Thomas Builds-the-Fire told his story to every other Skin on the Spokane Indian Reservation before he was twelve years old. By the time he was twenty, Thomas had told his story so many times all the other Indians hid when they saw him coming, transformed themselves into picnic benches, small mongrel dogs, a 1965 Malibu with no windshield. Eventually, Thomas could only find audience with the half-assed Indians, passed out behind the tribal trading post. Thomas leaned over, whispered his story to these Indians, who dreamt the words true and woke up hours later, rubbing their ears until they grew out of proportion.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire woke up at precisely 6:30 every morning, stood in front of his bathroom mirror and repeated his story, practiced the words again and again. *This is my small ceremony,* Thomas thought as he dressed, combed his hair into braids, washed his face. At 9:15 every morning, Thomas left his house and traveled to the post office on the hill, looking for some response to all his letters he mailed, an 8 ½ by 11 measurement of his story.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire wrote letters to congressmen, game show hosts, invited the president of the United States to his high school graduation. Every word was exact and essential.

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Thomas waited outside the post office, stamping his feet against the cold. He tried the door, still locked, peered through the front window, looking for Eve, the reservation postmaster. The clock on the wall inside the post office read 9:30. Thomas checked his watch, found he had the same time.

“You’re late, Eve,” he whispered, looked down the road he had traveled, the road leading down the hill into Wellpinit, the only town on the reservation.

Wellpinit. The HUD houses sat down in neat rows, the roads paved and straight, even aa few feet of cement sidewalk here and there, but the government surveyors had only guessed at the possible routes of travel, completely neglecting the politics of geography.

Sitting in the Powwow Tavern one Friday night, Thomas had listened to Simon explaining the politics of time, distance, and geography.

“You see,” Simon said, “there’s point A, and that’s where you are, and then there’s point B, and that’s where you’re supposed to be. So it’s how you get from point A to point B, how long it takes you to do it, and what you see along the way, that is politics.”

“I’m drunk now,” one of the Andrew brothers yelled out from the back of the bar,” and I plan on being drunk later.”

“My friends,” Simon said, “point A is drunk. Point B is drunker. That’s politics.”

Thomas smiled at his memory of Simon talking a good story, smiled more fiercely when he saw Simon come driving down the road in his pickup, weaving from one side of the road to the other.

Simon drove off the road, ran over a shrub, jumped a curb into the trading post parking lot, and parked directly behind Mary Song’s station wagon. Mary climbed out of her car, waving her arms and cussing so loud Thomas could hear her all the way up the hill at the post office.

Mary yelled, “I ain’t got time to wait for your crazy Indian ass. Get your truck out of the way.”

Simon jumped out of his truck, tipped his cowboy hat at Mary, and walked into the trading post. He walked like he spent his whole life riding a fat horse, so bowlegged he spent more time moving side-to-side than he did walking forward.

“Might as well drive like I walk,” Simon had explained to Thomas one night. “I wouldn’t want any Skins to think I was some stranger driving around town.”

Most days, Simon could be spotted in his Chevy pickup weaving his way down the reservation road. The tribal police just waved and shook their heads whenever Simon drove on by.

“I drive this way sober,” Simon said, “and the cops will never know when I’m driving drunk as a skunk.”

Thomas was still laughing to himself when Simon walked out of the trading post with a bag of groceries in one arm. Mary Song cussed some more as Simon tipped his cowboy hat to her again, jumped in his truck, backed up out of her way, kept on backing up, out of the trading post parking lot. Simon backed onto the main road, still driving in reverse, weaving back and forth, still backing up until Thomas could no longer see the pickup in the distance.

When Eve, the reservation postmaster, drove up the hill, Thomas was still laying on the ground, laughing, holding his stomach in pain. Eve stopped her car, looked at Thomas twitching on the ground and wondered for a moment if it was some kind of seizure. *No such luck*, she thought as Thomas sat up, wiping his eyes, and called out.

“Ya-hey,” he said. “You’re late this morning.”

