

INDIAN KILLER

A NOVEL



SHERMAN
ALEXIE



Indian Killer

A Novel

Sherman Alexie



to my mother and father, for staying

to Diane, for arriving

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We are what

We have lost

—Alex Kuo

Owl Dancing

Mythology

THE SHEETS ARE DIRTY. An Indian Health Service hospital in the late sixties. On this reservation or the reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation. Antiseptic, cinnamon, and danker odor. Anonymous cries up and down the hallways. Linoleum floors swabbed with gray water. Mop smelling like old sex. Walls painted white a decade earlier, now yellowed and peeling. Old Indian woman in wheelchair singing traditional songs to herself, tapping a rhythm on her armrest, right index finger tapping, tapping. Pause. Tap, tap. A phone ringing loudly from behind a thin door marked PRIVATE. Twenty beds available, twenty beds occupied. Waiting room where a young Indian man sits on a couch and holds his head in his hands. Nurses' lounge, two doctor's offices, and a scorched coffee pot. Old Indian man, his hair bright white and unbraided, pushing his I.V. bottle down the hallway. He is barefoot and confused, searching for a pair of moccasins he lost when he was twelve years old. Donated newspapers and magazines stacked in bundles, months and years out of date, missing pages. In one of the examining rooms, an Indian family of four, mother, father, son, daughter, all coughing blood quietly into handkerchiefs. The phone still ringing behind the PRIVATE door. A cinderblock building, thick windows that distort the view, pine trees, flagpole. A 1957 Chevy parked haphazardly, back door flung open, engine still running, back seat damp and bloodstained. Empty now.

The Indian woman on the table in the delivery room is very young, just a child herself. She is beautiful, even in the pain of labor, the contractions, the sudden tearing. When John imagines her birth, his mother is sometimes Navajo. Other times she is Lakota. Often, she is from the same tribe as the last Indian woman he has seen on television. Her legs tied in stirrups. Loose knots threatening to unravel. The white doctor has his hands inside her. Blood everywhere. The nurses work at mysterious machines. John's mother is tearing her vocal cords with the force of her screams. Years later, she still speaks in painful whispers. But during his birth, she is so young, barely into her teens, and the sheets are dirty.

The white doctor is twenty-nine years old. He has grown up in Iowa or Illinois, never seeing an Indian in person until he arrives at the reservation. His parents are poor. Having taken a government scholarship to make his way through medical school, he now has to practice medicine on the reservation in exchange for the money. This is the third baby he has delivered here. One white, two Indians. All of the children are beautiful.

John's mother is Navajo or Lakota. She is Apache or Seminole. She is Yakama or Spokane. Her dark skin contrasts sharply with the white sheets, although they are dirty. She pushes when she should be pushing. She stops pushing when they tell her to stop. With clever hands, the doctor turns John

head to the correct position. He is a good doctor.

The doctor has fallen in love with Indians. He thinks them impossibly funny and irreverent. During the hospital staff meetings, all of the Indians sit together and whisper behind their hands. There are no Indian doctors, but a few of the nurses and most of the administrative staff are Indian. The white doctor often wishes he could sit with the Indians and whisper behind his hand. But he maintains a personable and professional distance. He misses his parents, who still live in Iowa and Illinois. He calls them often, sends postcards of beautiful, generic landscapes.

The doctor's hands are deep inside John's mother, who is only fourteen, and who is bleeding profusely where they have cut her to make room for John's head. But the sheets were dirty before the blood, and her vagina will heal. She is screaming in pain. The doctor could not give her painkillers because she had arrived at the hospital too far into labor. The Chevy is still running outside, rear door flung open, back seat red and damp. The driver is in the waiting room. He holds his head in his hands.

Are you the father?

No, I'm the driver. She was walking here when I picked her up. She was hitchhiking. I'm just her cousin. I'm just the driver.

The phone behind the PRIVATE door is still ringing. His mother pushes one last time and John slides into the good doctor's hands. Afterbirth. The doctor clears John's mouth. John inhales deeply, exhales, cries. The old Indian woman in the wheelchair stops singing. She hears a baby crying. She stops her tapping to listen. She forgets why she is listening, then returns to her own song and the tapping, tapping. Pause. Tap, tap. The doctor cuts the umbilical cord quickly. There is no time to waste. A nurse cleans John, washes away the blood, the remains of the placenta, the evidence. His mother is crying.

I want my baby. Give me my baby. I want to see my baby. Let me hold my baby.

