The Night Watchman

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LOUISE ERDRICH

Louise Erdrich is one of the most renowned writers of her generation. Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota in 1952. Her father and her mother, an Ojibwe woman, both taught at a boarding school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Wahpeton, North Dakota. From North Dakota, Erdrich went on to attend Dartmouth College before receiving a Master of Arts degree from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins. She has written more than 28 books in total, including works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and children's books. Erdrich's work is often said to belong to the Native American Renaissance, which includes work by Native American writers beginning in the late 1960s. Much of her work explores Native American heritage and identity, and her work often contains narratives that interweave and overlap across multiple novels that take place in the same fictional setting, similar to William Faulkner's novels set in Yoknapatawpha county. Erdrich has received many awards and accolades over the course of her prolific career; her novel *The Round House* won the National Book Award in 2012, and *The Night Watchman* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2021. Erdrich currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As Erdrich writes in an introductory note to the novel, *The Night Watchman* is based on her own grandfather's attempts to fight the Termination Bill introduced by Senator Arthur V. Watkins in 1953. Erdrich uses Watkins's real name for the character based on him in the novel. Watkins introduced the termination bill in an attempt to, (according to Watkins), help Indians assimilate into white society, as prophesied in Mormon scripture. Watkins's bill sought to abrogate treaties signed between Native tribes and the United States government as well as dissolve the Bureau of Indian Affairs. That bill, House Concurrent Resolution 108, passed on August 1, 1953. That passage didn't immediately eliminate any Native tribes, but it established termination as the United States government's guiding policy and laid the groundwork for the U.S. government to target individual tribes for termination. The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa—the tribe for which Erdrich's grandfather was the chairman—was one of the first tribes the government. targeted. *The Night Watchman* presents a fictional account of the real-life events that led her grandfather to lead a group of delegates to Washington, D.C. to successfully testify to Congress against the termination of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Erdrich's work is often considered part of the Native American Renaissance, a literary period beginning in the late 1960s that marked an increase in the publication of works by Native American authors in the United States. Critics frequently argue that the period began with N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969. Other notable writers of the Native American Renaissance include Leslie Marmon Silko, whose book *Ceremony* was published in 1977; James Welch, whose novel *Winter in the Blood* was published in 1974; and Joy Harjo, the 23rd United States Poet Laureate, whose poetry collection *She Had Some Horses* was published in 1983. Harjo's memoir, *Crazy Brave*, touches on her time in boarding school, a subject that Erdrich explores in *The Night Watchman*. *The Night Watchman* details the attempts of people from the Turtle Mountain Reservation to fight against the Termination Bill introduced by Senator Arthur Watkins in 1953. In 2009, President Obama signed S.J. Res. 14, a general apology to Native people for the "long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes." Layli Long Soldier's book *Whereas*, published in 2016, was written in response to S.J. Res. 14.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Night Watchman
- **Where Written:** Minneapolis, Minnesota
- **When Published:** 2020
- **Literary Period:** Native American Renaissance
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** The early 1950s, on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in North Dakota; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Washington, D.C.
- **Climax:** Thomas, Patrice, and others travel to Washington, D.C. to testify against the Termination Bill authored by Senator Arthur V. Watkins.
- **Antagonist:** Arthur V. Watkins
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Congressional Testimony Much of the dialogue from the congressional hearing in the novel is based on the actual record of that hearing, and everything that Senator Watkins says in the hearing scene is a direct quote from the congressional record.

Pulitzer Prize *The Night Watchman* won the Pulitzer Prize in

Fiction in 2021. Erdrich's novel *The Plague of Doves* was previously nominated for the prize in 2012.

PLOT SUMMARY

In September of 1953, Thomas Wazhashk works as a night watchman at the Turtle Mountain Jewel Bearing Plant. He writes letters while he works, both personal letters to his children, and letters to government officials and reporters in his role as the chairman for the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. Often, late at night, the ghost of a former boarding school classmate, Roderick, visits Thomas. Thomas soon learns about House Concurrent Resolution 108, referred to as the Termination Bill. The Termination Bill, introduced by Senator Arthur V. Watkins, aims to undo treaties signed between Native American Tribes and the United States government. If termination went into effect, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa would be forced to relocate, and all government services, including the entire Bureau of Indian Affairs, would stop. Thomas and other members of the tribe's advisory committee make a plan to counter the bill, including collecting signatures on the reservation and organizing a coalition to testify against the bill before congress in Washington, D.C.

Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau also works at the Jewel Bearing Plant, making the bearings themselves, which will be used in watches and Department of Defense weapons. Her sister, Vera, has recently gone missing after moving to Minneapolis. Her father is a person with alcoholism and, when he is home, his drunken outbursts torment and terrorize Patrice along with her mother, Zhaanat, and her brother, Pokey. Pokey has started boxing lessons with Lloyd Barnes, who has unrequited feelings for Patrice. Lloyd often shows up at the Paranteau house, hoping he'll find an opportunity to talk to Patrice.

When the Paranteau family holds a ceremony to try and find out where Vera is, Zhaanat's cousin Gerald, a *jiisikid*, tells them that Vera is still alive. Patrice decides to travel to Minneapolis to look for her. On the train there, she runs into Wood Mountain, another boxer who trains with Lloyd Barnes. Wood Mountain is on his way to a fight in Fargo, and he tells Patrice that if she wants to find Vera, then when she gets to Minneapolis, she should look for "the scum."

When Patrice arrives in Minneapolis, an unmarked taxi stops for her. The driver ushers her inside, and when she gives him an address, he takes her to another place, which looks like a bar, called Log Jam 26. The driver and another man drag her inside. As they accost her, a third man, Jack Malloy, intervenes and tells Patrice that he'll help her. He then takes Patrice to the addresses she has for Vera. At the first, a dog emits a deathly whimper from behind the door. At the second, Jack seems visibly shaken. At the third place, Patrice finds Bernadette Blue, Wood Mountain's half-sister, who says she doesn't know where Vera is, but she has Vera's baby, and Patrice needs to take him. Patrice says she'll return later, and Jack takes Patrice back to Log Jam 26. He tells her that she can stay in the dressing room if she agrees to be the "**waterjack**" and perform in the club for $50 a night. With no better options available, and enticed by the money, Patrice agrees.

After doing a few performances, though, Patrice learns that the waterjack costume is poisonous—apparently, the first waterjack performer died, and the second performer is on her last legs. Wood Mountain's fight in Fargo is canceled, and he also decides to go to Minneapolis to make sure Patrice is okay. He goes to Bernadette Blue's house and finds out that Patrice has been with Jack Malloy. From there, he goes to Log Jam 26 and sees Patrice performing as the waterjack. He leaves a note for her, saying he'll be in the hotel next door and that she should leave that night. Patrice leaves the dressing room in the middle of the night and sees Jack in the hallway, apparently in the middle of an overdose. She goes to Wood Mountain's hotel, and the next morning, the two of them go to Bernadette Blue's house to retrieve Vera's baby and then return home.

Sometime later, the Turtle Mountain advisory committee holds a meeting in Fargo to try and raise awareness about the Termination Bill. At the end of the meeting, they hold a vote, in which zero people vote to support the bill and 47 people vote against it. Thomas approaches Lloyd Barnes about holding a fight between Wood Mountain and Joe "Wobble" Wobleszynski as a fundraiser to help support a delegation to travel to Washington, D.C. and testify against the bill in congress. All parties involved eventually agree, and the fight that ensues is well-attended, but for Wood Mountain and Joe Wobble, it's punishing and brutal. It's the last boxing match that either of them ever fights.

When they're back home, Wood Mountain acts fatherly toward Vera's baby. Patrice calls the baby Gwiiwizens, or Little Boy, to not get too attached, but Wood Mountain gives him the temporary name of Archille, his father's name. Patrice and Wood Mountain begin a romantic relationship, and while Patrice enjoys it, she still feels like something isn't quite right. She and her mother begin to have the same dreams, in which they see Vera, alive but struggling. One day, while Patrice and Pokey are hunting in the woods, they look through the window of an old cabin on their property and see someone slumped in the bed. It turns out to be their father, who has died there.

At this time, Vera has been kidnapped and trafficked to a ship where sailors use her body for sex. She has become addicted to drugs, and as she goes through brutal withdrawal, men from the ship take her and dump her body in an alley. A retired Army medic named Harry Roy finds her and takes her back home to nurse her back to health. He then brings her back to the Paranteau house, where she is reunited with her family and her son. She and Wood Mountain begin a romantic relationship, and Patrice senses that this is right, better than if she and

Wood Mountain ended up together.

After the success of the fundraiser, Thomas organizes the delegation to travel to Washington, D.C. to testify against the bill. In the testimony, they argue against immediate termination, while Arthur Watkins argues for it. Thomas does everything in his power to try and turn Watkins against the plan, including flattering him, even though Thomas finds Watkins contemptible. On the way home, Thomas suffers a stroke. He ultimately recovers, though, and returns to work at the Jewel Bearing Plant. In a closing note, Erdrich writes that the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa succeeded in standing up against termination.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Thomas Wazhashk – Along with his niece Patrice, Thomas is one of the protagonists of the novel. He is the chairman of the Turtle Mountain Advisory Committee and the titular night watchman. He is based on Louise Erdrich's own grandfather, and the impetus for the novel came when she reread letters he wrote during the time period that the novel takes place. Thomas is Rose's husband, and Wade, Sharlo, and Fee's father. After Thomas reads the Termination Bill—introduced to congress by Senator Arthur V. Watkins—he becomes more politically active and begins to organize opposition to the bill. He helps get together a petition and assembles a delegation of people from the Turtle Mountain Reservation to travel to Washington, D.C., to testify against the bill. This effort ultimately proves successful when the attempt to terminate the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa fails. During his shifts as the night watchman at the Turtle Mountain Jewel Bearing Plant, Thomas often writes letters, either to public figures or allies in the fight against termination, or to his children; he saves writing letters to his children for last because he enjoys those the most. Thomas is depicted as a kind man with a sense of humor, and one of his defining characteristics is the love he has for his family. Near the end of the novel, Thomas suffers a stroke. Though he recovers, for a while he is afraid that his fight against Arthur Watkins was "a battle that [will] cost him everything."

Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau – Patrice is one of the novel's protagonists. Her mother, Zhaanat, is Thomas's cousin, and Patrice thinks of herself as Thomas's niece. In part because of the precarity of her home life—economically, emotionally, and physically because of her alcoholic, abusive father, Pogo Paranteau —Patrice has become self-reliant and highly values her independence. Her desire to maintain that independence often puts her at odds with prevailing gender norms of the time. For instance, she is her family's primary breadwinner with her work at the Turtle Mountain Jewel Bearing Plant. Before the novel's present, Patrice was sexually assaulted by Bucky and his friends, including her coworker Doris's brother. The boxing coach and math teacher, Lloyd Barnes, is infatuated with Patrice, though she rebuffs him. After her sister, Vera, goes missing, Patrice feels compelled to go search for her, showing her deep loyalty to her family above all else. She travels to Minneapolis to try and track her down and meets Jack Malloy, who runs a nightclub where she briefly becomes a performer, wearing the **waterjack suit** nightly. When the circumstances at the nightclub—and Jack's attempts to manipulate her—become untenable, she escapes in the middle of the night. She then brings Vera's baby back home from Minneapolis. While Vera is missing, Patrice and Wood Mountain—along with Patrice's mother, Zhaanat—become surrogate parents to Vera's baby. At the same time, Patrice and Wood Mountain begin a romantic relationship, though it ultimately fizzles out. Through that relationship, the novel explores Patrice's ambivalence toward love, romance, and the social expectations society placed on women in the 1950s. Patrice's biggest dream, which she reveals to Millie Cloud, is to one day go to college.

Arthur V. Watkins – Senator Arthur V. Watkins is the novel's antagonist. A devout Mormon as well as a politician, he introduces the Termination Bill to Congress, threatening the continued survival of the people of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. The novel as a whole, especially the storyline that follows Thomas, builds to the climactic scene in which Thomas and members of a delegation from the Turtle Mountain Reservation travel to Washington, D.C. to testify before Congress against Arthur Watkins's bill. Based on a real-life senator of the same name, Watkins is described by Martin Cross the most powerful person in Congress. His motivations are undeniably racist, yet he cloaks his racism in the language of empowerment and helping others, saying that he aims to "help" Native people "stand on their own two feet" by abrogating treaties signed between the U.S. government and Native tribes that were intended to last in perpetuity. One of Watkins's most damning characteristics, according to Thomas, is that he doesn't have a sense of humor. In the chapter where the delegation testifies before congress about the harm that would be caused by termination, everything Watkins says is taken from the actual congressional record. In a concluding note following the novel, Erdrich writes that the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa successfully opposed Watkins's bill and was not terminated.