Eve climbed out of the car, walked past Thomas without comment, and unlocked the front door of the post office. Thomas followed her inside, watched as she threw her purse and keys into a corner and flipped on the lights.

“Eve,” Thomas asked. “You got a few stamps I can have? I’m out.”

“No. I told you yesterday. Nothing is free anymore.”

Thomas looked around the post office, examining each detail. Eve watched his eyes scanning the room.

“Thomas, this place never changes. Why are you always checking it out like it was new?”

“First time I been here today. So it’s like starting all over.”

Eve walked up close to Thomas. She stood over a foot shorter, the top of her head barely reaching Thomas’ mid-chest.

“Well, Thomas, if it’s like starting all over, why don’t I answer all your questions before you ask the same damn things.”

Thomas stepped back, surprised at the knowledge in Eve’s voice.

“No,” she continued. “You can’t have a few envelopes, no bite out of my sandwich, no drink out of my Pepsi, no long walks in the moonlight, no dollar bills for wine, no nothing.”

Thomas found he had no voice as Eve turned back and busied herself with a large stack of U.S. Government mail: form letters, income tax returns, Indian Health Service Bulletins. THE AMERICAN INDIAN AND DIABETES. ALCOHOLISM AMONG THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF THE AMERICAS.THE IMPORTANCE OF VITAMIN C.

Thomas stared hard at the curve of Eve’s back, searching his mind for the words which would describe the movement of blouse over skin. Only one word came to his mouth: treaty. But he bit the word back, refusing any belief in promise.

“This isn’t right,” he said.

“What isn’t right?”

“This isn’t how the story is supposed to be.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking a story,” Thomas said, hoping Eve would remember the part she played.

Every morning, Thomas walked into the post office at 9:25 and Eve would look up from sorting mail.

Every morning, Thomas asked the same question: *Does Custer deliver the mail now, Eve? I’m tired of waiting.*

Every morning, Eve answered the same way: *I don’t write the letters, Thomas. Come back tomorrow.*

“This isn’t right,” Thomas repeated, leaned over the counter, into the air surrounding Eve.

“Thomas, are you feeling sick? Maybe you should go see a doctor. Go home and get some rest, you know?”

Home. Thomas searche3d his memory for that word, home. Somehow, he knew it was wrong, deviating from his story in such a way that the air reversed itself as it came into the lungs.

“Sometimes,” he said, “It’s very hard to breathe.”

“Listen, Thomas. How about I give you a ride to the clinic?”

“That’s not what I mean,” Thomas replied. Staggered toward the door.*This is not my story, he thought. I do not belong here.*

He walked outside, leaving Eve to the mail, traveled back down the hill to the trading post. He stood by the garbage dumpster, checked his watch.

“I’m running late this morning,” he whispered, drawing the attention of a black dog who ambled over and sat at Thomas’s feet.

“Ya-hey,” Thomas greeted the dog, “Buffalo Bill, my old friend, you’re also running late this morning.”

The reservation dog stared up at Thomas Builds-the-Fire, waiting to hear the story.

“Buffalo Bill, I remember many years ago when you were young and powerful and feared by all the Spokane Indians.”

Thomas closed his eyes and the story came to him: “Late at night, standing around the woodstove, my father showed me his scars, the souvenirs from Buffalo Bill. My grandfather would also lift up his pant leg and display the same twisted calf muscle my father possessed. *He doesn’t go for the kill,* my father said, *he wants to hurt you, to cripple you, and leave you with a permanent record of your trespasses and indiscretions.* Once, my father got down on all fours and growled deep in his chest. *This is how it happens,* he said and chased me from room to room, all our breath thick with whiskey and fear.”

Thomas opened his eyes and looked down at Buffalo Bill.

“Do you remember?” he asked the reservation dog.

Thomas closed his eyes again, the story continued: “I was ten years old, sitting on the powwow fence with all the other Indian boys, watching all the princesses walk by. *Ya-hey,* I called out to them but could not be heard over the fancydancers, the drums, the drone of stick game, and tires breaking bottles against sawdust. I shouted to the princesses until my throat was too hoarse and tender beyond pain.”

