Do You Know Where I Am? -- A short story by Sherman Alexie

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| **SHARON AND I** were college sweethearts at St. Jerome II University in Seattle, or as it is affectionately known, St. Junior's. We met at the first mixer dance of our freshman year and soon discovered we were the only confirmed Native American Roman Catholics within a three-mile radius of campus, so we slept together that inaugural night, in open defiance of Pope Whomever, and kept sleeping together for the next three years. It was primary love: red girl and red boy on white sheets. Sharon was Apache and I was Spokane, but we practiced our tribal religions like we practiced Catholicism: We loved all of the ceremonies but thought they were pitiful cries to a disinterested God. My white mother, Mary, bless her soul, raised me all by herself in Seattle because my Indian daddy, Marvin, had died of stomach cancer when I was a baby. I never knew him, but I spent half of every summer on the Spokane Reservation with his mother and father, my grandparents. My mother wanted me to keep in touch with my tribal heritage, but mostly I read spy novels to my grandfather and shopped garage sales and second-hand stores with my grandmother. The reservation felt ordinary and magical at the same time. In Seattle, my mother was a corporate lawyer for old money companies and sent me to Lakeside School where I was a classmate of Bill Gates and Paul Allen, who have become the new money kings of the world. Sharon went to St. Therese's School for Girls. Her parents, Wilson and Pauline, were both architects; they helped build three of the tallest skyscrapers in downtown Seattle. If Zeus ate a few million pounds of glass, steel, and concrete, his offal would look something like those buildings. However fecal, those monstrosities won awards and made Wilson and Pauline very popular and wealthy. They lived in a self-designed home on Lake Washington that was lovely and tasteful in all ways except for its ridiculously turquoise exterior. I don't know whether they painted the house turquoise to honor the sacred stone of the Southwest or if they were being ironic: *Ha! We're Apache Indians from the desert and this is our big blue house on the water! Deal with it!* Sharon and I were Native American royalty, the aboriginal prince and princess of Western Washington. Sure, we'd been thoroughly defeated by white culture, but dang it, we were conquered and assimilated National Merit Scholars in St. Junior's English Honors Department. Sharon and I were in love and happy and young and skinny and beautiful and hyperliterate. We recited Shakespeare monologues as foreplay: *To be or not to be, take off your panties, oh, Horatio, I knew him well, a fellow of infinite jest, I'm going to wear your panties now*. All over campus, we were known as Sharon-and-David-the-Bohemian-Indians. We were inseparable. We ate our meals together and fed each other. Risking expulsion for moral violations, we sneaked into each other's dorm rooms at night and made love while our respective roommates covered their heads with pillows. Sharon and I always tried to take the same classes and mourned the other's absence whenever we couldn't. We read the same books and discussed them while we were naked and intertwined. Oh, Lord, we were twins conjoined at the brain, heart, and crotch. I proposed to Sharon on the first day of our senior year, and she accepted, and we planned to secretly elope on the day after our graduation. IN JUNE, THE DAY before graduation, Sharon and I were taking one last walk along the path beside the anonymous creek that ran through the middle of campus. We were saying good-bye to a good place. Overgrown with fern and blackberry thickets, the creek had been left wild and wet. "Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet," I said. "Gerald Manley Hopkins is the gent," said Sharon. We were playing "Name the Poet," a game of our own invention. "Yet and gent," I said. "A clumsy rhyme, don't you think?" "You stink," she said and laughed too loudly. Her joy was always rowdy, rude, and pervasive. I laughed with her and pulled her close to me and pressed my face into her hair and breathed in her scent. After the first time we'd made love, she'd said, *Now I know what you smell like, and no matter what else happens to us, I'm always going to know what you smell like.