The doctor tries to comfort John's mother. The nurse swaddles John in blankets and takes him from the delivery room, past the old Indian man dragging his I.V. down the hallway, looking for his long-lost moccasins. She carries John outside. A flag hangs uselessly on its pole. No wind. The smell of pine. Inside the hospital, John's mother has fainted. The doctor holds her hand, as if he were the loving husband and father. He remembers the family of four coughing blood into handkerchiefs in the examining room. The doctor is afraid of them.

With John in her arms, the nurse stands in the parking lot. She is white or Indian. She watches the horizon. Blue sky, white clouds, bright sun. The slight whine of a helicopter in the distance. Then the violent *whomp-whomp* of its blades as it passes overhead, hovers, and lands a hundred feet away. In the waiting room, the driver lifts his head from his hands when he hears the helicopter. He wonders if there is a war beginning.

A man in a white jumpsuit steps from the helicopter. Head ducked and body bent, the man runs toward the nurse. His features are hidden inside his white helmet. The nurse meets him halfway and

hands him the baby John. The jumpsuit man covers John's face completely, protecting him from the dust that the helicopter is kicking up. The sky is very blue. Specific birds hurl away from the flying machine. These birds are indigenous to this reservation. They do not live anywhere else. They have purple-tipped wings and tremendous eyes, or red bellies and small eyes. The nurse waves as the jumpsuit man runs back to the helicopter. She shuts the rear door of the Chevy, reaches through the driver's open window, and turns the ignition key. The engine shudders to a stop.

Suddenly this is a war. The jumpsuit man holds John close to his chest as the helicopter rises. The helicopter gunman locks and loads, strafes the reservation with explosive shells. Indians hit the ground, drive their cars off roads, dive under flimsy kitchen tables. A few Indians, two women and one young man, continue their slow walk down the reservation road, unperturbed by the gunfire. They have been through much worse. The *whomp-whomp* of the helicopter blades. John is hungry and cries uselessly. He cannot be heard over the roar of the gun, the chopper. He cries anyway. This is all he knows how to do. Back at the clinic, his mother has been sedated. She sleeps in the delivery room. The doctor holds her hand and finds he cannot move. He looks down at his hand wrapped around her hand. White fingers, brown fingers. He can see the blue veins running through his skin like rivers. The phone behind the PRIVATE door stops ringing. Gunfire in the distance. Nobody, not even the white doctor, is surprised by this.

The helicopter flies for hours, it could be days, crossing desert, mountain, freeway, finally a city. Skyscrapers, the Space Needle, water everywhere. Thin bridges stretched between islands. John is crying. The gunner holds his fire, but his finger is lightly feathering the trigger. He is ready for the worst. John can feel the distance between the helicopter and the ground below. He stops crying. He loves the distance between the helicopter and the ground. He feels he could fall. He somehow loves this new fear. He wants to fall. He wants the jumpsuit man to release him, let him fall from the helicopter, down through the clouds, past the skyscrapers and the Space Needle. But the jumpsuit man holds him tight so John will not fall. John cries again.

The helicopter circles downtown Seattle, moves east past Lake Washington, Mercer Island, hovers over the city of Bellevue. The pilot searches for the landing area. Five acres of green, green grass. A large house. Swimming pool. A man and woman waving energetically. Home. The pilot lowers the chopper and sets down easily. Blades making a windstorm of grass particles and hard-shelled insects. The gunner's eyes are wide open, scanning the tree line. He is ready for anything. The jumpsuit man slides the door open with one arm and holds John in the other. Noise, heat. John cries louder than before, trying to be heard. Home. The jumpsuit man steps down and runs across the lawn toward the man and woman, both white and handsome. He wears a gray suit and colorful tie. She wears a red dress with large, black buttons from throat to knee.

John cries as the jumpsuit man hands him to the white woman, Olivia Smith. She unbuttons the top of her dress, opens her bra, and offers John her large, pale breasts with pink nipples. John's bird

mother had small, brown breasts and brown nipples, though he never suckled at them. Still, he knows there is a difference, and as John takes the white woman's right nipple into his mouth and pulls at her breast, he discovers it is empty. Daniel Smith wraps his left arm around his wife's shoulders. He grimaces briefly and then smiles. Olivia and Daniel Smith look at the jumpsuit man, who is holding a camera. Flash, flash. Click of the shutter. Whirr of advancing film. All of them wait for a photograph to form, for light to emerge from shadow, for an image to burn itself into paper.

