior and Arnold. I’m both.”

I felt like two different people inside of one body.

No, I felt like a magician slicing myself in half, with Junior living on the north side of the Spokane River and Arnold living on the south.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Penelope

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

When Junior gets to the high school Reardan, filled mostly with white students, he begins to experience a phenomenon that feels like splitting himself in half. He feels like he has to be a different person around white people than he is around Indians, and he feels like his true self doesn't fit quite right in either world. The difficulty with his name is emblematic of this feeling. The Indians in his community have always called him Junior, but his official name is Arnold, and the white students want to call him Arnold. Junior has to explain that both names are his – both are equally true – but it doesn't seem that anyone else can see everything about him that these two names encompass.

This shows the ways in which stereotypes and social norms constrict Junior's ability to be himself, and it also shows the tangible differences between his background and the backgrounds of the white students. While the white students are suspicious of his two names, Junior is delighted that white students can have names like "Penelope," which is a name that he would never find on the rez.

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

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Roger

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes when Junior has just defended his

honor by punching Roger after Roger told a racist joke. This is a moment of huge growth for Junior, who has been bullied all his life and has relied on Rowdy to protect him. Without Rowdy nearby, Junior can finally come into his own and protect his own values and dignity, which is important to his coming of age.

This moment also shows that Junior is committed to protecting and defending his identity as an Indian, even though he is attending the white school and his tribe thinks he is a traitor. He could have chosen to ignore Roger's casual racism and try to fit in with the white students by not standing out, but instead he asserted himself as who he is: an Indian who won't be messed with. This proves to be a good choice for Junior, as it is asserting his real identity that allows him to eventually be accepted socially.

Chapter 11 Quotes

“Hey buddy,” I would have said. “How do I make a beautiful white girl fall in love with me?”

“Well, buddy,” he would have said. “The first thing you have to do is change the way you look, the way you talk, and the way you walk. And then she'll think you're her fricking Prince Charming.”

Related Characters: Rowdy, Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Penelope

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Junior realizes he has a crush on Penelope and, while he doesn't know how Penelope feels about him, she is being nice to him which gives him hope that they could end up together. He thinks about emailing Rowdy to ask advice since Rowdy is his best friend (even though they are fighting), but he thinks better of it, perhaps because Rowdy's tough love approach has begun to seem pessimistic rather than realistic.

Junior imagines Rowdy telling him that the only way for a white girl to fall in love with him would be if he were white, too, and essentially a different person. While that would seem to be the racist reality that he and Rowdy grew up with, being at Reardan has changed what seems possible for Junior (which is, in part, why he transferred there in the first place). This is both a moment of hope, in which Junior is

beginning to see possibilities that were unthinkable before, but also a moment of sadness in which Junior is still reckoning with a racist reality that could keep him from the things he most wants. And both of those things – hope and reality – continue to be embodied in Junior's suddenly difficult friendship with Rowdy.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☞ There are all kinds of addicts, I guess. We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make the pain go away.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Dad, Penelope

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

A big part of Junior's growth when he goes to Reardan is his growing understanding of and empathy for the white students he's in class with. Before going to Reardan, Junior had associated whiteness with perfection, possibility, and beauty, but he is beginning to see that the white students experience pain and difficulty that aren't totally dissimilar from his own. In this passage, he has just heard Penelope throwing up in the bathroom and when he confronts her about her eating disorder she says something reminiscent of the way Junior's dad talks about his alcoholism.

This is a moment of revelation for Junior in that he realizes that Penelope has pain that she is dealing with in a way that is parallel to his own father's coping mechanisms for pain, and it opens up a way for him to empathize with her.

Certainly, Junior's peers at Reardan have more opportunities than the kids on the rez, but it's important for Junior to understand that this doesn't mean their lives are completely different.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger. I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other. It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job. And it didn't pay well at all.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Junior's time at Reardan, he feels caught between worlds. At school, he is expected to act like a white kid (and, as will become relevant soon, he is expected to have money like white kids do). At home, he is expected to act like an Indian. He feels like a stranger in both places because he doesn't feel that he embodies either identity completely.

It's interesting that he says being Indian is "like a job." This indicates that his Indian-ness is something he feels that he has to work to put on or perform for others, but he doesn't necessarily feel Indian when he is unobserved. A big part of Junior's growth in the story is about learning to negotiate this tension inside himself; he has to come to terms with the fact that he'll never be the "stereotypical" Indian or white kid, but that he can be himself and exist in both worlds without needing to conform to other people's expectations.

☞ I mean, the thing is, plenty of Indians have died because they were drunk. And plenty of drunken Indians have killed other drunken Indians. But my grandmother had never drunk alcohol in her life. Not one drop. That's the rarest kind of Indian in the world.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Grandmother Spirit

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the book, Junior's grandmother has died because she was run over by a drunk driver. He was close to his grandmother, who (like Junior) was a bit of an outlier among Indians. His grandmother didn't drink, which set her apart, and she was beloved for her open mind and her kindness. Her death is a particular cruelty for Junior because his grandmother avoided drinking – the vice that so often gets Indians in his community killed – and yet she was still killed by alcohol.

His grandmother's senseless death leads Junior to a new hopelessness, as he sees that even with a good faith effort to separate herself from the violence of the rez, his

grandmother could not save herself. At the same time, her death galvanizes Junior's anger at the situation on the rez and his desperation to escape it. His grandmother's death suggests that even if he were to have stayed at his school on the rez and made good choices and tried his best, he still could have been consumed by the cycle of poverty and violence that destroys Indian lives.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☞ Two thousand Indians laughed at the same time. ... It was the most glorious noise I'd ever heard. And I realized that, sure, Indians were drunk and sad and displaced and crazy and mean, but dang, we knew how to laugh. When it comes to death, we know that laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, Junior has leaned heavily on humor to deal with tragedy and hardship. Before this moment, we have only seen this in his drawings and narration, but this scene (when a billionaire embarrasses himself at Junior's grandma's wake) shows that this quality might be common to the entire community on the rez. Junior clarifies that laughing at the wake is not disrespectful, but rather another form of mourning; "laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing," he says.

This scene is a moment of unity on the rez when Junior doesn't feel outside of his community, and it suggests that Junior might have more in common with them than he thinks. This moment also points out the tremendous strain that Indians are under. There are so many tragedies and hardships that laughter has become a common response in the face of grief or the casual racism of whites. It seems that, for Junior and his community, learning to laugh at pain and suffering is one of the only ways they can move forward.

☞ "I used to think the world was broken down by tribes," I said. "By black and white. By Indian and white. But I know that isn't true. The world is only broken into two tribes: The people who are assholes and the people who are not."

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Mrs. Jeremy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

When Junior's teacher tries to shame him for missing school, Junior's classmates walk out to defend him. This shows that he is finally part of the community at Reardan, though the fact that they leave him behind to speak with his teacher may also signify that for the other students their defense of Junior has an aspect of show to it, a self-conscious attempt to "defend the Indian" rather than support for Junior himself.

Regardless, Junior then gives this speech to his teacher, which shows his growing maturity and his changing understanding of the world. When Roger made the racist joke, Junior punched him to stand up for himself, and even earlier in the novel Junior threw his schoolbook at his teacher when he was frustrated with his education. Now, though, Junior defends himself not physically, but verbally through an eloquent speech. He is learning to be part of a community and to communicate with others, strongly but without violence.

Also, the content of this speech shows that Junior is moving away from dividing the world into the stark categories he once did. He is no longer as committed to thinking about people in terms of whether they are Indian or white, but rather he is trying to look beyond race to see people's character. This is a worldview that will be more hospitable to Junior's own struggles with his identity, since thinking of people as assholes or not assholes doesn't force him to pigeonhole himself into a single identity based on race.

☞ We had defeated the enemy! We had defeated the champions! We were David who'd thrown a stone into the brain of Goliath! And then I realized something. I realized that my team, the Reardan Indians, was Goliath.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, Junior has taken refuge in basketball as an area in which he can excel despite his being Indian. He

views basketball as transcending race and class, and therefore being a fairer mode of competition than, say, classroom performance. Because of this, Junior has felt justified in wanting to crush the Wellpinit team (though of course he also wants to win because Rowdy, who has hurt him, is the best player on the other team), and he thought that achieving this goal would make him feel unambiguously good.

However, once he has done it he realizes that his team *does* still have unfair advantages over Wellpinit. The people on the Reardan team have stable families, nice things, and general security in the present and in their futures. The Indian players who do not have those luxuries don't leave their problems off the court; how could it not affect their playing if they are grieving a loved one or if they're hungry, for example? This is a humbling realization for Junior, because it is a moment in which he realizes that he has to be careful with the advantages he has been given and he has to prioritize empathy and kindness. Otherwise, he might become one of the people who are making Indian lives harder, and he can't bear to do that.

●● Gordy gave me this book by a Russian dude named Tolstoy, who wrote: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Well, I hate to argue with a Russian genius, but Tolstoy didn't know Indians. And he didn't know that all Indian families are unhappy for the same exact reason: the fricking booze.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Gordy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, Junior has experienced unbelievable hardship due to the rampant alcohol abuse in his community. This passage comes right before Junior reveals one more tragedy, the alcohol-related death of his sister. While Gordy looks to Tolstoy for illumination on the things that make families unhappy, Junior has firsthand experience that leads him to a different conclusion.

His statement that alcohol is what makes all families unhappy shows how pervasive this problem is on the rez, which is especially heartbreaking because alcoholism is a much more tangible and preventable problem than, say, general marital malaise, which might be Gordy's experience of unhappiness in families. This passage fits with Junior's

insistence on being very concrete about goals and problems, and very frank about the state of the world. Junior has no patience for euphemism, and, just as he doesn't respect goals that are so vague and lofty as to be unachievable, he doesn't respect vague assessments of a problem that he considers, in reality, to be very specific.

There is also a sense in which one can read Tolstoy's assertion as racist or classist. Junior is suggesting that all unhappy families can be unhappy in their own ways when those families are privileged (such as the rich Russian families that Tolstoy was writing about). Families mired in poverty and despair can't afford, or manage, to be unhappy except in the same way: because of the misery exacted by poverty and racism.

●● I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms.
And to the tribe of cartoonists.
And to the tribe of chronic masturbators.
And the tribe of teenage boys.
And the tribe of small-town kids.
And the tribe of Pacific Northwesterners.
And the tribe of tortilla-chips-and-salsa lovers.
And the tribe of poverty.
And the tribe of funeral-goers.
And the tribe of beloved sons.
And the tribe of boys who really missed their best friends.
It was a huge realization.
And that's when I knew that I was going to be okay.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

This is a watershed moment for Junior in which he can finally let go of his tendency to relentlessly divide the world into Indian and white. He has been so perturbed by his inability to decide whether he is more white or more Indian, or which side of himself he should bring out in a particular context. Here, he is finally realizing that his identity (and the identities of others) cannot be reduced along a single axis. Junior has many interests and qualities that connect him to others and those are sufficient connections to transcend race and class.

Junior knows at this moment that he has the power to

define himself and his choices. Junior understands, too, that this revelation does not apply to everyone; just because Junior has broken free of a worldview limited by the racism directed towards Indians does not mean that his Indian friends will be able to do the same. Junior recognizes that his success means he will have to leave some people and realities behind, so even as it is empowering there is also an element of sadness. Junior knows that he is going to be okay, but as part of that "okay-ness" he is going to have to leave behind things that he loved.

“You’re an old-time nomad,” Rowdy said. “You’re going to keep moving all over the world in search of food and water and grazing land. That’s pretty cool.”

Related Characters: Rowdy (speaker), Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Junior and Rowdy have finally made up. Rowdy has come to terms with Junior's decision to leave the rez, and Junior has accepted that Rowdy is not choosing the same path. Over a game of basketball, the two of them settle into a new dynamic in their friendship in which they can enjoy each other's company without being possessive or co-dependent. Their personalities can evolve independently, in other words, which shows that they've both grown up tremendously.

In this passage, Rowdy is offering Junior a kind observation, that Junior's choices remind him of nomadic Indians of pre-reservation times. Throughout the book, Junior has had a hard time reconciling his choices with his community. His need to leave the rez has made him feel not Indian enough, but Rowdy has now given him a way to think about his

choices that connects him deeply to Indian history. This is the ultimate form of acceptance that Rowdy could give Junior.

“I would always love Rowdy. And I would always miss him, too. Just as I would always love and miss my grandmother, my big sister, and Eugene. Just as I would always love and miss my reservation and my tribe.

I hoped and prayed that they would someday forgive me for leaving them.

I hoped and prayed that I would someday forgive myself for leaving them.

Related Characters: Junior (Arnold Spirit, Jr.) (speaker), Eugene, Mary Runs Away, Grandmother Spirit, Rowdy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

This book refuses to give readers easy answers to complex problems, and its conclusion is no exception. Junior has grown and matured and he has made brave and difficult decisions that have put him on a path to achieving his dreams. However, Alexie does not pretend that this comes without cost or that Junior's problems are all solved.

Even though Junior has come to deep realizations about the complexity of his identity and his ability to connect to others, he is still not immune from feeling guilty about the choices he has made to separate himself from his community, and Alexie's placement of this statement at the end of the book indicates that Junior likely never will. Junior's ability, though, to sit with his ambivalence and declare that both things are true at once is a tremendous evolution from the Junior at the beginning of the book who could only see the world divided into separate categories.



