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Jackson Squared Equals What? The Ending of Sherman Alexie's "What You Pawn I Will Redeem"

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Were we to judge "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" by its final paragraph, we would likely say that it is a tale of joyous redemption. Jackson Jackson, the first-person narrator, has embarked on a "mission," a "quest" (*TLI* 189, 177), to repossess his grandmother's regalia, and as the story ends, he, after years living as a homeless drunk, dances into the street with the regalia, bringing all other activity in Seattle to a screeching halt. Pedestrians and drivers stop to bear witness to his redemption: to recognize, acknowledge, and validate it. In that moment, Jackson² has become the center of all. He has discovered that he *is* his grandmother. Jackson has always suspected that the cancer that killed his grandmother (and morphed into his family's spiritual illness) began to develop when her regalia was stolen. Now, though, as the story reaches its climax, the pawnbroker has decided he doesn't need the nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars he's so far insisted upon. He now declares that Jackson has *earned* the regalia and turns it over to Jackson for nothing. "Do you know how many good men live in this world?" Jackson exclaims to us in reaction, "Too many to count!" (*TLI* 194). And it's both with the joy that the pawnbroker's gesture has given him *and* the joy of possessing the regalia that he saunters into the street and dances.

Of course, it is not a one-paragraph story, and Jackson has shown us that up to that point he remains a semi-dysfunctional alcoholic. If his original quest to raise nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars remains the quest, he fails miserably. That monetary quest begins with Jackson spending the twenty dollars the pawnbroker has given him on "three bottles of imagination," after which Jackson falls asleep—an atypical couple of hours "earning," at best. At 4 PM, Jackson receives another contribution, free newspapers to sell from the Real Change organization, but he ends up throwing most of them in the trash, and he uses the five dollars he does

make in sales to buy cheeseburgers that he immediately vomits. Finally, he wins a hundred dollars in a lottery, again a questionable “earning,” but he immediately heads for a bar and buys shots for everyone there—and manages to continue drinking after his own money is gone, and ends up getting beaten up and spending the night asleep on railroad tracks. When he finally gets back to the pawnshop the next day, all he has is still just five dollars—though a different five dollars than what he started with the day before.

We’re left with an obvious question: If his alcoholism remains and his ability to function in his daily life remains uncertain at best, what is the exact meaning of the joy that he feels in the story’s final paragraph?

Eric Weinberger has called what Jackson experiences in the story’s final paragraph “a brittle, gentle epiphany,” one “that suggests that tomorrow it will all be the same again.” But if it is a brittle, gentle joy destined to disappear, it is a little difficult for me to understand how it can be a true epiphany. Or if it *is* a true epiphany—only one that allows the alcoholism and dysfunction to continue—are we left to wonder if yet another epiphany is necessary, and of what sort it may be?—or if, maybe, the story is meant to show a cruel reality from which there can only be brief and temporary relief? If the answer to the last question is *yes*, it would be, I think, a very sad story indeed.

In this paper, then, I would like to take a closer look at the story’s ending. My goal is not to present a definitive interpretation but only to present some reasonable ideas that might shed a little more light on where Jackson may be in his particular struggle. In the beginning of the story, Jackson tells us of his “mental problem.” He says he doesn’t think the term “asocial disorder” fits its very well. In telling us this, Jackson is perhaps discouraging us from thinking of his problems in terms of psychotherapy and pathology—but an attempt to discourage a reader from thinking a certain way can sometimes encourage him to do so. There are a myriad of issues to consider when interpreting the ending, but I think one of the most important ones does indeed relate to psychotherapy—more particularly, to a brand of psychotherapy that can be applied to the mental/spiritual struggles in Original People’s communities that have suffered historical trauma.

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In his 2006 *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and*

other Native Peoples, Dr. Eduardo Duran introduces the manner in which he learned, through years and years of counseling work within Native American communities, how best to combine his understanding of native cultures, including their metaphors, with his training in traditional Western psychology so as to provide the best possible healing. Here I'll introduce only the elements of his counseling that I feel are relevant to my discussion of Alexie's fiction, but Duran's book is a fascinating read for both the counseling professional and the curious layman. I recommend it strongly.