The Last Skyscraper in Seattle

WHEN NO BABY CAME after years of trying to conceive, Olivia and Daniel Smith wanted to adopt a baby, but the waiting list was so long. The adoption agency warned them that white babies, of course, were the most popular. Not that it was a popularity contest, they were assured. It was just that most of the couples interested in adopting a baby were white, so naturally, they wanted to adopt a white child, a child like them, but there were simply not enough white babies to go around.

“Listen,” the adoption agent said. “Let’s be honest. It’s going to take at least a year to find a suitable white child for you. Frankly, it may take much longer than that. Up to eight years or more. But we can find you another kind of baby rather quickly.”

“Another kind?” asked Olivia.

“Well, of course,” said the agent. “There’s always the handicapped babies. Down’s syndrome. Children missing arms and legs. Mentally retarded. That kind of kid. To be honest, it’s very difficult, nearly impossible, to find homes for those children. It’s perfectly understandable. These children need special care, special attention. Lots of love. Not very many people can handle it.”

“I don’t think we want that,” Daniel said. Olivia agreed.

“There are other options,” said the agent. “We have other difficult-to-place children as well. Now, there’s nothing wrong with these babies. They’re perfectly healthy, but they’re not white. Most are black. We also have an Indian baby. The mother is six months pregnant now.”

“Indian?” asked Daniel. “As in American Indian?”

“Yes,” said the agent. “The mother is very young, barely into her teens. She’s making the right decision. She’ll carry the baby to full term and give it up for adoption. Now, ideally, we’d place the baby with Indian parents, right? But that just isn’t going to happen. The best place for this baby is with a white family. This child will be saved a lot of pain by growing up in a white family. It’s the best thing, really.”

Olivia and Daniel agreed to consider adopting the Indian baby. They went home that night, ate a simple dinner, and watched television. A sad movie-of-the-week about an incurable disease. Daniel kept clearing his throat during the movie. Olivia cried. When it was over, Daniel switched off the television. They undressed for bed, brushed their teeth, and lay down together.

“What do you think?” asked Olivia.

“I don’t know,” said Daniel.

They made love then, both secretly hoping this one would take. They wanted to believe that everything was possible. An egg would drop, be fertilized, and begin to grow. As he moved inside her wife, Daniel closed his eyes and concentrated on an image of a son. That son would be exactly half

him. He saw a son with his chin and hair. He saw a baseball glove, bicycle, tree house, barking dog. Olivia wrapped her arms around her husband, pressed her face to his shoulder. She could feel his heart inside her, but it was a vague, amorphous feeling. There was nothing specific about it. During the course of their married life, the sex had mostly felt good. Sometimes, it had been uncomfortable, once or twice painful. But she did not feel anything this time. She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling.

Olivia knew she was beautiful. She had been a beautiful baby, little girl, teenager, woman. She had never noticed whether it was easy or hard to be that beautiful. It never really occurred to her to wonder about it. All her life, her decisions had been made for her. She was meant to graduate from high school, get into a good college, find a suitable young man, earn a B.A. in art history, marry, and never work. Somewhere between reading a biography of van Gogh and fixing dinner, she was supposed to have a baby. Except for producing that infant, she had done what was expected of her, had fulfilled the obligations of her social contract. She had graduated with honors, had married a handsome, successful architect, and loved sex in a guarded way. But the baby would not happen. The doctors had no explanations. Her husband's sperm were of average count and activity. "In a swimming race," their doctor had said, "your husband's sperm would get the bronze." She had a healthy uterus and her period was loyal to the moon's cycles. But it did not work. "Listen," the doctor had said, "There are some people who just cannot have babies together. We can't always explain it. Medicine isn't perfect."

Still staring at the ceiling, Olivia moved her hips in rhythm with her husband's. She wanted to ask him what he was thinking about, but did not want to interrupt their lovemaking. She lifted herself to her husband, listening to the patterns of his breathing until it was over.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," Daniel said.

He lifted himself off her and rolled to his side of the bed. She reached out and took his hand. He was crying. She held him until they fell asleep. When they woke in the morning, both had decided to adopt the Indian baby.