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 - THE BLACK-EYE-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB

Fourteen-year-old Junior was “born with water on the brain”—that is, with too much cerebral spinal fluid, which damaged his brain when he was an infant. He notes that it might be more specific to say that his brain was “drowning in grease,” but that this statement sounds too goofy; to say he was born with water on the brain “seems more serious and poetic and accurate.”

Junior’s hydrocephalus gave him a number of physical problems, such as ten extra teeth and lopsided vision, which the healthcare systems on his reservation had a limited ability to care for. For instance, because the Indian Health Service only funded major dental work once a year, he had to get all ten extra teeth pulled at once—by a white dentist who believed Indians only needed half as much Novocain as white people.

Junior also looked unusual, with a large head, hands, and feet on a very skinny body, and suffered from seizures, a stutter, and a lisp. Because of this, he has always been bullied by other kids and some adults. He gets beat up at least once a month, and so he prefers to spend his time alone inside, reading books and drawing cartoons.

Junior draws cartoons, especially cartoons of his friends and family, because he finds words too limited and unpredictable. In contrast, everyone in the world can understand a picture.

Drawing also makes Junior feel important, as if he could grow up to be somebody famous: his artistic talent might be the one real chance he has to escape the reservation. He states, “I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats.”

The first thing Junior chooses to reveal about himself is his birth defect, showing that a sense of being “defective” is part of his identity—but also that he thinks of himself as someone who fights and beats the odds. He’s also very aware of the way he presents this information and constructs his identity through this written “diary.”



The barriers Junior faces as an Indian living on a reservation—the poverty of his family and their community, and the dentist’s racist beliefs—make his medical condition even harder to deal with, and make it even more difficult for Junior to be “normal.”



Junior’s frank and humorous description of his physical problems makes his character seem likable and trustworthy, rather than simply a victim—even as it also makes clear that the odds are stacked against him. Meanwhile, his creativity grows out of his hardships.



Junior’s cartoons are closely connected to his human relationships. He uses them to show how he feels about people, and also to bring people together. Drawing, he implies, can transcend things like class and race.



Junior hopes that drawing could make it possible for him to transcend his own class and race as well. The metaphor of lifeboats dramatizes this point, and links to the idea of “saving yourself” that Mr. P will bring up later on. After his long description of his handicaps, it is significant that Junior takes such pride in his cartoons. It shows his resilience.



CHAPTER 2 - WHY CHICKEN MEANS SO MUCH TO ME

One thing Junior's cartoons can't do, however, is alleviate his family's poverty. For all his talent, Junior is "really just a poor-ass reservation kid living with his poor-ass family on the poor-ass Spokane Indian Reservation."

Junior makes it clear that hunger isn't the worst thing about being poor. Even if his family sometimes goes hungry, he always trusts that his parents will eventually bring home a bucket of Kentucky Fried **Chicken**.

In fact, the worst thing about being poor is what happened when his "best friend Oscar"—the family dog—got sick. To Junior, Oscar was the only living thing he could depend on—more dependable than any of his family members.

However, when Junior asks his mom to take Oscar to the vet, she tells him they can't afford the hundreds of dollars it would cost. Junior is furious at the situation and the fact that there is nothing he can do, but he knows that he can't blame his parents. Their family, like the other Indian families on the rez, has always been poor, "all the way back to the very first poor people."

Junior describes what his parents might have been able to do "if someone had paid attention to their dreams." His mom would have gone to college, and his dad would have been a musician. He includes a cartoon of his parents' ideal selves, with his mother as "Spokane Falls Community College Teacher of the Year 1992-98" and his father as "The Fifth-Best Jazz Sax Player West of the Mississippi."

However, because of poverty, reservation Indians don't get the chance to realize their dreams or any choice about who they can become. Junior describes how the cycle of poverty makes people feel that they deserve to be poor and are destined to be so. The only lesson you can learn from poverty, he says, is how to be poor and how to be defeated.

Coming immediately after the poetic language about lifeboats, Junior's harsh description of reality emphasizes the contrast between dreams and the real world—and the limitations of dreams—that he will bring up again and again throughout the novel. This pessimistic outlook and dismissive self-description reflects Junior's state of mind at the start of the novel.



Junior's faith in his parents illustrates his love and trust in them, and also shows the family's resilience. This passage also begins the novel's definition of poverty, which hurts people not only with day-to-day physical hardships, but also by limiting and demeaning them as humans.



The fact that Junior feels Oscar is more dependable than his family members hints at issues like his dad's alcoholism. It also presents Junior as feeling alone in the world.



For Junior, the worst thing about being poor is being powerless—particularly being powerless to care for the people (and animals) you love. Because of this, poverty is also cyclical, as poor parents can't do much to help their kids achieve their dreams. And, for Junior, poverty is also part of what it means to be Indian.



Again, Junior draws—literally—a contrast between dreams and reality. Making cartoons of his parents' ideal selves is his way of "paying attention" to the dreams that poverty barred them from in real life. The titles he gives them aren't wild fantasies, but achievable goals, which adds credibility to the idea that his parents have unfairly missed out and been held back.



Although strength and resilience are indeed part of Junior's character, he pushes back against the naive idea that poverty teaches life lessons like how to be strong. He begins to explain the widespread culture of defeat that will eventually make it necessary for him to leave the reservation.



Junior feels this sense of defeat when he says goodbye to Oscar, before his dad shoots the dog to put him out of his misery. After all, Junior notes, “A bullet only costs about two cents, and anybody can afford that.”

Oscar’s death is a moment of “coming of age” for Junior. He loses innocence in realizing that there are things his parents can’t fix, and feels the full impact of poverty for the first time in the loss of a friend. His comment about the cost of a bullet implies that when poverty cuts off hopes, dreams, and caring, violence and death may be the only options left.



CHAPTER 3 - REVENGE IS MY MIDDLE NAME

After Oscar’s death, Junior wants to disappear, but his best friend Rowdy talks him out of it, claiming, “It’s not like anybody’s going to notice if you go away ... so you might as well gut it out.”

Rowdy’s characteristic tough love shows his deep-but-deeply-buried love for Junior, and foreshadows the moment when Junior really does go away, and Rowdy really notices. Rowdy, even more than Junior, sees both of their lives as worthless because of their race and poverty, but he also thinks having nothing to lose is reason enough to keep fighting.



Rowdy often comes to Junior’s house to avoid his abusive father, who is “drinking hard and throwing hard punches.” When Rowdy invites Junior to go to the annual Spokane powwow—a celebration with ancient and modern traditions including singing, war dancing, storytelling, food, and “plenty of alcoholic brawling”—Junior declines, fearing he’ll get beat up by drunken revelers, but Rowdy promises to protect him as he has always done.

More connections between poverty, alcohol, and violence on the reservation appear here. Rowdy’s alcoholic father beats him, and Junior is afraid of being attacked by drunks. The alcoholic brawling at the powwow also shows how violence and alcoholism have been absorbed into Spokane culture. Meanwhile, Rowdy’s protection of Junior is one of the most important dynamics of their friendship.



On the way back from the powwow, Rowdy trips and stumbles in a funny way and Junior laughs at him. Rowdy gets furious, but smashes a sack of bottles and the windows of a nearby car in lieu of taking out his anger on Junior.

This exchange shows Rowdy’s capacity for revenge, as the smallest breach of trust in his friendship with Junior can have violent consequences. At the same time, his fury at that breach of trust—and most importantly, his refusal to hit Junior—demonstrates how much Rowdy still cares about Junior and his opinion.



“That was a mistake,” Junior says about laughing at Rowdy. Although Junior knows Rowdy would never hurt him, the violent display scares him—as does the possibility of being jailed for vandalism if he and Rowdy are caught—and so he runs away. Again, “That was a mistake”: Junior runs right into the camp of the Andruss brothers, “the cruelest triplets in the history of the world,” who like to bully Junior even though they are thirty years old.

Junior’s repetition of “That was a mistake” shows he feels a sense of personal responsibility for the bad things that happen to him. He’s internalized bullying just as he’s internalized poverty. His choice to run away is also an example of how Junior acts before he matures and learns to defend himself.



Because Junior is alone, the drunken Andruss brothers make fun of his brain disorder, knock him down, and knee him in the crotch. After Rowdy finds the beaten-up Junior, the two boys hide out near where the Andruss brothers are camping, and when they are passed out Rowdy gets revenge by shaving their eyebrows and cutting off their braids—a great insult and injury to an Indian man.

Though this episode illustrates Rowdy's toughness, Junior knows Rowdy also has a softer side: Rowdy loves old comics, and Junior's cartoons always make him laugh. Junior says he draws cartoons for Rowdy "to make him happy, to give him new worlds to live inside. I draw his dreams."

Junior and Rowdy don't talk about their dreams with anyone else but each other. Junior calculates that they've spent 40,880 hours together in their fourteen years of friendship, which makes them the most important people in each other's lives.

The Andruss brothers' drunkenness is key to this scene: it's what makes them cruel, and also what makes them vulnerable to Rowdy's revenge. For his part, Rowdy gets revenge by attacking the brothers' Indian identity. Rowdy will go to great lengths to protect Junior, but he is also sometimes the person Junior needs protection from.



Rowdy's softer side is something only Junior knows about. This secret identity is not so different from a dream, since it's a better version of himself that Rowdy doesn't get to be in everyday life. Junior and his cartoons make it possible for Rowdy to express both his dreams and his kinder self, just as they also expressed the dreams Junior's parents didn't get to fulfill.



Junior and Rowdy's sharing of dreams is confessional in a way—a mark of trust, with a secrecy that also implies such hopes are somehow shameful. The boys' identities are very closely tied to each other, with Junior as the weak one and Rowdy as the strong one. Coming of age will require both of them to strike out on their own and learn to define themselves on their own terms.



CHAPTER 4 - BECAUSE GEOMETRY IS NOT A COUNTRY SOMEWHERE NEAR FRANCE

On his first day of high school, Junior is particularly excited about his first geometry class, confessing that isosceles triangles make him feel "hormonal." Of course, women and their curves make him hormonal too. Junior confesses frankly that he can spend hours masturbating, and is not just unashamed, but proud to say he's good at it "because EVERYBODY does it. And EVERYBODY likes it. And if God hadn't wanted us to masturbate, then God wouldn't have given us thumbs."

Still, Junior is "much more in love with the right angles of buildings" than with any imaginary woman. As a child, he used to love to sleep in corners, and spent a few years sleeping in his bedroom closet until his older sister Mary ruined it by telling him he was just trying to find his way back into his mother's womb.

Part of coming of age is exploring sexual desire and learning to be comfortable with it. Junior's frank discussion of masturbation is not only funny, but also important, as a confession that establishes intimacy and trust between him and the reader.



Junior is beginning to have adult desires, but he hasn't yet left his childhood behind. This passage shows the process of growing up, establishing Junior as halfway between childhood and adulthood, with Mary's "ruining" the closet as one of the disillusionments involved in growing up.



Junior says Mary is “good at ruining things.” Although Mary is beautiful, strong, and funny, she shut down after she finished high school for reasons no one in the family understands, and has been living alone in the family’s basement for the past seven years. Junior’s drawing of her shows her looking tough, “like Jennifer Lopez (if J. Lo was smarter)” and wearing clothes that have all been shoplifted or stolen. She is nicknamed “Mary Runs Away” because she is so unpredictable. Junior, in contrast, is “steady” and “excited about life.”

In particular, Junior is excited about school, particularly playing **basketball** with Rowdy on the high school team. They were the best players on their eighth-grade team last year. Because Rowdy is so much bigger and stronger, Junior is a little scared that Rowdy will outshine him, leave him behind to hang out with the older guys, and start to hate Junior as much as everyone else does. Still, Junior is happy about starting high school and doesn’t care that the other kids will make fun of him.

The geometry teacher, Mr. P, is old and absentminded—so much so that he sometimes forgets to come to school. When he arrives and passes out books, Junior notices that his book has his mom’s maiden name inscribed in it—meaning the book is at least thirty years older than he is. The fact that the reservation school hasn’t had the money to buy new geometry books in thirty years makes Junior feel that “the world has declared nuclear war” on him, his tribe, and his dreams.

His reaction is shown in a cartoon: he stands up in a rage and throws the book across the room, accidentally hitting Mr. P in the face.

Like Rowdy, Mary is another one of the people against whom Junior defines himself. She is tough, but also downwardly mobile, two traits that Junior sees as opposite to himself. Junior loves, admires, and pities Mary at the same time. His cartoon of her doesn’t show her dreams, but her real self, which could suggest he doesn’t believe any dreams are possible for her anymore.



Junior’s identity is still closely tied to Rowdy’s. While he’s excited about school for its own sake, Junior can’t picture himself excelling there on his own. His worries foreshadow the rivalry he and Rowdy will later have as star players on opposing teams—Junior will leave Rowdy behind, and Rowdy will indeed start to hate him.



The reservation school’s limited resources—including a less-than-competent teacher who should probably retire, and outdated textbooks—are another example of how poverty hurts the Indian community and stands in the way of students’ dreams. Junior knows that having a substandard education will make it much harder for him to get off the rez.