Duran begins by introducing the concept of "liberation discourse":

Liberation discourse involves taking a critical eye to the processes of colonization that have had a deep impact on the identity of Original Peoples; as a result a new narrative of healing will emerge. . . . Decolonizing is a process of liberation. In other words, we are going beyond colonizing, because colonizing is a dehumanizing activity. (1, 14)

Trauma that is intergenerational in nature—as in Jackson's case—can result, Duran says, in what he calls a "soul wound" (7), and "unresolved trauma becomes more severe each time it is passed on to a subsequent generation" (16). Furthermore, a counselor (a healer) imposing his own worldview upon a patient is an act that "can be understood as a form of violence against the patient's knowledge life world"—that is, "epistemic violence" (9).

To avoid this sort of violence—and doing more damage—the counselor should strive to address a patient's mental issues in a manner that the patient, given his worldview, might best understand them, and adjust both the counseling process and the language of the counseling process to make them as supportive as possible to the patient. In the end, the successful counselor will be able to employ a sort of "epistemological hybridism," which means, essentially, "being able to see the truth in more than one way" (14)—that is, being able to see the world in ways that the dominant culture typically does not.

Some of the key strategies Duran employs with his Native American patients are as follows.

1. "[D]ecolonizing the individual from the ideology of diagnosis and naming"

- (31). “Naming ceremonies are part of Native traditions and are used to assign spiritual identities” (31), Duran says, so diagnosing, and thus naming, a pathology can cause a patient to accept the diagnosis and the pathology as his true spiritual identity.
2. Recognizing the importance of ceremony in Native traditions. Inserting ceremony into the counselling process (42).
 3. Avoiding transference of stereotypical perceptions of Native Americans (30).
 4. Focusing on the healing of the soul or spirit, and the healer revealing to the patient that he has “a profound spiritual practice” of his own (2). Healers who feign spirituality “will be disingenuous and offensive to Native patients. Native patients often have a keen eye for charlatans” (2). “You cannot do for others what you haven’t done for yourself” (44). “The healer must be able to harmonize with the patient” (47).
 5. Emphasizing “centering.” Durant tells us that Black Elk, the Lakota visionary, “believed that the center of the universe was everywhere and that all people are at the center, with some actually realizing that they are at the center.” The healer, by being “in constant awareness of his own soul’s healing process,” can “assist the patient in finding her own center of the universe” (46).
 6. Treating dreams as living entities. Encouraging a patient to give gifts to dreams so that she can recognize that “the intervention resides in her” (42).
 7. Working with the vampire metaphor. Internalized oppression (identification with the aggressor), Duran says, “is a wound that, like the vampire bite, becomes embedded” in the victim as he experiences trauma and remains until “the victim is able to consciously explore the dynamics of the abuse and find meaning in the situation” (23).
 8. Realizing that too much analytical thinking can prevent a “patient from living in balance.” Understanding that *feeling* is essential for happiness. “You’re thinking too much,” Duran tells one patient. “You have to get in touch with the howl” (56-57). Durant suggests the patient, sometime when alone in his car, howl at the top of his lungs—a sort of barbaric yawp.
 9. Realizing that communal wounds often require a healing of the land (an “Earth therapy”) and that the return of objects that once “resonated with the Earth and community”—“baskets, ceremonial pipes, bows, arrows, ceremonial clothes”

can help revive the spirit of community and assist in developing new narratives (122).

10. Realizing that “[h]ealing on a community level [requires] long-term commitment and patience” (123).

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The first story in *Ten Little Indians*, “The Search Engine,” presents a number of characters who encourage us to consider the natures of therapy, healing, and redemption, and much of what the characters say and do illustrate many of Duran’s ideas—which makes a discussion of “The Search Engine” a good introduction to a more thorough look at Jackson’s state of mind in “What You Pawn I Will Redeem.”