Vera Paranteau – Vera is Patrice's sister who went missing sometime before the novel's present. She initially traveled to Minneapolis with a man who said that he wanted to marry her, but she hasn't been seen since then. In a later chapter, one of Patrice's friends, Betty Pye, tells Patrice that that's a tactic that people often use to traffic and exploit women in the area: they'll come to the reservation, tell women they want to marry them, then "sell her to someone who puts them out for sex." This

seems to be what happens to Vera. Patrice and her mother, Zhaanat, begin to have disturbing dreams about Vera, where she seems to be calling out to them, trying to get them to help her. Vera ends up on a ship, going through withdrawal from drugs while her body is used sexually by men on the ship. When the withdrawal gets even worse, men on the ship dump her body in an alley. A retired Army medic, Harry Roy, finds her there and helps nurse her back to health before bringing her home. Vera comes home broken, but when she is reunited with her family and her baby, there seems to be hope for recovery. Wood Mountain and Vera also begin a romantic relationship, which Patrice approves of, thinking that she will support anything that helps Vera heal.

Wood Mountain – Wood Mountain is a boxer who trains with Lloyd Barnes. Throughout the novel, he has feelings for Patrice, which puts him in conflict with Barnes, who also has feelings for her. After one of Wood Mountain's fights in Fargo is canceled, instead of going home, he travels to Minneapolis to try and make sure that Patrice is doing okay while she's searching for Vera, showing that he genuinely cares for Patrice and is willing to go out of his way to try and be there for others. In Minneapolis, he finds Patrice working at Log Jam 26, and he helps engineer her escape. The two of them then take Vera's baby back home. Wood Mountain becomes a kind of surrogate parent to the baby, and he suggests naming him Archille, after his father—at least temporarily, until Vera returns. He and Patrice begin a romantic relationship at that time, too. But when Vera returns, it becomes clear, at least to Patrice, that Wood Mountain and Vera make a better match. Patrice gives Wood Mountain her blessing when he tells her that he and Vera would like to be a couple. Wood Mountain also fights against Joe Wobble in a boxing match that serves as a fundraiser for the delegation that travels to Washington, D.C., to testify against the Termination Bill.

Lloyd Barnes – Lloyd Barnes is a math teacher and boxing coach who trains Wood Mountain and Patrice's brother, Pokey, among others. In his mind, Barnes attaches numbers to people. He sees Patrice, with whom he's infatuated, as a "26" because he loves the curl of the two and the loop of the six. He often shows up at the Paranteau home uninvited after dropping Pokey off, hoping he might be able to speak with Patrice. On one of those visits, Patrice's mother, Zhaanat—hoping to get him to stop trying to get Patrice's attention—tells him that he smells bad. He becomes frustrated and angry when he learns that Wood Mountain also has feelings for Patrice, but Barnes eventually ends up dating Patrice's friend Valentine while having feelings for another friend, Doris, as well. He helps train Wood Mountain for the fight against Joe Wobble, which is a fundraiser for the delegation that will travel to Washington, D.C., to testify against Arthur V. Watkins's Termination Bill.

Zhaanat – Zhaanat is Patrice's mother. She makes baskets and beadwork, but she is a holder of traditional Chippewa knowledge and wisdom, and her real work is to pass on that knowledge to others who come to learn what she can teach. When Patrice returns from Minneapolis with Vera's baby, Zhaanat helps to raise the child, and eventually produces milk to give to him. Before Vera returns, Zhaanat and Patrice begin having identical, painful dreams about her in which Vera is in danger. When Millie Cloud, a graduate student who was raised off the reservation, meets Zhaanat, she becomes interested in what she can learn from her. At the end of the novel, Millie has decided to study with Zhaanat and is in the process of trying to secure funding to make sure Zhaanat gets paid for that study.

Jack Malloy – Jack Malloy is the owner of Log Jam 26, a bar in Minneapolis where Patrice ends up performing as the waterjack. He ostensibly tries to help Patrice when she first arrives in Minneapolis—he gives her food, drives her around to search for Vera, and offers her a place to stay. But over time, it becomes clear that he's manipulating her, first to try and get her to become his bar's latest **waterjack**, and then to stay in the role for as long as possible. Patrice is suspicious of Jack from the start, and she soon decides that she has to escape from Log Jam 26, especially after she learns that the first two waterjacks are either dead or dying, presumably because the waterjack suit is poisonous. Jack is also addicted to drugs, and when Patrice slips out of the dressing room late at night, she sees Jack having an overdose. She alerts an attendant at the hotel next door about Jack's overdose and then never sees or hears from Jack again.

Millie Cloud – Millie Cloud is Louis Pipestone's daughter and a graduate student who returns to the reservation at Thomas's invitation. Her white mother raised her away from the Turtle Mountain Reservation, but, as a student at the University of Minnesota, she recently completed a study of the economic conditions of the reservation. Because of her work, she eventually becomes integral in the effort to strike down the Termination Bill. She is a member of the delegation that travels to Washington, D.C. to testify before congress, and, in some respects, her economic survey is the backbone of their testimony. Millie finds patterns pleasing and often dresses in them. Her ambivalence toward romance is somewhat reminiscent of Patrice's, and she says that men are not interested in her. At one point, Millie seems to harbor romantic feelings for Patrice, but near the end of the novel, she decides to go out with Barnes after he asks her out using an equation, which she finds irresistible. At the end of the novel, she is planning to study with Zhaanat and is in the process of securing funding that would allow Zhaanat to be paid for her teaching.

Valentine Blue – Valentine works with Patrice at the jewel bearing plant. She is described as one of Patrice's closest friends, but throughout the novel, tensions flare up in their relationship. When Patrice is looking for a way to go to Minneapolis to search for Vera, Valentine, in an act of generosity, gives Patrice her sick days to use. Patrice is grateful,

but when she returns, she becomes frustrated when Valentine won't stop talking about her own generosity and about what she did for Patrice. Valentine then grows closer to a new friend, Doris Lauder. Near the end of the novel, Valentine is given a promotion that Patrice thinks she deserves. Valentine also dates Barnes, though that relationship is short-lived.

Doris Lauder – Doris is a "white girl" who is new to working at the jewel bearing plant. She gives Patrice and Valentine rides to work each day and also gives Patrice a ride to the train station when she goes to Minneapolis to look for Vera, showing Doris's capacity for kindness and generosity. At the same time, though, Doris also asks Patrice what happened between her and Bucky the summer before. Through the course of the conversation, Patrice comes to understand that Doris's brother was one of the boys in the car when Bucky and his friends assaulted her. Patrice realizes then that she can't trust Doris.

Betty Pye – Betty Pye works with Patrice at the jewel bearing plant. She prompts Patrice's trip to Minneapolis to hunt for Vera when she tells Patrice that her cousin had recently seen Vera in the city. When Valentine receives the promotion that Patrice thinks she deserves, Betty Pye moves to the workstation beside Patrice. The two of them become closer, and Betty Pye talks to Patrice about sex and about how to get away from men they don't like.

Pokey Paranteau – Pokey is Patrice's younger brother. He practices boxing with Lloyd Barnes, who often drives him home, hoping for a chance to talk to Patrice. Because both he and Wood Mountain are boxers, they are friendly with each other, and Wood Mountain learns from Pokey that Patrice isn't interested in Lloyd Barnes. Pokey is with Patrice, setting snares, when they find the body of their father, Pogo Paranteau, who has died in the cabin on their property.

Bucky Duvalle – Bucky Duvalle and his friends sexually assaulted and attempted to rape Patrice in a car the summer before the events of the novel take place. It could have been even worse, Patrice thinks, but she managed to escape and then swim to her uncle, Thomas's, boat in the middle of the lake. After the assault, Bucky is struck by an illness that contorts his mouth and then travels down his side. Patrice feels that she did it to him—that her anger left her body and struck the side of Bucky's face. Bucky, however, thinks that Zhaanat, Patrice's mother, put a curse on him. When he asks her to lift the curse, though, she tells him that what happened is a result of his own actions and that he did it to himself.

Walter Vold – Walter Vold is the overseer and supervisor at the jewel bearing plant. He is described as "lurkishly" watching the women work, and he doesn't allow people to speak while they are working (though they do anyway). When Patrice needs to go to Minneapolis to look for Vera, he tells her she has just three days of leave total; when higher-ups are set to come to the factory to observe, he takes away the workers' coffee breaks and never reinstates them. Overall, he is an authority figure intent on enforcing rules and maximizing productivity by his standards, with little to no regard for the humanity of the people who work at the plant.

Pogo Paranteau – Pogo Paranteau is Patrice's father. He is often referred to simply as Paranteau. He is a person with alcoholism, and his outbursts at home cause chaos and fear. He is absent for most of the novel, though he sometimes returns home, asking his wife, Zhaanat, or Patrice for money. When he dies, Patrice and Pokey find his body in a cabin on their property, and the community then holds a funeral for him.

LaBatte – LaBatte is the night janitor at the jewel bearing plant. He and Thomas often talk with each other, especially about the ghost of their former classmate, Roderick, who often visits them in the plant at night. By Thomas's estimation, LaBatte is a very superstitious person. LaBatte also has a history of petty theft, and he plans on stealing from the jewel bearing plant before Thomas warns him not to and gives him some money. LaBatte also briefly converts to Mormonism, though he decides not to go through with it soon after and refuses to be baptized or to see Elnath or Vernon, the Mormon missionaries, again.

Gerald – Gerald is Zhaanat's cousin. He is a *jiisikid*, which means that he can fly to faraway places, inhabited by other spirits. When Vera is missing, he comes to help the Paranteaus find her. After he flies for a long time, he tells the family that he has seen Vera, lying in a ditch, with a baby beside her.

Joe "Wobble" Wobleszynski – Joe Wobble, as he's better known, is Wood Mountain's main boxing rival. Years ago, Joe Wobble's family encroached on land that Wood Mountain's grandmother owned. During their first fight, Wood Mountain has the opportunity to land a potentially winning combination against Joe, but the bell rings early, unfairly letting Joe escape defeat. When Barnes approaches Joe about a rematch (for the fight that will be the fundraiser for the delegation to travel to Congress), Joe agrees, saying that he didn't like the unfairness of the first fight either. For the fundraiser, Wood Mountain wins the fight on points, but it's so brutal that both boxers resolve never to fight again.

Bernadette Blue – Bernadette is Wood Mountain's half-sister. She lives in Minneapolis, and she reluctantly takes care of Vera's baby after Vera disappears. Bernadette tells Patrice that she doesn't know where Vera is, but she tells Wood Mountain that she is in the "hold," which eventually leads to Patrice and Wood Mountain realizing that Vera is on a ship.

Roderick – Roderick is a former boarding school classmate of Thomas and LaBatte who appears in the form of a ghost to both men throughout the novel. He died of tuberculosis, which he contracted after he was locked in a cellar multiple times as punishment at the boarding school. Thomas feels guilty for not doing more to help Roderick when he was locked in the cellar, but Roderick tells Thomas that he visits the jewel bearing plant to haunt LaBatte; he was locked in the cellar the first time,

Roderick tells Thomas, because he took the blame for something that LaBatte did. He also says that he probably only contracted tuberculosis the second time he was locked in the cellar. LaBatte travels with Thomas to Washington, D.C. and prompts Thomas to try and win over Arthur Watkins with flattery. When Roderick misses the train back home, he decides to stay among the Native ghosts in Washington, D.C.

Vernon – Vernon is one of the Mormon missionaries on the Turtle Mountain Reservation. He is infatuated with Grace, and his partner, Elnath, suspects that Vernon and Grace are getting up to "the worst kind of sin." Elnath and Vernon visit Thomas's house and give him a copy of the Book of Mormon, which he occasionally reads to try and better understand Arthur V. Watkins's motivation.

Elnath – Elnath is one of the Mormon missionaries on the Turtle Mountain Reservation. He considers turning his missionary partner, Vernon, in for violating the rules of the church because he suspects that Vernon is having sex with Grace, but Elnath decides to confront him instead. This confrontation strains Elnath and Vernon's relationship, and they ultimately seem to decide to leave the reservation before their scheduled year of living there is up because they find the conditions too difficult to endure.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Moses Montrose – Moses is the tribal judge. He is the first person to bring the seriousness of the Termination Bill to Thomas's attention. He is a member of the tribal advisory committee and also a member of the delegation that travels to Washington, D.C. to testify against the Termination Bill.

Juggie Blue – Juggie is Wood Mountain's mother. She is also the caretaker and cook for the teachers' quarters at the school. She helps in the effort to raise awareness about the Termination Bill and is also part of the delegation that travels to Washington, D.C. to testify against it.

Louis Pipestone – Louis is Millie Cloud's father. He raises and trains racehorses. Louis is in charge of circulating the petition against the Termination Bill and getting as many people to sign as possible.

Biboon – Biboon is Thomas's father, who Thomas often seeks out for advice. Biboon also tells Thomas the story of his name, Wazhashk, which is the story of the muskrat.