Junior’s feelings are so strong that he can’t put them into words. As he’s said before, his drawings express his feelings more accurately and completely. At the same time, drawings are often reserved for Junior’s dreams, so it’s not immediately clear that throwing the book really happened—he did act, but he acted without thinking. Junior’s desire for revenge against the impersonal force of poverty also has an unintended victim: Mr. P. This is the novel’s first example of why revenge doesn’t work.



CHAPTER 5 - HOPE AGAINST HOPE

Having broken Mr. P’s nose, Junior is suspended from school. It’s the first time he’s really been in trouble, and his family is very disappointed in him. After a week, Mr. P comes to see him and unexpectedly apologizes for the suspension.

Junior’s family’s reaction to the suspension demonstrates his role at school and in his family. Unlike Rowdy and Mary, Junior follows the rules, and people have higher expectations of him than he knows. Junior feels guilty for his actions, which is why Mr. P’s apology is so surprising.



Junior is “freaked out” by Mr. P’s questions about why he threw the book, and frightened when the teacher says what he did was almost unforgivable whether he intended to do it or not. However, Mr. P tells Junior he forgives him.

This is the novel’s first example of the power of forgiveness. Mr. P’s forgiveness is even more meaningful because Junior hasn’t necessarily earned it. It’s also important for Junior’s future, since continuing to punish him—if Mr. P had sought revenge—could sour Junior’s attitude toward school, and hurt his potential to fulfill his dreams.



Mr. P explains that as a young teacher at the reservation school, he was part of an education system intended to kill Indian culture. He can’t apologize to the people he hurt—both psychologically, and physically by beating kids who didn’t conform—but he can apologize to Junior. Junior realizes that he is listening to a confession.

As it turns out, though, Mr. P’s forgiveness is itself a form of atonement. Through forgiving Junior, he is trying to find a way to forgive himself. Mr. P has realized his part in a harmful, racist system that kept Indians down, and sees helping Junior succeed as a way of undoing some of the damage.



Mr. P reveals to Junior that Mary used to want to be a writer; before she gave up on her dream, she was working on a romance novel like the ones she liked to read. Junior is saddened, and surprises himself by saying she might still have a chance to change her life (in fact, he believes, “you don’t get to change your life, period”).

Writing, like drawing, is a way of constructing imaginary worlds, so it’s fitting that both Junior’s and Mary’s dreams involve transforming fantasy into reality. Junior’s comment about Mary changing her life shows the beginning of a transformation in his beliefs about what is possible for him and for other Indians.



Mr. P doesn’t want Junior to give up like his sister did. In an emotional speech, he tells Junior that he deserves better than the culture of defeat on the reservation, and makes him promise to leave the reservation before reservation life kills his hope and his ability to fight. Instead, Mr. P says, Junior must “take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope”—or as Junior puts it, “multiply hope by hope”—which means going as far away as possible from the reservation.

As Mr. P’s speech makes clear, achievement isn’t just about people’s individual qualities—it also has a lot to do with their surroundings, the opportunities available to them, and what the people around them expect. This falls in line with Junior’s earlier statement that poverty only teaches you how to be poor, and (perhaps ironically) with the communitarian values he identifies as one of the best parts of his Indian heritage.



CHAPTER 6 - GO MEANS GO

After thinking about Mr. P’s words to him, Junior tells his parents that he wants to transfer immediately to the high school in Reardan, a rich, white farm town twenty-two miles away.

Junior recognizes that going to a wealthy, all-white school will be a way to escape the effects of racism and poverty on the rez. For the first time, he is taking real action to achieve his dreams, rather than simply drawing or telling Rowdy about them in private, and he makes the decision on his own—an important step in growing up.



Junior's parents quickly agree to his plan, even though it will be difficult to get him to school every day. However, Junior's mom warns him that since Junior will be the first person to leave the rez this way, the other members of the tribe will be angry and might see him as a traitor.

Because the Indians all suffer together from racism and poverty, some see the idea of one person trying to escape that shared burden as a betrayal and a denial of Indian heritage. Here, Junior is identified as the first person to leave the rez, which singles him out as someone special, but also as someone who doesn't belong.



CHAPTER 7 - ROWDY SINGS THE BLUES

The next day, Junior finds Rowdy on the playground and tells him that he is transferring to Reardan. Rowdy does not believe Junior at first, but when he finally does, he begins to get angry. When Junior asks Rowdy to come to Reardan with him, Rowdy spits on the ground.

Rowdy sees Junior's choice to leave as an insult not only to the tribe, but also to him. From Rowdy's perspective, Junior is saying that Rowdy's friendship isn't enough to make him stay. Rowdy also doesn't want to go to Reardan with Junior, since he doesn't believe that even leaving the rez will mean any real hope for him.



Junior understands that Rowdy hates Reardan because Reardan beat Wellpinit at every team sport in the previous year (including the Academic Bowl) in spite of Rowdy's outstanding athletic accomplishments. This makes Junior scared of Reardan, too. But Junior also sees the **white** students as being full of hope, whereas Rowdy just hates them. With a drawing of a flying white horse, Junior explains that "hope for me is like some mythical creature: white, white, white, white, white, white, white, white."

Rowdy sees the Reardan students only as adversaries—he can't possibly imagine himself benefiting from the hopeful opportunities they have. Junior, perhaps because his understanding of racial boundaries is less rigid, thinks hope is something he could share with the white students. He does still think of hope and beauty as being inherently white, however, and so not necessarily possible for him.



As Rowdy begins to understand that Junior is serious, he turns away, and Junior touches his shoulder. Rowdy shoves Junior away, calling him a "retarded fag," which breaks Junior's heart.

Since Rowdy is one of the only people who doesn't bully him, Junior is deeply hurt by this rejection. He realizes that pursuing his dreams could mean the loss of his most important friendship.



Both boys begin to cry, which makes Rowdy even more upset. Rowdy screams in rage and pain, and it is the worst thing Junior has ever heard. After Rowdy accuses Junior of thinking he is better than Rowdy, Junior touches his shoulder again, trying to reassure him.

Crying is contrary to Rowdy's tough persona—even to his understanding of himself—and accepting his own feelings will be an important part of his coming of age, just as Junior will have to learn to see people in less reductive terms than merely "strong" and "weak."



Rowdy punches Junior hard in the face, knocking him to the ground. As Rowdy walks away, Junior understands that his best friend has become his worst enemy.

Rowdy's punch, like his insult, marks a huge breach in their friendship. Until now, Junior has been the only person Rowdy wouldn't hit, and Rowdy has been the only person who wouldn't hit Junior. This moment begins the quest for revenge between Junior and Rowdy that carries on throughout the novel, and starts their new, complicated relationship of both loving and hating each other at once.



CHAPTER 8 - HOW TO FIGHT MONSTERS

Junior begins school at Reardan the next day. His dad tells him to remember that the **white** kids aren't any better than him—which, according to Junior, both of them know isn't true—and that Junior is being a warrior—which is “the best thing he could have said.”

Junior's belief that the white kids are inherently better than him is part of his low self-esteem and internalized racism. However, he takes a lot of pride in his father's compliment, which alludes specifically to their Indian heritage. Being Indian—not acting white—is what's making it possible for Junior to go after his dreams.



Recognizing that “the only *other* Indian in town” is the high school's racist mascot, Junior feels out of place as the other students begin to arrive. He feels that Reardan is the opposite of the rez, his family, and himself, and illustrates the difference with a cartoon diagram of a half-**white**, half-Indian boy—split down the middle with opposing labels such as “Ergonomic backpack/Glad garbage book bag,” “Positive role models/A family history of diabetes and cancer,” and “Hope/Bone-crushing reality.”

Junior is very conscious of not belonging in Reardan. His cartoon again shows a conflict between hope and reality, and identifies the disadvantages Indians have as a result of generations of oppression in real material terms, from diabetes to book bags. The drawing also shows Junior's habit of thinking in binary terms. This will be challenged throughout the novel as he himself becomes a link between the apparently opposite worlds of Reardan and the rez.



Finally, Junior works up the courage to go inside and pick up his schedule from the front office. He arrives late to his homeroom class, where a beautiful blond girl named Penelope asks his name and laughs at him when he tells her it's Junior, even though it's a very common nickname on the reservation. In contrast to her reaction, Junior is surprised and delighted to discover that “Yep, there are places left in the world where people are named Penelope!”

How Junior and Penelope react to each others' names shows their different attitudes of openness and tolerance—Junior is excited to hear a name different from one he's used to, while Penelope is dismissive. Hearing his name—his identity—ridiculed makes Junior feel even more strongly that he doesn't belong in Reardan.



When the teacher calls Junior by his full name, Arnold Spirit, Penelope asks accusingly why he told her his name was Junior, the Indian nickname that Junior thinks of as his “*real* name.” He explains, “My name is Junior ... And my name is Arnold. It's Junior and Arnold. I'm both.”

This is the first time Junior's full name is mentioned in the book, and it begins his sense of being split into two people: Arnold in Reardan and Junior on the rez. One of the novel's main conflicts is now his struggle to reconcile these two seemingly opposite versions of himself.



Penelope also says Junior has a funny accent, which makes him afraid to talk for his whole first week in Reardan. Although the “Official and Unwritten Spokane Indian Rules of Fisticuffs” that he grew up with demand fighting back whenever someone insults you or a family member, he keeps quiet when the other students call him names like “Tonto” and “Squaw Boy” because he is afraid that unlike the Indian boys who would simply beat him up, the white boys will literally kill him.

However, when Roger, a big, athletic upperclassman, tells him a horribly racist joke, Junior decides he has to do something: “I wasn’t just defending myself. I was defending Indians, black people, and buffalo.” He punches Roger in the face.

To Junior’s surprise, Roger doesn’t fight back. Instead, Roger and his friends are shocked, and act as if Roger is the one who has been wronged. Junior thinks, “maybe it was the most important moment of my life. Maybe I was telling the world that I was no longer a human target.”

When Junior demands to finish the fight after school, Roger calls him crazy and walks away—leaving Junior feeling much stronger, but also even more alienated and confused, since he doesn’t understand the “rules” that Roger was playing by.

CHAPTER 9 - GRANDMOTHER GIVES ME SOME ADVICE

Although Junior is terrified that Roger will come after him and kill him, his grandmother reassures him that Roger probably just wanted to see what the new kid was made of—the fact that he walked away probably means he respects Junior now. Still, Junior is unconvinced.

Because his parents don’t have enough gas in the car to drive him, Junior gets a ride to school from his dad’s best friend Eugene, who rides a motorcycle. When they arrive at school on the motorcycle—to the amazed stares of Junior’s white classmates—Eugene tells Junior that what he is doing is cool, adding “I could never do it. I’m a wuss.” Junior feels proud.

The casual racism of Junior’s white classmates exacerbates his sense of alienation, and the racism in their verbal bullying makes him even more afraid of them than he was of the bullies who physically hurt him in the past. Meanwhile, the strict code of retribution that Junior grew up with helps explain Rowdy’s and the other Indians’ strong desire for revenge against Junior after he leaves.



This is a big turning point for Junior, who has always either run away, taken hits, or allowed Rowdy to protect him. Being on his own, representing his tribe, and hearing other people insulted forces him to stand up not just for himself, but for other people—like Rowdy has always done for him.



With this declaration to the world that he won’t be bullied, Junior takes another big step toward maturity and coming of age.



Junior demonstrates his difference from the Reardan kids by responding in a way they don’t expect—which makes him stand out positively, but also shows how he “doesn’t belong.” His ways of exacting revenge don’t work in this environment, and he doesn’t know how or if Roger will take revenge on him.



As Grandmother points out, Junior’s move to a new school gives him a chance to redefine his place in the high school hierarchy. However, Junior still thinks there’s no way his peers could respect him, and he assumes that people always want revenge at any cost.



Junior realizes that being different in each of his communities—an Indian who rides a motorcycle and goes to a white school—can also make him special. Eugene’s comment underscores the bravery of Junior’s choice to pursue his dreams, which is especially important to Junior because he has always thought of himself as weak.



At the front door, Junior runs into Roger and thinks he will have to fight. “My whole life is a fight,” he adds. Instead, Roger acts cordial and compliments Eugene’s bike, an act of respect that makes Junior feel “almost like a human being.”

This is one example of a revenge fight that actually succeeds. It does because Junior’s actions are justified and because Roger lets it end while they’re even, without pursuing any further revenge. Respecting Junior as a person who has feelings goes a long way towards counteracting the dehumanizing beliefs that Roger expressed before.



Junior’s relief and happiness at having earned Roger’s respect gives him the courage to greet Penelope when he sees her a moment later. However, she snubs him and then calls him “the boy who can’t figure out his own name.” Once again, Junior feels ashamed of himself.

Penelope’s comment goes beyond just Junior’s name. His uncertainty over whether to introduce himself as Junior or Arnold—his Indian name or his white name—reflects his struggle to define himself and his sense of being caught between his two communities.



CHAPTER 10 - TEARS OF A CLOWN

Junior remembers that when he was twelve, he fell in love with another popular girl, an Indian girl named Dawn who mostly only spoke to him to make fun of him. From then on, he knew that he would always be “one of those guys who always fell in love with the unreachable, ungettable, and uninterested.”

Junior’s description of his love life could apply just as well to his other aspirations. He’s a dreamer who wants things and people that seem unattainable. His hopes don’t have to be realistic—he’ll care deeply about them no matter what.



