Student Sample

ENG 271

2 May 2019

The Secret of Cardboard-opoly

*A Lost Chapter Between “Because Russian Guys Are Not Always Geniuses” and “Remembering”in Sherman Alexie’s* The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

I couldn’t sleep much after my sister died.

Well, that’s not entirely true. I would fall asleep just fine, but then wake up Mom and Dad by screaming my lungs out. I kept having this dream where the trailer Mary died in was sitting, deflated, on a giant stove burner. The burner glowed red hot, and as the trailer heated, it expanded like a bag of Jiffy pop. But instead of delicious buttery corn kernels popping, I heard screams. Dozens of Indians trapped, screaming as the fire began to slowly consume the trailer. Over the sound of trapped Indians and the pop of flames, I heard Mary screaming. I thought she was screaming words, but I couldn’t make out the syllables. Not over the sizzle and crackle of her skin as it bubbled, pulling away from her flesh. That I could hear perfectly.

That’s pretty gross, right? But it’s not even the worst part. Then I was inside the trailer with her. It was trashed in there. The curtains hung ragged in the windows, their color so dulled by cigarette smoke that I could only guess they might have once been ivory. Empty beer cans littered the floor. I tried to take a step. The cans clinked together as I shuffled my feet. I took another step toward the bedroom, but a heavy layer of cans knocked against my shins.

She was definitely screaming something, and now I could clearly hear what it was.

Mary was screaming MY NAME.

“Junior!” she shrieked, frantic, pleading. “Junior, help me!”

I took another step, determined. I had a second chance. I could save my sister. I was the reason she had left the rez, and I couldn’t let her die. I couldn’t live with the guilt.

The light from the fire bounced off the empty beer cans, creating a silvery blue light. They were higher than my knees now. Still, I pressed forward. I was almost to the hallway. The bedroom door was on the left.

The pile of cans just kept growing. It was up to my waist now. I felt like I was wading through pudding, but after it’s been left out on the counter in the sun for awhile and has become a gloppy, congealed mess. It made me think of when we were kids and sometimes all we would have in the house is those little Jello packets of pudding mix that just need milk and heat. Before she moved down to the basement, Mary would make them for me when Mom and Dad were on a bender. I don’t know if it’s normal for pudding to eventually turn rock hard, but the way Mary used to make it, it would become inedible in an afternoon. It never made sense to me.

The cans were piled up to my chest now as I neared the bedroom door. I was swimming, swimming in a sickly sea of the very thing that has or is slowly killing everyone I love: my Grandmother. Eugene. My sister. Someday, my dad. Maybe Rowdy, if his dad goes too far one day. Or if he ends up like his dad. That’s why I wanted him to go to Reardan with me. Even if he hates me, I want him to have a fighting chance, too.

The door to the bedroom was open. Despite the fire raging around us, only the dim light of the moon illuminated the cramped space. I could see a double bed in the corner. I think it was a bed. It looked more like a charred piece of toast, the kind that popped out of a secondhand store toaster if you didn’t keep an eye on it.

A shadowed moved on the toast-bed. It rolled toward the side of the bed, slowly unfurling itself. I watched with horror as my sister, scorched and blackened, stood.

Her skin was almost completely gone; only tattered shreds hung from her seared flesh. She held her arms out wide. “I miss you, little brother,” she croaked with her fried vocal cords.

Now you get why I’d wake up screaming. Dreams about my dead sister trying to give me a hug aren’t much of a replacement for the sex-infused dreams I’d been having about Penelope before all this death happened.

The last time I had that dream, I decided I needed to do something about it. Grandma Spirit believed that we’re all connected, and that dreams have a purpose. Maybe Mary was calling to me. Maybe she needed something. Ghosts only hang around when something from their life is left unfulfilled, right?

So the next morning I went down to the basement to commune with Mary. I didn’t have a Uuija board, so I did it the old fashioned way: I called on her spirit, asking it to guide me to whatever it was that she wanted me to find. I called on Eugene and Grandma Spirit and all the other dead Indians I knew, too. I didn’t know if they would all answer, but I felt like I could use all the supernatural help I could get to help me figure out what Mary wanted.