Gwiizikens (Vera's Baby) – Gwiizikens is Vera's baby. Patrice uses the name Gwiizikens, meaning Little Boy, to avoid attracting the attention of evil spirits. Wood Mountain, who helps Patrice care for Gwiizikens until Vera returns home and also builds a cradle board for him, "temporarily" names the baby after his father, Archille.

Grace – Grace is Louis Pipestone's daughter. She helps train the racehorses, and she is infatuated with Wood Mountain, who also helps train the horses.

Martin Cross – Martin Cross is Thomas's friend and is a tribal chairman of Fort Berthold. A lot of the information that Thomas hears about Arthur Watkins comes from Martin Cross, who is also engaged in opposing the Termination Bill.

Rose – Rose is Thomas's wife, and the mother of Wade, Sharlo, and Fee.

Wade – Wade is Thomas and Rose's son. He is also an aspiring boxer.

Sharlo – Sharlo is Thomas and Rose's daughter. She is a high school senior and is crowned homecoming queen near the end of the novel.

Fee – Fee is also Thomas and Rose's daughter and is eleven years old.

Noko – Noko is Rose's mother. She lives with Thomas and Rose and their family and seems to be experiencing some form of dementia.

Harry Roy A man who found Vera sleeping by the side of the road and took care of her.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POWER, SOLIDARITY, AND COMMUNITY ACTION

Time after time, when the characters in *The Night Watchman* confront conflicts, they respond with solidarity to overcome them. When people in power try to enforce their will on others, the most effective way those people can fight back, the novel seems to suggest, is through collective action. For example, when Patrice forgets to cook her bread and has nothing to eat for lunch, the community of people she works with steps in to give her food. She forgets to cook her bread in the first place because she is rattled by her father's drunken outburst, which is an exhibition of power (in the form of physical force and the threat of violence). Another example also takes place at the jewel bearing plant. When Mr. Vold takes away their coffee breaks, the women band together to start a petition to have them reinstated. Readers learn from a note after the book that the real-life women who worked at the plant, on whose story the book is loosely based, ultimately attempt to unionize. While they were unsuccessful in that campaign, they did get wages raised, the cafeteria finished, and coffee breaks reinstated as a result of their efforts.

The central conflict of the novel demonstrates a similar dynamic. Arthur Watkins is a senator who uses his power to advocate for the elimination of federal recognition of Native tribes. If his proposed bill were to pass, it would be devastating for the Native people it impacts. To counter this exhibition of power, Thomas helps to mobilize his community, and the community bands together to fight. First, they start a petition, which Louis tends to like "a garden" as he aims to get everyone on the reservation to sign. And the community comes together again for the fundraiser, a community-sponsored boxing match, that enables a group to travel from the Turtle Mountain Reservation to Washington, D.C. to testify against the bill. This solidarity is not idealized, though. When Thomas convenes the committee to decide who will go to Washington, even though they know how important it is, most people don't want to go. Even when solidarity is widespread, action based on that solidarity can be difficult to achieve, especially because success isn't guaranteed. Eventually, though, Thomas does get a group together, and their collective action ultimately succeeds in defeating the bill. The novel suggests, then, that community action, though difficult to achieve, can effectively counter unfair displays of power, whether they come from an exploitative boss or an agent of one of the world's most powerful institutions.

OPPRESSION AND SUPPOSED GOOD INTENTIONS

Much of the brutality depicted in *The Night Watchman* is done by people who claim, and by some who might believe, that they are acting for the good of the people they harm. When Patrice travels to Minneapolis, a stranger almost kidnaps her, and then Jack Malloy steps in to "help." Jack offers to do whatever she wants and takes her to the addresses she has written down to try and find her missing sister Vera. His plan, of course, is deeply manipulative, as he aims to make money off Patrice without concern for her wellbeing (he hires her to perform as a "**waterjack**," which involves dancing in a water tank in a costume that resembles Paul Bunyan's sidekick, Babe the blue ox). Patrice later removes herself from the situation soon after she learns that the first two waterjacks who performed in Jack's club "didn't last long" (ostensibly because the costume was poisonous).

Similarly, Arthur V. Watkins cloaks his racism, and his desire to terminate Native tribes, in either the neutral language of bureaucracy or the salvific rhetoric of religion. He uses lofty words like "emancipation, freedom, equality, success" to "disguise the truth: termination." This desire for termination is rooted in racism and white supremacy. Martin Cross, a tribal chairman, writes to Thomas that, from his view, the Mormon project of conversion of Native people aims to "change Indians into whites" and that "they think if you follow their ways your skin will bleach out." When the hearings take place, Arthur Watkins (in excerpts from the actual historical records of the proceedings) uses racist ideas and language to argue his point. This is one instance of the persistent desire, on the part of the U.S. government, to eradicate Native history, culture, and people, and Arthur Watkins plays his part in this history while still believing himself to be deeply "righteous." Another instance of this history is the boarding schools that Thomas and Roderick went to and that ultimately claimed Roderick's life. The government established the boarding schools with the supposed intention to "help" Native people, but in effect, they often sought to destroy Native culture, history, and people. Through these repeated examples, the novel shows how a desire to "help" or "do good" and a belief in one's own righteousness can often be the impetus for actions that oppress, exploit, or otherwise endanger others.

HUMOR AND PAIN

When confronted with pain and suffering, characters in the novel often use humor as a way to get through it. After Thomas has had a stroke, Louis comes to the hospital to pick him up. Louis feels guilty because he thinks that if he had gone on the trip to Washington, Thomas might not have been so overworked and might not have had a stroke. Thomas, for his part, feels like this battle against the Termination Bill and Arthur Watkins might "cost him everything." Instead of delving into those emotions, when Louis and Thomas see each other for the first time, they joke with one another. Thomas asks Louis if he's down in the city because his horses got out again, and Louis says he's there to bring Thomas back in grand style, with a red carpet laid out to Juggie's car.

Similarly, after Patrice has been essentially kidnapped, witnessed disturbing scenes at the addresses where she had checked for Vera, and is about to be lowered into the tank to be the **waterjack** (all of which happens in one day), she looks for humor in the situation. Specifically, she aims to locate a kind of feeling and thinking that could "only be described in Chippewa," where the "strangeness was also humorous" and the danger became something "you might laugh at," all while knowing you could be hurt and that the potential damage could be devastating. With that in mind, it's notable that one of Arthur Watkins's most damning qualities is that he has "no sense of humor," which Thomas finds even more frightening than the Mormon bible. Thomas also points out how the exploits of the figure Nanabozho (a trickster figure in Chippewa folklore) differ from the Mormon bible, considering how Nanabozho created "everything useful and much that was essential, like laughter." This perspective suggests that humor can transform pain into something more manageable, while a lack of humor can lead a person to harm and dehumanize others.

SEX, VIOLENCE, AND GENDER

Sex often, though not always, goes hand in hand with violence in the novel. This violence is almost always, if not always, committed by men against women. The summer before the events of the novel, Bucky Duvalle, with the help of his friends, attempts to rape Patrice. She eventually gets away by swimming to Thomas's boat in the middle of the lake, but not before she suffers scratches, bruises, and a bite mark on her shoulder, along with deep psychological wounds. When Patrice goes to Betty Pye as a trusted confidante to talk about sex, one of the main topics of their conversation is how to get away from men who they don't like. And when Patrice is considering how her relationship with Wood Mountain might progress, she remembers something her mother told her, which she believes to be absolutely true: you don't truly know a man until you reject him, and then "his true ugliness, submerged to charm you, might surface." When Valentine spurns Barnes's advances, he doesn't react with physical violence, but he does think to himself, in a threatening way, "a man is a man," intimating his belief that men have needs that women are obligated to satisfy. More shockingly, Vera is brutalized by men, who commit unspeakable acts of violence against her so that they can use her body for sex. She finds herself in the hold of a ship where, while going through withdrawal, she feels her insides being "pulled out" and her brain "heaving in her skull," and she comes home bearing scars of the violence committed against her. In the city, Patrice finds collars fixed to chains attached to the walls of an abandoned house, where it's suggested that women were held captive.

It's worth noting that sex and violence do not always go together in the novel. Betty Pye enthusiastically enjoys much of the sex she has with her boyfriend, and Patrice goes to her when she is curious about sex. But by presenting various women's relationships with different men, and by showing the internalization of gender norms and the violent actions of those different men, the novel suggests that gender norms at this time tended to affirm and perpetuate gender-based violence.

AGENCY AND EXPLOITATION

When Patrice talks with Betty Pye about sex, Betty says that sometimes men come to the reservation, tell women they want to get married, then "ditch the woman, [and] sell her to someone who puts them out for sex." This seems to be what happened to Vera. And by the time Vera actually appears in the novel, she is trapped in the hold of a ship, and it seems like she has been sold into a kind of sexual slavery that strips her of her agency. When Patrice goes to the city to look for Vera, Jack claims to act in Patrice's best interests; really, though, he lies to her and manipulates the situation to try and get her to do what he wants her to. This situation doesn't entail the erasure of agency that Vera experiences—Patrice accepts the **waterjack** job because the money is good, and when she does it, she seems to enjoy the actual performance. But once what happened to the last two waterjacks is revealed (the first is dead, and the second is "on her last legs"), and it becomes clear that the suit is poisoning them, it also becomes clear that Jack is acting exploitatively and has erased Patrice's agency by lying to her and luring her into performing without telling her that the performance might kill her.

Arthur Watkins seems to have aims similar those of Jack and the people who exploit Vera. When Millie is considering an incorrect census from years ago that made people on the Turtle Mountain Reservation seem prosperous, she says, "I suspect as always they simply want our land." The Termination Bill can be seen, in part, to have similar goals in mind, to seize land held by Native people so that those in power can use it for their own purposes. To achieve that aim, Watkins introduces a bill that, if passed, would essentially erase the agency of the Native people on that land; they would be "relocated" without a say in the matter. With that in mind, the novel highlights the tendency of people in power to erase the agency of people with less power so that they can exploit them, their bodies, or their land.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE WATERJACK SUIT

The waterjack suit, which gradually poisons its wearer, is a symbol of the kind of exploitation that people in the novel with less power often endure at the hands of those with more power. After Patrice arrives in Minneapolis, two men attempt to kidnap her. When a third man, Jack Malloy, intervenes, he offers her a job as a performer at his bar, Log Jam 26. The performance entails dancing in a tank of water while wearing a "waterjack" costume that resembles Paul Bunyan's sidekick, Babe the blue ox. Paul Bunyan is a character of Canadian and American folklore, a lumberjack who performs extraordinary feats; through his profession, he represents the extractive approach to land use closely aligned with colonialism in the U.S. Jack claims to be acting in Patrice's best interest and says that the job pays $50 a night, significantly more than Patrice makes working at the jewel bearing plant. While Patrice is suspicious of Jack, the money is tempting, and she agrees. Patrice dresses up as a sidekick to Paul Bunyan, and when she performs, she actually doesn't mind the performance itself. Over time, though, she learns that the first person who performed as the waterjack died, and the second is "on her last legs," and Patrice realizes that the waterjack suit has poisoned them. The suit, then, shows how little regard Jack has for Patrice or for the previous two people who wore the waterjack

costume. He is willing to slowly kill them if it means that he can make money off them. In this way, Jack is like the other characters in the novel who have power, like Senator Arthur V. Watkins or Mr. Vold, and the waterjack suit is a symbol of their shared intent to extract the vitality of those with less power until they die or become shells of who they once were, all in the name of increasing their own power and profits.

THE MUSKRAT

Thomas's last name, Wazhashk, comes from *wazhashk*, which means muskrat, a "lowly, hardworking, water-loving rodent." Muskrats are common, and they aren't necessarily the most glamorous animals, Thomas thinks, but they are essential. When Thomas visits his father, Biboon, and asks for the story of his name, Biboon says that in the beginning, the world was covered in water. The creator lined up the best divers and asked them to dive, but none could reach the bottom. Then came the muskrat. The muskrat dove too, as far as it could, and when it came back up, it had drowned. But in its hand, it held a tiny bit of silt from the very bottom, and from that, the creator made the whole earth. This journey is, in some ways, similar to Thomas's fight against Senator Arthur V. Watkins. Thomas works as hard as he can, dives as deep as he can go, and, as a result, Thomas has a stroke. Unlike the muskrat of the story, though, Thomas recovers, and he—along with all the others who fought alongside him—ultimately succeeds in defeating Arthur Watkins's Termination Bill, just as the muskrat returned with silt from which the creator made the earth. With that in mind, the muskrat is a symbol of the unsung heroes in the background who do the often unglamorous but industrious work necessary not just to make the world keep going, but to protect what is valuable and to make lasting and vital change.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *The Night Watchman* published in 2021.