Olivia was determined to be a good mother. She knew it was a complicated situation, that she would have to explain her baby's brown skin to any number of strangers. There was no chance that she would be able to keep her baby's adoption a secret. Two white parents, a brown baby. There was no other way to explain it. But she did not fool herself into thinking that her baby would somehow become white just because she and Daniel were white. After John arrived, she spent hours in the library. With John sleeping beside her, she would do research on Native American history and culture. The adoption agency refused to divulge John's tribal affiliation and sealed all of his birth records, revealing only that John's birth mother was fourteen years old. Olivia spent hours looking through books, searching the photographs for any face like her son's face. She read books about the Sioux, and Navajo, and Winnebago. Crazy Horse, Geronimo, and Sitting Bull rode horses through h

imagination. She bought all the children's books about Indians and read them aloud to John. Daniel thought it was an obsessive thing to do, but he did not say anything. He had named the baby John after his grandfather and thought it ironic. His grandfather had been born in Germany and never really learned much English, even after years in the United States.

"Honey," Daniel whispered to his wife when John woke up crying. Three in the morning, the moon full and bright white. "Honey, it's the baby."

Olivia rose from bed, walked into the nursery, and picked up John. She carried him to the window.

"Look, sweetie," she said to John. "It's just the moon. See, it's pretty."

Daniel listened to his wife talking to their son.

"It's the moon," she said and then said the word in Navajo, Lakota, Apache. She had learned a few words in many Indian languages. From books, Western movies, documentaries. Once she saw an Indian woman at the supermarket and asked her a few questions that were answered with bemused tolerance.

"It's just the moon," whispered Olivia and then she softly sang it. "It's the moon. It's the moon."

Daniel listened for a few minutes before he rolled over and fell asleep. When he woke the next morning, Olivia was standing at that same window with John in her arms, as if she'd been there all night.

"We need to get John baptized," she said with a finality that Daniel didn't question.

Because the baby John was Indian, Olivia and Daniel Smith wanted him to be baptized by an Indian, and they searched for days and weeks for the only Indian Jesuit in the Pacific Northwest. Father Duncan, a Spokane Indian Jesuit, was a strange man. A huge man, an artist. He painted contemporary landscapes, portraits, and murals that were highlighted with traditional Spokane Indian images. His work was displayed in almost every Jesuit community in the country. He was a great teacher, a revered theologian, but an eccentric. He ate bread and soup at every meal. Whole grains and vegetable broth, sourdough and chicken stock. He talked to himself, laughed at inappropriate moments, sometimes read books backward, starting with the last page and working toward the beginning. An irony, an Indian in black robes, he took a special interest in John and, with Olivia and Daniel's heartfelt approval, often visited him. The Jesuit held the baby John in his arms, sang traditional Spokane songs and Catholic hymns, and rocked him to sleep. As John grew older, Father Duncan would tell him secrets and make him promise never to reveal them. John kept his promises.

On a gray day when John was six years old, Father Duncan took him to see the Chapel of the North American Martyrs in downtown Seattle. John found himself surrounded by vivid stained glass reproductions of Jesuits being martyred by Indians. Bright white Jesuits with bright white suns at their necks. A Jesuit, tied to a post, burning alive as Indians dance around him. Another pierced with dozens

of arrows. A third, with his cassock torn from his body, crawling away from an especially evil-looking Indian. The fourth being drowned in a blue river. The fifth, sixth, and seventh being scalped. An eighth and ninth praying together as a small church burns behind them. And more and more. John stared up at so much red glass.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” asked Father Duncan.

John did not understand. He was not sure if Father Duncan thought the artwork was beautiful, or if the murder of the Jesuits was beautiful. Or both.

“There’s a myth, a story, that the blood of those Jesuits was used to stain the glass,” said Duncan. “But who knows if it’s true. We Jesuits love to tell stories.”

“Why did the Indians kill them?”

“They wanted to kick the white people out of America. Since the priests were the leaders, the Indians were the first to be killed.”

John looked up at the stained glass Jesuits, then at the Spokane Indian Jesuit.

“But you’re a priest,” said John.

“Yes, I am.”

John did not have the vocabulary to express what he was feeling. But he understood there was something odd about the contrast between the slaughtered Jesuits and Father Duncan, and between the Spokane Indian Jesuit and the murderers.

“Did the white people leave?” asked John.

“Some of them did. But more came.”

“It didn’t work.”

“No.”

“Why didn’t the Indians kill all the white people?”

“They didn’t have the heart for it.”

“But didn’t white people kill most of the Indians?”

“Yes, they did.”

John was confused. He stared up at the martyred Jesuits. Then he noticed the large crucifix hanging over the altar. A mortally wounded Jesus, blood pouring from his hands and feet, from the wound in his side. John saw the altar candles burning and followed the white smoke as it rose toward the ceiling of the chapel.