Thomas opened his eyes, kneeled down beside Buffalo Bill, he4ld the dog tightly by its ears.

“Buffalo Bill, you must remember the Spokane Indians never ate dog meat.”

The reservation dog shook free of Thomas, trotted over to the front door of the trading post and sat down next to the feet of Junior, the reservation autistic. Junior watched the automatic door open, close. He spent hours watching the door most days, more fascinated with the useless technology than autistically obsessed.

Thomas himself spend more than a few moments transfixed by the door, dissonant, like a missed step in a fancydance. All the Skins were still surprised when the door swung open on their approach. The door was a promise kept; the door was an instantly redeemable treaty.

“Simon,” Thomas said to himself, thought of his friend. “Point A is this side of the door. Point B is the other side of the door. So, the door is politics.”

Thomas smiled at his own small piece of wisdom, was still smiling when Simon swung his truck into the parking lot, still driving backward, and drove past the trading post into a utility pole.

Thomas, Simon, even Buffalo Bill and Junior, watched as the pole swayed slightly from side to side, gaining momentum like a reverse pendulum, back and forth in over-widening arcs, until gravity pulled it down to the ground.

Sparks flew as the live wires touched, crawling along the grass like blind snakes. Simon was out of his pickup, waddling as fast as he could away from the wires, sidestepping, hopping on one foot, skipping.

“Ya-hey,” Thomas yelled at Simon, “I didn’t know you were a fancydancer.”

Simon ran out of reach of the wires, stopped, and whooped.

“Thomas,” he asked, breathing hard. “What does this teach you?”

Thomas searched his mind, could not find this lesson to be learned anywhere in his story.

“Simon, I don’t know what this means.”

“It’s simple. Electricity is just lightning pretending to be permanent.”

Simon sat down hard on the ground, watched the eye-level fireworks dancing around his truck. Thomas did not understand Simon’s words. *This is not right,* Thomas thought, as he backed away from Simon, almost a stranger now.  
 “Ya-hey, Thomas. Sit down beside me and watch the show.”

Thomas shook his head, repeated Simon’s words to himself, could not recognize their meaning, confused the verbs with the color of Simon’s shirt.

*This is not my language,* Thomas thought as he turned to run but stopped as he saw Buffalo Bill walking down the road beside Junior.

“Buffalo Bill,” Thomas cried out. “You have not heard the rest of my story.”

The reservation dog did not look back and Thomas fell to his knees. He watched the manager of the trading post pushing at the automatic door, frozen shut, without electricity.

Simon also watched the manager sweating, straining against the inevitable. Simon started laughing, laughing so hard he never saw the tribal police cruiser pull into the parking lot.

“What the hell happened?” the tribal cop asked loudly as he climbed out of his car.

“Simon killed the utility pole,” the manager of the trading opst said between grunts, through the glass of the automatic door.

Simon stopped laughing when he heard his name. He looked up at the tribal cop with wide eyes. The tribal cop walked over to Simon, picked him up by his braids.

“Damn it, Simon,” the tribal cop yelled. “You been drinking too much again?”

“Some of us drink too much. Some of us don’t drink enough.”

Thomas put his forehead to the ground, his behind sticking up into the clear morning sky. Simon started to laugh when he saw Thomas kowtowing but the tribal cop silenced him with a left uppercut to the jaw, sending Simon’s upper plate into the air.

*This isn’t right, this isn’t right,* Thomas was chanting to himself when the tribal cop dropped Simon, unconscious, to the dust. Thomas was still chanting when the tribal cop walked over and picked him up by his braids.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” the tribal cop asked Thomas.