Introductory Note Quotes

❝ My grandfather Patrick Gourneau fought against termination as a tribal chairman while working as a night watchman. He hardly slept, like my character Thomas Wazhashk. This book is fiction. But all the same, I have tried to be faithful to my grandfather's extraordinary life. Any failures are my own. Other than Thomas, and the Turtle Mountain Jewel Bearing Plant, the only other major character who resembles anyone alive or dead is Senator Arthur V. Watkins, relentless pursuer of Native dispossession and the man who interrogated my grandfather.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Arthur V. Watkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: i

Explanation and Analysis

Erdrich uses this note to situate the story that she'll tell in the novel within its historical context. This contextualization serves several purposes. First, by stating explicitly that the character of Thomas is based on her actual grandfather, Erdrich establishes the story as an homage to him, both the person he was and what he was able to accomplish in his life. In the note, she also clarifies one of the main themes of the novel. Her grandfather fought against termination as a tribal chairman while he was also a night watchman. He was an ordinary person who worked extraordinarily hard, and his efforts had profound and lasting effects. By reminding the reader that Arthur V. Watkins is also the name of the real, historical senator who proposed the Termination Bill, Erdrich is also making it clear that while the novel is a work of fiction, both the central catalyst for the events of the novel—the Termination Bill—and its author were real, historical entities, and the events were grounded in real racism. Those things, Erdrich writes, are not, by any means, fiction.

Turtle Mountain Jewel Bearing Plant Quotes

❝ Thomas was named for the muskrat, wazhashk, the lowly, hardworking, water-loving rodent […] Although the wazhashkag were numerous and ordinary, they were also crucial. In the beginning, after the great flood, it was a muskrat who had helped remake the earth. In that way, as it turned out, Thomas was perfectly named.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The novel establishes early on that Thomas is a kind of "everyman." He, like the muskrat that gave his family its name, is similar to so many others, but his actions are essential, not just to keep the world spinning, but to help recreate it after it has been decimated by disaster. In the creation story referenced, the disaster is a flood. After countless other animals try to dive down through the water to find the silt at the bottom that will help recreate the

earth, the muskrat, an unlikely hero, is able to reach the bottom and bring silt back up. Notably, the muskrat drowns and dies in the process. The disaster referenced for Thomas is the violence of colonization and its lasting legacy. Thomas is perfectly named (after a muskrat) on the one hand because his efforts will help to continue the effort to rebuild the Native community following the lasting impacts of colonization. He's also perfectly named because, in some ways, he derives his power from his ordinariness. He doesn't think he's superior to anyone; as a result, he sees himself in everyone, which also allows others to see themselves in him. That ability to have shared experiences, along with shared outlooks and goals, enables people to come together, with Thomas as a leader, under the banner of a shared struggle.

Lard on Bread Quotes

❝ Word went out that dough was in Patrice's bucket. That she'd forgotten to cook it, bake it, fry it […] Saint Anne pushed a buttered bun across the table to Patrice. Someone handed an oatmeal cookie down the line. Doris gave her half a bacon sandwich.

Related Characters: Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau, Doris Lauder

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

While it can be presumed that no one working at the jewel bearing plant is especially wealthy, and no one has an abundance of food or can afford to not worry if there might come a time when they don't have enough, when Patrice forgets to cook her lunch, several of her fellow workers step in to give her food. Notably, Patrice forgets to fry her bread because she is rattled by her father's drunken outbursts, and all of the people working on the line with her are women—introducing the novel's theme of violence and gender, as well as the theme of solidarity against oppression.

This section begins the narrative, following Patrice, which will be told alongside, and will often intertwine with, Thomas's story of opposing and ultimately defeating the Termination Bill. Patrice ultimately becomes essential to that effort as well, but the central conflict animating her story is the fact that her sister Vera has gone missing. Similar to how Thomas must find people willing to work alongside him to defeat the Termination Bill, Patrice also must rely on others to try and find Vera. This attempt—to find trustworthy people—proves difficult, but not impossible, as Patrice navigates the wider world to piece together clues of what happened to Vera. This quote hints that, as difficult as that search might be, Patrice can succeed by relying on the help and support of others.

❝ Mr. Vold forbade speech. Still, they did speak. They hardly remembered what they said, later, but they talked to one another all day.

Related Characters: Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau, Walter Vold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Vold is the authority figure at the jewel bearing plant, the manager who looks at women on the line "lurkishly." His position of relative power, and his use of power to demean and dehumanize those with supposedly less power, put him in line with other characters in the novel like Arthur Watkins and Jack. The novel posits that the only way to counter those kinds of people is through solidarity and collective action. And the solidarity of these plant workers is evident, even if it is not supported or encouraged by the plant's management. If they are ever going to be able to stand up to someone like Mr. Vold, they'll have to do it together, as a community that's come together for a common purpose. Notably, the people on the line talk all day, but, in the end, they hardly remember what they said. The novel contends that that is often how the bonds of relationships—and, by extension, communities—are formed. A person might not remember exactly what happened when, but they remember the feeling of being seen by someone else, being listened to, and listening to others, and those feelings, when they happen often enough, bind people together.

The Skin Tent Quotes

❝ There were times when Patrice felt like she was stretched across a frame, like a skin tent. She tried to forget that she could be so easily blown away. Or how easily her father could wreck them all. This feeling of being the only barrier between her family and disaster wasn't new, but they had come so far since she started work.

Related Characters: Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Since getting a job at the jewel bearing plant, Patrice has become the main breadwinner for her family, and her family is often one missed paycheck away from catastrophe. Her father is also always on the edge of wrecking her family due to his drinking and violence, and since Vera left, Patrice has also felt increasingly alone. On one level, Patrice is aware that she's only human, that there could be any moment when an outside force, a wind, could come along and sweep her away, like a tent. But she also tries not to think about those outside forces, lest she fixate on the catastrophe that would inevitably follow and be dragged down into fear and dread. This passage illustrates one of the reasons that Patrice clings to her independence: she's self-reliant because so often she has had to be. She hasn't had any other choice, and, out of repeated thought and action, the habit of self-reliance has become a personality trait.

Three Men Quotes

❝ Thomas had a good friend in the Bureau of Indian Affairs Area Office in Aberdeen, South Dakota, who had sent him a copy of the proposed bill that was supposed to emancipate Indians. That was the word used in newspaper articles. Emancipate.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Arthur V. Watkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the first mentions of the Termination Bill in the novel. The passage establishes the way that the author of the bill, Arthur Watkins, along with the reporters covering that bill, use language to disguise the proposal's true intentions. Specifically, the word "emancipated" carries with it the connotation, in the United States and in English, of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which effectively abolished slavery. Arthur Watkins, the author of the bill, uses that word, "emancipate," to obfuscate the bill's actual intentions (to terminate Native tribes) and instead makes it seem like the bill's aim is not just to correct past injustices, but set right the course of history. It's notable that newspapers go along with this obfuscation of language and perpetrate it themselves, suggesting that the media, despite its claims to be unbiased, is instead clearly biased in favor of Watkins and his bill. Similar to the ongoing question throughout the novel of whether Arthur V. Watkins is a cynical actor or a person who genuinely believes he is doing good, the media might be genuine in their attempts to fairly cover the different sides of a debate around the Termination Bill; but, if so, that makes the novel's documentation of the reporters' clear failure to do so an indictment of the ways that conviction in one's own goodness can cloud judgment.

Juggie's Boy Quotes

❝ Many years back, the first Wobleszynski had encroached on the land owned by Wood Mountain's grandmother. Since then, the Wobleszynskis sent their cattle to graze on Juggie's land so often that her family had finally shanghaied a cow. This happened during berry-picking time, when there were extra people camped out everywhere, so if the cow was stolen it was quickly absorbed into boiling pots. Nothing was ever traced or proved but nothing was ever forgotten, either. Over the years, resentment between the families had become entrenched.

Related Characters: Wood Mountain, Juggie Blue, Joe "Wobble" Wobleszynski

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation comes just before Wood Mountain fights Joe Wobble for the first time. While much of the novel documents how the United States government is attempting to strip Native people of their land (again) through its most powerful institutions, this passage highlights the ways that injustice can function on an intimate level—between families, with repercussions felt for generations. But Joe Wobble's ancestors were able to act with impunity in the first place, encroaching on the land of Wood Mountain's family, because they had the implicit support of those institutions. If Wood Mountain's family had gone to the authorities when the Wobleszynski family first encroached, the novel implies that the authorities would have clearly sided with the Wobleszynskis, not Wood Mountain's ancestors. However, the passage also makes clear that Wood Mountain's family didn't surrender their agency. They attempted to seek retribution for the illicit actions of the Wobleszynskis by taking Wobleszynski cows

if they were on their land. The passage also suggests, though, that jockeying for retribution, the give and take on both sides, will be endless, and always out of balance, if the conflict can't be arbitrated by an authority accepted by both parties. Again, though, when the United States government is trying to do to the entire Turtle Mountain Reservation what the Wobleszynskis did to Wood Mountain's family, there's little hope that an unbiased authority will be found in any currently established institutions of governmental power.

Valentine's Days Quotes

Valentine said, "You can have my days."

"What do you mean?"

"My sick days. Mr. Vold told me that I could give my days to you. Under the circumstances."

Related Characters: Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau, Valentine Blue, Walter Vold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

When Patrice decides she needs to travel to Minneapolis to try and find Vera, Mr. Vold holds firmly to the time-off policy at the jewel bearing plant. Patrice has three days she can take to travel, but if she's not back by then, there's a chance she'll lose her job. In an act of solidarity, Valentine talks to Mr. Vold, and Mr. Vold allows Valentine to give her available days off to Patrice, leaving Patrice with six days total to travel and try to find Vera. Far from considering himself the villain in this situation, Mr. Vold might even think that he's being generous, that he's doing a good thing for Patrice. This ability to believe that you are righteous while dehumanizing others is one of the main characteristics linking Mr. Vold to Arthur Watkins. If the Termination Bill were to pass, then it would be legally binding, held up as the rule of law by all relevant institutions in the United States. Similarly, Mr. Vold is just operating according to pre-established rules at the plant. But, like the proposed Termination Bill, those rules are not fair or just. They are not guidelines designed for the mutual benefit of all parties involved. Instead, the rules are designed to benefit one party, those in power, while the workers at the plant suffer as a result.

Pukkons Quotes

"This one takes away the treaties."

"For all Indians? Or just us?"

"All."

"At least they're not picking on us alone," says Biboon. "Maybe we can get together with the other tribes on this thing."

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Biboon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas consults with his father Biboon about the best way to challenge the Termination Bill. Biboon is old enough to remember when they signed the initial treaties, which were supposed to last in perpetuity. Native people signed those treaties out of necessity, Biboon says; either they signed or they would die. The Termination Bill seeks to abolish those treaties, and makes it clear, once more, just how little the United States government can be trusted, how willing the government is to change the rules to suit those in power. Biboon sees it as a blessing, though, that at least the bill doesn't target only the Turtle Mountain Reservation. Since they're targeting more people than just them, Biboon hopes that many tribes will be able to band together to oppose the bill, articulating one of the central themes in the novel, that those with less power can challenge those with more if they act in solidarity and as a united community.

A Bill Quotes

In the newspapers, the author of the proposal had constructed a cloud of lofty words around this bill—emancipation, freedom, equality, success—that disguised its truth: termination. Termination. Missing only the prefix. The ex.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Arthur V. Watkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

As media coverage of the Termination Bill increases, Arthur Watkins continues to use the rhetoric of freedom and empowerment to cloak his true aim, termination. The bill

itself, quoted just before this passage, contains the word termination itself: The bill aims to "terminate federal supervision over the property of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians." The motives of the bill are also disguised by the faux neutrality of its bureaucratic language. That language, and the language of empowerment that Watkins uses in newspapers, has the goal of making the bill seem either benign or beneficial to Native people. The quoted passage is situated in a third-person section that is grounded in Thomas's perspective. For Thomas, far from being benign or beneficial, the bill is aimed at more than its stated goal of termination. In truth, the bill seeks to exterminate Native people. The evocation of the word extermination links Watkins's project to genocide, a mission that seeks to achieve its aims not through physical violence but through state-sanctioned legislation and is covered up through misinformation.

"They think if you follow their ways your skin will bleach out. They call it lightsome and gladsome."

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Arthur V. Watkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This quote follows the one above, which identifies Senator Watkins's goal with his bill to be genocidal. The phrase "lightsome and gladsome" echoes the phrase from the Book of Mormon, which says that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints will be a "white and delightsome people," a white supremacist ideology that was taught as doctrine in the Mormon church during the time period when the novel takes place. The Mormon Church didn't disavow the explicit white supremacy of its past teachings until 2013, when the official Church of Latter-Day Saints website posted a statement saying that the "church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse." Knowing that the Mormon church of the 1950s, the time period of the novel, explicitly endorsed white supremacy makes it clear that Thomas's interpretation is in fact the stated goal of the church of which Watkins is a devout member. The church sees skin that is not white as a sign of "divine disfavor" or a "curse," and, as such, the goal of the church is to, as Martin Cross says in the quote above, "bleach out" others' skin, or eliminate them.