“Was Jesus an Indian?” asked John.

Duncan studied the crucifix, then looked down at John.

“He wasn’t an Indian,” said the Jesuit, “but he should have been.”

John seemed to accept that answer. He could see the pain in Jesus’s wooden eyes. At six, he already knew that a wooden Jesus could weep. He’d seen it on the television. Once every few years, the wooden Jesus wept and thousands of people made the pilgrimage to the place where the miracle

happened. If miracles happened with such regularity when did they cease to be miracles? And simply become ordinary events, pedestrian proof of God? John knew that holy people sometimes bled from their hands and feet, just as Jesus had bled from his hands and feet when nailed to the cross. Such violence, such faith.

“Why did they do that to Jesus?” asked John.

“He died so that we may live forever.”

“Forever?”

“Forever.”

John looked up again at the windows filled with the dead and dying.

“Did those priests die like Jesus?” asked John.

Father Duncan did not reply. He knew that Jesus was killed because he was dangerous, because he wanted to change the world in a good way. He also knew that the Jesuits were killed because they were dangerous to the Indians who didn't want their world to change at all. Duncan knew those Jesuits thought they were changing the Indians in a good way.

“Did they die like Jesus?” John asked again.

Duncan was afraid to answer the question. As a Jesuit, he knew those priests were martyred just like Jesus. As a Spokane Indian, he knew those Jesuits deserved to die for their crimes against Indian

“John,” Duncan said after a long silence. “You see these windows? You see all of this? It's what is happening inside me right now.”

John stared at Duncan, wondering if the Jesuit had a stained glass heart. Rain began to beat against the windows, creating an illusion of movement on the stained faces of the murderous Indians and martyred Jesuits, and on young John's face. And on Duncan's. The man and child stared up at the glass.

Father Duncan's visits continued until John was seven years old. Then, with no warning or explanation, Duncan was gone. When John asked his parents about Father Duncan's whereabouts, Olivia and Daniel told him that the Jesuit had retired and moved to Arizona. In fact, Duncan's eccentricities had become liabilities. After the strange Sunday when he had openly wept during Eucharist and run out of the church before the closing hymn, Duncan was summarily removed from active duty and shipped to a retreat in Arizona. He walked into the desert one week after he arrived at the retreat and was never seen again.

As he grew up, John kept reading the newspaper account of the disappearance, though it contained obvious errors. Anonymous sources insisted that Father Duncan had lost his faith in God. John knew that Duncan had never lost his faith, but had caused others to believe he did. His body was never found, though a search party followed Duncan's tracks miles into the desert, until they simply stopped.

For John, though, Father Duncan did not vanish completely. The Jesuit, exhausted and sunburned

often visited him in dreams. Duncan never spoke. He just brought the smell, sounds, and images of the desert into John's head. The wind pushing sand from dune to dune, the scorpions and spiders, the relentless yellow sun and deep blue sky, the stand of palm trees on the horizon. John always assumed it was a Catholic way to die, lost in the desert, no water, no food, the unforgiving heat. But the hallucinations must have been magical. John knew that real Indians climbed into the mountains to have vision quests. Stripped of their clothes, they ate and drank nothing. Naked and starved, they waited for a vision to arrive. Father Duncan must have been on a vision quest in the desert when he walked to the edge of the world and stepped off. Did it feel good to disappear? Perhaps Duncan, Indian and Christian, had discovered a frightening secret and could not live with it. Perhaps Duncan knew what existed on the other side of the desert. Maybe he was looking for a new name for God.

John attended St. Francis Catholic School from the very beginning. His shoes always black, topsiders polished clean. His black hair very short, nearly a crew cut, just like every other boy in school. He was the only Indian in the school, but he had friends, handsome white boys. And John had danced with a few pretty white girls in high school. Mary, Margaret, Stephanie. He had fumbled with their underwear in the back seats of cars. John knew their smell, a combination of perfume, baby powder, sweat, and sex. A clean smell on one level, a darker odor beneath. Their breasts were small and perfect. John was always uncomfortable during his time with the girls, and he was never sorry when it was over. He was impatient with them, unsure of their motives, and vaguely insulting. The girls expected it. It was high school and boys were supposed to act that way. The girls assumed that boys were much more complicated than they actually were. Inside, John knew that he was more simple and shallow than other boys, and less than real.