Thomas looked at the tribal cop, this face that did not belong in Thomas’s story. Thomas closed his eyes, invented a memory: “I was in fifth grade at the reservation school. Mrs. Aristotle was my teacher. Red hair, green eyes, she stood in front of the classroom, holding a pencil sketch I gave her as a gift. It was just a simple drawing of the tribal longhouse. *Class,* she said, *I want you all to take a look at some real talent.* I wanted to tell Mrs. Aristotle, to shout it in her face: *We are not the same color. We are not the same color.* She looked at me and she smiled, like she was giving me a gift instead of making me a sacrifice. *Thomas,* she said, *you have quite an eye for perspective for someone so young.* I pulled myself down into my chair, heard all the Skins in the classroom laughing, so I covered my head when they started throwing pencils, erasers, bottles of Elmer’s glue, a Big Chief Tablet paper airplane, and dreams. I looked up at Mrs. Aristotle and searched her face for recognition of her sins, some evidence of my possible rescue. She came to my desk, leaned over, and her blouse dropped forward until I could see her small, white breasts hanging down into her bra. I sat there and waited for something to change.”

Thomas opened his eyes, looked hard at the tribal cop.

“Is that all?” the tribal cop asked.

“It’s all I can remember.”

The tribal cop held Thomas off the ground with one hand while he made a fist with the other.

“I’m going to beat your ass, Thomas.”

Thomas closed his eyes, not in fright, but in the hope that he would find something familiar when he opened them again. He counted one, two, three, opened his eyes and saw Eve hanging off the tribal cop’s arm.

“Let him go, let him go,” Eve screamed, holding tight to the tribal cop, distracted long enough for Thomas to break free and run.

Thomas broke into an easy stride. *Relax, relax,* he told himself, *breathe through your nose.* The tribal cop threw Eve to the dirt and started after Thomas.

“Thomas,” he yelled, “get your Indian ass back here.”

Eve sat on the ground, watched the tribal cop chase Thomas out of the trading post parking lot, up the hill toward the post office.

“That’s my post office,” she yelled, jumping to her feet and started after Thomas and the tribal cop. *Relax, relax,* she told herself, *breathe through your nose.*

Thomas was halfway up the hill when he checked his watch: 10:30. He looked behind him and watched Eve run past the tribal cop.

“That’s my damn post office,” she yelled, kept yelling as she gained ground on Thomas. They skidded to a stop at the front door of the post office simultaneously. Eve opened the door, Thomas ran through, Eve followed him closed and locked the door.

Thomas bent over, his hands on his knees, dizzy. *Breathe deep*, he told himself.

Eve looked out the window just as the tribal cop made it to the top of the hill and slumped against the front door of the post office.

*Breathe deep,* the tribal cop told himself, *breathe deep.*

Thomas stood straight, looked around the post office, examined each detail. Everything was still the same here.

“Eve,” he asked. “You got a few stamps I can have? I’m out.”

Eve looked at Thomas, couldn’t believe he was trying to start the morning at the very beginning.  
 “Thomas,” she said. “Get your head out of your ass. The tribal cop is right outside the damn door and when he catches his breath, he’s going to beat the crap out of you.”

Thomas felt a sudden, sharp pain in his head. He pressed his hands tightly against his skull, wanting to keep his story from escaping, expanding the walls. *This is not right,* he thought, *my story is never supposed to change.*

Eve touched Thomas’s arm and the usual static rose along the skin. She took him into her arms.

“Thomas do you need a doctor? Do you need help?”  
 Thomas closed his eyes and sank to the floor, pulling Eve down with him.

“This isn’t my story,” he said. “This isn’t my story.”

Eve was still holding Thomas when the tribal cop started pounding on the front door.

“Thomas,” the tribal cop yelled. “Open the door, I got you surrounded.”

Thomas jumped to his feet, sent Eve sprawling.

“Get the hell out of here,” Thomas yelled back. “I’ve got a gun and I might use it.”

The tribal cop started laughing, laughed until three other tribal cops pulled up in their cruisers. They all threw open their doors and crouched behind them, revolvers drawn, arms propped in open windows.

“Put those things away,” the tribal cop yelled to his newly arrived partners. “You ain’t the reservation SWAT team.”

Thomas looked quickly out the window, saw the other tribal cops and dropped to the floor.

“Thomas,” someone said through a bullhorn. “We know you ain’t got a gun, come on out.”

“Maybe I got the idea of a gun,” Thomas yelled back. “And that’s just as good.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Eve asked Thomas.

