

In a final unreasoning assault I overpowered the child's neck and jaws. I forced the heavy silver spoon back of her teeth and down her throat till she gagged. And there it was — both tonsils covered with membrane. She had fought valiantly to keep me from knowing her secret. She had been hiding that sore throat for three days at least and lying to her parents in order to escape just such an outcome as this.

Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before but now she attacked. Tried to get off her father's lap and fly at me while tears of defeat blinded her eyes.

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Questions for Analysis

1. This story is told from the doctor's point of view. How does he justify his use of force? What are the pros and cons he weighs in using it? To get started, look in particular at paragraph 34.
2. How do the sexual overtones of the story — for example, in the doctor's describing the girl as "an unusually attractive little thing" (par. 4) and admitting "I had already fallen in love with the savage brat" (par. 22) — affect your understanding and judgment of the doctor's and the girl's behavior?
3. Because this story came out of the era of the Great Depression, you might expect it to say something about the impoverished material conditions in which people lived at the time and how these hardships affected them. Are these expectations borne out? What seems to be the economic status of the family and the doctor, and how does class affect what happens in the story? To get started, take a look at paragraphs 2 and 3.



SHERMAN ALEXIE (b. 1966), a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, was born on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. According to Alexie's official biography (www.fallsapart.com), Alexie was educated at Gonzaga University and Washington State University, where, "after fainting numerous times in human anatomy class," he abandoned his pre-med path, enrolled in a poetry workshop, and discovered his talent for writing. To date, Alexie has published eleven

poetry collections, the most recent of which is *Dangerous Astronomy* (2005); four novels, including the young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007); two screenplays, *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *The Business of Fancydancing* (2003); and three short-story collections, including *Ten Little Indians* (2003) and *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000). "A Good Story" was first published in the collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993).

A GOOD STORY

Sherman Alexie

The Quilting

A quiet Saturday reservation afternoon and I pretend sleep on the couch while my mother pieces together another quilt on the living room floor.

"You know," she says. "Those stories you tell, they're kind of sad, enit?"

I keep my eyes closed.

"Junior," she says. "Don't you think your stories are too sad?"

My efforts to ignore her are useless.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

She puts down her scissors and fabric, looks at me so straight that I have to sit up and open my eyes.

"Well," she says. "Ain't nobody cries that much, you know?"

I pretend to rub the sleep from my eyes, stretch my arms and legs, make small noises of irritation.

"I guess," I say. "But ain't nobody laughs as much as the people in my stories, either."

"That's true," she says.

I stand up, shake my pants loose, and walk to the kitchen to grab a Diet Pepsi with cold, cold ice.

Mom quilts silently for a while. Then she whistles.

"What?" I ask her, knowing these signals for attention.

"You know what you should do? You should write a story about something good, a real good story."

"Why?"

"Because people should know that good things always happen to Indians, too."

I take a big drink of Diet Pepsi, search the cupboards for potato chips, peanuts, anything.

"Good things happen," she says and goes back to her quilting.

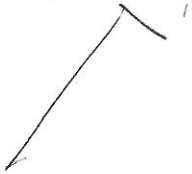
I think for a moment, put my Diet Pepsi down on the counter.

"Okay," I say. "If you want to hear a good story, you have to listen."

The Story

Uncle Moses sat in his sandwich chair eating a sandwich. Between bites, he hummed an it-is-a-good-day song. He sat in front of the house he built himself fifty years before. The house sat down at random angles to the ground. The front room leaned to the west, the bedroom to the east, and the bathroom simply folded in on itself.

There was no foundation, no hidden closet, nothing built into the thin walls. On the whole, it was the kind of house that would stand even years after Moses died, held up by the tribal imagination. Driving by, the Indians would look across the field toward the house and hold it upright with their eyes, remembering *Moses lived there*.



reader

It would be just enough to ensure survival.

Uncle Moses gave no thought to his passing on most days. Instead, he usually finished his sandwich, held the last bite of bread and meat in his mouth like the last word of a good story.