One night during a sleepover with Rowdy, Junior confessed his feelings for Dawn. After being silent for a moment, Rowdy declared that Dawn didn’t give a shit about him, which made Junior cry.

In contrast, Rowdy puts a lot of effort into not wanting what he can’t have, and his blunt dismissal of Junior’s confession is another example of the contrast between hope and “bone-crushing reality.”



Junior hates the way he has always cried so easily, whether he is happy or sad or angry: “It’s weak. It’s the opposite of warrior.” In this instance, Rowdy told Junior to stop crying repeatedly and then called him a wimp. However, Rowdy also promised he would never tell anyone Junior had cried “over a dumb girl,” just like he had never told any of Junior’s secrets.

Both Junior and Rowdy believe that in order to be men they can’t cry, and part of their coming of age will involve coming to terms with tears. Even though Rowdy doesn’t seem to support Junior’s confession, the fact that he keeps the secret of both the tears and the “dumb girl” is an important demonstration of trust and caring.



CHAPTER 11 – HALLOWEEN

On Halloween, Junior and Penelope both arrive at school dressed as homeless people—an easy costume for Junior, he notes, since his clothes are in poor condition anyway. They compliment each other's costumes ("You look really homeless," says Penelope) and Penelope says that her costume is a political statement. Instead of trick-or-treating, she will be collecting spare change for charity. Junior offers to help with Penelope's project and goes trick-or-treating for spare change on the rez.

While plenty of people give Junior spare change and candy, and some compliment his bravery in going to the white school, many more of his neighbors slam the door on him and call him names. On his way home, Junior is jumped by a group of guys in Frankenstein masks, who kick him, spit on him, and take his candy and money. He knows that they aren't trying to hurt him too badly, but simply to remind him that he is a traitor.

Although Junior had felt "almost honorable" as a poor kid raising money to help other poor people, the experience makes him feel stupid and naïve, and he knows he would not have been jumped if he had been with Rowdy. He wonders whether one of the guys could have *been* Rowdy, but refuses to believe it.

At school, Junior tells a shocked and concerned Penelope what happened. She sympathizes (even touching his bruises, to Junior's amazement) and promises to put his name on her donation anyway. They share a moment when, as Penelope is walking away, Junior asks her, "It feels good to help people, doesn't it?" Penelope agrees.

Still, Junior and Penelope don't say much to each other. Junior wishes he could ask Rowdy for advice about how to win over a beautiful **white** girl. At the same time, he imagines what Rowdy would say—that he would need to change everything about himself to have a chance.

Penelope and Junior arrive at the same costume from opposite directions. It's a mark of Penelope's privilege that she can choose to dress as a homeless person to collect money for charity. Her well-meaning compliment is ironically insensitive given Junior's poverty, but luckily he doesn't seem to mind.



Besides Rowdy's rejection, this is the first real evidence of the way Junior has been "banished" from the tribe for daring to leave the rez. His attackers' revenge is calculated to be particularly demeaning. It's less about taking away what Junior has than asserting that he is worthless to begin with.



Since poverty only teaches you how to be defeated, the chance to help other people in a worse situation is empowering for Junior. Meanwhile, his trust that Rowdy still wouldn't hurt him shows the strength of their relationship, even while they are practically enemies.



Penelope and Junior's moment of sympathy is another step toward a sense of belonging for Junior, as well as a dream come true. The fact that it happens because they try to help people together fits in well with the message of caring, inclusion, and forgiveness—not just for people's actions, but more broadly for their existing handicaps—expressed by characters like Junior's Grandmother.



Rowdy's hypothetical advice says that Junior can't possibly have a chance with Penelope, because he cannot change who he is and who he is isn't good enough. At this point in the novel, Junior (like Rowdy) has a very static and limited view of his identity and his prospects. Changing himself to achieve his dreams still doesn't seem conceivable. Junior's interpretation of what Rowdy would say also suggests that his close identification with Rowdy may have held him back, since Rowdy doesn't seem to believe in Junior or encourage him at all.



CHAPTER 12 - SLOUCHING TOWARD THANKSGIVING

Over the next few weeks in Reardan, Junior endures what he describes as “the loneliest time of my life,” during which he begins to feel like “the opposite of human.” He describes how each day when he leaves the reservation, he becomes “something less than Indian” on the way to Reardan, and then “something less than less than less than Indian” once he arrives—a characteristically extreme statement that shows how deeply being ignored by the **white** kids affects him.

However, during this time he does learn that he’s smart—smarter than most of the kids in his classes. Once, he is able to correct the geology teacher, Mr. Dodge, with an explanation of how **petrified wood** is formed. Rather than the wood transforming into rock, as Mr. Dodge says, Junior states that rock replaces the wood, with minerals keeping the shape of the tree as it disintegrates.

Furious at being contradicted, Mr. Dodge belittles Junior’s education from the rez, and calls on Gordy, the “class genius,” to explain the truth. When Gordy confirms that Junior’s explanation is correct, Mr. Dodge thanks Gordy instead of Junior for sharing the fact. Junior shrinks back in his chair and remembers “when I used to be a human being ... when people used to think my brain was useful.”

Junior tries to thank Gordy for standing up for him, but Gordy just says that he did it for science. Feeling snubbed, Junior compares himself to a piece of **petrified wood**, waiting “for the rocks to replace my bones and blood.”

Junior takes the bus to the edge of the reservation and hitchhikes home. As he explains in a self-contained cartoon, getting to and from school—twenty-two miles away—is a frequent struggle for him, since his parents often don’t have gas money or the car isn’t running. He is usually able to catch a ride home, but sometimes has to walk.

Junior’s sense of alienation eats away at his identity. If others don’t recognize him as one of them, he feels, then he might as well not exist at all. He’s made it clear that the extreme poverty on the rez is dehumanizing, but isolation is dehumanizing too. Right now it seems like leaving the reservation—and giving up a sense of community in the process—might not have been worth it for Junior.



Junior’s description of the petrified wood is symbolic of his situation, because he feels that the core elements of who he is are being stripped away. Mr. Dodge’s explanation, in contrast, presents a more optimistic but overly simplified view of transformation. Wood can’t just turn into rock, just as Junior can’t simply turn into a white kid.



Here Mr. Dodge displays a not-so-subtle form of racism, which hurts Junior deeply. Junior’s idea of being human—that is, afforded full dignity and respect—includes being “useful”—valued for playing a role (such as “class genius”) in the community. At the very least Junior wants to be recognized as existing.



The fact that Gordy chooses to protect an abstract concept instead of relating to Junior on personal terms doesn’t help Junior’s sense of being less than human. This moment adds another element to the symbolism of petrified wood: not only has a change taken place, but the parts of the wood that once were growing and living are being replaced by cold, dead rock.



Junior’s struggle to get to school is one example of how his poverty causes difficulties that his wealthier white classmates don’t even have to think about.



When he gets home on this day, Junior learns that his sister Mary has married a Flathead Indian and moved to Montana without saying goodbye to anyone. His mom and dad are “absolutely freaked”: they feel that they have now lost two kids to the outside world. Junior is equally surprised—what she’s done, he notes, sounds like something out of a romance novel—but recognizes that his act of bravery in leaving the reservation must have shamed and inspired his sister.

In Mary’s marriage there is an intriguing overlap between dreams, art, and reality, as she’s actually living out a storyline from one of the books she dreamed of writing. This could work to disprove Junior’s belief in the strict divide between reality and dreams. It’s also a very hopeful moment, since it shows that Junior’s choice to leave the reservation can inspire others to do the same—although, as Junior’s parents’ reaction shows, the act of leaving still represents a loss.



Feeling shamed and inspired in turn by Mary’s dramatic act, Junior decides to face up to a confrontation and asks Gordy to be his friend. In their initial conversation, both Gordy and Junior annoy each other—Gordy is impatient and critiques Junior’s language, Junior is frustrated by Gordy’s superior attitude, and Gordy thinks Junior is asking him out rather than simply asking for friendship. However, when Junior points out that they have a lot in common, Gordy also recognizes that both of them are weird, and so the two begin studying together.

Again, “multiplying hope by hope” has positive effects. Mary’s brave and hopeful act inspires Junior to attempt another one. The degree to which Junior and Gordy annoy each other while establishing a friendship is what makes their conversation funny, but it also shows the depth of their characters, and demonstrates—like Junior’s other friendships with Rowdy and Penelope—that very different people can still have a lot in common.



Gordy teaches Junior how to read books: first for the story; then for the words, taking every one seriously; and finally “because really good books and cartoons give you a boner,” or inspire joy. Junior decides to approach not only books, but also the rest of the world with this attitude of curiosity, joy, and respect.

This realization brings Junior closer to achieving his dreams, not only by making him a more dedicated student, but also by helping to break down the divide between the wonderful things he reads about and hopes for and what he sees as being possible in reality.



CHAPTER 13 - MY SISTER SENDS ME AN E-MAIL

Junior receives an enthusiastic email from his sister in which Mary tells Junior about her new home in Montana. The Flathead reservation has more towns and restaurants than the Spokane reservation, making it seem more successful economically. Mary tells Junior that she ordered Indian fry bread like their grandmother’s in a hotel on her honeymoon, and describes her new life as “a dream come true.”

Mary’s letter suggests that reservation life isn’t inherently bad. The Flathead reservation seems to provide more opportunities than the Spokane reservation, making it a hopeful example of what Wellpinit could be like. Mary’s email is quoted directly rather than summarized by Junior, allowing her to construct and communicate—and thereby fulfill—her “dream come true” in her own words.



CHAPTER 14 - THANKSGIVING

Junior enjoys Thanksgiving with his mom, dad, and grandmother, but misses Rowdy because he always used to come over for a pumpkin-pie eating contest with Junior. Junior draws a cartoon of the two of them “like we used to be”—as a pair of superheroes with matching costumes, bumping fists—and brings it to Rowdy’s house.

Junior’s cartoon shows him and Rowdy not only as a team, but also as superheroes. Rowdy isn’t purely an advocate for “bone-crushing reality”—in fact, the friendship in which nothing seemed insurmountable as long as Rowdy and Junior were friends was just another shared dream world, one that Junior gave up for a more practical pursuit of his ambitions.



Rowdy's dad answers the door and says Rowdy isn't home. He looks at Junior's cartoon and calls it "kind of gay," but promises to give it to Rowdy. Junior wants to curse at Rowdy's dad and tell him he thinks he is being courageous in trying to fix their friendship, but refrains from saying anything.

Junior chooses to tolerate Rowdy's dad's comments rather than fight back openly and express his true feelings. This is strategically necessary to make sure Rowdy's dad delivers the message, so in some ways it shows Junior's maturity and judgment, but it is also another example of how "reservation Junior"—the "human target" who never fights back—is still unable to stand up for himself.



As he walks away from the house, Junior sees Rowdy holding the cartoon and watching him sadly from an upstairs window. When Junior waves, Rowdy flips him off, but Junior is happy that at least Rowdy hasn't ripped up his cartoon: it means that Rowdy must still respect him a little.

Junior feels his cartoons are an extension of himself. Rowdy's choice not to take his revenge out on the cartoon suggest that he feels the same way, although he arguably respects the cartoon more than Junior himself, since it shows a dream of Rowdy's as well. Despite the middle finger, this interaction still seems like a sign of respect and caring for Junior—one of the many contradictory aspects of Rowdy and Junior's friendship.



CHAPTER 15 - HUNGER PAINS

One day, when Junior leaves class to use the bathroom, he hears someone vomiting violently in the girls' bathroom next door. Worried that someone is severely ill, Junior knocks on the door and asks if the person is okay, but she yells at him to go away. Even so, for reasons he isn't quite sure of, he decides to wait in the hall for the person to come out so that he'll know she's all right.

Junior's decision to check on the person in the girls' bathroom and then to wait for her even after she's said to go away illustrates two of his key character traits: caring and persistence.



The vomiter turns out to be Penelope, who comes out of the bathroom clearly trying to hide what she's done by chewing a piece of cinnamon gum. When she asks what Junior is looking at, he says he's looking at an anorexic. Penelope says haughtily that she's not anorexic, she's bulimic, and only when she's throwing up—which reminds Junior of the way his dad says he's only an alcoholic when he's drunk.

Penelope, like Junior's dad, is still in denial about her addiction. At the same time, though, their insistence that they don't really have problems is an interesting way of refusing to let those problems define them. Penelope wants to see bulimia as something she does, rather than something she is, as Junior's formulation ("I'm looking at an anorexic") seems to suggest.



Junior reflects that Penelope's purging and his dad's drinking are both forms of addiction—that everyone has pain, and that these two self-destructive acts are both ways of trying to make the pain go away. Remembering what he always tells his dad when he is drunk and depressed, Junior tells Penelope, "Don't give up." Penelope begins to cry and confess how lonely and scared she is, despite being pretty and smart and popular (her mention of these three attributes makes Junior think she has an ego).

Junior's reaction to learning about Penelope's eating disorder (and experiencing his dad's alcoholism) is compassionate and forgiving, and seeing that compassion is what leads Penelope to trust him further. However, it's a mark of Junior's immaturity that he's unable to reconcile Penelope's awareness of her own positive traits with her sense of fear and loneliness. Once again, overcoming this binary way of thinking will be part of Junior's coming of age.