“The Search Engine” begins with Corliss, a Spokane Indian who is majoring in English and a true lover of poetry, discovering an intriguing book of poems written by a Spokane man she has never heard of, Harlan Atwater. When the librarian tells her she’s the first person to have ever checked out the book, she immediately feels it is up to her to rescue Harlan from oblivion. She tries to reach him, and finally gets him on the phone, but he’s not much interested in talking to her. Eventually, though, she goes to Seattle, meets him face to face, and gets him to reveal some of his story to her. Interestingly, Corliss’ mother has told others that “Corliss had already been accepted to Harvard Medical School but had declined because she didn’t feel Harvard would respect her indigenous healing methods” (*TLI* 18). Thus, readers can see Corliss as a figure, a healer, capable of two types of thinking, one not so different from the traditionally-trained interns that Duran has encouraged to incorporate indigenous ideas into their treatment of Native Peoples.

When she first reaches Seattle, she shows Harlan’s address to a homeless person panhandling outside a McDonald’s and asks for directions, and the two of them end up having an extended conversation. This homeless man, an Economics professor who has lost his career, could almost be Jackson. He is only in slightly different circumstances and only in a slightly different state of mind. No sooner does Corliss lay eyes on him than she is aware of his mental problems: “This handsome homeless man,” she thinks, “was not defeated. He was still fighting his monsters, and maybe he’d someday win. If he won, he’d write an epic poem about his journey back from the darkness” (28).

“You give me directions out of the goodness of your heart,” she tells him. “And I’ll buy you lunch out of the goodness of my heart” (*TLI* 29). These words make the homeless man feel human and respected—she is “harmonizing” with him—and he opens up to her. “I am nuts,” he tells her. “Diagnosed and prescribed. [. . .] I got a pathological need for respect.” It’s a short explanation of his mental state, but introduces at least three problems in his spiritual journey—that is, if we follow Duran’s thinking: one, he has allowed himself to be diagnosed, maybe by himself, maybe by someone else; two, he has allowed himself to be named negatively, “nuts”; and three, he has allowed himself to see his problem, not as his soul needing to rid itself of the vampire’s venom, but as a pathological illness. There’s nothing wrong with wanting respect—but it’s a problem to see the need for respect as a pathological illness within oneself—at least, as Duran explains the healing process.

Corliss and the homeless man have a long talk—for all practical purposes, a counseling session—but in the end, when she leaves him to find Harlan, the homeless man can only say to her, “I’m sorry you have to leave me. But I understand. I was born to be left and bereft.” These words of self blame show how far he is from being healed.

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The poem of Harlan’s that first intrigued Corliss was one called “The Naming Ceremony.”

No Indian ever gave me an Indian name
So I named myself.
I’m Crying Shame.
I am Takes the Blame.
I am the Four Directions:
South, A Little More South,
Way More South, and All the Way South.
If you are ever driving toward Mexico

And see me hitchhiking, you’ll know me
By the size of my feet.
My left foot is named Self-Pity

And my right foot is named Born to Lose.
But if you give me a ride, you can call me
And all of my parts any name you choose. (*TLI* 6-7)

The poem is a clear indication of Harlan recognizing the damage that naming a pathology—“Take the Blame,” “Born to Lose”—can cause. And long ago, in the one interview with him published in a newspaper, Harlan said this: “There’s so much junk written about Indians, you know? So much romanticism and stereotyping. I’m just trying to be authentic, you know?” And this: “It’s all about ceremony. As an Indian, you learn about these sacred places” (*TLI* 22). These statements show that he was aware of the problem of the transference of stereotypical projections, and of the way in which ceremony can provide a sound environment for spiritual reflection, or as Duran would call it, a “healing container” (42).

Corliss is impressed by how enlightened and aware Harlan seemed to be as a young poet, so she is quite shocked to discover how much he has come to hate himself. Genetically, he was indeed a Spokane Indian, but he was “adopted out and raised by a white family” (*TLI* 40), and he’s consumed with guilt: his poems praising Native authenticity were, in themselves, unauthentic, he believes. “Indian is easy to fake,” he tells Corliss. “People have been faking it for five hundred years” (*TLI* 40).