“I’m talking a story.”

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We interrupt regularly scheduled programming to bring you this special live report.

“In Wellpinit, Washington, the Spokane Tribal Police have surrounded the United States Post Office where Thomas Builds-the-Fire, age 35, an enrolled Spokane Indian, has allegedly held Eve Ford, age 36, hostage for over 8 hours with the idea of a gun.

“I have with me Tribal Police Chief David WalksAlong. Chief WalkAlong, how would you assess this situation?”

“Well, we’re worried about what Thomas might think of next. He’s always had a very good imagination.”

“Has there been any communication with Builds-the-Fire?”

“Well, negotiations have been pretty much limited to possible changes in the weather, the cost of a stamp, and the politics of time.”

“What exactly is the politics of time?”

“You see, Thomas started this morning at point A, and it took him about 9 hours to get where he is now, which is point B. What Thomas wants is to get rid of all that time in between point A and point B. You know, start the whole damn day at the beginning.”

“Thank you, Chief WalksAlong. As you can see, the situation here is very inexact. Officials at the Bereau of Indian Affairs have declined comment. This is Andy Jackson reporting live from Wellpinit, Washington.”

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The post office was cold and dark. Thomas wanted to start a fire with junk mail but Eve stopped him.

“That’s a federal offense,” she said, “and you’re in enough trouble already.”

She lay on the floor, wrapped in a mail bag, while Thomas sat with his back to the door, alternately closing and opening his eyes.

“Why do you do that with your eyes,” Eve asked.

“Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve done that with your eyes.”

“I see better with my eyes closed. But I don’t like much of what I see so I have to keep opening them to let in good light.”

“So, tell me what you see now?”

Thomas closed his eyes, a new story came to his mouth: “When I was a baby, so much a baby I couldn’t walk or talk, my head started to grow. Only my mother could see it happening, knew it was growing, but the doctors said *No, it was a mother’s imagination growing.* My mother measured the size of my skull every day; it grew two inches in one week. She said my head was visibly growing. Each second became an explosion of possibilities. My mother read all the medical journals, stole textbooks from the Indian Health Service Clinics, and watched THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC television specials. She found out some animals have to keep eating continually, grind their teeth down endlessly. *The teeth will keep growing,* my mother said, *if the animals don’t grind their teeth down, they will grow into the brain and kill.* My skull was expanding, pushing outward, all the while changing my hearing and my vision, even changing the shape of my teeth. I was born with dreams, lies, lust, all impossibly large, filling my mind and spilling out into the floor.”

Thomas opened his eyes, looked across the room at Eve.

“Is that true?” she asked.

“Simon explained truth to me,” Thomas said. “If there’s a tree in the distance and you run to get there, run across the grass with all your heart, and make it and touch the tree, press your face against the bark, then it is all true. But if you stumble and fall, lose your way, move to the city and buy a VCR and watch cowboy movies all the time, then nothing is true.”

Eve and Thomas remained silent, silent, until David WalksAlong spoke through the bullhorn.

“Thomas, we don’t think you have the idea of a gun at all. We’re giving you ten seconds to get your ass out here or we’re coming in.”

“They’re calling my bluff,” Thomas said, stood, faced the door. “I better give myself up.”

“No,” Eve said. “They’ll hurt you. They think you’re crazy.”

“What choices do I have?”

“I don’t know. Tell them you have the idea of forgiveness, of survival, of something.”

Thomas reached out for the door handle. Eve stood up to stop him but he waved her back.

“Eve, there’s something about my story no one has ever heard. No one ever let me finish.”

“What is it?”

“A long time ago, my vision animal came to me. He limped to me on three legs, carrying the fourth up close to his chest. He asked for a drink of water but I only had whiskey. He asked for deer jerky but I only had commodity cheese. He looked at me and said, *Thomas, you don’t have a dream that will ever come true.* I’ve been waiting all these years for someone to tell me different.”

Eve watched Thomas walk out the door, off government property, listened to the spaces between sound. *It isn’t necessary,* she wanted to say, *it isn’t necessary.*