Junior finds all of this sexy, including Penelope's ego and her cinnamon-vomit breath. He understands for the first time why love and lust could make his sister move to Montana for a guy she just met. With Mary's romance novels in mind, he draws a book whose cover illustration shows him kissing the crying Penelope—a scene that feels like the beginning of a romance to Junior, even though the cartoon says it's only "one boy's fantasy."

Over the next few weeks, Junior and Penelope become "the hot item at Reardan High School—not exactly a romantic couple [but] more like friends with potential." Their murkily defined relationship shocks their classmates because while Penelope is popular, Junior is the new kid, a stranger to everyone, and the only Indian in the school. Meanwhile, Penelope's father, Earl, is a racist who declares Penelope is only dating Junior to piss him, Earl, off and that he will disown Penelope if Junior gets her pregnant. Junior suspects Penelope of being bored with her role of perfect, popular girl and really is using him to defy her father, but he admits that his becoming more popular through her makes the relationship beneficial for him too. What's more, he thinks Penelope likes him because he's different from everyone else: "an exciting addition to the Reardan gene pool."

Besides this, talking with Penelope makes Junior realize that they have more important things in common. At first, Junior makes fun of Penelope's "big goofy dreams" and dramatic way of speaking—she says she's so ready to leave her hometown that she was "born with a suitcase" and that she wants to **travel** around the world to see "every single piece of everything." He tells her it's hard to take her seriously when she's talking about things that aren't real.

However, Junior admires Penelope's more specific dream of going to Stanford to study architecture: her desire "to build something beautiful [and] be remembered" matches his own. As an Indian boy and a small-town girl, they aren't expected to dream big or achieve very much, but they both want to go beyond the limitations they were born into.

The humor of this scene comes from another set of overlapping opposites: sexiness and cinnamon-vomit breath. The cartoon is an interesting narrative device—by leaving what happens in the hallway ambiguous, it protects Junior and Penelope's privacy in an intimate moment (of confession or anything else), while also inserting Junior's fantasy into the real-life storyline, blurring the line between Junior's fictional dream world and his reality.



Junior and Penelope, like Junior and Rowdy, have opposite identities within the high school hierarchy. As it turns out, however, their differences complement each other and contribute to the strength of their friendship. Earl explicitly gives voice to racism—it's not only an institutional barrier to Indians' success, but sometimes also an interpersonal hatred. Junior's explanation of why Penelope likes him recalls—and directly contradicts—the advice he once imagined Rowdy giving him, that he'd have to change how he looks and talks and walks to have a chance with her. For the first time, Junior sees his outsider status as an advantage.



Penelope's declaration that she was "born with a suitcase" recalls some of Junior's earlier statements, like that he was "born with water on the brain" and Rowdy was "born mad." This time, however, Junior sees such a reductive self-definition as childish. With his strong sense of real-world practicality (something Penelope lacks, partly because of her relatively privileged background) he also pushes back on the vagueness of her aspirations. Though his dismissal of extreme dreams might seem hypocritical because of his own ambition, he's actually judging Penelope for not dreaming with enough conviction and practicality.



Junior has more respect for Penelope's dream that's a plan of action: Stanford is still aiming high, but it's more within reach than "every single piece of everything." Junior is moving toward a definition of identity that is more about what people do in their lives than the way they were born.



While Junior points out to Penelope that she won't get to travel very far if she doesn't eat enough, he doesn't act very definitively toward helping her overcome her eating disorder, noting, "She was in pain and I loved her, sort of loved her, I guess, so I kind of had to love her pain too." Mostly, he just loves to look at her, and includes a sketch of Penelope wearing Earl's old hat to show how beautiful she is.

Embracing Penelope's pain is another example of forgiveness and acceptance. In some ways, however, Junior's infatuation with Penelope—sexy vomit breath and all—prevents him from fully understanding her as a person who needs help. Meanwhile, drawing Penelope in her racist father's old hat shows Junior's growing understanding of people's complexity. She is beautiful to him even in the context of her father's decidedly ugly views.



CHAPTER 16 - ROWDY GIVES ME ADVICE ABOUT LOVE

One day while watching Penelope at a volleyball game, Junior marvels at how beautiful she is with her pale skin and her **white** uniform: "all white on white on white, like the most perfect kind of vanilla dessert cake you've ever seen."

The color white, to Junior, is a symbol of hope and of impossibility—"like some mythical creature," he says at one point. Here, Penelope's whiteness becomes another symbol of Junior's unattainable hopes.



Junior emails Rowdy to ask what he should do about being in love with a **white** girl, but Rowdy tells him to get a life: "I'm sick of Indian guys who treat white women like bowling trophies."

Penelope's role as an unattainable dream gives weight to Rowdy's comment. Although Penelope has the overarching privilege of her whiteness, it's still dehumanizing and objectifying for her personally when Junior wants her just because of her color, or thinks of her as a symbol rather than a person.



Junior asks Gordy for advice, and Gordy Googles "in love with a **white** girl," finding an article about how the media will focus on the plight of one beautiful white girl while ignoring the suffering of hundreds of other people. Gordy tells Junior this means "you're just a racist asshole like everyone else." Junior thinks that Gordy, in his own way, is just as tough as Rowdy.

Though rational, research-oriented Gordy is very different from hot-tempered Rowdy, the two of them are equally no-nonsense friends to Junior, and arrive at the same conclusion: Junior is placing Penelope on a pedestal. This is partly at least because of her color, which is one way the Indians who accuse him of being a "white-lover" are justified.



CHAPTER 17 - DANCE, DANCE, DANCE

Although Junior's friendships with Gordy and Penelope improve his school experience, he still feels like a stranger both in Reardan and on the reservation: "It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job." People in Reardan assume he has money because there's a casino on the reservation, and so Junior pretends he isn't poor in order to fit in.

Junior feels like an impostor because what people expect of him—acting white, acting Indian, or acting rich—conflicts with who he really is. His Indian identity feels like a job because he has to perform conflicting versions of it for his white classmates, whose understanding of "Indian-ness" is incorrect, and for his tribe, who feel he's already failed some requirements of being Indian.



In December, Junior takes Penelope to the Winter Formal, which is complicated for him because he's been trying to keep the extent of his poverty a secret from her. He has to meet Penelope at the dance (as opposed to picking her up) and shows up wearing his father's old disco suit since he can't afford to buy new formal clothes. Luckily, Penelope likes the suit, and the two of them have a great time.

But Junior again feels nervous when Roger invites them along with his friends to drive into Spokane for pancakes, which Penelope is eager to do. Junior doesn't have money to pay for pancakes, but he can't say no to her. He hopes Earl, who has arrived to pick Penelope up, won't allow Penelope to go. But Roger assures Earl that he will drive Junior and Penelope home, leaving Junior jealous of the way Earl trusts and respects Roger in addition to also being anxious about his lack of money.

Halfway through the meal, Junior is so nervous about how he's going to pay for the pancakes that he goes to the bathroom, worried that he might throw up. Roger comes in and hears him retching, and asks if he's all right. Junior says he's just tired, and the two boys chat for a while, with Roger inviting Junior to try out for the **basketball** team.

Amazed that Roger is being so nice—"he was POLITE! How many great football players are polite?"—Junior decides to confess why he was getting sick. Though he can't bring himself to admit the whole truth, Junior tells Roger he's lost his wallet. Without hesitation, Roger gives Junior forty dollars to cover his and Penelope's food.

After the meal, Junior claims that his dad will pick him up at the school, and so Roger drops him off there and waits in the car while Junior and Penelope get out to say goodbye. Saying that Roger told her he lent Junior some money, Penelope asks Junior outright if he is poor, and Junior confesses the truth. He expects that Penelope will abandon him immediately, but instead, she kisses him on the cheek and promises that she and Roger won't tell anyone and will be his friends.

While poverty again makes something that seems easy and natural for the other students especially difficult for Junior, it doesn't stop him and Penelope from having fun together, proving that their relationship is more important than the difference in their backgrounds.



"Penelope's boyfriend" is another role that Junior feels pressured to play. While his feelings for Penelope are genuine, his sense that Roger "fits" better with Penelope recalls Gordy's and Rowdy's assessment of their relationship. Junior can't help focusing on what he, Penelope, and Roger each represent in the high-school community, rather than who they are as individuals.



Interestingly, this scene parallels the scene in which Junior catches Penelope throwing up. In both cases, an unlikely friend arrives at a humiliating moment and inspires a reluctant confession.



Though they've been cordial since their initial fight, Roger's kindness in response to Junior's partial confession is completely at odds with both his racist joke and Junior's impression of who he should be as a popular athlete. For Junior, it demonstrates that people have complex identities that extend beyond their roles in the social hierarchy.



This is another important moment of confession—just as Penelope has trusted Junior with her eating disorder, Junior is now trusting her with his poverty. Having told Penelope his secret, he can now trust that she likes him because of who he really is.



Under Penelope's persistent questions, Junior also admits that his dad isn't picking him up. Refusing to let Junior hitchhike home, Penelope tells Roger the truth. After that, says Junior, "Roger, being of kind heart and generous pocket, and also a little bit racist, drove me home that night ... and plenty of other nights, too," alleviating some of Junior's transportation problems. Junior is still surprised that Roger is so nice because of the racism Roger displayed when they first met, but reflects that "If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing."

Penelope's and Roger's responses to learning the truth about Junior's poverty teach him the value of an honest confession, and relieve a lot of the pressure he feels to pretend to be someone he's not. Junior learns that not only can many different elements exist in one person's personality—Roger's kindness coexists with his racism—but his friends can also appreciate the complexity of his identity too. What's more, the way Roger and Penelope work together to help Junior shows that he's finally earned a place in their community, and can enjoy the support that comes with it.



CHAPTER 18 - DON'T TRUST YOUR COMPUTER

Missing Rowdy, Junior emails him a photo of his smiling face, and gets a picture of Rowdy's naked butt in return. It makes him laugh, but also makes him depressed, since he misses Rowdy's spontaneity—the Reardan kids are too worried about their futures to do something like that. When Gordy sees, Junior tells him the story of his fight with Rowdy, and explains that the Indians think he's a traitor for leaving the reservation.

Ironically, the photo Rowdy sends as an insult is also a reminder of what Junior loves about him. Since the Reardan kids don't act that way, the cultural differences between Wellpinit and Reardan also come up again, as does another confession—Junior admitting his banishment.



Gordy says that "life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community," and that early humans only survived "because we trusted one another." "Weird people" who didn't conform were ostracized because they were a threat to the strength of the tribe. Both Junior and Gordy are weird people who have been ostracized, and so, Junior declares, they have a tribe of two. He wants to hug Gordy, but Gordy tells him not to get sentimental, causing Junior to reflect that "even the weird boys are afraid of their emotions."

Gordy offers a sociological explanation for why Junior feels like he doesn't belong, and for why his tribe is rejecting him. The "tribe of two" illustrates the important idea—central to Junior's climactic "revelation" at the end of the novel—that just because you can't be part of one "tribe" doesn't mean you don't belong somewhere else. Meanwhile, illustrating the same point, Junior and Gordy still obey the standards of "manliness" that won't let them hug—they may be weird in some respects, but they conform like everyone else in their "tribe" in others.



CHAPTER 19 - MY SISTER SENDS ME A LETTER

In another happy letter, Mary tells Junior that although she hasn't been able to find a job yet, she has begun to write her life story, entitled "How to Run Away From Your House and Find Your Home."

Mary's decision to write her life story means she's finally pursuing her dream of becoming a writer, but it's also a metaphor for her decision to take control of her own life.



Mary encloses a photo of her "gorgeous new place," an aluminum trailer that Junior, who reproduces it in cartoon form, thinks "looks like a TV dinner tray."

In some ways, Mary's happiness seems delusional, as her reality doesn't match her "gorgeous" dream, even though she thinks it does. On the other hand, she's found a lot of joy in a life that doesn't seem very glorious, proving that finding your dream isn't so unattainable after all.



CHAPTER 20 - REINDEER GAMES

Though Junior almost doesn't go to **basketball** tryouts because he's afraid of being humiliated, his dad convinces him to go, saying with uncharacteristic optimism, "You have to dream big to get big."

When Junior arrives at the gym for the first day of practice, he feels short, skinny, and slow, and like all the **white** boys are better than him. When Coach announces that he can only take twenty-four players out of the forty boys who have showed up, Junior is sure that he will be cut, but Coach asks everyone to do their best: if they play with dignity and respect, he will treat them with dignity and respect no matter what.

Coach begins by ordering one hundred laps around the gym—with four players quitting by the end of the drill—and then assigns random pairs for full-court one-on-one. Junior plays against Roger, who easily gets the ball away from him, and then runs him over when Junior tries to block him. Coach asks Junior if he needs a break, but Junior, knowing that he won't make the team if he stops, says he'll take Roger on again.

Though Junior is intimidated by Roger, he figures out how to keep him from stealing the ball, and scores with a jump shot to cheers from everyone in the gym. When their time is up, Roger congratulates Junior with a fist bump, and Junior knows he will make the team. In fact, he makes varsity, and Coach says he's the best shooter who's ever played for him.

Two weeks later, the team travels to Wellpinit for their first game, which happens to be against Junior's old classmates. When the Reardan team arrives outside the gym, they can hear the Indian fans chanting, "Ar-nold sucks!" Coach tells Junior that he doesn't have to play, but Junior says he does. Seeing his mom, dad, and grandmother at the door of the gym and knowing that they have supported him in spite of the tribe's disapproval gives Junior the strength to walk inside.