"What are you thinking?" the girls always asked John. But John knew the girls really wanted to tell him what they were thinking. John's thoughts were merely starting points for the girls to talk about mothers and fathers, girlfriends, ex-boyfriends, pets, clothes, and a thousand other details. John felt insignificant at those times and retreated into a small place inside of himself, until the girls confused his painful silence with rapt interest.

The girls' fathers were always uncomfortable when they first met John, and grew more irritated as he continued to date Mary, Margaret, or Stephanie. The relationships began and ended quickly. A dance or two, a movie, a hamburger, a few hours in a friend's basement with generic rock music playing softly on the radio, cold fingers on warm skin.

"I just don't think it's working out," she'd tell John, who understood. He could almost hear the conversations that had taken place.

"Hon," a father would say to his daughter. "What was that boy's name?"

"Which boy, daddy?"

"That dark one."

“Oh, you mean John. Isn’t he cute?”

“Yes, he seems like a very nice young man. You say he’s at St. Francis? Is he a scholarship student?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Does it matter?”

“Well, no. I’m just curious, hon. By the way, what is he? I mean, where does he come from?”

“He’s Indian, daddy.”

“From India? He’s a foreigner?”

“No, daddy, he’s Indian from here. You know, American Indian. Like bows and arrows and stuff. Except he’s not like that. His parents are white.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Daddy, he’s adopted.”

“Oh. Are you going to see him again?”

“I hope so. Why?”

“Well, you know. I just think. Well, adopted kids have so many problems adjusting to things, you know. I’ve read about it. They have self-esteem problems. I just think, I mean, don’t you think you should find somebody more appropriate?”

The door would shut with a loud and insistent click. Mary, Margaret, or Stephanie would come to school the next day and give John the news. The daughters would never mention their fathers. Of course, there were a few white girls who dated John precisely because they wanted to bring home a dark boy. Through all of it, John repeatedly promised himself he would never be angry. He didn’t want to be angry. He wanted to be a real person. He wanted to control his emotions, so he would often swallow his anger. Once or twice a week, he felt the need to run and hide. In the middle of a math class or a history exam, he would get a bathroom pass and quickly leave the classroom. His teachers were always willing to give him a little slack. They knew he was adopted, an Indian orphan, and were leading a difficult life. His teachers gave him every opportunity and he responded well. If John happened to be a little fragile, well, that was perfectly understandable, considering his people’s history. All that alcoholism and poverty, the lack of God in their lives. In the bathroom, John would lock himself inside a stall and fight against his anger. He’d bite his tongue, his lips, until sometimes they would bleed. He would hold himself tightly and feel his arms, legs, and lower back shake with the effort. His eyes would be shut. He’d grind his teeth. One minute, two, five, and he would be fine. He would flush the toilet to make his visit seem normal, slowly wash his hands and return to the classroom. His struggles with his anger increased in intensity and frequency until he was visiting the bathroom on a daily basis during his senior year. But nobody noticed. In truth, nobody mentioned any strange behavior they may have seen. John was a trailblazer, a nice trophy for St. Francis, a successfully integrated Indian boy.

There were three hundred and seventy-six students at St. Francis. Along with three black kids

John was one of the four non-white students in the school. He was neither widely popular nor widely disliked. He played varsity basketball for two years, but never started, and entered the game when the outcome, a win or loss, was already decided. He was on the varsity only because he was an upperclassman and over six feet tall. His teammates cheered wildly whenever he entered the game because teammates are taught to behave that way. John understood this. He cheered for his teammates even during those games in which he never played. He never really cared if the team won or lost. But he was always embarrassed when he had to play, because he knew he was not very good. In fact, he only played because his father, Daniel, a St. Francis alumnus, had been a star player.

“You need to get your hand behind the ball when you shoot,” Daniel Smith said to John during one of their driveway practices.

“Like this?” asked John, desperately trying to hold the basketball correctly.

“No,” Daniel said, calmly, patiently. Daniel Smith never raised his voice, not once, in all the years. He would coach John for hours, trying to show him how to play defense, box out for rebounds, throw the bounce pass. No matter how poorly John played, and he was awful, Daniel never yelled.

One winter, when John was a sophomore, Daniel read about an all-Indian basketball tournament that was going to be held at Indian Heritage High School in North Seattle. Daniel and Olivia both looked for any news about Indians and shared the information with John. The sportswriter made the tournament into some kind of joke, but Daniel thought it was a wonderful opportunity. He had never seen Indians play basketball. Maybe John would improve if he saw other Indians play.