Gradually, their candid talk takes on the tone of a therapy session: “Corliss reached across and took his hand. She hoped he wouldn’t interpret it as a sexual gesture. But he didn’t seem to notice or acknowledge her touch. He was too involved with his own story. He was confessing; she was his priest” (*TLI* 42). He feels particularly guilty about the persona he created to be loved by white readers:

“Even though my poems were just my imagination,” he said, “just my dreams and ideas about what it would’ve been like to grow up Indian, these white people, they thought my poems were real. They thought I had lived the life I was writing about. They thought I was the Indian I was only pretending to be. After a while, I started believing it, too. How could I not? They wanted me to be a certain kind of Indian, and when I acted like that kind of Indian, like the Indian in my poems, those white people loved me.” (*TLI* 42).

So though his public persona showed an enlightened Native, one aware of the dangers of transference of stereotypical projections, he himself became the victim of such projections—and in the process, his self, he felt, had been lost. The worst of the horror came on a night when he lied to a white female fan about his upbringing as an Indian, a night when he could only have sex with her after flipping her over on her stomach—so that she could not “see the deceit in his eyes” (*TLI* 46).

After that night, he could no longer believe he’d ever written poems. He’d only written “litter” (*TLI* 48). To a degree, his confessing to Corliss seems to benefit him. “Never pretend to be an Indian when you’re not,” he says, wiping away tears. Corliss thinks that Indians are always crying—but feels that at least Harlan was crying “in an original venue.” She thinks they may have created “an original ceremony” (*TLS* 49).

But Harlan resists talking any further. He is not willing to look inside himself any deeper, to examine the state of his soul. He talks of how he has spent the years driving a forklift. “It’s good money, honest work, I guess, as long as I don’t think too hard about what’s in the boxes, you know?” That’s where he stands: unwilling to open up “the boxes.” The narrator implies that Corliss knows “denial” when she sees it (*TLI* 52).

As the story ends, Corliss gives him a final chance to open up more, to talk not about what he’d felt about his phony identity, but about his real one—his authentic one. “What’s your real name?” she asks, giving him a chance to name himself positively. But to this question, he merely turns and walks away (*TLI* 52). He’s not even close to taking a good look into his soul—not even close to examining what attention it requires.

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Unlike the homeless man in “The Search Engine,” Jackson has refused to name himself in a negative way with a damaging pathology: “[I] went crazy. Of course, ‘crazy’ is not the official definition of my mental problem, but I don’t think ‘asocial disorder’ fits it, either, because that makes me sound like a serial killer or something” (*TLI* 169).

And whereas Harlan Atwater has shut himself up inside his home with his elderly parents, living in seclusion, only coming out to move about boxes filled with he knows not what, Jackson, though homeless and alcoholic, is social. He is, in

fact, clever and engaging and funny and fun for others to talk with.

And he is, from the beginning, keenly aware of the root of his problem, inter-generational trauma—a soul wound: “I am living proof,” he tells us, “of the horrible damage that colonialism has done to us Skins” (*TLI* 171).

What makes his situation more difficult than that of the two men in “The Search Engine” is his need to talk to white people. If Corliss was a type of healer, she was a Spokane Indian healer, so the homeless man and Harlan were both opening their hearts to a Native healer. Jackson, though, in his first-person narration, seems to want to be heard by non-Natives. His narration begins like this: “One day you have a home and the next you don’t, but I’m not going to tell you my particular reasons for being homeless, because it’s my secret story, and Indians have to work hard to keep secrets from hungry white folks” (*TLI* 169). Either he’s addressing white folks directly—or he’s worried about them getting hold of a transcript.

“Piece by piece, I disappeared,” he writes a little later, “And I’ve been disappearing ever since. But I’m not going to tell you any more about my brain or my soul.” These words show, first, that he is aware of his problem, he’s allowed his essential self to disappear, and second, that he is aware of two different possible psychological approaches to his troubles, one addressing the mind, and one addressing the soul. Were he to sit down with Duran and have Duran tell him that his problem was the lack of attention he’d given to his soul, it would not likely sound at all strange to him. His insistence, though, on not telling anymore about his brain or soul, shows he’s not quite ready to open up, especially not if the ones doing the listening are white.