Junior's dad reinforces the message, voiced by Mr. P and by Junior himself, that Junior must take real, concrete steps—and risks—to succeed.



Though Junior, as always, feels like he doesn't belong—and that he's been placed at a disadvantage—Coach's commitment to treat all the candidates with equal "dignity and respect" reassures him. Metaphorically, this also applies on a much broader social level. Junior is constantly disadvantaged by poverty and racism, but basketball is now one place where he's literally on a level playing field with everyone else.



Junior's persistence in basketball—choosing not to quit when other players do, and going up against Roger even after he's been knocked down—is one of his key character traits, and arguably the one that's most important for achieving his dreams.



Contrary to the expectations he had when he arrived at tryouts, Junior now not only belongs to the team, but excels—and excels on his own, without Rowdy. It's a kind of success he's never seen before, and it's important to developing his individual self-worth. Basketball offers a kind of pure merit-based opportunity that Junior has never experienced before.



The game against Wellpinit puts Junior's two worlds into conflict. He's especially affected by hearing his tribe chant his Reardan name, which shows they now see him as an outsider and not a boy who grew up among them. He realizes again what he's lost in leaving the reservation.



As soon as the team walks in, the gym falls completely silent. The entire tribe turns its back on Junior—all except for Rowdy, who simply looks like he wants to kill him. Both angered and impressed by the show of contempt, Junior thinks that he might not have left if his tribe was this organized in other respects, a thought that makes him laugh.

The tribe turning their backs against Junior is a powerful visual metaphor. The display is revenge for his figuratively turning his back on them. As he often does in difficult situations, Junior sees the ridiculous side of the tribe's show of contempt, and his laughter helps to get him through the moment. Meanwhile, as angry as Rowdy looks, his refusal to turn away shows that he still cares too much about Junior to just ignore him.



Junior's new teammates laugh with him as they make their way to the locker room. Once there, though, Junior starts crying. Coach tells him and the rest of the team that it's natural to cry when you care deeply about something. He tells Junior to turn his pain into anger and use it to help his play.

Junior's conflicted feelings continue, and he reacts by crying, something he's often been ashamed of in the past. Coach gives him an important lesson in how he can not only accept this emotional part of his personality, but also channel it toward his goals—that is, a more adult way of handling his feelings.



As soon as Coach sends Junior into the game, someone in the crowd throws a quarter at him, cutting his forehead and drawing blood so that he can't play. Eugene, who is an EMT for the tribal clinic, comes to take a look. Eugene mentions that he wrecked his motorcycle and regrets that Junior couldn't play that night. Eugene was once a legendary **basketball** player; rumor has it that he was good enough to play on a college team, but couldn't because he couldn't read. Perhaps thinking of Eugene's lost opportunities, Junior asks Eugene to stitch up his cut so that he can rejoin the game. Eugene protests that this might scar Junior's face but agrees in time for the second half.

From the loss of the would-be basketball scholarship that could have gotten him off the rez, to the wreck of the motorcycle that once made the Reardan students respect him and Junior, Eugene's life story illustrates the vicious cycle of lost opportunities on the rez. Though Junior doesn't say that Eugene wrecked the motorcycle while drunk, it's a reasonable assumption given his alcoholism. Junior's intense commitment to all his endeavors, including basketball, is motivated by his desire to escape this cycle.



As soon as Junior rejoins the game, however, Rowdy goes after him. He elbows Junior in the head as he jumps to shoot, giving him a concussion. While Junior, unconscious, is driven to the hospital in Eugene's ambulance, the Reardan players get into a shoving match with the Wellpinit players—and fans—and the **white** referees, afraid of the Indians, begin calling fouls in Wellpinit's favor. Wellpinit ends up winning by thirty points, most of them scored by Rowdy.

Rowdy's attack on Junior is significant, given that he's always made a point not to hurt Junior in the past. For Junior, who until now has only wanted to restore his friendship with Rowdy, the concussion—and the humiliating loss, for which Junior feels responsible—incites a desire for revenge against Rowdy. Meanwhile, even though the game works out in the Indians' favor, the referees' racial prejudice prevents it from being fair.



Late that night, Coach visits Junior in the hospital, apologizing for the way the game turned out and applauding Junior's commitment with a Vince Lombardi quote. Since Junior needs to stay awake to monitor his concussion, they stay up all night talking, but Junior doesn't retell any of the stories; that night, he says, belongs just to him and his coach.

As Coach points out, Junior's commitment to his goals is one of his defining character traits. The omission of Coach's stories is a reminder that Junior is "writing" or mediating the narrative, and his choice to keep them private suggests a confessional element. Of all the moments in the novel when characters build trust by sharing their secrets, this may be the most important, since the secrets remain completely preserved.



CHAPTER 21 - AND A PARTRIDGE IN A PEAR TREE

When Christmas Eve comes, Junior's family doesn't have enough money for presents. Junior's dad is so depressed that—as he always does when there isn't enough money—he takes the money they do have and runs away for a week to get drunk.

When Dad gets home, he does nothing but lie on his bed. He tells Junior he's sorry about Christmas, and Junior says it's okay, though it isn't. He wonders why he is "protecting the feelings of the man who had broken my heart yet again."

Dad tells Junior he got him something and tells him to look inside one of his boots. It turns out to be a wrinkled, damp five-dollar bill, which smells "like booze and fear and failure." Realizing that his dad must have really wanted to spend the money on more alcohol, Junior recognizes the saved bill as "a beautiful and ugly thing." He wishes his dad a merry Christmas and kisses him on the cheek, even though he's already asleep.

Dad's reaction is sadly ironic and counterproductive, but it's also another example of the vicious cycle his family is trapped in. Poverty leads to depression, which leads to alcoholism, which leads to more poverty.



Junior expresses his love for his father by forgiving him even though he doesn't deserve it. In this way, Dad's alcoholism reverses the usual dynamic between father and son, demanding that Junior act like an adult before he's necessarily ready.



The five-dollar bill is both beautiful and ugly because it shows Dad's deep love for Junior and also his inability to adequately care for him. It's a nearly meaningless item, yet a meaningful gesture. In a similar way, Junior's kiss and "Merry Christmas" is a poignant message of love and forgiveness, even though his dad isn't awake to receive it.



CHAPTER 22 - RED VERSUS WHITE

To make clear that he hasn't fallen in love with **white** people and still sees good in Indians, Junior compares his family to the families of his white classmates. He loves Mary and his mom and dad and grandmother. In spite of their flaws, he believes his mom and dad are good parents because they make sacrifices for him, care about him, talk to him, and listen to him—whereas many of his white classmates' fathers ignore them.

Another big difference between Wellpinit and Reardan is that on the reservation everyone knows and cares about each other, while in Reardan people can be strangers to each other even though it's a very small town. Junior is realistic about the drawbacks of both towns, but believes after careful thought that it's still better to live in Reardan than in Wellpinit.

Junior's conscientiousness about representing whites and Indians fairly shows how his understanding of the world has broadened. Not only does he recognize that his different communities have their pros and cons, he also is beginning to see himself as a full member to both of them, with an insider's understanding.



Junior considers the complex pros and cons of both Wellpinit and Reardan, and decides that the close-knit tribal community doesn't quite make up for the economic and social disadvantages Wellpinit has compared to Reardan. It's important to Junior that this selection of where it's "better" to live is based on reason, not emotion. Despite his conflicted feelings about leaving the reservation, the practical realities seem to make it a necessity.



Junior thinks the best thing about Reardan is Penelope—as well as Gordy, maybe—and the best thing about Wellpinit was his grandmother. He thinks his grandmother’s greatest gift was her tolerance, an “old-time Indian spirit” of forgiving and celebrating people’s differences that has been lost “since white people showed up and brought along their Christianity and fears of eccentricity.”

While Grandmother embodies the Indian spirit of tolerance, Penelope and Gordy also represent tolerance for Junior: Penelope because she doesn’t care that Junior is poor, and Gordy because he accepts and appreciates Junior’s weirdness. Thus, to Junior, the best aspect of any community is the people who are willing to open that community to others. In stating that Indians lost their tolerance because of whites, he also points out a “contagious” aspect of prejudice that’s similar to the self-perpetuating tendencies of poverty and alcoholism noted elsewhere in the novel.



Grandmother was always open-minded, loved meeting new people, and was famous at powwows simply for being loved by everyone she met—and, as Junior abruptly reveals, she was killed shortly after the holidays when she was hit by a drunk driver while walking home from a powwow.

The long lead-up to Grandmother’s death—including a detailed description of her most lovable qualities—makes the abrupt revelation especially surprising and affecting, and underscores the suddenness and randomness of her death.



The surgeon who works on Grandmother when she is brought to the emergency room tells Junior’s family that her last words were “Forgive him,” referring to Gerald, the drunk driver who hit her with his car. When the cops find Gerald, Junior’s family feels ready to kill him, but they honor his grandmother’s wishes and let Gerald be sentenced to prison. Gerald serves eighteen months, and moves to a reservation in California when he gets out.

Grandmother’s last words have a powerful impact. Much as Junior’s family might like to seek revenge, doing so would probably cause additional pain for them and for Gerald’s loved ones. Instead, Gerald is able to leave the rez and start a new life, in which he could potentially sober up and do something to atone for the accident. It’s like Mr. P forgiving Junior for throwing the book, but on a much larger scale.



To Junior, the fact that his grandmother was killed by a drunk driver is especially ironic because although many Indians die because of alcohol, she never drank alcohol in her life, which makes her, according to Junior, “the rarest kind of Indian in the world.” She used to explain that she didn’t want to be in the world “if I couldn’t touch the world with all of my senses intact.”

The manner of Grandmother’s death reflects that alcohol abuse doesn’t just affect alcoholics—it can also hurt innocent bystanders. Meanwhile, Grandmother’s philosophy of life is reminiscent of Gordy’s (and Junior’s) beliefs about books. They both want to experience things in full detail, whether they’re real or imaginary.



CHAPTER 23 – WAKE

When Grandmother’s wake is held three days later, almost two thousand Indians attend. Out of respect for Junior’s and his family’s grief, they stop tormenting him for being a traitor, an act of kindness for which Junior is grateful. Even Rowdy just stands far away, and Junior says “he would always be my best friend, no matter how much he hated me.”

It’s true to Grandmother’s spirit of forgiveness that the Indians choose to forgive Junior—at least temporarily—during her wake. Junior once again declares that his friendship with Rowdy transcends their fight. In the same way, his tribe will always be his tribe no matter how much it rejects him, and his grandmother will always be his grandmother even after her death.



So many people have come to the funeral to tell stories and say goodbye that the coffin has to be moved onto the football field—a “crazy and fun and sad” send-off that Junior knows Grandmother would have loved.

One of the guests is a white billionaire named Ted, whom the Indians recognize as being “famous for being filthy rich and really weird.” To everyone’s exasperation, Ted begins his story by saying how much he loves Indians and their culture. He goes on to tell the story of buying what he knew was a stolen powwow outfit and feeling guilty for years about keeping it. While Junior wonders why Ted has chosen his grandmother’s funeral for this confession, Ted explains that he learned from an anthropologist that the outfit was Spokane and belonged to a woman named Grandmother Spirit. Ted has now arrived to return the powwow outfit to her children.

Junior’s mother rises to accept Ted’s apology and explains that there’s nothing to forgive: her mother wasn’t a powwow dancer, and the outfit is clearly not of Spokane design. As a humiliated Ted packs up and hurries away, first Junior’s mother and then all two thousand of the funeral guests begin to laugh.

Junior, realizing that “when it comes to death, [Indians] know that laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing,” sees the laughter as a “glorious” expression of community. “Each funeral was a funeral for all of us,” he writes. “We lived and died together. ... And all of us laughed as we walked and drove and rode our way back to our lonely, lonely houses.”

CHAPTER 24 - VALENTINE HEART

Junior begins his next chapter with the following sentence: “A few days after I gave Penelope a homemade Valentine (and she said she forgot it was Valentine’s Day), my dad’s best friend, Eugene, was shot in the face in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven in Spokane.”

As the mix of sadness and fun at Grandmother’s funeral shows, things never have just one meaning. Junior is especially adept at recognizing the emotional complexity of different situations—things are hardly ever just sad, but often have a funny side too.



Ted’s patronizing “love” for Indian culture is very different from Grandmother’s open-hearted love for everyone she meets, or from Junior’s love for his white friends. Rather than accepting people for whoever they might be, Ted loves a generalized, reductive idea of what he thinks Indians are like, as illustrated by his ignorance about powwow outfit. The fact that he co-opts a funeral for his confession doesn’t help his case. He seems to want public recognition more than he wants any kind of absolution.



Though Ted’s attempt at confession fails when Junior’s mom exposes his ignorance, the crowd at the funeral experiences a catharsis similar to forgiveness through their laughter, finding joy and humor in spite of their loss.



Closing the chapter with “our lonely, lonely houses,” Junior raises the important point that people can be isolated even when they are part of a community—in fact, individual loneliness can be the defining feature of a group. Since loss—of land, language, culture, and loved ones—is for Junior one of the defining features of being Indian, it makes sense that he feels most connected to his tribe at a time like this.