Who? [1] Quotes

So it comes down to this, thought Thomas, staring at the neutral strings of sentences in the termination bill. We have survived smallpox, the Winchester repeating rifle, the Hotchkiss gun, and tuberculosis. We have survived the flu epidemic of 1918, and fought in four or five deadly United States wars. But at last we will be destroyed by a collection of tedious words.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Arthur V. Watkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As Thomas reads again through the Termination Bill while at work, he's struck by the mordant irony that after surviving so many different onslaughts of colonization, whether they came in the form of physical violence or physical illness, a string of words, intentionally made to sound tedious and stripped of force, will be the thing that will destroy Native people. By presenting a list of past threats Native people have faced at the hands of colonizers, the passage also establishes a baseline of past wrongs, one that is in no way exhaustive. The Termination Bill, then, is just the latest in a series of attempts to destroy Native people. While Thomas notes the irony that a set of tedious words might be what ultimately destroys them, this list also states in the most straightforward terms some of the violence that colonizers have enacted on Native people. The historical list also makes the conclusion impossible to avoid that, even if the Termination Bill doesn't succeed in its goal to destroy Native people, unless something drastic changes, those in power will just go back to the drawing board to try and find a new way.

Who? [2] Quotes

How should being an Indian relate to this country that had conquered and was trying in every possible way to absorb them? […] How could Indians hold themselves apart, when the vanquishers sometimes held their arms out, to crush them to their hearts, with something like love?

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Arthur V. Watkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Thomas continues to think about how to best oppose the Termination Bill and about how to maintain his identity in a country that continuously tries to "absorb" that identity, to wash it away. The passage also articulates one of the central themes of the book, that people who act with good intentions often commit horrific acts. This is presumably the case with Arthur Watkins, who considers himself to be deeply righteous while attempting to eradicate Native people by enacting policies grounded in and fueled by white supremacist ideology. The novel also suggests that a sincere, even if unfounded, belief in the righteousness of one's own intentions might be the key to achieving one's aims, which puts Thomas in a conundrum. How does he oppose people who claim, and might believe, they are offering love? On a basic level, it can be difficult to parse true good intentions from good intentions laced with maliciousness if the person offering them says they are one and the same. On a deeper level, it can be difficult to wage a fight against people who believe so strongly in the God-granted righteousness of their cause, who derive power from their religious beliefs as well as the most powerful institutions in the world. The novel as a whole, though, presents a kind of answer to Thomas's conundrum. He successfully opposes the Termination Bill, and its author, through deft strategy, mobilization, solidarity, and community action.

Flags Quotes

❝ He had been there a few months when he heard the phrase a *flag worth dying for*, and a slow chill prickled.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

When Thomas went to boarding school, the authorities tried to chip away at his identity as well as the identity of his classmates. The United States government initially founded the boarding schools with the intention of "helping" Native people, but their true function seems to have been to try and eradicate Native culture. It's worth noting that Native tribes are autonomous nations within the United States. With that in mind, along with signaling United States nationalism, the inculcation of the Pledge of Allegiance and the propaganda of the phrase "a flag worth dying for" in boarding schools for Native youth serves an explicitly political function. It is meant, again, to wear down Native identity and agency with a long-term aim of weakening commitment to the treaties that give Native Nations autonomy with the United States. In the context of a boarding school like the one Thomas went to, the phrase "a flag worth dying for" also seems to contain a threat: if you don't join us, then the power behind this flag can be turned on you. That is, if Native tribes function as autonomous nations, then the statement that the U.S. flag is one that, for many people, is thought to be worth dying for can also serve as a menacing reminder that, if the U.S. government were to turn on Native Nations, the force of the U.S. military could also turn on them.

The Old Muskrat Quotes

❝ "Survival is a changing game."

Related Characters: Biboon (speaker), Thomas Wazhashk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

When Thomas seeks Biboon's counsel about the Termination Bill, Biboon tells him that "survival is a changing game." The statement serves a few different functions. First, Biboon is making the point that Native communities are in a different position than they were when he was younger. Native communities, Biboon says, are more autonomous now and also more deeply entwined with surrounding communities. The economies of those surrounding communities depend on a Native workforce and Native agriculture, among other things. Abolishing Native tribes, then, would have far-reaching implications, and Biboon tells Thomas that he'll have to remind politicians in power of that fact. In that statement, Biboon is also reminding Thomas that he has to be adaptable, that the strategies that worked when he was a young man might not work as well now. And by saying that survival "is a changing game"—instead of, for example, saying that the game of survival has changed—Biboon is making the point that the "game" of survival is *continuously* changing, and, as a result, adaptability remains paramount.

❝ "I would like to move we refer to House Concurrent Resolution 108 as the Termination Bill. Those words like emancipation and Freedom are smoke."

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas is speaking here before a meeting that the advisory committee has convened to go over the Termination Bill and its implications. Thomas again calls attention to the way that the bill's author, Arthur Watkins, uses language to obfuscate his true motives, masking his intentions behind the vague, bureaucratic-sounding "House Concurrent Resolution 108." Thomas's proposal—to call the bill what it is, a Termination Bill—is then at once a condemnation of misused language and a testament to its power, a demonstration of the sometimes hidden force of naming. By calling the bill the Termination Bill, Thomas suggests (and the novel bears out the truth of his suggestion) that the act of properly naming something can be an act of dragging something out of the shadows and into the light. Calling the bill the Termination Bill brings its true intentions into the light and allows others to see those intentions clearly, to cut through the fog of obfuscation to find the truth.

The Waterjack Quotes

Gawiin ingikendizo siin. I am a stranger to myself […] This was again the sort of feeling and thinking that could only be described in Chippewa, where the strangeness was also humorous and the danger surrounding this entire situation was the sort that you might laugh at, even though you could also get hurt, and there were secrets involved, and desperation, for indeed she had nowhere, after her unthinkable short immediate future rolling in the water tank, nowhere to go but the dressing room down at the other end of the second-floor hall of Log Jam 26.

Related Characters: Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Before she has had her first performance, Patrice is surprised at herself that she has agreed to take on the role of the waterjack at the bar Log Jam 26. She wonders who she has become, over the course of only a day, and also wonders what her mother would make of her. She thinks that the Chippewa language can get more to the heart of the issue than English because Chippewa can capture the way that danger and humor are deeply intertwined, how humor, in Chippewa, can help process pain without washing away that pain. The idea grapples deeply with questions of identity, first of who Patrice is now and if she knows herself or knows who she is. Second, is she less herself because she has to operate almost exclusively in English, has to navigate a world that has been constructed by colonizers and navigate it in the colonizer's language? These are complicated questions, and the novel engages with them throughout the entire story without offering reductive answers. Interestingly, Patrice translates the Chippewa phrase "gawiin ingikendizo siin" to herself as "I am a stranger to myself." While the sentiment itself is experienced commonly enough in the modern world, Patrice, and the novel, aim to reclaim that modernist sentiment by clarifying that colonization, more than perhaps any other modern phenomenon, is responsible for the kind of alienation that Patrice feels.

The Average Woman and the Empty Tank Quotes

Louis Pipestone tended the petition like a garden.

Related Characters: Louis Pipestone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

One of the main tactics used by the advisory committee to raise awareness of, and register opposition to, the Termination Bill is a petition, circulated by Louis Pipestone. The petition is an example of the solidarity needed to oppose the bill, and it also serves as a direct symbol of widespread community action. The fact that Louis tends it "like a garden" is also significant. The garden metaphor suggests that the community engagement that goes along with the petition is something organic, something that grows of its own accord. Notably, though, a garden is something that a person must cultivate, must "tend." Community engagement isn't something purely organic that happens on its own; it's not a "weed" that will grow anywhere in any conditions or a "wildfire" that will consume anything in its path. Instead, it is a garden that Louis, and the other members of the advisory committee, must nurture for it to take root and grow. And, the novel also shows, this garden ends up thriving as a result of their faithful efforts.

He reached over to his lunch box. Maybe he'd left that crust. It was LaBatte's lunch box, full. A meat sandwich with real butter. More bread, this time with butter and sugar. A baked potato, still warm. Apples.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, LaBatte

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

After Thomas confronts LaBatte about his possible plan to try and steal jewel bearings from the plant, LaBatte confesses. He tells Thomas that he's fallen on hard times and isn't sure what to do or how to get by. Thomas, as the night watchman, isn't just listening to LaBatte as a friend. Ostensibly, he's also listening to LaBatte as someone who has a duty to protect the plant, and in a different scenario, it wouldn't be completely unlikely that Thomas might feel compelled to turn LaBatte in. But that fundamentally contradicts who Thomas is as a person. Thomas is loyal, first and foremost, to the people he knows, to his community, not to the jewel bearing plant. And he's not out to punish people, to take something from others that they don't have to give. Instead, Thomas counsels LaBatte. He listens to LaBatte. He tries to understand him. And when he leaves work in the morning, Thomas finds LaBatte's lunch box in his car, which LaBatte, even though he doesn't have much to his name to give, has left for Thomas, illustrating the full-circle way that solidarity and community work, with each person exhibiting their own forms of loyalty, each giving what they have to help the other.

The Missionaries Quotes

They didn't look alike anymore, but they walked in exactly the same straight line, full of mystifying purpose.

Related Characters: Vernon, Elnath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

The missionaries, Elnath and Vernon, arrive one day at Thomas's door. When Thomas asks them why their senator, Arthur Watkins, wants to terminate Native people, Elnath says Watkins doesn't want that at all and that they—Elnath and Vernon—have been sent to bring Native people to the gospel. "You're all Lamanites," Elnath says, referencing one of the four ancient groups of people in the Book of Mormon. According to the Book of Mormon, Lamanites have "skin of blackness" as the result of a curse on the children of Laman ("Lamanites") from God because of their wickedness and corruption. In this worldview, Elnath and Vernon (and Watkins, by extension) see themselves as acting for the betterment of Native people, who they see as corrupted, and their skin color is evidence of that corruption. While Elnath and Vernon preach white supremacy and all of its constituent ignorance and violence, they believe that they are acting righteously and doing God's work. They are acting with purpose, but their purpose is "mystifying," dizzying for Thomas, and those raised outside of the religion's precepts, to try and comprehend or to understand why its adherents would choose to follow it.

The Star Powwow Quotes

They had as good as killed Roderick down there.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Roderick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

This sentence clears up Roderick's story arc, pieces of which have been doled out throughout the novel. In short, Roderick was Thomas's boarding school classmate. He never had much and worked countless jobs to get by, including one in a bakery, which he loved. When he was caught stealing bread from the bakery (because he didn't have anything to eat), the school authorities punished him by locking him in a basement for weeks at a time. Roderick contracted tuberculosis as a result of those punishments and eventually died from the illness. Thomas helped smuggle a jacket into the basement for Roderick, but Thomas also feels guilty for Roderick's death, thinking that he should have done more to help. The story as a whole presents a straightforward condemnation of the boarding schools, which were again established with supposedly good intentions, but in effect aimed to eradicate Native culture and killed Native children like Roderick.

Roderick's inhumane punishment at the hands of authorities when he is caught stealing is presented in contrast to Thomas's decision to act in solidarity with LaBatte when LaBatte confesses that he planned to steal from the jewel bearing plant. With that in mind, Roderick's story is central to Thomas's overall arc in the novel. Roderick's death shows—at least in how Thomas interprets

it for himself—a failure for Thomas to act in solidarity with someone who is being treated unjustly. Though the blame for Roderick's death of course lies with the boarding school authorities, Thomas in part holds himself responsible, and his commitment to acting in solidarity with others and acting on behalf of his community can be understood as an attempt to atone for his past failure to do enough to help Roderick.

Two-Day Journey Quotes

❝ She began to wonder whether she was even dead. Although she had been dead way back when she'd been alive. Maybe for a long time. Of that she was sure.

Related Characters: Vera Paranteau

Related Themes:

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

After people on the ship where Vera has been held captive dump Vera in an alley while she's going through withdrawal from drugs, she starts walking. Part of her is convinced that she has died and she's slowly marching toward the afterlife. When objects around her begin to take shape, though, she wonders if she has actually died or whether she might be alive. Regardless, though, she knows that she had been dead while she had been alive. The idea, that she had died while still alive, puts words to how the brutality she experienced impacted her. Maybe she didn't die biologically—maybe her pulse continued to pound, her blood to flow—but she knows that something deep in her had died. For Vera, it's an acknowledgment of the pain she experienced, but it's also a way to accurately name what people did to her. Whether one considers it to be her spirit or her soul, the men who abused her killed something in her, and their actions, the passage suggests, should be thought of in terms similar to murder.

The Promotion Quotes

❝ "A pimp is someone who owns the lady. Takes the money she got paid for having sex, see?"

"No. I don't see," said Patrice flatly. But she did see. Jack would have tampered with her slightly, just enough so that when somebody else came along she'd have that shame, then more shame, until she got lost in shame and wasn't herself.