"Ya-hey," he called out to the movement of air, the unseen. A summer before, Uncle Moses listened to his nephew, John-John, talking a story. John-John was back from college and told Moses that 99 percent of the matter in the universe is invisible to the human eye. Ever since, Moses made sure to greet what he could not see.

Uncle Moses stood, put his hands on his hips, arched his back. More and more, he heard his spine playing stickgame through his skin, singing old dusty words, the words of all his years. He looked at the position of the sun to determine the time, checked his watch to be sure, and looked across the field for the children who would soon come.

The Indian children would come with half-braids, curiosity endless and essential. The children would come from throwing stones into water, from basketball and basketry, from the arms of their mothers and fathers, from the very beginning. This was the generation of HUD house, of car wreck and cancer, of commodity cheese and beef. These were the children who carried dreams in the back pockets of their blue jeans, pulled them out easily, traded back and forth.

"Dreams like baseball cards," Uncle Moses said to himself, smiled hard when he saw the first child running across the field. It was Arnold, of course, pale-skinned boy who was always teased by the other children.

Arnold ran slowly, his great belly shaking with the effort, eyes narrowed in concentration. A full-blood Spokane, Arnold was somehow born with pale, pretty skin and eyes with color continually changing from gray to brown. He liked to sit in the sandwich chair and wait for Uncle Moses to make him a good sandwich.

It took Arnold five minutes to run across the field, and all the while Moses watched him, studied his movements, the way Arnold's hair reached out in all directions, uncombed, so close to electricity, closer to lightning. He did not wear braids, could not sit long enough for his mother.

Be still, be still, she would say between her teeth, but Arnold loved his body too much to remain still.

Big as he was, Arnold was still graceful in his movements, in his hands when he touched his face listening to a good story. He was also the best basketball player in the reservation grade school. Uncle Moses sometimes walked to the playground just to watch Arnold play and wonder at the strange, often improbable gifts a person can receive.

We are all given something to compensate for what we have lost. Moses felt those words even though he did not say them.

Arnold arrived, breathing hard.

"Ya-hey, Little Man," Uncle Moses said.

"Hello, Uncle," Arnold replied, extending his hand in a half-shy, half-adult way, a child's greeting, the affirmation of friendship.

"Where are the others?" Uncle Moses asked, taking Arnold's hand in his own.

"There was a field trip," Arnold answered. "All the others went to a baseball game in Spokane. I hid until they left."

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“Why?”

“Because I wanted to see you.”

Moses smiled at Arnold’s unplanned kindness. He held the child’s hand a little tighter and pulled him up close.

“Little Man,” he said. “You have done a good thing.”

Arnold smiled, pulled his hand away from Moses, and covered his smile, smiling even harder.

“Uncle Moses,” he said through his fingers. “Tell me a good story.”

Uncle Moses sat down in the story chair and told this very story.

The Finishing

My mother sits quietly, rips a seam, begins to hum a slow song through her skinny lips.

“What you singing?” I ask.

“I’m singing an it-is-a-good-day song.”

She smiles and I have to smile with her.

“Did you like the story?” I ask.

She keeps singing, sings a little louder and stronger as I take my Diet Pepsi outside and wait in the sun. It is warm, soon to be cold, but that’s in the future, maybe tomorrow, probably the next day and all the days after that. Today, now, I drink what I have, will eat what is left in the cupboard, while my mother finishes her quilt, piece by piece.

Believe me, there is just barely enough goodness in all of this.

Questions for Analysis

1. Why do you think Alexie gives his story the title “A Good Story”? What does he seem to say about what makes a story good? To get started, you could begin by looking at what the word *good* means in paragraph 15.
2. The purpose of art in society, the process of making art, and the education of the artist are common *motifs*, or themes, in stories and films. Who are the artist figures in this story? What connections exist between their art and the culture from which it stems? What do you learn about the purpose of art, its process, or the education of the artist? To get started, take a look at paragraphs 22–23.
3. Alexie grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, which is where he set this story. What impression of reservation life do you get from the story? How significant is the setting to its meaning? To get started, take a look at paragraph 28.