Unlike the long preface to Grandmother’s death, the news of Eugene’s death is shockingly upfront. The contrast between this bluntly stated, horrifying news and the much more trivial, juvenile problems that preoccupied Junior just days before highlights the extreme differences between Junior’s lives in Reardan and Wellpinit.



Eugene was shot by his good friend Bobby during a drunken argument, which the police think was over the last drink from a bottle of wine. Though Bobby does not at first realize what he has done, he is later so overcome with guilt that he hangs himself in his jail cell, before Eugene's loved ones even have a chance to forgive him.

Eugene's death turns out to be another violent, senseless result of alcohol abuse, and Bobby's suicide compounds the tragedy. Junior implies that forgiving Bobby might have made things better by providing some closure for Eugene's loved ones and some marginal relief for Bobby.



In grief, Junior's Dad goes on a drinking binge, Mom goes to church every day, and Junior draws and draws cartoons that mock God and Jesus as he feels they are mocking him.

Recalling Junior's earlier observation that we all have pain and try to make it go away, each member of Junior's family has a different coping mechanism. Junior's grief, unlike Dad's drinking, finds its outlet through creativity. Angry though his cartoons may be, he's still channeling his feelings into art, just as Coach told him to turn his pain and anger into a passion that could help him win at basketball.



From Gordy, Junior gets a book with what seems like a good definition of his grief: Euripides' [Medea](#), which includes the line, "What greater grief than the loss of one's native land?" Junior feels this applies perfectly to Indians, who as a group have lost everything, and identifies with Medea's sense that the world is completely joyless. Depressed, Junior worries that his departure from the reservation may have cursed his family.

Not only do Medea's words apply to Indians as a group, but they also apply to Junior, who made a decision to leave his native land before Grandmother and Eugene died. Like death, exile means leaving behind the people and places you knew and loved, but unlike death you have to experience the loss yourself. Junior left voluntarily, which makes him feel personally responsible for the deaths, as if his loved ones are being taken away because he abandoned them.



After missing close to twenty days of school because of wakes, funerals, and his own and his parents' depression, Junior goes back to class. His social studies teacher, Mrs. Jeremy, makes a mocking comment about his absences—shocking his classmates, who know what his family has been going through.

It's probably more racism that leads Mrs. Jeremy to assume that Junior's absences are the result of his own negligence, rather than circumstances beyond his control. In any case, her reaction shows a failure of forgiveness and compassion.



To show his support for Junior, Gordy stands and drops his textbook, leading the rest of the class to do the same. The **white** students then walk out—leaving Junior alone with Mrs. Jeremy. Junior laughs at the absurdity of being left behind.

Junior's white classmates' show of support demonstrates how fully they have accepted him—and yet they still act as a unit, leaving him behind. As usual, this element of humor undercuts the seriousness of the scene.



Junior tells Mrs. Jeremy that he used to think the world was broken down into tribes such as black, Indian, and white. Now, however, he knows that “the world is only broken into two tribes: The people who are assholes and the people who are not.” He walks out of the classroom feeling hope, and a little bit of joy.

Junior is basically saying that he now believes people are defined and grouped by the way they act, not by the way they're born. This change in Junior's point of view is part of his coming of age, and marks his transition to an understanding of identity that transcends race. Meanwhile, the feeling that he's been accepted into his classmates' "tribe" and that their support will outweigh the "assholes" gives him a sense of hope.



To make it through the many deaths and changes in his life, Junior makes a “grieving ceremony” out of writing lists of all the things that give him joy, as well as drawing the things that make him angry, over and over.

Again Junior chooses creative, forward-looking ways of dealing with his pain. The association between grief and creativity provides another connection between hope and loss.



CHAPTER 25 - IN LIKE A LION

As **basketball** season continues, Junior's shooting makes him an unexpected star on Reardan's basketball team. The high expectations and encouragement he gets from Coach and from his teammates drive him to become even better, and though he's still too much of an outsider to be compared to great Reardan players of the past like his teammates sometimes are, he starts to wonder whether he could build his own legacy.

Junior's status in Reardan is different from anything he's experienced as a "freak" in Wellpinit. He learns that here not only do others' expectations help define what a person can accomplish, but they also help define what he can hope for.



Meanwhile, Rowdy has led his own team to an undefeated record, and as the rematch between Wellpinit and Reardan (this time in the Reardan gym) approaches, he and Junior are the players to watch—Rowdy because of his skill, and Junior because he will be playing against his hometown.

Despite their opposite personalities, Junior and Rowdy have been on parallel paths since birth, and their basketball success is no different. The rematch will pit them against one another, providing another opportunity for revenge and forcing their parallel paths to collide at last.



A local news crew interviews Junior, who finds it difficult to say he feels anything other than “weird” until he admits that Rowdy used to be his best friend and that he, Junior, wants to use this game to get revenge. He tells the news crew that he needs to prove to Reardan, Wellpinit, and himself that he is stronger than everyone else and will never give up, in **basketball** or in life.

Interestingly, besides expressing his dedication to his dreams and his desire for revenge, Junior describes a need to be not just strong, but stronger than everyone else—singling himself out from the group. Junior might want to be part of a community, but he doesn't want to just blend in.



Coach assigns Junior—the team's “secret weapon”—to guard Rowdy throughout the game. Junior isn't sure he can do it, but Coach tells him he can—which reminds Junior of Eugene, a happy drunk who used to shout “Junior, you can do it!” from the stands during any game Junior ever played. Though Junior feels haunted by the ghosts of his loved ones, when Coach repeats the phrase “you can do it”—“the four hugest words in the world”—Junior feels empowered.

Eugene had such a tragic, hopeless life that his optimism is painfully ironic. Still, his words are powerful, especially when repeated by Coach. With Eugene's ghostly voice in his head and Coach's hopeful one in his ear, it's as if Junior's past and his future converge at this climactic moment, spurring him on to act.



When the two teams take the court, the Reardan crowd boos Wellpinit. Rowdy and Junior send each other “serious hate signals” across the gym, Junior noting that “you have to love somebody that much to also hate them that much, too.” As they face off, Rowdy tells Junior he can’t stop him—Rowdy has been kicking his ass for fourteen years. Junior replies that tonight is his night.

When Rowdy goes to dunk the ball and humiliate Reardan on the opening play, Junior jumps just ahead of him, rises above him, and steals the ball out of his hands. He then runs across the court for a three-pointer, humiliating Rowdy and deciding the fate of the game. The crowd is amazed—Junior’s mom faints, and his dad hugs and kisses the **white** guy next to him even though they don’t know each other.

Ultimately, Reardan beats Wellpinit by forty points, with Junior holding Rowdy to only four. But Junior’s joy at the victory immediately turns to shame when he realizes that even though Wellpinit’s team was recognized as the more talented, Reardan had huge advantages; Junior’s former Wellpinit classmates were playing with alcoholic parents, no food in the house, and no chance at a college education. Junior feels that he needs to apologize to his tribe and has broken his best friend’s heart.

The Wellpinit team never recovers from the crushing loss. The Reardan team wins all the way to the playoffs, but ultimately gets what Junior sees as cosmic comeuppance in a loss that leaves them all crying for hours in the locker room. Junior speculates that this may be the only time when men and boys can cry without getting punched in the face.

CHAPTER 26 - ROWDY AND I HAVE A LONG AND SERIOUS DISCUSSION ABOUT BASKETBALL

After **basketball** season ends, Junior emails Rowdy an apology for what happened at the game, and Rowdy sends back a promise that Wellpinit will destroy Reardan next time. They exchange what “might just sound like a series of homophobic insults, but ... was also a little bit friendly,” which makes Junior happy.

For Junior and Rowdy, love and hate are similar things because both show mean an intense kind of caring. Their strong bond also includes a rigid power dynamic, however, which Junior has to break in order to grow up and define himself separately from Rowdy. Even when Rowdy loved and protected Junior, he insisted on keeping him down.



Junior breaks the lifelong hold that Rowdy has had over him by literally rising above him on the basketball court. Not only does Junior’s amazing play give him the respect and admiration he’s hardly dared to dream of, it also brings the crowd together in a way that transcends class and race—whites and Indians alike are equally awestruck.



In some ways, Junior has been seeing basketball as a true meritocracy, separate from the unfair outside world—the one place where he can hold his own against the white kids and excel on just his own strength and talent. Now that he’s on top, however, his perspective suddenly changes, and he realizes that basketball doesn’t exist in a vacuum. He also sees that his quest for revenge against Rowdy has led him to grow so far apart from his tribe that he’s become one of the powerful people trying to beat them when they’re down—a total transformation from his formerly bullied character, and not a good one.



In accordance with the theme of complementary opposites—laughter and tears, love and hate—Junior believes very strongly in balance, which is also a more positive way of saying revenge. Much as he hates to lose, he thinks his team deserves it for what they did to Rowdy’s team. The locker-room tears, which Junior deems okay because they are related to a sport, are another small addition to Junior’s developing understanding of masculinity.



Junior and Rowdy’s battle for vengeance is now basically resolved. Though Rowdy doesn’t explicitly forgive Junior, their back-and-forth exchange—rather than another one-sided attempt from Junior to reach out—restores a kind of balance between them.



CHAPTER 27 - BECAUSE RUSSIAN GUYS ARE NOT ALWAYS GENIUSES

Junior decides that the biggest difference between Indians and **white** people is the number of deaths they experience; he's been to forty-two funerals in his short life, while none of his white friends have been to more than five. He also disagrees with the Tolstoy quote he gets from Gordy about unhappy families, since "all Indian families are unhappy for the same exact reason: the fucking booze."

Junior's bitterness comes from the news he has just heard: one morning, Reardan's guidance counselor, Miss Warren, comes to pull him out of class. When he asks what's going on, she starts crying and pulls Junior into a hug, which gives him an embarrassing erection just before she tells him that his sister Mary has died.

With no experience counseling a student whose sibling has died, Miss Warren doesn't know what to say to Junior and asks him to wait in her office for his father. Junior runs outside away from her, into the snow. As he waits, he becomes terrified that his dad will get into a car crash and die too on his way to the school. He is so relieved to see his father arrive that he begins laughing hysterically and can't stop until they reach the reservation border.

Junior's dad explains that Mary and her husband had a big party in their trailer and passed out drunk in the back bedroom. While they were asleep, a curtain caught fire on a hot plate that had been left on, burning down the trailer before Mary even woke up.

Dad tries to comfort Junior by telling him that Mary was too drunk to feel any pain, but Junior finds this thought so far from comforting that he starts laughing again. He laughs so hard that he throws up a little in his mouth and, oddly, spits out a small piece of cantaloupe—a food Mary loved, that Junior never eats. It makes Junior laugh even harder, and he doesn't stop until he suddenly falls asleep.

Junior dreams about how, when he was seven, he ate a bunch of cantaloupe at a school picnic and was stung in the face by a wasp that was sucking the cantaloupe juice off his cheek. He wakes up just as the car is pulling up at the house and tells his dad about the dream. Junior's father remembers how scared the family was: they had to take Junior to the hospital, and Junior thought he was going to die.

The widespread poverty and alcoholism in Junior's tribe means he has a much more personal understanding of death, loss, and sorrow than his white friends do, and in this way has been forced to grow up much more quickly. Just as he rejects the idea that poverty can teach you strength, Junior rejects the idea that there's anything special or romantic about unhappiness. It de-individualizes and dehumanizes people just as poverty does.



Junior calls attention to his own control of the narrative in the way he points out his own bitterness and then explains where it comes from. His erection is another example of incongruous humor that makes a tragic scene more complicated, and thus more realistic and affecting.



Junior's strongest feelings are always linked closely to their opposites, like his simultaneous love and hatred for Rowdy. Here, his intense grief that Mary is dead is mingled with intense relief that his father isn't, and the tragedy of her loss is almost balanced by the joy of Dad's arrival.



Like Grandmother and Eugene, Mary dies accidentally, and indirectly because of alcohol abuse. The preventable nature of all of these deaths makes them even more painful for Junior.



Though he often cries about things he feels strongly about, Junior seems to laugh at the moments when he feels the strongest. This might be because he doesn't want to believe Mary's death is real or anything more than a cruel joke, or that the laughter is a kind of catharsis and release of tension.



Junior falls asleep and begins to dream because reality is too much to handle. His dream, however, is somewhat parallel to reality, both because of the fear of death and because it involves a sweet and happy experience abruptly turned painful—just as Mary's joyous, hopeful new life was suddenly cut short.



Junior's dad begins to cry, and can't stop even though he is trying. Junior guesses, to be strong in front of his son. Junior doesn't cry; instead, he wipes his father's tears away. Junior and his dad say "I love you" to each other, something they rarely do.

When Dad and Junior walk inside, the house is full of family. Junior's mom pulls him into her lap and tells him never to leave her. Then she slaps him, making him promise never to drink. After that, she holds on to him for hours, crying, until all the cousins leave and Junior's dad goes into his bedroom. Junior hopes to fall asleep again, thinking "any nightmare would be better than my reality," but his mother falls asleep first.

Mary's funeral is held two days later. Junior feels like he is living in a fog—or, more accurately, a tiny, freezing room with greasy glass walls that he can't see through—until the sighing sound of the coffin being lowered into the ground makes Junior panic and run into the woods.

He runs straight into Rowdy, who has been hiding there to watch the burial, sending both of them sprawling. As they sit up, Junior realizes that for the first time in their friendship, Rowdy is crying, but Junior is not. When Junior comments on it, Rowdy tries to punch him and misses, which makes Junior laugh again and makes Rowdy cry harder.