Related Characters: Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau, Betty Pye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

After Patrice expresses her curiosity, Betty Pye and Patrice talk about sex one day after work. The conversation covers numerous topics—from how to get away from men you're not interested in to tips to better enjoy sex—and eventually the conversation moves toward ways that men exploit women through sex work. Betty Pye describes a scenario of a man coming to the reservation, promising to marry a woman he meets, then taking that woman to the city to "sell her to someone who puts them out for sex," a person Betty calls a "pimp." The scenario sounds like what might have happened to Vera. Patrice pretends she doesn't understand, but in her mind, instead of sitting in judgment or being confused, Patrice knows exactly what Betty is talking about. She recognizes the patterns that could have led to something similar happening to her. When she traveled to Minneapolis and met Jack, Jack didn't present himself as a villain. Similar to Arthur V. Watkins, Jack presents himself as a good Samaritan, a savior. At the same time, Jack also began to manipulate Patrice to get her to do what he wanted, making Patrice feel ashamed. Patrice recognizes how that shame could build and build until it turned her (or, the passage suggests, Vera) into someone lacking the independence she so fiercely protects, someone she would no longer recognize.

New Year's Soup Quotes

❝ And Patrice thought another thing her mother said was definitely true—you never really knew a man until you told him you didn't love him. That's when his true ugliness, submerged to charm you, might surface.

Related Characters: Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau, Zhaanat

Related Themes:

Page Number: 344

Explanation and Analysis

Wood Mountain has recently asked Patrice to marry him, and Patrice hasn't said no, but she didn't say yes either. She also still wants to have sex, but she's worried that, after the proposal, Wood Mountain has become too "sticky," that he's fallen in love with her and will cling to her, especially if they

have sex. That reminds Patrice of what Zhaanat had said, that you don't know a man until you tell him you don't love him, that that's when his true ugliness might surface. The passage sheds light on how gender dynamics function within the novel. According to Zhaanat (and Patrice), men seek to charm women if it will help get them what they want. If a woman spurns those advances, though, the man, with a bruised ego, might reveal his true ugliness, resulting in one form of violence or another. Rather than serving as a reason to be afraid of men, the quote instead reminds Patrice of why her independence is so important, why she must maintain her agency in the face of threats from those who want to take it away, from men with fragile egos whose understanding of their place in the world, and the way they relate to others, have been woefully misshaped by prevailing gender norms.

The Lamanites Quotes

"Their hatred was fixed, and they were led by their evil nature that they became wild and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness, feeding upon beasts of prey, dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins."

"What do you think, Rosey?" said Thomas. "It's us."

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Arthur V. Watkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 381

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas reads through the Book of Mormon, which the missionaries, Elnath and Vernon, left for him. The quotation that Thomas reads to Rose is a direct quotation from that book. When the missionaries gave the book to Thomas, Elnath told him that he and Vernon, and Arthur Watkins, didn't want to terminate Native people; instead, they wanted to bring them to the gospel, to, in essence, "show them the light." Elnath says they feel driven to do that because "they," meaning Native people, are all "Lamanites," one of the four ancient peoples described in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon, and Mormon doctrine during the 1950s (until 2013, presumably, when the Mormon Church repudiated its past teachings about race), claims that the darker skin of "Lamanites" is evidence of a curse from God, and "Lamanites" are described, as can be seen in the direct quote above, as evil by nature, wild and ferocious. The description is vile in its racism. Thomas, for his part, sees it in the only way that seems to make sense: as a joke. But, following one of the main themes of the novel, while that joke might help cope with pain, it doesn't neutralize the danger inherent in the racist ideology represented by that quote. This is especially the case in the novel because racism and a white supremacist worldview animate Arthur Watkins, who is intent—no matter what he says to himself, to the media, or to anyone else—on dispossessing and terminating Native people and Native tribes.

Thomas Quotes

His mind was everything to him, but he hadn't the slightest notion how to save it. He just kept diving down, grabbing for the word, coming back up. The battle with termination and with Arthur V. Watkins had been, he feared, a battle that would cost him everything.

Related Characters: Thomas Wazhashk, Arthur V. Watkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 442

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes near the end of the novel when Thomas is reflecting on his battle to oppose the Termination Bill and his fight against Arthur Watkins. The quote calls back to Biboon's earlier description of the name Wazhashk, meaning muskrat, and the creation story in which the muskrat was the only animal able to swim to the bottom of the ocean to find silt that would help create the earth. After he has a stroke, Thomas grasps for words that don't come as readily as they once did, and he feels again like the muskrat swimming to the bottom of the ocean, hoping to grasp what he's looking for. Similarly, his battle with Arthur Watkins was like the journey that the muskrat went on. Though Thomas, like the muskrat, might not have been the most likely hero, he was able to face long odds and go up against something extraordinarily powerful—like the muskrat against the ocean—and come out victorious. Thomas worries, though, that like the muskrat, which succeeded in finding silt but drowned in the process, the battle will cost him everything, that he will die as a result of his efforts. An explanatory note at the end clarifies that Erdrich's grandfather, who the character of Thomas was based on, survived his initial stroke, but the point remains that Thomas's battle for his survival, and the survival of his community, almost killed him.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The novel begins with an explanation of its historical context. On August 1, 1953, the United States Congress announced a bill that aimed to dissolve treaties between the United States government and Native American tribes. The announcement also stated that, if passed, the bill would immediately eliminate five Native tribes; eventually, all Native tribes would be eliminated. Erdrich's grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, fought against that termination when he worked as a tribal chairman and a night watchman, similar to the character of Thomas Wazhashk in the book. Senator Arthur V. Watkins, who is also a character in the book, is the real name of the person who introduced the bill. Pixie, aka Patrice, is "completely fictional."

Erdrich begins with this explanatory note to establish the book's relationship to actual events in United States history. Grounding the book in actual events serves numerous functions, but, by citing the characters who are based on actual people—Thomas and Senator Watkins—Erdrich calls attention to two functions in particular. First, Erdrich bases the character of Thomas on her actual grandfather to pay homage to him as a person and to what he, and a group of similarly motivated people, were able to accomplish against long odds. Second, keeping Arthur Watkins's name the same as the actual senator who proposed the Termination Bill helps to underline the fact that while the novel is a work of fiction, the racism that animated 1950s politicians and policies is not imagined, made-up, or fictionalized. Instead, it is part and parcel of the history of the United States. Erdrich's decision also points to the ways that racism is embedded in the foundation of the United States as it is today and how it has shaped the ideology of several people charged with running its institutions and creating its policies.

TURTLE MOUNTAIN JEWEL BEARING PLANT

In September 1953, Thomas Wazhashk sets his work jacket on the chair and lunchbox on the windowsill when he arrives at his post as a night watchman at the Turtle Mountain Jewel Bearing Plant. At the plant, women apply thin slices of ruby, sapphire, and garnet onto spindles to prepare them for drilling. The jewel bearings are then used by the Defense Department and in Bulova watches. Women fill the desirable jobs because they do much better on exams testing manual dexterity. Thomas considers himself lucky to have gotten his own job at the plant. His name came from the **muskrat**, *wazhashk*, a "lowly," industrious rodent that loves water.

The jewel bearing plant is a main source of well-paying work in the area. The novel points out that it is rare in the 1950s that women would be able to secure well-paying jobs over men, given the gender norms of the time. The fact that the jewel bearings will be used for Department of Defense weapons is also notable; as Thomas and others fight against the U.S. government's proposed Termination Bill, the jewel bearing plant (where Thomas works) manufactures parts for weapons that will help the U.S. reinforce its military power, which enables the country to administer its will on those with less power. Ultimately, though, while those on the Turtle Mountain Reservation have less power, the meaning of Thomas's last name, Wazhashk, muskrat, points toward how they will ultimately defeat Arthur Watkins: through industrious, unglamorous hard work.

LARD ON BREAD

Pixie Paranteau fixes a jewel blank onto a block for drilling. Rage helps her focus, and she fumes that everyone keeps calling her Pixie when she wants them to call her by her real name, Patrice. Pixie means cute. But Patrice isn't cute. She has a job. And she's above the mess that happened when she accepted a ride from Bucky Duvalle and his friends when they lied about what she had done. And Patrice is above finding the brown bile from her father's binge on the blouse she left in the kitchen. That morning she'd gotten a ride for the first time with Doris Lauder, a "white girl" new to the jewel plant. Patrice's best friend, Valentine Blue, had been there too, but the whole time refused to use Pixie's given name.

Patrice bristles against the expectations others have for her. They think of her as "cute," which connotes, to Patrice, something childlike. Patrice wants to be taken seriously and to be thought of as an adult because she has a job, she's the main breadwinner for her family, and she feels like an adult and not a child. Mostly, though, in her own life, Patrice doesn't desire power so much as autonomy and control. She doesn't want to be at the whims of others, of men, whether those men are Bucky Duvalle, who assaulted her the summer before, or her father, who wreaks havoc on their family whenever he's home.

At the jewel plant, Mr. Walter Vold walks down the line, "lurkishly" observing the women work. Walter doesn't allow speech on the line, though the women still talk to one another all day. He leaves his office every few hours to do his inspections. He tells Patrice she's doing excellent work. At lunch, with the cafeteria not yet set up, Patrice realizes she'd been so rattled by her father's outbursts that she had forgotten to cook her bread; she only has dough. At first, she tries to eat it, but then the other women pass her bits of food—a buttered bun, an oatmeal cookie, half of a bacon sandwich—for her to eat.

Walter Vold is another person who holds power, power that is tinged with lechery (how he "lurkishly" watches women) and that he uses to dehumanize others. At lunch, Patrice realizes that her father's outbursts have also rattled her to the point that she's forgotten food to eat. The women who she works with, though, come together in solidarity, counteracting the influence of individual men by coming together as a group and sharing food with Patrice.

Doris gives Patrice and Valentine a ride home, and Pixie asks to be dropped off before the path to the house so that Doris won't see their yard, which is filled with junk and debris. At home, her mother is boiling water for tea. Her brother, Pokey, is at boxing practice. Her sister, Vera, has gone to Minneapolis with her new husband through the Placement and Relocation Office, which gave them some money, a place to live, and training for a job. Pixie misses Vera and the way she would make fun of everything. And without Vera, there's no one to keep her father in check, and no way to make jokes at his expense that help soften the "shame" that comes with having him as a father. In the kitchen, Patrice's father pleads with her mother for money.

Vera has left home with—or maybe has been taken away by—a new husband. Without Vera, Patrice feels like it's just her against her father, and she doesn't have the same ability to neutralize him that Vera does. And there's no one to joke around with, to mitigate the pain with a sense of humor, which is a recurring theme throughout the novel—particularly the way that humor can help soften suffering.

Patrice stacks wood behind the house. It would be Pokey's job, but he's at boxing practice. Pokey looks up to Patrice; she's the first person in their family to have a job, not a job making a living off the woods, like trapping, hunting, or berry-gathering, but a "white-people job." Patrice saves a bit of every paycheck so that she can eventually follow Vera, who seems to have disappeared.

Patrice's position as the family's main breadwinner is reinforced here, as is her desire to eventually follow and find Vera. It's also notable that Patrice thinks of her job, a reliable job that pays decently, as a "white-people job," in part because it's the kind of job that hasn't customarily been available to Native people.

THE WATCHER

Thomas sits down at his night watchman job. He writes letters using the Palmer Method of penmanship, which he had been taught through painstaking exercises in boarding school. He writes to a senator, then to a newspaper columnist he knows. He finishes, as a reward to himself, by writing to his son Archie and daughter Ray.

The novel references Thomas's time in boarding school here, foreshadowing the exploration of that time that will come later in the story. Thomas also "rewards himself" by writing letters to his children, showing that while he might be politically well-connected to a certain extent, his true passion and joy come from his family and from being a father.

Thomas drifts off to sleep. In his sleep, he sees a boy wearing the same canvas vest and pants that Thomas had worn at the government boarding school. When he wakes up, he reads the newspaper, then other tribes' newsletters, where he learns of a bill that indicates that Congress is "fed up" with Native people. As he's leaving, Thomas runs into the night janitor, LaBatte, and tells him about his dream of the little boy. LaBatte asks if the little boy was Roderick, and Thomas tells him no, saying it had just been the motor of the bandsaw, which, out of the corner of his eye, he had mistaken for a child.

Thomas sees the ghost of his boarding school classmate, Roderick, for the first time. Roderick died after contracting tuberculosis as the result of harsh punishments at boarding school. Those boarding schools functioned with the stated purpose of "helping" Native people, but Roderick's death shows how destructive those supposed good intentions actually were. This is also the first mention of the Termination Bill; Thomas then spends the rest of the novel trying to defeat that bill.