A page later, as he’s winding down his “prologue” (my term) to his tale of the twenty-four-hour quest and just after he’s made his remark about the damage colonialism has done him, he repeats his unwillingness to open up his heart completely: “But I’m not going to let you know how scared I sometimes get of history and its ways. I’m a strong man, and I know that silence is the best way of dealing with white folks” (*TLI* 171). He is aware of historical trauma, but he is scared of examining it too closely, and he is virtually admitting, or at least suggesting that he *would* like to talk to white men, that he *needs* to but can’t trust them, and that his need to be “strong” may show he has absorbed the transference of a stereotyped

projection. After all, soon after, he'll declare that he, Junior, and Rose of Sharon may be drunks, but at least they are "warrior drunks" (*TLI* 171).

While he certainly can't control his drinking during his twenty-four-hour quest, he shows us, in several ways, that he can think positively. First, he can recognize the possibility of their actually *being* "possibilities." We see this at least three different times in the story. First, in the first scene in the pawnshop, Jackson observes the shop owner carefully and realizes, "He was thinking hard about the possibilities" (*TLI* 173). Then, there are two different accounts of the Aleuts he's spent time with down by the seaside entering the ocean and disappearing. Some Indians say they saw them wade into the water and drown. Others say the Aleuts "walked on the water and headed north." Jackson can only comment, "I don't know what happened to them." It seems to him that they could have chosen to do, either—or maybe neither. Finally, when Jackson returns to the pawnshop, he once again sees the owner contemplating the "possibilities." I'll have a more to say about this final example later. Here, I simply want to emphasize that in all three scenes, Jackson sees that endings are not pre-determined, that agents bring them about, that individuals can make choices that, at least sometimes, affect outcomes. Twice in the story, third parties (the newspaper man, the police officer) suggest that he could get the regalia back by reporting it as stolen, but Jackson has no ears for that. As absurd as it may be for him to think that he can raise nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars in a day, he wants to believe in his own agency. He has not completely given up on the notion that he can choose to pursue a self-directed goal. Thus he tells the newspaper man, "It's a quest now. I need to win it back by myself" (*TLI* 177).

A second positive tendency he shows is his willingness to feel an emotional attachment to the past and his traditional culture. Of course, the sudden appearance of his grandmother's regalia stirs his emotion and memories, but so do other things. When he walks down to the sea, he tells us that he "loved the smell of ocean water." "Salt always smells like memory," he says (*TLI* 174). And down by the sea, the Aleuts, Jackson says, "smell like salmon" (*TLI* 175). Alexie has used salt to invoke memory and purification rituals in many of his stories, including "Breakfast" and "Salt"; and he has showed us the importance of salmon as a sacred living creature in his stories as well, perhaps most notably in "The Toughest In-

dian in the World.”¹

He seems to be close to his traditional culture, too, in the scene in Big Heart’s, an Indian bar. There, he meets Irene and Honey Boy—the latter being male anatomically, but containing, Jackson judges, “eight or nine spirits”—that is, eight or nine gender orientations. The night turns into one of debauchery, there’s gross (heterosexual) sex in a toilet stall, and finally Jackson wakes up on the railroad tracks with a busted face. Despite all that, he has seen in Honey Boy the traditional “two-spirits,” and this seems to mitigate against the false “warrior” identity he’d at least momentarily assigned to himself earlier (*TLI* 182-184).

Of course he has, too, over the twenty-four hours, shown kindness and generosity to nearly everyone he’s felt needed it. He’s shared his lottery winnings with the Korean store clerk, he’s bought shots, though too many, for everyone in Big Heart’s, and he’s bought meals for all the Aleuts. He does not see himself as without value as a human being.