John had spent time at different Indian events. Olivia had made sure of that. But he had never seen so many Indians crammed into such a small space. The Indian Heritage gym was full of Indians. All shapes and sizes, tribes and temperaments. Daniel and John found seats in the bleachers and watched a game between a Sioux team and a local team of Yakama Indians. The game was fast-paced and vaguely out of control, with offenses that took the first open shot, from anywhere on the court, and defenses that constantly gambled for steals. Most of the players were tall and impossibly thin, although a few were actually fat. The best player on the court was a chubby guy named Arnold, a Yakama Indian. Daniel and John knew he was named Arnold because they heard his name announced over the loudspeaker.

“Arnold for two.”

“Arnold with a three-pointer.”

“Arnold with the steal, and a nice pass for two.”

Daniel decided that Arnold was the best player he had ever seen. He could have played Division I basketball. God, Daniel thought, this Indian is fifty pounds overweight, closing in on forty years old and still plays well.

“Watch,” Daniel said to John.

John was watching Arnold, but he was watching the people around him too. So many Indians, s

many tribes, many sharing similar features, but also differing in slight and important ways. The Makahs different than the Quinaults, the Lummi different from the Puyallup. There were Indians with dark skin and jet-black hair. There were Indians with brown hair and paler skin. Green-eyed Indian Indians with black blood. Indians with Mexican blood. Indians with white blood. Indians with Asian blood. All of them laughing and carrying on. Many Indians barely paying attention to the game. They were talking, telling jokes, and laughing loudly. So much laughter. John wanted to own that laughter never realizing that their laughter was a ceremony used to drive away personal and collective demons. The Indians who were watching the game reacted mightily to each basket or defensive stop. They moaned and groaned as if each mistake were fatal, as if each field goal meant the second coming of Christ. But always, they were laughing. John had never seen so many happy people. He did not share their happiness.

“Look at him,” Daniel said. “Look at that guy play.”

John watched Arnold shoot a thirty-five-foot jumper that hit nothing but the bottom of the net. A glorious three-pointer. The crowd cheered and laughed some more. Arnold was laughing, on the court doubled over, holding his stomach. Laughing so hard that tears ran down his face. His teammates were smiling and playing defense. The other team worked the ball around, trying to shoot a long jumper of their own, wanting to match Arnold’s feat. A big man caught the ball in the far corner, faked a dribble then took the shot. An air ball, missing the basket and backboard completely, by two or three feet. The big man fell on his back, laughing. The crowd laughed and rolled all over the bleachers, pounding each other on the back, hugging each other tightly. One Yakama player grabbed the rebound and threw a long pass downcourt to Arnold. He caught the pass, fumbled the ball a bit, dribbled in for the layup and missed it. So much laughter that the refs called an official timeout. John looked at his father. Daniel was laughing. John felt like crying. He did not recognize these Indians. They were nothing like the Indians he had read about. John felt betrayed.

John never did become a good basketball player, but he graduated from high school on time, 1987. Since he was an Indian with respectable grades, John would have been admitted into almost any public university had he bothered to fill out even one application. His parents pushed him to at least try a community or technical college, but John refused. During his freshman year in high school, John had read an article about a group of Mohawk Indian steel workers who helped build the World Trade Center buildings in New York City. Ever since then, John had dreamed about working on a skyscraper. He figured it was the Indian thing to do. Since Daniel Smith was an architect, he sometimes flattered himself by thinking that John’s interest in construction was somehow related. Despite John’s refusal to go to college, his parents still supported him in his decision, and were sitting in the third row as John walked across the stage at St. Francis to accept his diploma. Polite applause, a few loud cheers from his friends, his mother and father now standing. John flipped his tassel from one side to the other, blinked in the glare of the flashbulbs, and tried to smile. He had practiced his smile, knew it was going

to be needed for this moment. He smiled. The cameras flashed. John was finished with high school and would never attend college. He walked offstage and stepped onto the fortieth floor of an unfinished office building in downtown Seattle.

John Smith was now twenty-seven years old. He was six feet, six inches tall and heavily muscled, a young construction worker perfect for all of the heavy lifting. His black hair was long and tucked under his hard hat. When he had first started working, his co-workers used to give him grief about his hair, but half of the crew had long hair these days. Seattle was becoming a city dominated by young white men with tiny ponytails. John always had the urge to carry a pair of scissors and snip off those ponytails at every opportunity. He hated those ponytails, but he did not let them distract him at work. He was a good worker, quiet and efficient. He was eating lunch alone on the fortieth floor when he heard the voices again.