THE SKIN TENT

Patrice wishes she had a watch so she could be sure to meet Doris and Valentine on time. If she doesn't arrive on time, she'll lose her job and won't be able to support her family. She feels like "a skin tent," like she's the only barrier between her family and disaster. While Patrice is at work, her mother, Zhaanat, sits behind the door with an ax, on guard for when Patrice's father returns. Zhaanat makes baskets and beadwork to sell, but her real job is passing on knowledge to people who come, often from far distances, to learn from her. Because of that knowledge, Zhaanat had been mostly kept out of school. Patrice, on the other hand, grew up speaking Chippewa, but she also had no trouble learning English and was valedictorian of her class.

The connection between the jewel bearings made for watches at the plant and the watch Patrice wants is notable. Patrice's world is governed by time, and being a second behind schedule could wreck her, and her family's, lives. But, really, Patrice and her family are beholden not so much to time but to the bosses who enforce those rules, to the people who would fire Patrice for being late. Patrice, then, as well as her entire family, are at the whims of those with more power, subject to their capriciousness with no clear way to exercise autonomy other than by doing what those in power want and expect them to.

THREE MEN

Thomas and the tribal judge, Moses Montrose, meet at their meeting hall, which is really Henry's Café. They talk about getting a new door for the jail, which has recently been kicked in, but the tribe is broke. Moses then tells Thomas that he has seen the copy of a proposed bill that aims to "emancipate" Native people. When Thomas says he remembers hearing the word "emancipate," Moses says he's read the entire bill, and it amounts to the same thing.

The true, destructive, and dehumanizing intentions of the Termination Bill are cloaked in the language and rhetoric of empowerment and helping. The word "emancipate" in particular echoes the Emancipation Proclamation, shrouding the racism of the bill's authors and supporters behind a scrim of wordplay and the pantomime of supposed good intentions.

THE BOXING COACH

Lloyd Barnes's smartest math student the year before also practices boxing with him. He goes by the name Wood Mountain. Barnes is at the gym he'd set up at a community center, instructing his students. Wood Mountain took a welding class and made weights for the gym by filling cans of all sizes with sand and welding them back together. Barnes throws punches at one of his students, Pokey, to teach him not to flinch. Barnes always drives Pokey home and insists on driving all the way down the path, even though it means he'll have to back out. At first, Barnes wanted to make sure things would be okay between Pokey and Pokey's father. Then he saw Pixie, and now, every time he drops Pokey off, he hopes he'll see Pixie again.

This section emphasizes the improvisation with which the community has faced issues related to a lack of resources in the past: Barnes set up a gym in a community center; Wood Mountain made weights from scratch. In his coaching, Barnes also teaches Pokey not to flinch when punches are thrown at him, a skill that is useful in the boxing ring but also serves as a larger metaphor for Pokey's life. People will aim to harm him, the passage seems to say, and when that happens, it's important not to react with fear, but to stand there, ready to counter if necessary when the opportunity is presented.

Barnes goes back home to the teachers' quarters. The caretaker/cook, Juggie Blue, always keeps a heaping plate of food warm for him. Juggie is Wood Mountain's mother. When Barnes goes back to the gym, Wood Mountain is already there, working at a sawdust bag. Barnes tells Wood Mountain that he's tightening up before he strikes and that he needs to relax. As he helps Wood Mountain work out, Barnes's arms start to get tired, and he thinks that it's a good thing he stopped fighting before Wood Mountain started.

Barnes already sees himself, in some ways, as competing with Wood Mountain, even though Wood Mountain is ostensibly Barnes's student. This recourse to a competitive mindset, and the insecurity that it shows, foreshadows the competitiveness and jealousy that Barnes will feel when it becomes clear that Wood Mountain also has feelings for Patrice.

NOKO

Thomas wakes up. In the kitchen, his wife, Rose, has a kettle of water going on the stove. Rose's mother, Noko, dozes in a chair. When Noko wakes up, she has trouble recognizing Thomas and says, looking at Thomas, that the man she sees is old, while Thomas is a young man. Thomas's daughter, Sharlo, brushes Noko's hair, and then Rose and Thomas put Noko to bed, placing a blanket under her to make the mattress more comfortable, which is the only thing they can think of that might help alleviate her pain. Thomas then goes with his son Wade to haul drinking water. Wade, who has skipped grades because he's smart, tells Thomas that he got into a fight with a boy in school who was picking on him. Thomas tells Wade he doesn't want him to fight, but if he did, he'd be as good as Wood Mountain.

Noko is experiencing some form of dementia, and Rose and Thomas try to alleviate her suffering using the limited means at their disposal while Sharlo brushes her hair. Thomas then goes to fetch water with his son, Wade. The section as a whole shows how tightly knit Thomas's family is and also highlights how devoted Thomas is to that family. In a sense, the family, as shown in this section, can be thought of as the most basic unit of solidarity and community, the most fundamental form of coming together in the name of something larger than your individual self.

WATER EARTH

When Patrice returns home, she finds her mother's family camped outside with frayed canvas tents and lean-to shelters stained with mud. Her cousin, Gerald, is a *jiisikid* and has come to help the family find Vera. That night, Gerald flies for a long time, inhabited by a spirit. Eventually, he sees Vera, lying on her back, wearing a dress with a cloth across her throat. Gerald tells the family that he's found Vera in the city, and he saw a child beside her.

Gerald is a jiisikid, *a kind of seer, who is trying to locate Vera. When he finally finds her, the cloth he sees across her throat seems to suggest that she's in some kind of trouble, that she can't breathe freely, and that she may have given birth to a child, a development that will be significant for Patrice later.*

The next day, at work, Patrice gets a note from Betty Pye, who has just come back after being off for a week. The note says that Betty's cousin lives in the city and saw Vera and that Patrice should be on the lookout for more news. The next day, Patrice hitches a ride to the post office with Thomas, who sees her on the road while he's driving with Wade. Patrice reads the note from Betty out loud to him. Patrice walks back from the post office, needing time to think. When she gets home, she sees Barnes's car stuck in the mud. He is trying to push it out with Pokey behind the wheel.

As information about Vera trickles in, Patrice starts to plan how she'll try and find her sister. Meanwhile, Barnes, who Patrice isn't interested in, has come to her house uninvited, not for the first time, with hopes of talking with her. Barnes's fixation on his own desires (he wants to talk to Patrice) at the expense of caring about what Patrice is going through (trying to find her missing sister) shows not just Barnes's obliviousness, but hints at the erasure of women's agency at the hands of men that will animate other parts of the novel, particularly Vera's story. Barnes's obliviousness is also juxtaposed against Thomas's selfless, community-minded action of giving Patrice a ride simply because she needed one.

JUGGIE'S BOY

On the drive to Minot to see Wood Mountain fight, Thomas and his family debate how exactly he'll beat Joe "Wobble" Wobleszynski. Joe Wobble's family, years back, had encroached on the land of Wood Mountain's grandmother. Patrice and Valentine watch the fight too. During the fight, Wood Mountain lets Joe Wobble's punches slide off him without absorbing their impact. Wood Mountain senses an opportunity and lands a combination. With Joe Wobble dazed, Wood Mountain steps in, but the bell rings 15 seconds before the round is supposed to end. "Foul! Foul! Fifteen seconds left," Barnes yells.

Joe Wobble's family stealing land from Wood Mountain's family highlights how deeply-rooted, and intimate, exploitation of Native people at the hands of white people is in the region, going back generations between families who still know each other. The injustice carried out by Joe Wobble's ancestors is then echoed when someone rings the end-of-round bell 15 seconds early, an unseen authority acting unjustly on behalf of Joe, saving him from potential defeat.

On the ride home, Thomas remembers a trip south he took with Wood Mountain's father, Archille, and the discrimination and racism they faced. He then starts to talk to Archille, who died years ago, and tells him how well Wood Mountain fought. He also tells Archille that he's trying to fight the bill coming out of Washington. He doesn't know what it is, he says, but he knows that it's not good.

On a trip south with Wood Mountain's father, Archille, Thomas also faced racism, showing how racism against Native people has permeated United States culture, regardless of region. That racism, then, has led to governmental policy, like the Termination Bill, which aims to eliminate Native tribes.

VALENTINE'S DAYS

Mr. Vold tells Patrice that she has three days total that she can take off for work. After she explains that she needs to go to the city to look for Vera, Mr. Vold says she can take a weeklong leave of absence without pay. When Patrice asks if she can think on it overnight, he says, "Go right ahead," and he seems pleased with himself for offering this kind of false generosity. At the end of the workday, Valentine tells Patrice that she can use her sick days. She explains that she talked to Mr. Vold and, under the circumstances, he'll allow Valentine to let Patrice use her three sick days in addition to her own three days.

Patrice needs to travel to try and find her sister, who has disappeared. Even though Patrice's trip is dire, potentially a matter of Vera's life and death, she is still at the mercy of the whims of a man in power. He gets to decide whether Patrice will keep her job or not if she goes. His power, though, is countered through Valentine's act of solidarity, her gracious offer to let Patrice use her sick days. Notably, Mr. Vold can act exploitatively with little to no regard for the humanity of people who work at the jewel bearing plant and still think of himself as a good person, insulated by the rules and bylaws of bureaucracy, which enable him to avoid looking at his actions honestly.

Back home, Patrice packs for her trip. She goes to the Relocation Office to find a train schedule and then goes home to get the money she has buried. She'll get a ride with Doris to the train. "Don't go disappear on me too," Zhaanat whispers to Patrice as she leaves.

As Patrice leaves to look for Vera, Zhaanat tells her not to disappear too. The statement carries with it the ache that Zhaanat feels not knowing where Vera is or what has happened to her, and also an acknowledgment of the threat that Patrice could potentially face on her trip, an understanding that the place where she is going might not be safe for her.

PUKKONS

Thomas carries his rifle on the trail to his father's house, hoping to scare out a partridge or deer. When he reaches his father's house, he tells his father about the bill coming from the government and says that the government aims to take away the treaties. His father, Biboon, says that because they're targeting other tribes as well, it might be possible to fight it as a larger group.

Biboon expresses the strategy that will become the key to defeating the Termination Bill: they must fight it as a group, and as large of a group as possible. Solidarity, then, extends beyond individual communities and tribes to include diverse groups with common interests.

PERFUME

On the ride to Rugby, Doris asks Patrice if she has a boyfriend. She says she's heard that Barnes likes her. Patrice says she hasn't heard anything about it. After a while, Doris asks her what she thinks of Bucky Duvalle, and to Patrice, it's like someone is poking an electric wire into her brain. Patrice tells Doris about how Bucky and his friends gave her a ride last summer and at first promised and then refused to take her where she wanted to go. They trapped her, and Bucky threw himself at her, then they took her down the road to have a "picnic" at Fish Lake, where Patrice pretended to go along with what they wanted. But then she jumped into the lake and swam to her uncle, Thomas's, boat.

Patrice describes the sexual assault she experienced the summer before. It's an example of the violence that often, though not always, accompanies sex in the novel. Patrice is able to escape when she fights back and swims to the boat belonging to Thomas, a man with power and standing in the community who uses what standing he has to help others instead of using it to try and get what he wants.

Doris tells Patrice that her brother is friends with Bucky. Patrice understands then that Doris's brother was one of the boys in the car with Bucky and that Doris heard about what had happened from him. Patrice knows she can't trust Doris anymore. Patrice asks what her brother said, and Doris says that he told her that "Bucky was a jackass" and that he didn't know why Patrice went into the bushes with him. Patrice says that's not what happened, and Doris says she defended Patrice to her brother. She then says that her brother told her that Bucky made him say that. When Patrice asks why, Doris tells her that Bucky thinks if he ruins Patrice's reputation, then she'll have no choice but to pick him, as he'll be the only option left. Doris says that Bucky likes her just like Barnes does. She tells Patrice she should be glad that at least someone likes her.

Patrice confronts complex and competing loyalties while she's talking to Doris, complicating the novel's theme of solidarity. On the one hand, Patrice might expect Doris, a new friend from the jewel bearing plant, to understand how horrific her experience in the car was, that it was sexual assault that would have escalated if she hadn't escaped. When Patrice understands that Doris's brother was in the car, though, Patrice knows she can't trust Doris, that Doris will potentially twist events without regard for what actually happened, until those events fit the narrative her brother told her, that she'll ultimately betray Patrice if it helps her brother save face or maintain some kind of innocence. Doris seals her after-the-fact complicity in what her brother did by bemoaning Patrice's inability to be happy that someone likes her, a sentiment that shows how gender norms and expectations of the time didn't just lead to gender-based violence by men directed against women, but also impacted how women interacted with each other.

THE IRON

At home, when Thomas steps inside, Rose is busy ironing. She'd asked for a plug-in iron before they had had electricity. It didn't quite make sense to buy one, but Thomas bought it anyway, and Rose guarded it and kept it shined like a trophy. Later, Thomas wakes up at 11:04 p.m. to go to work. He's been a night watchman for seven months. At first, he could do his role as chairman of the Turtle Mountain Advisory Committee in the afternoons and evenings, but now that the government has introduced its bill, he has more and more work. In the newspaper, he reads that the United States Congress intends to "emancipate" Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, and Thomas thinks of the treaties that his father and grandfather had signed and that were supposed to last in perpetuity.