In all, Jackson is, though hungover, in a much healthier psychological state as he heads back to the pawnshop than either Harlan or the homeless Economics professor were when they had their talks with Corliss. Yet he has been overly absorbed in *thinking* his way through his crisis, and hasn’t allowed himself to *feel* the things he needs to—until he comes into possession of his grandmother’s regalia. Then he is able to fully engage his emotions. His dancing in the street with the regalia, though apparently *silently* dancing into the street with it, is totally uninhibited. It is his way, as Duran puts it, of howling.

The contrast between Jackson’s dancing scene and the scene in “The Search Engine” in which the then still employed Economics professor rants about his need for respect while standing in the middle of his university’s campus could not be starker. Here’s how the homeless professor describes to Corliss his experience:

“I kept shouting, ‘I want some respect! I want some respect!’ I shouted it all day and all night. And nobody gave me any respect. I was asking directly for it, and people just kept walking around me. Avoiding me. Not even looking at me. Not even acknowledging me. Hundreds of people walked by me. Thou-

¹ “Breakfast,” “Salt,” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” all appear in his latest collection of short stories, *Blasphemy*.

sands.” (*TLI* 31).

Eventually, one student does say she respects him, but her words do little to mitigate against the pain of the isolation he has experienced. He believes all have looked at him as if he were a raving lunatic—and they have. He doesn’t feel at all he’s placed himself at the center of the universe—to the contrary, he feels about as shunned by the world and as far from its center as a person can be.

Jackson’s dancing in the street is a completely different affair. Perhaps because the joy he’s feeling is authentic, he finally *does* feel centered—and thereby becomes the center of attention. He expresses none of the antagonism the Economics professor does—only love.

Outside, I wrapped myself in my grandmother’s regalia and breathed her in. I stepped off the sidewalk into the intersection. Pedestrians stopped. Cars stopped. The city stopped. They all watched me dance with my grandmother. I was my grandmother, dancing. (*TLI* 194)

No one, I don’t think, would say that Jackson is healed, but he has not allowed himself to be negatively named, has never lost an awareness of good in the world, and he has, in these last twenty-four hours, felt closer to salt, the salmon, and the two-spirits, all elements of his traditional home, and re-established a connection with ceremony, and perhaps begun to create the type of sacred space necessary to realize that his soul is not damaged, only in need of attention, that the pain he’s felt is the venom of a vampire and can be dispelled. And he has allowed his emotion, a howl, to speak louder, at least for a moment, than his analytical mind. He has felt, at least for a moment, himself as the center. Though no result is guaranteed, he seems ready to engage fully in a healing process in which he can dispel the venom, give his soul the attention it craves, and ultimately create a new narrative for himself.

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Actually, the ending of “What You Pawn I Will Redeem” is a little more complicated than I have suggested above. Two more points need to be considered. The first is the state of mind of the pawnbroker, for how Jackson believes he has been

evaluated by a white person is of crucial importance to him. The second is whether we're supposed to believe that the story really does end as Jackson tells us that it does—or whether the final visit to the pawnshop is all just a product of his imagination.

First, the state of mind of the pawnbroker. When he first encounters Jackson and first realizes that the regalia may rightfully belong to Jackson, he is not particularly eager to help undo the wrong done to Jackson's family—not if it means taking a loss personally. The pawnbroker says that giving the regalia back “would be the right thing to do” but that he “can't afford to do the right thing.” He says he'll drop a dollar off the price, “to make it fair,” but it's a meaningless sacrifice on his part—and giving someone back their own possession for 999 dollars is not exactly the fairest dealing there's ever been. He also tells Jackson and his friends that Jackson “could go to the cops” but they'd not likely believe a word he said, more or less expressing his willingness to exert a little white privilege in order to protect his personal investment. Finally, feeling a bit guilty, he gives Jackson twenty bucks, to get his quest going, but this as well cannot be seen as a particularly large personal sacrifice (*TLI* 173-174).

If Jackson needs to talk to a white person, then he needs to talk to a white person who can help him heal—and as Duran suggests, a good white healer cannot be one who quickly declines any personal responsibility for any historical trauma the patient is attempting to overcome .

