By Sherman Alexie

**Fixed Income**

When I landed the McDonald’s job, I was surprised to learn that I was the only teenager. I thought fast food was the only place where teenagers could get jobs. But most of the workers were college students or college-effing-graduates. One of the cooks has an Electrical Engineering degree. And he’s using all that science education to make sure there are two pickles, and only two pickles, on the hamburgers.

I don’t mean to make fun of my co-workers. They’re mostly cool. I’m angry at this effing country for making these adults work at McDonald’s. The woman who works the drive-through is a forty-five-year-old single mother and has three kids. How the hell does she pay for anything with her McDonald’s wages?

And don’t think it’s an accident that 99% of my co-workers are Black and Latino. I’m Native American and I’m pretty dark for a mixed-blood urban Indian. The only thing white in this McDonald’s are the effing vanilla milkshakes.

Sometimes, I feel guilty that I have this job. There might be other mothers and fathers who need it. But it ain’t like my parents are rich. My Mom, the Indian, is an Academic Advisor at the University of Washington, and makes decent cash, but my Dad, the white guy, got laid off from Boeing two years ago and can’t get a job anywhere else. Sooner or later, he’s probably going to be making french fries alongside me.

I’m saving my money for college. I screwed off my first two years of high school, like too many Indians do, so I don’t have the grades for a four-year school. But Seattle has some awesome community colleges. I can kick ass in my studies there and earn my way into a university somewhere close to home.

These are desperate times, and I’m not as desperate as a lot of people, but I’m desperate enough to need this job.

There’s an elderly white man who works here. His reflexes are too slow to use any of the equipment, so he greets people at the door and clears and cleans tables.

He’s got a sharp mind, though. I like what he has to say. We take our breaks together. We put on coats to cover our McDonald’s polo shirts, walk a block, step into an alley, and smoke.

His wife died ten years ago.

“Old husbands aren’t supposed to live longer than old wives,” he said. “My wife should be the widow sitting with other old widows making fun of their dead husbands.”

He has a girlfriend, though. A few girlfriends, actually.

“When you’re a single man in the old folks home,” he said, “you spend a lot of time dancing with different women.”

“Dancing is what you geezers call it?” I said. “You’re, like, the oldest playboy in the world.”

After a few months of cigarette friendship, he asked me to call him Grandfather with a capital G.

“Isn’t that what you Indians call your respected elders?” he said. “Not grandpa or gramps or old man or geezer. It’s Grandfather like it was my royal name.”

All four of my grandparents, two Indian and two white, died before I was born, so I didn’t have any traditional elders. I needed a grandfather. I was hungry for a grandfather.

“Grandfather,” I said. “It’s time to go back to work.”

He smiled as big as I’d ever seen. He loved the respect. I loved respecting him. In this sad country, respect is the only thing most of us can afford.