

Analysis of "this is
what it means to say
phoenix, arizona" by
sherman alexie ess...



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In Sherman Alexie's "This is what it means to say Phoenix, Arizona" a man named Victor finds out that his father has passed away. Being next of kin, Victor is responsible for gathering his father's assets together, which requires him to make an out of town trip. In order to accomplish this Victor needs help. This help comes from the town outcast, Thomas Builds-the Fire. Victor and Thomas were childhood best friends but as they grew older, Victor turned his back on the one that always looked out for him. A trip to gather his father's remains turns into a journey of reviewing his life and choices.

Shortly after losing his job with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Victor is informed of his father's death. Although they haven't had contact in years, Victor is left responsible to claim the cremated remains as well as his father's truck and savings account. The remains are in Phoenix, Arizona and Victor lives on an Indian Reservation near Spokane, Washington. The trip is over 2000 km and Victor has no money to get there. He turns to the tribal council for financial assistance. Unfortunately all they will give him is \$100.00. This isn't near enough to make it.

Almost everyone on the reservation is financially struggling, so borrowing money is not an option. With no one to lend him the funds required, Victor knows he needs a miracle. While at the reservation post office, to cash his \$100.00 cheque, Victor spots Thomas-Builds-the-Fire standing by a rack of magazines. Thomas is the town outcast and he helps to fulfill that 'role' by constantly talking to himself. Thomas is always philosophizing and trying to share his 'visions' with anyone willing to listen. Unfortunately for Thomas, people stopped listening years ago. Yet even with no one listening, he keeps on speaking.

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Victor and Thomas were childhood friends and Victor can remember Thomas story telling from the start. When the boys were seven, Thomas predicted that Victor's father would one day abandon his family. He was right. As the boys grew older, Victor turned his back on Thomas and started to partake in the ostracizing and ridiculing of his once best friend. Thomas approaches Victor and offers his condolences. He tells Victor that he has money to lend him so he can make it to Phoenix. The only condition is that Victor must take Thomas with him. Victor tells Thomas that he can't accept his money and that they aren't even friends.

Thomas replies " I didn't say we were friends. I said you had to take me with you. " (249). Victor says he'll think about it and goes home. When he arrives home, he is flooded with memories. After heavy consideration, Victor knows the only way he'll be able to claim his father's remains is to borrow the money from Thomas. He agrees to take Thomas along for the trip and the two men catch a plane to Phoenix, Arizona. Throughout the story Victor replays moments in his mind. Times when he and Thomas were best of friends. Times when he loved listening to Thomas' visions about life and stories with hidden lessons.

Times when Thomas was there for him and even a time when Thomas helped to save his life. The good memories turn to visions of Victor turning his back on his best friend. Victor is faced with the reality of his cruel actions and choices. Of how he chose to go with the rest of the ' pack' and attack the ' weak' one. Victor recalls being drunk when he was fifteen and beating up Thomas for the fun of it. How all of the other boys on the reservation just

stood and watched and how he may have continued beating Thomas till death if an elder wouldn't have broken it up.

Victor wonders what his motivation for acting this way was. Is it just what kids do? Pick on the underdog, make fun of the ones who don't fit in? Regardless of why, Victor is left feeling sick to his stomach, the reality of his actions haunting him. He can't believe that the person he let down the most, is the one who offered to help him. Victor apologizes to Thomas for beating him up and Thomas shrugs it off by replying " Oh, it was nothing. We were just kids and you were drunk. " (252). Victor can't understand how Thomas can be so forgiving and why he would help him after the horrendous way he has treated him.

The men arrive at Victor's father's trailer and Victor gathers anything of value. Thomas recalls memories of Victor's dad. Victor is surprised that Thomas would remember anything, especially since his own memories of his father are vague. Thomas begins to tell a story about a vision he had when he was thirteen. The vision told him to go to the Spokane waterfalls and wait for a sign. Thomas walked all day to reach the falls and when he finally made it he stood, waiting. Victor's father showed up and asked him what he was doing. When Thomas explained, Victor's dad lead him away from the falls and took him for dinner.

Then he took Thomas home. Thomas and Victor's father made an agreement. Victor's father would not tell of the Thomas' trip to the falls and in return he asked Thomas to always look out for Victor. Victor finally understands why Thomas is helping him. Thomas tells Victor that he was

angry for a long time because he thought his vision was wrong because he never got the sign he was waiting for on the falls. Later he realized that Victor's dad was his sign. The sign was to "take care of each other" (254). At the end of this story Victor and Thomas go their separate ways.

Victor knows that it is unlikely they will become friends again, even if renewing their relationship is the right thing to do. Victor feels that their lives are too different and figures that even if it is cruel and unfair, that its just the way life is. Thomas' character symbolized an important lesson. That no matter what has happened in the past, it is important to move forward and to help others. That just because someone treats you in a negative manner doesn't mean you have to treat them the same way. That if you show someone forgiveness and compassion, perhaps it will help them to one day do the same for someone else.