* "Hey," I said as we walked the creek. "How about we climb into the bushes and I get you a little wild and wet?" We kissed and kissed until she pulled away. "Do you hear that?" she said. "What?" "I think it's a cat. Can you hear it meowing?" I listened and heard nothing. "You're imagining things," I said. "No, it's a cat. I can hear it. It sounds pitiful." "There must be a hundred cats around here. City cats. They're tough." "No, it sounds hurt. Listen." I listened and finally heard the faint feline cry. "It's down there in the creek somewhere," she said. We peered over the edge and could barely see the water through the thick and thorny overgrowth. "I'm sure it's just hunting rats or something," I said. "It's OK." "No, listen to it. It's crying. I think it's stuck." "What do you want me to do? It's just a dumb-ass cat." "Can you go find it?" I looked again at the jungle between that cat and me. "I'd need a machete to get through there," I said. "Please," said Sharon. "I'm going to get all cut up." "All in green went my love riding," she whispered in that special way, "on a great horse of gold into the silver dawn." "Cummings wrote the poem, and I'm in love and gone," I said and made my slow way down the creek side. I didn't want to save the cat; I wanted to preserve Sharon's high opinion of me. If she hadn't been there to push me down the slope, I never would have gone after that cat. As it was, I cursed the world as I tripped over ferns and pushed blackberry branches out of way. I was cut and scraped and threatened by spiders and wasps, all for a dumb cat. "It's like *Wild Kingdom* down here," I said. "Do you see him?" she said, more worried about the cat. I could hear the love in her voice. I was jealous of that damn cat now! I stopped and listened. I heard the cry from somewhere close. "He's right around here," I said. "Find him," she said, her voice choking with fierce tears. I leaned over, pushed aside one last fern, and saw him, a black cat trapped in blackberry branches. He was starved, too skinny to be alive, I thought, but his eyes were bright with fear and pain. "Man," I said. "I think he's been caught in here for a long time." "Save him, save him." I reached in, expecting the cat to bite or claw me, but he remained gratefully still as I tore away the branches and freed him. I lifted and carried him back up the bank. He was dirty and smelly and I wanted all of this to be over. "Oh, my god," said Sharon as she took him from me. "Oh, he's so sad, so sad." She hugged him and he accepted it without protest. "What are we going to do with him?" I asked. "I don't know." "We can't keep him," I said. "Let's just let him go here. He's free now. He'll be OK." "What if he gets stuck again?" "Then it'll be natural selection. Come on, he doesn't have a tag or anything. He's just a stray cat." "No, he's tame, he's got a home somewhere." She stared the cat in the eyes as if he could tell us his phone number and address. "Oh, wait, wait," she said. "I remember, in the newspaper, last week or something, there was a lost cat ad. It said he was black with white heart-shaped fur on his belly." Sharon had a supernatural memory; she could meet a few dozen new people at a party and rattle off their names two days later. During an English Department party our sophomore year, she recited by memory 73 Shakespeare sonnets in a row. It was the most voluminous display of erudition any of us had ever witnessed. Tenured English professors wept. But I was the one who enjoyed the honor and privilege of taking her home that night and making her grunt in repetitive monosyllables. Beside the creek, Sharon gently turned the cat over and we both saw the white heart. Without another word, Sharon ran back to her dorm room and I followed her. She searched for the newspaper in her desk, but couldn't find it, and none of her floormates had a copy of the old paper either, so she ran into the basement and climbed into the dumpster. I held the cat while she burrowed into the fetid pile of garbage. "Come on," I said. "You're never going to find it. Maybe you imagined the whole thing. Let's just take him to the shelter. They can take care of him." She ignored me and kept searching. I felt like throwing the cat into the wall. "This is it," she said and pulled a greasy newspaper out of the mess. She flipped to the classifieds, found the lost cat ad, and shouted out the phone number. She jumped out of the dumpster, grabbed the cat, and ran back to her room and quickly dialed. "Hello," said Sharon over the telephone. "We have your cat. Yes, yes, yes. We found him by the creek. At St. Junior's. We'll bring him right over. What's your address? Oh, god, that's really close." Sharon ran out of the dorm; I ran after her. "Slow down," I called after her, but she ignored me. Maybe Sharon wasn't a good Apache or Catholic, but she was religious when she found the proper mission. We sprinted through a residential neighborhood, which may or may not have been a good idea for two brown kids, no matter how high our grade point averages. But it felt good to run fast and I dreamed about being a superhero. Fifteen minutes later and out of breath, Sharon knocked on the front