



THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO FISTFIGHT IN HEAVEN

Sherman Alexie

According to critic Louis Owens, "Alexie's prose startles and dazzles with unexpected, impossible-to-anticipate moves, like the perfect reservation point guard whose passes sometimes catch you flat-footed and right in the face. It is a prose that takes risks and seldom stumbles." The twenty-two stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* fit Owens' description well. Alexie's ironic language slips though the hoop easily to score humorous points, but because his laughter comes from irony, it is tinged with darkness. Alexie's writing speaks to the fact that the ability to laugh at life's miseries is necessary for survival.

Alexie, a graduate of "reservation university," writes of his own experiences and heritage. Combining fiction and fact, he presents contemporary Indian life fraught with five hundred years of history. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* blends images of hunger and broken treaties, basketball and car wrecks, commodity food and smallpox blankets, love and anger. It demonstrates Alexie's ability to use pop culture icons such as 7-11, Elvis, television, Diet Pepsi, and neon signs in the context of Indian myth, history, and dreams.

In real reservation life, the convenience store is not just convenient. It is often the *only* store for miles with gas, groceries, and magazines. In Alexie's text, the 7-11 becomes a place of necessity and fantasy: "There are so many possibilities in the reservation 7-11, so many methods of survival. Imagine every Skin on the reservation is the new lead guitarist for the Rolling Stones, on the cover of a rock-and-roll magazine. Imagine forgiveness is sold 2 for 1. . . . Imagine a song stronger than penicillin. Imagine a spring with water that mends broken bones. Imagine a drum which wraps itself around your heart."



1 Too hot to sleep so I walked down to the Third Avenue 7-11 for a
Creamsicle and the company of a graveyard-shift cashier. I know that game.
I worked graveyard for a Seattle 7-11 and got robbed once too often. The
last time the bastard locked me in the cooler. He even took my money and
basketball shoes.

2 The graveyard-shift worker in the Third Avenue 7-11 looked like they all
do. Acne scars and a bad haircut, work pants that showed off his white socks,
and those cheap black shoes that have no support. My arches still ache from
my year at the Seattle 7-11.

3 "Hello," he asked when I walked into his store. "How you doing?"

4 I gave him a half-wave as I headed back to the freezer. He looked me
over so he could describe me to the police later. I knew the look. One of my
old girlfriends said I started to look at her that way, too. She left me not long
after that. No, I left her and don't blame her for anything. That's how it
happened. When one person starts to look at another like a criminal, then
the love is over. It's logical.

5 "I don't trust you," she said to me. "You get too angry."

6 She was white and I lived with her in Seattle. Some nights we fought so
bad that I would just get in my car and drive all night, only stop to fill up
on gas. In fact, I worked the graveyard shift to spend as much time away
from her as possible. But I learned all about Seattle that way, driving its back
ways and dirty alleys.

7 Sometimes, though, I would forget where I was and get lost. I'd drive
for hours, searching for something familiar. Seems like I'd spent my whole
life that way, looking for anything I recognized. Once, I ended up in a nice
residential neighborhood and somebody must have been worried because
the police showed up and pulled me over.

8 "What are you doing out here?" the police officer asked me as he looked
over my license and registration.

9 "I'm lost."

10 "Well, where are you supposed to be?" he asked me, and I knew there
were plenty of places I wanted to be, but none where I was supposed to be.

11 "I got in a fight with my girlfriend," I said. "I was just driving around,
blowing off steam, you know?"

12 "Well, you should be more careful where you drive," the officer said. "You're
making people nervous. You don't fit the profile of the neighborhood."

13 I wanted to tell him that I didn't really fit the profile of the country but
I knew it would just get me into trouble.

14 "Can I help you?" the 7-11 clerk asked me loudly, searching for some
response that would reassure him that I wasn't an armed robber. He knew
this dark skin and long, black hair of mine was dangerous. I had potential.

15 "Just getting a Creamsicle," I said after a long interval. It was a sick twist
to pull on the guy, but it was late and I was bored. I grabbed my Creamsicle

and walked back to the counter slowly, scanned the aisles for effect. I wanted to whistle low and menacingly but I never learned to whistle.

16 "Pretty hot out tonight?" he asked, that old rhetorical weather . . . question designed to put us both at ease.

17 "Hot enough to make you go crazy," I said and smiled. He swallowed hard like a white man does in those situations. I looked him over. Same old green, red, and white 7-11 jacket and thick glasses. But he wasn't ugly, just misplaced and marked by loneliness. If he wasn't working there that night, he'd be at home alone, flipping through channels and wishing he could afford HBO or Showtime.

18 "Will this be all?" he asked me, in that company effort to make me do some impulse shopping. Like adding a clause onto a treaty. *We'll take Washington and Oregon and you get six pine trees and a brand-new Chrysler Cordoba.* I knew how to make and break promises.

19 "No," I said and paused. "Give me a Cherry Slushie, too."

20 "What size?" he asked, relieved.

21 "Large," I said, and he turned his back to me to make the drink. He realized his mistake but it was too late. He stiffened, ready for the gunshot or the blow behind the ear. When it didn't come, he turned back to me.

22 "I'm sorry," he said. "What size did you say?"

23 "Small," I said and changed the story.

24 "But I thought you said large."

25 "If you knew I wanted a large, then why did you ask me again?" I asked him and laughed. He looked at me, couldn't decide if I was . . . just goofing. There was something about him I liked, even if it was three in the morning and he was white.

26 "Hey," I said. "Forget the Slushie. What I want to know is if you know all the words to the theme from 'The Brady Bunch?'"

27 He looked at me, confused at first, then laughed.

28 . . . "I was hoping you weren't crazy. You were scaring me."

29 "Well, I'm going to get crazy if you don't know the words."

30 He laughed loudly then, told me to take the Creamsicle for free. He was the graveyard-shift manager and those little demonstrations of power tickled him. All seventy-five cents of it. I knew how much everything cost.

31 "Thanks," I said to him and walked out the door. I took my time walking home, let the heat of the night melt the Creamsicle all over my hand. At three in the morning I could act just as young as I wanted to act. There was no one around to ask me to grow up.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The narrator knows the cashier is wary, but he can't resist making him a little more anxious. Why do you think he does this?
2. Why does the narrator think that he doesn't "fit the profile of the country"?
3. Explain the narrator's sarcastic remark in paragraph 17.
4. Under what circumstances are people usually told to "grow up"?
5. Alexie often uses humor and irony to sharpen the impact of his words. Discuss three examples you think are effective.

WRITING TOPICS

1. Recall a funny or dramatic incident that happened while you were working at a summer or part-time job and write about it. Follow Alexie's example: describe the setting and tell what you were thinking as events progressed.
2. Write about the incident at the 7-11 from the clerk's point of view. Include the events in the order in which they happened and how you, as the clerk, felt.