If non-Native therapists are willing to deal with the soul wound, they also will have to be willing to acknowledge their role in a historical context. I have advised interns over the years to never, never try to disavow complicity by saying things like, “I wasn't there,” or “That's in the past.” (Duran 53-54)

In Alexie's story, the pawnbroker, in only taking a dollar off the price, seems to be disavowing personal responsibility. In telling Jackson and his friends that the police are not likely to believe them, he is metaphorically saying, “I wasn't there.”

But the story can be seen as twenty-four hours of soul searching not only on the part of Jackson, but on the part of the pawnbroker, too. And if the story is to be read literally, with the pawnbroker indeed deciding that Jackson *has* earned the

regalia despite not having raised any of the money he requested, the most logical conclusion is that the pawnbroker has spent the last twenty-four hours re-evaluating the nature of Jackson's plight, the historical plight of Native peoples—and his own personal connection to it. And if this is the case, then it's likely that Jackson can now see the possibility of a dialogue with the pawnbroker, a dialogue that he's desperate for, a dialogue, a counselling, that might help him dispel the vampire. In this case, it is still, by no means, the end of Jackson's therapy—really, only the beginning—but the comfort of a belief in a process to come is more than enough justification for the joy that Jackson experiences as the story ends.

And now the second issue, whether we're supposed to believe that the story ends as Jackson tells us that it does—or whether the final visit to the pawnshop is all just a product of Jackson's imagination.

As the twenty-four hours expires, Jackson heads back to the pawnshop—only he can't find it.

I looked for the pawnshop but couldn't find it. I swear it wasn't located in the place where it had been before. I walked twenty or thirty blocks looking for the pawnshop, turned corners and bisected intersections, looked up its name in the phone books, and asked people walking past me if they'd ever heard of it. But that pawnshop seemed to have sailed away from me like a ghost ship. I wanted to cry. Right when I'd given up, when I turned one last corner and thought I might die if I didn't find that pawnshop, there it was, located in a space I swore it hadn't been filling up a few minutes before. (*TLI* 193)

Not being able to find a small shop in a big city, one a person was at just recently, is not in itself so hard to believe—many of us have experienced much the same—but adding this long paragraph here, as the climax of the story approaches, seems to encourage readers to wonder if it *is* really there.

And when Jackson goes inside, the pawnbroker seems to him “a little younger.” This could be a hint that the change in the pawnbroker's attitude has made him look younger—or another clue that he is, really, only a figment of Jackson's imagination, “a ghost ship” in Jackson's mind, one that's always shifting in nature

and character.

If we do conclude that the ending only takes place in Jackson's mind, we can then go back to the beginning of the story and wonder if the whole quest, the whole twenty-four hours, has all been only a figment of his imagination. For Jackson makes a point of telling us at the beginning, too, that it is odd he's never noticed this pawnshop before—and that it is especially strange “because we Indians have built-in pawnshop radar” (*TLI* 171). If it's true that Indians have special radar, then either Jackson's radar is in disrepair—or the pawnshop only exists in his mind.

If we read the story in this way, the pawnshop only existing in his mind, then the true quest seems to be one for a dialogue with a white person as understanding and involved as the best of Duran's trained interns. But if that is so, then the joy that Jackson experiences at the end, too, only exists in his imagination, and we're left to wonder the odds, in his real life, of meeting a white “pawnbroker” willing not just to drop a dollar from a thousand-dollar price tag . . . but to look deep into the past, understand that what he has come into possession of was obtained through a process that he may not have dirtied personally but was dirty just the same—and give up the possession with disregard for his own personal financial loss.

In his review of *Ten Little Indians*, David Kipen writes that as “What You Pawn I Will Redeem” ends, Alexie is “fancydancing along the brink of every writer's perennial quandary: wanting to give his characters hope without giving his readers an easy way out.” If “his readers” are white, then Jackson's healing, ready as he may be for it, may depend on how ready his readers are to be good healers—“good” implying a willingness not to, from the very get-go, “disavow complicity.”

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