door of a small house. An old couple opened the door. "Lester," shouted the old man and took the cat from Sharon. The old woman hugged the man and cat. All three cried to each other. "How'd you find him?" asked the old man, weeping hard now and barely able to talk but unashamed of his tears. "He's been gone for a month." "I heard him crying," I said (I lied) and stepped into the doorway. Sharon stood behind me and peered over my shoulder. "Oh, thank you, bless you," said the woman. "I pulled him out of some blackberry thorns," I said. "And then I remembered your ad in the newspaper, and I found the paper in the garbage, and I called you, and here I am." The old man and woman hugged me, holding the cat between us, all of us celebrating the reunion, while Sharon stood silently by. I think I lied because I wanted to be briefly adored by strangers, to be remembered as a handsome and kind man, a better man, more complete, even saintly. But it was Orwell who wrote, "Saints should be always judged guilty until they are proved innocent." All during this time, Sharon never spoke. I can only guess at her emotions, but I imagine she was shocked and hurt by my disloyalty. And standing in the presence of such obvious commitment between two people and their damn cat, she must have lost faith in me, and more importantly, in herself. "How can we ever repay you?" asked the old woman. "Nothing," I said. "We need nothing." "Here, here," said the old man as he opened his wallet and offered me a 20. "No, no," I said. "I don't need that. I just wanted to be good, you know?" He forced the money into my hand; I accepted it. "You're a good man," said the old woman. I shook my head, took Sharon's hand, and walked away, leaving those grateful strangers to their beloved pet. "Why did you do that?" Sharon asked as we walked. "I needed to," I said. That was the best answer I could give her. It wasn't enough. "You lied to me, you lied to them, and you took their money," she said. "How could you do that?" "I don't know," I said. Sharon broke away from me and ran. I DIDN'T SEE her that night as I got ready for graduation, and I didn't see her the next morning. "Where's Sharon?" asked my mother as she adjusted my cap and gown. "She's with her parents," I said, which was a true statement, I suppose, but hardly close to the truth. I went through the ceremony alone; Sharon went through the ceremony alone; we sat 10 chairs apart. The day after graduation, Sharon was still missing. I didn't know where she was. When my mother asked me about Sharon's absence, I said she was on a spiritual retreat. "One month of silence," I said, lying to my mother--to another woman who loved me. "After a big event, like a graduation or birth, the Apaches leave for a month. It's an Apache thing." "I wish I could do that," she said. "I think everybody should do that. Make it a law. Once a year, everybody has to be silent for a month. We'll all rotate, you know? You have to be quiet during your birth month." "It's a good idea, Mom, I'm sure it would go over well." "Sarcasm is a sin, honey." After another day of unceremonial silence, I'd assumed Sharon had left me forever, and I finally confessed my fears to my mother. "Mom," I said. "I love Sharon and I destroyed her." Was I overreacting to Sharon's overreaction? I'd told such a small lie, had taken credit and reward for such a small act of heroism. But then I wondered if Sharon had always had her doubts about my character, and perhaps had always considered me an undependable braggart. What if she'd been gathering evidence against me all along, and I'd finally committed the last unpardonable crime? "You have to go find her," my mother said. "I can't," I said, and it was true and cowardly. My mother turned away from me and cried while she fixed dinner. Later that night, while she washed dishes and I dried, my mother told me how much she still missed my father. "He's been gone 22 years," she said. "But I can still feel him right here in the room with us. I can still smell him, his hair, his skin." My mother didn't call my father by name because she wanted the dead to stay dead; I wanted to learn magic and open a 24-hour supermarket that sold resurrection and redemption. The next morning, Sharon came to see me. I was so grateful for her presence that I had to lean against the wall to keep from falling down. My mother hugged Sharon until they both cried. Then Sharon asked my mother to give us some privacy. After Mary left, Sharon took my face in her hands. "You're a liar," Sharon said. "I'm going to marry a liar." I didn't want to ask her why she came back. We were so fragile I worried that one wrong word could completely break us. FOR THE NEXT 39 years, we lived as wife and husband, as the mother and father of four kids (Sarah, Rachael, Francis, and