Junior can't stop laughing even though he wants to, and realizes that Rowdy thinks he is laughing at him. He does stop, though, when Rowdy accuses him of killing Mary: she is dead because Junior left. As Junior realizes that he might be right—Mary wouldn't even have left the rez if Junior hadn't done it first—Rowdy screams that he hates him and runs away, another thing Junior has never seen him do. Junior wonders if he will ever see Rowdy again.

The next day, Junior can't bear to stay in his house, where he won't be able to stop thinking that he killed his sister and where his extended family will commemorate Mary's life by getting "drunk and unhappy." He would like to be there for a sober ceremony, but knows that once again everyone will be "drunk and unhappy in the same exact way."

Seeing Dad cry represents another role reversal for Junior and his father. This time, though—unlike with Dad's alcoholism—it brings them closer together. It's an important coming-of-age moment for Junior, since he and his dad approach each other as equals and Dad draws on Junior's strength.



Junior's mom also sees alcohol as the cause of Mary's death. Junior has often drawn a distinction between his hopeful dreams for the future and his grim reality, and now he hopes for literal dreams as a means of escape—a dynamic that in some ways recalls an addict turning to drugs or alcohol.



Grief and loss continue to make Junior feel like he is living in an unreal, horrifying place. Dreams and loss seem to be directly connected—as when Junior's desire to leave the reservation caused the loss of his tribe and his home, while losing loved ones causes nightmares and nightmarish sensations for him.



This role reversal suggests that Junior and Rowdy, after being separated from each other and from the roles they always used to play, have actually grown as people, or at least learned to express different parts of their personalities.



Rowdy's accusation brings the connection between dreams and loss full circle—Mary's death is an indirect result of Junior pursuing his dreams. For Junior, who believes that the universe will take revenge on him if he's done something wrong, this could easily be enough to convince him he never should have left the reservation.



Junior's strong reaction against the traditional ways of mourning Mary's death—besides being another example of his disapproval for alcohol abuse—shows that he's already become somewhat separate from reservation culture. Before he went to Reardan, he might not have liked the drunken wake, but he wouldn't have felt he had any other options but to attend.



Instead, Junior goes to school, where his white friends, including Penelope, offer their concern and sympathy. He is surprised, and touched, to find that he matters to them now, just as they matter to him. Still, he has no idea “what ... you say to people when they ask you how it feels to lose everything.”

The fact that Junior willingly turns to his white classmates for comfort, and that they willingly offer it, shows that both he and they finally consider him a full member of the community. It's a hopeful moment that emerges from a time of terrible loss.



CHAPTER 28 - MY FINAL FRESHMAN YEAR REPORT CARD

At the end of the school year, Junior goes to the cemetery with his mom and dad to clean the graves of Grandmother Spirit, Eugene, and Mary. They make it a day of celebration, with a picnic and Dad's saxophone. Junior's parents kiss and hold hands, the family hugs, and Junior's mom says she is proud of him. Junior reflects that “in the middle of a crazy and drunk life, you have to hang on to the good and sober moments tightly.”

Just like they do at Grandmother's funeral, Junior's family finds a way to make their visit to the cemetery a joyous occasion. The scene illustrates the close family relationships that have supported Junior throughout his difficult year and will likely continue to anchor him to his tribe, even after he leaves the reservation.



Thinking of how Mary died while attempting to find her dreams—and how he is making the same attempt, even if it kills him too—Junior begins to cry for his sister, himself, and his tribe. He wishes everyone could “get strong and get sober and get the hell off the rez,” but knows he is the only one “brave and crazy enough ... with enough arrogance.”

Despite his past experiences with bullying and his low self-esteem at the beginning of the novel, Junior has a strong belief in his own exceptionalism. This might be partly a result of his being an outsider—after a long time feeling like “the only one” in various contexts, he's learned to take pride in his differences and use them to his advantage.



In the midst of his tears, Junior has a huge realization: that he will never drink and never kill himself, but will leave the reservation and make a better life for himself; that this will make him lonely, but that he will not be alone in his loneliness; that he is a member of many “tribes” in addition to being a Spokane Indian, such as the tribe of cartoonists and the tribe of poverty and the tribe of chronic masturbators; and that all this means that he is going to be okay.

Junior's revelation begins and ends with the idea that he's in control of his own life: he won't drink and he won't kill himself, because he can choose not to. He also realizes that he can form a connection with others based on almost anything—in other words, he'll never not belong to a tribe—and that membership in one “tribe” doesn't negate his membership in another. This is a significant change from the beginning of the book, when he believed he was weak and powerless and had a very black-and-white view of the world. This climactic moment marks Junior's true coming-of-age, as he is now ready to make his own way in the world and has the maturity to navigate its complexities.



However, it also makes Junior think of people who are not going to be okay—including Rowdy, whom he desperately misses and wants to beg for forgiveness for leaving. He includes a sketch of him and Rowdy in third grade, holding hands (“Boys can hold hands until they turn nine”) as they jump into Turtle Lake.

One of the hardest parts of growing up for Junior is leaving Rowdy behind, both in the literal sense—that Rowdy is at greater risk from the violence and deprivations of life on the rez—and in the figurative sense—that Rowdy was part of his childhood, and now Junior has left childhood behind. It’s to illustrate this second sense of “leaving” that Junior includes the sketch of himself and Rowdy jumping into Turtle Lake. In the sketch, they’re on the cusp of a big leap, just as they’re now on the cusp of adulthood, but (as their clasped hands show) they haven’t yet passed the point where they can’t take that leap together.



CHAPTER 29 - TALKING ABOUT TURTLES

Junior thinks about the beauty of the reservation, particularly the many tall, beautiful pine trees that are hundreds of years old. When he and Rowdy were ten, they climbed one of the tallest—the 150-foot “monster” by Turtle Lake. On that day, Junior remembers, they weren’t afraid of falling, even though they probably should have been and Junior is usually terrified of it.

For most of the novel, Junior’s narration has been fast-paced, sarcastic, and focused on action, and so this quiet moment of introspection is a significant shift in tone. It freezes the present-day narrative in place and leaps back into the past—a psychologically appropriate move, given that Junior is now preparing to leave that past behind. Junior’s memory also involves some parallels to his current situation, as the tree then, like adulthood now, was a seemingly insurmountable challenge that he wasn’t afraid to face.



That July, when Junior is ten, it is “crazy hot and dry,” and he and Rowdy spend a lot of time hanging out in the basement. They talk about what they would do if they were rich and famous and had air conditioning, and Junior tries to build up Rowdy’s confidence about the possibility of a pro **basketball** career, since “Rowdy didn’t believe in himself.” One day, they decide to go swimming in Turtle Lake, a volcanic crater so deep that no one has ever been to the bottom even in a submarine.

This flashback reveals that Junior was a much more supportive friend to Rowdy than Rowdy has been to him, but it also illustrates the private discussions of dreams that Junior had identified as a hallmark of their friendship. It speaks to the boys’ poverty (and thus to the obstacles against their dreams) that they imagine air conditioning, something many people take for granted, as the height of luxury.



Junior is afraid of the lake, not only because of its depth but also because of the legends surrounding it, such as the story of Stupid Horse. According to Junior’s dad, the horse (so named because it was so stupid) drowned in the lake one day, disappeared, and washed up a few weeks later on the shores of another lake, ten miles away. The body was burned, but a few weeks after that, Turtle Lake suddenly caught on fire—and the body of Stupid Horse appeared on the shore again, unburned. Junior doesn’t think anyone should swim in Turtle Lake after that, but “people forget. They forget good things and they forget bad things. They forget that lakes can catch on fire.”

The story of Stupid Horse is an odd, isolated episode, yet it also works as an important metaphor. The horse, like Junior, is incredibly persistent: it keeps coming back no matter what is done to obliterate it (and it’s in keeping with the novel’s sense of humor that this hopeful message is delivered by such a silly figure as Stupid Horse). As for the forgetfulness Junior rants about, he’s complained elsewhere in the novel about a lack of cultural memory—like Indians’ willingness to stay on reservations despite the fact that reservations were created as death camps—but in this case there’s a hopeful, redemptive element to the forgetting as well. The lake, like the horse, can always start over again, no matter what.



Since Junior doesn't want to tell Rowdy he's scared, they walk the five miles from Junior's house to Turtle Lake. When Junior admires the monster tree, Rowdy suggests that they climb it—which, according to the rules of their friendship, means they must.

They make it to a spot within ten feet of the top, from which they see the whole reservation—their entire world. In Junior's words, "our entire world, at that moment, was green and golden and perfect." Even Rowdy says it's pretty—the only time Junior's heard him talk like that. Junior thinks they could stay up there until they died, but after a while Rowdy breaks the spell by farting, and they climb back down.

Looking back, Junior can hardly believe that he and Rowdy climbed that tree. He then says that he also can hardly believe that he survived his first year at Reardan.

Junior spends the first part of summer reading comics and missing his **white** friends—Penelope, whom he's written three love letters although she hasn't written one in return yet; Gordy, who wants to come to the rez and stay with Junior for a week or two; and Roger, who has willed Junior his **basketball** uniform and told him he's going to be a star.

One day, Junior hears a knock on his front door, and Rowdy walks in, saying that he still hates Junior, but he's bored and wants to play some **basketball**. Junior considers trying to make Rowdy apologize for the way he's acted, but decides that he is never going to change.

After they shoot hoops for a while without talking, Rowdy suggests they play one-on-one. Rowdy adds that Junior has never beaten him in one-on-one, but Junior tells him that's going to change someday.

This is an example of Rowdy being a positive influence, and pushing Junior to face his fears and leave his comfort zone. In fact, the bravery that enables Junior to leave the reservation probably has a lot to do with what he's learned from Rowdy, though neither of the boys would know it.



The moment Junior and Rowdy share in the tree is a moment outside of time. In reaching the top, they've just achieved a big dream of theirs, and for a while they don't need to worry about having to grow up or what the future might bring for each of them.



Junior draws a clear analogy between climbing the tree and going to Reardan. Both were risky, frightening challenges that he hardly dared dream of completing, but he ultimately succeeded at both.



Though they're now Junior's friends, the white kids retain many of their associations with hope, as Roger has an eye toward Junior's future as a star, and Penelope remains unattainable. Junior's friendship with Gordy, though, is more of an equal give-and-take. Having welcomed Junior into his world of books, Gordy now wants to see Junior's world too.



After all the changes Junior has gone through in the past year, it's surprising to hear him dismiss the possibility that Rowdy could ever change. On the other hand, though, his choice to forgive Rowdy after their long battle for revenge shows he still deeply cares about his friend.



This exchange between Rowdy and Junior recalls their exchange on the basketball court—Rowdy reminds Junior of the past and how their relationship has always been, and Junior reminds him of the future and how people can change.



Rowdy passes Junior the ball, and before he begins to play, Junior asks Rowdy once again to come to Reardan with him, stating that a lot has changed since the last time he asked. Rowdy looks like he's going to cry, but says instead that he was reading a book about how Indians used to be nomadic. He doesn't think Indians are nomadic anymore—except for Junior, who he always knew was going to leave.

Rowdy says he had a dream about Junior a few months before. Junior was standing on the Great Wall of China, looking happy, and Rowdy was happy for him. He tells Junior, "You're an old-time nomad ... You're going to keep moving all over the world in search of food and water and grazing land. That's pretty cool."

Hearing Rowdy say that he is happy for him makes Junior begin to cry. He feels he will always love and miss Rowdy, just as he will always miss his grandmother, Mary, Eugene, his reservation, and his tribe. He hopes and prays that they will one day forgive him for leaving them—and that he will one day be able to forgive himself.

When Rowdy tells Junior to stop crying, Junior asks if they will still know each other when they are old. Rowdy responds, "Who knows anything?" and throws him the ball. They play one-on-one for hours, until dark, without keeping score.

Junior and Rowdy finally address the fight they've been having throughout the novel, and Rowdy acknowledges that he's come to terms with Junior's decision to leave. The moment is bittersweet, however, since Rowdy makes clear that he believes he and Junior are destined for different things.



Comparing Junior to an "old-time nomad" puts Junior's guilt and fears about being labeled a "white-lover" to rest. Rowdy is suggesting there is something essentially "Indian" about the desire to seek a better life, and that Junior embodies that. Rowdy's literal dream about Junior traveling far away to fulfill his metaphorical dreams shows how deeply the boys still identify with and care about each other, even though (as the image of the wall suggests) they are growing apart as they grow up.



Interestingly, Junior includes Rowdy (and his entire tribe) on a list of his dead loved ones, as if his separation from them after he leaves will be just as complete. His caveat that he hopes he'll forgive himself points out an important element of forgiveness that hasn't been discussed before now: that it's just as important, and often harder, to forgive yourself than for others to forgive you. Arguably, Junior's confessional "diary," which explains everything he's done to an unknown audience, is his way of understanding and accepting his choice to leave.



This game of one-on-one with Rowdy, like the moment the two share in the tree, is a moment outside of time. The fact that they don't keep score adds to this—not only are they no longer out for revenge or "settling the score," but they also aren't keeping track of the time that's passed or the choices they've made, both of which would be represented by keeping score. Instead, the only thing that matters about the game is the fact that they're playing it together.





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