To be honest I was kinda scared. I wanted Rowdy there with me, but was afraid to ask since we weren’t best friends anymore. If he tried to punch me again, this time he might not miss, and I didn’t really want to give him the opportunity for a second concussion. My hydro head is damaged enough already.

I thought I felt a little different after I asked the spirits for help—a little lighter, like I’d been sprinkled with fairy dust.

(Has an Indian ever played Peter Pan? Penelope would be a shoe-in for the part of Tinkerbell. Her long, milky legs would look great in that short fairy outfit.)

I took a deep breath, then began rummaging around. Mary hadn’t taken much with her when she left, and nobody could bring themselves to box up her things yet. My mother couldn’t even look at the basement door without bawling. Her eyes were red all the time now.

The place was a disaster. Empty bags of Cheetos littered the floor. Orange dust had been ground into the carpet by Mary’s bare feet. Clothes covered every surface. A desk in the corner sagged under the weight of romance novels. I tried not to think about how all she’d wanted was a life like she’d read about in these books. How her hunger for love and romance killed her.

The books were stacked as high as my head, hundreds of novels so dog-eared that she must have read them a dozen times each. I touched the crumbling paperback cover of one. I held it in my hand, flipped through the pages that Mary’s had touched. This is where she had escaped to in all the time that she’d spent down here. Alone, but not really alone.

I cocked my head to one side to read some of the titles. *Burning Fury. Summer Escape. Bucking Red Broncos.*

Yeeeechhhhh.

I set the novel—*All’s Fair in Love and Warrants*—back on top of the stack, hoping they wouldn’t all topple like a Jenga tower. I turned and surveyed the rest of the room.

“Come on, Mary,” I whisper-pleaded. “Tell me what I’m looking for.”

She didn’t respond. I beat around the basement some more. I picked up an old sweater and just held onto it for awhile, like a little kid holding a security blanket.

When I couldn’t find her scent on it, I set it back down and wandered some more.

 In one corner of the room, under a pile of old, half-finished school assignments, I found the board games we used to play. Our parents had been too broke that Christmas to buy us the real deal from Milton Bradley, so they’d made them out of cardboard. Some of the game pieces were made from cereal boxes. I used to cry when Mary wouldn’t let me be the Cardboard-opoly piece that had Tony the Tiger’s face on it.

“That cartoon tiger is for babies,” she would say. Sometimes she rolled her eyes so hard I wondered if she could see her brain. Maybe if she had one.

I eased the Cardboard-opoly box out from under the pile. It felt… heavy. I cleared some papers from the card table where Mary’s portable TV sat. I set the game on the table as I sat down.

When I lifted the lid, I knew then what it was that Mary had meant for me to find.

I lifted a notebook, holding it in my hands like some kind of holy relic. It looked like any normal notebook: 8”x 11”, spiral bound. It was thick, one of those five subject notebooks. The flimsy purple cover had the words **Mary’s Notebook! KEEP OUT!!!!** written across it in permanent marker.

I knew that when she was alive, she would have pummeled me for going through her things, and even though I knew she was dead, it still felt weird. Could a ghost pummel me? I wished I could ask Grandma Spirit. She would know.

But I knew Mary wouldn’t. She wanted me to see it.

I opened the cover to the first page. At the top was the title *Powwow Passion*. I laughed. This was Mary’s romance novel notebook!

Pages and pages were covered with Mary’s spidery, sprawling handwriting. I read every single word, drinking in her dream.

Reading sex scenes written by my sister should have made me barf, but it actually wasn’t weird. It actually kind of made me feel proud—her writing was really good. I sat there for hours, absorbing the entire text in one sitting. I turned page after page, engrossed, until her words gave way to blank pages.

I closed the notebook. And I cried. And then I hugged the notebook to my chest.

“Thank you, Mary,” I whispered as I wiped the snot running from my nose. When I was all cried out, I kissed the notebook, put it back in the box, and put the box back at the bottom of the game pile.

“Thank you,” I whispered again.

As I turned to climb back up the stairs, I felt the sensation of arms around me, like Demi Moore in that movie where her boyfriend’s a ghost. But this wasn’t some ghost dude who wanted to make spooky ghost love to me. I knew it was my sister saying goodbye.