Joshua Marvin) who suddenly grew into adults and became wives and husbands and mothers and fathers. During our long marriage, Sharon and I buried her mother and father and my mother, and all of our grandparents and many of our aunts, uncles, and cousins. I covered sports and reviewed movies for the local alternative weekly while Sharon ran her own coffee shop and wrote sonnets she never published. We paid our taxes, owned a modest home, and made love an average of three times a week. We didn't have nearly as much money as our parents, and that could be viewed as our failure, but we felt successful. We weren't triumphant, by any means, but we lived a good and simple life, and I often wondered if I deserved it. And all during those years, at every house party, group dinner, family gathering, and company picnic, Sharon told the story of the lost cat. "My husband, the liar," she always called me. At first, she told the story to hurt me, then she told it out of habit, and then she told it because she'd turned it into a wildly funny and exaggerated adventure: *And then he fell in the creek!* She loved to make people laugh, and so they laughed at my small sins. I wanted the laughter to absolve me, but I'm not sure if that was its purpose. I never asked to be forgiven; Sharon never offered her forgiveness. We never talked about the lost cat in private; it was our most public secret. For my 50th birthday, Sharon and the kids all pitched in together and gave me a T-shirt that read "LOST CAT" on the front and "DO YOU KNOW WHERE I AM?" on the back. I laughed and wore that shirt as pajamas. For two years, Sharon fell asleep next to me wearing that shirt. "Oh, Lord," I said to Sharon on the day I finally tossed that ragged T-shirt into the trash. "With every new day comes a new ceremony, a new monument to our love and pain." "Who wrote that?" she asked. "I did." "It's free verse," she said. "I hate free verse." We laughed and kissed and made love and read books in bed. We read through years of books, decades of books. There were never enough books for us. Read, partially read, and unread--our books filled the house, stacked on shelves and counters, piled into corners and closets. Our marriage became an eccentric and disorganized library. Whitman in the pantry! The Bront� sisters in the television room! Hardy on the front porch! Dickinson in the laundry room! We kept a battered copy of *Native Son* in the downstairs bathroom so our guests would have something valuable to read! How do you measure a marriage? Three of our children still lived in Seattle and taught high-school English, history, and Spanish, respectively, while the fourth managed a homeless shelter in Portland, Ore. Maybe Sharon and I had never loved each other well enough, but our kids were smart and talented and sober. They made less money than we did, as we made less than our parents did. We were going the wrong way on the social class map! How glorious! Every Sunday night, we all gathered for dinner (Joshua drove up from Portland with his partner, Aaron, and their son) and told each other the best stories of our weeks. We needed those small ceremonies. Our contentment was always running only slightly ahead of our dissatisfaction. Was it enough? I don't know. But we knew enough not to ask ourselves too often if it was enough. We knew to ask ourselves such questions only during daylight hours. Oh, Lord, we fought hard for our happiness and sometimes we won. And over the years, we won often enough to develop a strong taste for winning. AND THEN SUDDENLY and mortally, Sharon and I were old. On her 61st birthday, surrounded by her husband, daughters, sons, and six grandkids, Sharon blew out the candles on her cake, closed her eyes, and said, "I want to be happy 51 percent of the time!" One year later, after chemotherapy, radiation, organic food, acupuncture, and tribal shaman, Sharon lay on her deathbed in Sacred Hope Hospital. Our children had left their children to gather around Sharon, and it was goodbye, Rachael! Goodbye, Sarah! Goodbye, Francis! Goodbye, Joshua! She asked our children to give us some privacy. They cried and hugged her and left us alone. "I'm going to die soon," Sharon said. "I know," I said. "I'm OK with it." "I'm not." "Because I love you so much," I said, "I would fist fight Time to win back your youth." "You're a liar," she said and smiled, too tired to laugh. "I lied to you once," I said. "But I haven't lied to you since." "Is that the truth?" "Yes," I said, and it almost was. Sherman Alexie is the writer and director of the highly independent The Business of Fancydancing*, which is playing in four or five theaters at any given moment. He's written a bunch of books of stories and poems and two novels. He lives with his family in Seattle.* |