John swallowed the last of his cold coffee and gently set the thermos down. He cupped his hand to his ear. He knew he was alone on this floor, but the voices were clear and precise. During the quiet times, he could hear the soft *why-why-why* as Father Duncan's leather sandals brushed against the sand on his long walk through the desert. Once, just once, John had heard the bubble of the baptismal fountain as Father Duncan dipped him into the water. Sometimes there were sudden sirens and explosions, or the rumble of a large crowd in an empty room. John could remember when it first happened, this noise in his head. He was young, maybe ten years old, when he heard strange music. It happened as he ran from school, across the parking lot, toward the car where Olivia waited for him. He knew this music was written especially for him: violins, bass guitar, piano, harmonica, drums. Now, as he sat on the fortieth floor and listened to those voices, John felt a sharp pain in his lower back. His belly burned.

"Jesus," said John as he stood up, waving his arms in the air.

"Hey, chief, what you doing? Trying to land a plane?"

The foreman was standing in the elevator a few feet away. John liked to eat his lunch near the elevator so he could move quickly and easily between floors. He always liked mobility.

"Well," said the foreman. "What's up?"

John lowered his arms.

"On my break," John said. He could still hear voices speaking to him. They were so loud, but the foreman was oblivious. The foreman knew John always ate lunch alone, a strange one, that John never went for beers after work. Showed up five minutes early every day and left five minutes late. He could work on one little task all day, until it was done, and never complain. No one bothered him because he didn't bother anyone. No one knew a damn thing about John, except that he worked hard, the ultimate compliment. Not that the hard work mattered anymore, since there would be no more high-rise work in Seattle after they finished this job. They were building the last skyscraper in Seattle.

Computers had made the big buildings obsolete. No need to shove that many workers into such a small space. After this last building was complete, the foreman would take a job for the state. He did not know what John had planned.

“Well,” the foreman said. “Lunch is over. Get in. We need you down on thirty-three.”

John was embarrassed. He felt the heat build in his stomach, rise through his back, and fill his head. It started that way. The heat came first, followed quickly by the music. A slow hum. A quiet drum. Then a symphony crashing through his spinal column. The foreman brought the heat and music. John looked at him, a short white man with a protruding belly and big arms. An ugly man with a bulbous nose and weak chin, though his eyes were a striking blue.

John knew if he were a real Indian, he could have called the wind. He could have called a crosscutting wind that would've sliced through the fortieth floor, pulled the foreman out of the elevator, and sent him over the edge of the building. But he's strong, that foreman, and he would catch himself. He'd be hanging from the edge by his fingertips.

In his head, John could see the foreman hanging from the fortieth floor.

“Help me!” the foreman would shout.

John saw himself plant his feet just inches from the edge, reach down, take the foreman's wrists in his hands, and hold him away from the building. John and the foreman would sway back and forth like a pendulum. Back and forth, back and forth.

“Jesus!” the foreman would shout. “Pull me up!”

John would look down to see the foreman's blue eyes wide with fear. That's what I need to see, that's what will feed me, thought John. Fear in blue eyes. He would hold onto the foreman as long as possible and stare down into those terrified blue eyes. Then he'd let him fall.

“Let's go, chief,” the foreman said, loud and friendly. “We ain't got all day. We need you on thirty-three.”

John stepped into the elevator. The foreman pulled the gate shut and pressed the button for the thirty-third floor. Neither talked on the way down. John could feel the tension in his stomach as the elevator made its short journey. He fought against the music.

“Chuck needs your help,” the foreman said when they arrived.

John looked where the foreman pointed. The thirty-third floor was a controlled mess. Chuck, a white man with a huge moustache, was pounding a nail into place. He raised a hammer and brought it down on the head of the nail. He raised the hammer, brought it down again. Metal against metal. John saw sparks. Sparks. Sparks. He rubbed his eyes. The sparks were large enough and of long enough duration to turn to flame. The foreman didn't see it. The rest of the crew didn't see it. Chuck raised the hammer again and paused at the top of his swing. As the hammer began its next descent, John could see it happening in segments, as in a series of still photographs. In that last frozen moment, in that brief instant before the hammer struck again its explosion of flame, John knew exactly what to do with

his life.

John needed to kill a white man.

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