Again, the actual intentions of the Termination Bill are shrouded by language that connotes empowerment, and the word "emancipate" specifically aims to link the Termination Bill with the Emancipation Proclamation in the minds of people in the 1950s. The supporters and writers of the Termination Bill can hide their racism by claiming to be acting in the best interest of the people they aim to harm and against whom they are prejudiced. This is part of why Erdrich may have written a novel focusing on this period of history in the 21st century, and why she opens and closes the novel with nonfiction segments situating the events of the novel in a historical context; through Erdrich's telling, it becomes clear that the same kinds of tactics are still used in politics and political discourse to this day and that the events of the novel both directly impact, and are in communication with, the present moment.

THE FRUIT CRATE

In his mind, Barnes, a math teacher, attaches numbers to people. Patrice he sees as a 26, even though she's just 19. He loves the curl of the two and loop of the six. One night, he brings Pokey home and says he'll stop in to meet his parents, who he hasn't met before. While Barnes, Pokey, and Zhaanat are eating, Pokey says his mother wants to know why Barnes has come. Barnes says he's just come to visit. Pokey's mother speaks again in Chippewa, and Pokey translates to Barnes. Zhaanat has said that Pixie doesn't like him, and she doesn't like him because he smells bad.

Zhaanat has noticed that Barnes is interested in Patrice and that Patrice isn't interested in Barnes. This disparity in affection could be harmless, but Zhaanat also knows that it could lead somewhere truly destructive, that if Patrice tried to reject Barnes, his true ugliness might come out (as Zhaanat warns Patrice later in the story). With that in mind, Zhaanat tries, ultimately unsuccessfully, to dissuade Barnes from taking an interest in Patrice. Interestingly, Barnes's association between Patrice and the number 26 foreshadows Patrice going to Log Jam 26 later in the novel.

A SEAT ON THE TRAIN

On the train, Patrice is unsure what to do when a man asks her to change seats so he and his wife can sit together. A different man volunteers to switch seats. The man who wants Patrice to move says, "You two belong together." When the other man sits next to Patrice, she sees that it's Wood Mountain. He says he's getting off in Fargo, where he has a fight, and talks about his training process. When Patrice tells him her plan to find Vera, he tells her that if she wants to find Vera, she should find the "scum."

Patrice is at the very beginning of her journey and already she experiences the discomfort and shock of being in a new and strange situation where you don't know the rules and norms. She also experiences racism almost immediately, foreshadowing the dangers of the world that Patrice will enter when she follows Wood Mountain's advice to find the "scum."

A BILL

At work, Thomas reads through Congress's proposed bill. As he reads, he automatically replaces the word "emancipate" with "terminate" in his mind. In the news, the author of the bill used lofty words like freedom and equality to cloak the truth, which is that he aimed for "termination." Earlier in the morning, Thomas had talked with his friend, Martin Cross, a tribal chairman of Fort Berthold. Martin tells Thomas that the man who proposed the bill, Arthur V. Watkins, is the most powerful person in Congress and, though he's not sure if it matters or not, that the man is a Mormon. Martin says it's in their religion to "change Indians into whites" and that "they think if you follow their ways your skin will bleach out."

As Thomas reads through the Termination Bill, he dismantles the language tricks that the bill's author is trying to play. After he talks to Martin, he also begins to consider the role that religion plays in the racism that motivated Arthur Watkins to propose the bill in the first place.

WHO? [1]

At work the next night, Thomas reads through the bill again. He thinks about all that Native people have survived—smallpox, the Winchester repeating rifle, the Hotchkiss rifle, tuberculosis—and thinks they'll ultimately be defeated by a collection of tedious words. He drifts off to sleep, and when he wakes up, he hears an owl. He goes outside to see it more clearly. Later, next to his time stamp, which is a few minutes late and should have been punched on the hour, he writes, "*Went outside to answer Snowy Owl's question, Who? Owl not satisfied with answer.*"

Thomas compares the physical violence Native people have endured to the latest political and bureaucratic attempt to eliminate them. On the surface, the political tactics might seem less violent, but if they were to be more successful than all past attempts to eliminate Native people, then the violence contained in those tactics becomes clear.

INDIAN JOKE

The next day, when Mr. Vold sees what Thomas wrote on his time card about the owl, he interprets it as a cryptic joke. LaBatte plays along and offers an interpretation about Thomas smoking Snowy Owl brand cigars, but once he leaves Vold's office, he stops laughing. If Thomas had seen an owl, LaBatte thinks, that would mean a death soon. He then shuffles through mental lists of who might die.

LaBatte interprets Thomas's sighting of an owl, a bird that can hold significance in Chippewa culture, as an omen of death. Thomas's inscription on his time card, though, makes any straightforward reading of the owl as a symbol in the novel difficult. While Mr. Vold attempts his own interpretation—and seems to widely miss the mark—later in the story the reader will find out that Thomas also recognizes the owl as a symbol, but doesn't interpret it as superstitiously as he believes LaBatte does.

WHO? [2]

Thomas is part of the "after-the-buffalo-who-are-we-now generation," and it is up to them to determine their own identity. But how could they figure out and maintain that identity, he wonders, when the people who sought to take it from them often came with outstretched arms, seeking to crush them with what they called love?

Thomas expresses one of the main themes of the novel here. Countless times, the most harmful acts—against Native people and others—have been done by people with supposed good intentions. Whether it was people who started the boarding schools through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which ended up causing significant damage, or Arthur Watkins, it can be hard to protect yourself from people who claim, and might even believe, that they are your friends.

FLAGS

The year he went to boarding school, his father was gaunt, and Thomas was always hungry. Thomas's mother had been torn about whether to cut his hair before he went because they would cut it off when he went to school. To cut hair meant that someone had died, a form of grieving. She decided to cut it off and hang it in the woods so that Thomas would have to come home. At school, one of the first things Thomas noticed was the blue flag. The teacher told him to put his hand over his heart and recite words while looking at it. He had been there for a few months when he heard the phrase about a flag that you should die for and a chill went through his body.

This chapter illustrates the harm that boarding schools caused. While they claimed to be built to benefit Native people, their true motive was to attempt to eliminate Native culture. In place of Native culture, the schools attempted to inculcate into students the kind of United States nationalism represented by the Pledge of Allegiance and the sentiment that one should die for the flag.

LOG JAM 26

When Wood Mountain is about to leave the train at Fargo, he copies down the addresses where Patrice is going to check for Vera. Patrice gives him two addresses but has another address that she doesn't tell Wood Mountain about. That address is for Bernadette, Wood Mountain's half-sister. When Wood Mountain gets off the train, he walks toward a bar. If he goes in, Patrice thinks, she'll never speak to him again, but he walks past.

Patrice feels herself growing fonder of Wood Mountain, but, after seeing what alcohol has done to her father, she is ready to relinquish those feelings and never speak to him again if he goes into a bar, illustrating Patrice's independence and willingness to stand up for herself.

When Patrice arrives in Minneapolis, she doesn't know how she'll get to the first address where she wants to go. She asks a woman working at the ticket window, who says that she can take a taxi, and Patrice thinks, of course, just like in a story in a magazine. After she sits down on a bench by the curb, a car pulls up. She shows the address to the driver and asks how much it will cost. The driver says it will be free because he's going there anyway. The driver tells Patrice to sit up front, but that doesn't seem right to her, so she sits in the back. The man smells like Barnes, Patrice thinks, but also like he's already had a drink.

Patrice finds herself again in a new situation with unfamiliar norms and expectations where she's not sure what to do. The man who gives her a ride takes advantage of that. While leading Patrice into a bad situation, he also claims to be acting in her best interest.

The driver says his name is Earl. He pulls up to a place with neon letters over the door that say Log Jam 26. To Patrice, it looks like a bar, and she says she doesn't go into bars. The man says it's not a bar. When Patrice gets out, the man tries to push her forward, and then another man comes, and the two of them hold her by the elbows and force her through the doors. In the middle of the club, Patrice sees a lighted tank of water.

When they arrive at a bar, which Patrice doesn't want to enter, Earl takes Patrice in by force. The charade of his good intentions has been broken, but Patrice also doesn't have the power, on her own, to overcome him.

Patrice crumples on the floor and yells out that the men are trying to kidnap her. A third man approaches and asks Earl if that's true. The third man apologizes to Patrice and introduces himself as Jack Malloy. Patrice tells the man that her name is Doris Barnes, and Jack offers Patrice a hamburger. He also offers her a job and explains that it would be swimming in the tank of water wearing a **costume like an ox**. He tells Patrice that it's 50 dollars a night plus she gets to keep her tips every other night. Patrice says she'll look at the outfit just for fun. Jack takes her to a dressing room and shows her a blue wetsuit with the hands and feet painted white like hooves. When Jack asks if she'll try on what he calls the "**waterjack" costume,** Patrice says that she certainly won't.

Jack Malloy acts similarly to how Earl acted (and similar to how Arthur Watkins frames his intentions): though he ultimately aims to harm Patrice for his own benefit (by making money off her performance), Jack claims to be helping her out and offering her something for her own good.

When Patrice brings up finding her sister again, Jack offers to help her look and says that she can stay in the dressing room at Log Jam 26. The whites of his eyes are yellow. Eventually, Patrice says that she'll let Jack drive her where she wants to go. Jack says they'll part ways if Patrice finds her sister, and if not, Patrice will do the waterjack show. As she goes to get in Jack's car—the same car Earl had been driving before—she thinks that more new things have happened to her in the past day than in the rest of her life.

Jack continues his charade that he's helping Patrice by taking her to different addresses to look for Vera. Patrice begins to understand that something's really wrong, though, when she realizes that the car Earl drove to attempt to kidnap her is actually Jack's.

THE WAKE-UP SHAVE

Thomas, tired at work, sees Roderick again perched on the band saw. He takes out his shaving kit, which he'd brought from home as a kind of experiment. Maybe shaving might wake him up, he thinks. It works. And that morning, and every morning after, he greets the morning shift with a perfect shave and combed hair.

This chapter shows Thomas's ingenuity and also reveals his optimism and the humor he uses to address challenges. Instead of lamenting where he is, that he has to stay up all night for his job and is having a hard time doing it, Thomas looks for a novel solution, which ends up working.

THE OLD MUSKRAT

Thomas talks with his father, Biboon, about strategies to fight the proposed bill in Congress. Biboon tells Thomas what they did when he was younger to keep their land, the contracts they signed, petitions they started. Biboon says the treaties were a promise to exchange what Congress gave them for the use of Native land and are supposed to last as "long as the grass grows and rivers flow." Thomas says they are still using Native land, but they are trying to pretend they didn't sign a contract to pay rent.

Biboon helps Thomas to come up with plans for the kind of community actions that might be most effective when taking on the powerful. He also points out that the treaties signed by people in his generation were supposed to last in perpetuity, and the institution that guaranteed that, the United States government, is the same one that is now trying to pretend those agreements didn't happen.

Thomas then convenes a meeting of the advisory committee at the community center to talk about the bill, House Concurrent Resolution 108, or HCR 108. Joyce Asiginak says that they want to relocate Native people, but "relocate" is a fancy word for "remove." As a group, they decide to explore possibilities for taking action. They start a petition, which Louis will take to get signed by as many people as possible, and they move to start referring to HCR 108 as the Termination Bill.

Thomas begins to enact some of the plans that he talked about with Biboon, like starting a petition. The advisory committee, notably working as a group rather than as individuals, also decides to cut through the language tricks of the bill's author by referring to it as the Termination Bill, highlighting the bill's true intentions rather than let those intentions be disguised by the bland and innocuous-sounding HCR 108.

THE WATERJACK

Patrice goes with Jack to the first address she has to look for Vera. The yard is dead, and the front steps have collapsed. Patrice knocks on the window next to the door. A dog barks, and its bark is high and whining and anxious to live. Patrice feels tears in her eyes. She calls out Vera's name. Eventually, she gives up and decides to go on to the second address. Jack says that he's familiar with the building and that if Patrice finds Vera there, it won't be good.

There's something foreboding about the first house that Patrice visits. She'll find out more later, when she returns, but at this point she isn't quite sure what to make of the troubling sensation that comes over her.

At the next place, Patrice goes to each apartment but doesn't get an answer. Jack says that it must be exhausting for Patrice and that they can set up a cot in the dressing room so she can rest. Patrice, though, wrenches her arm from him and tells him she wants to go to the third address, which belongs to Bernadette Blue. Jack asks if she means Bernie Blue and if the two of them are friends. Patrice tells him a friend gave her Bernadette's address so she could stay there if she needed to. Jack says she'd be better off staying at Log Jam 26. When they get back to the bar, Patrice says she'll consider being the waterjack if she can get the tips every night instead of just every other night.

Jack continuously tries to shake Patrice off her plan by telling her that the places she wants to visit are dangerous and that she shouldn't go. Again, his claim to be acting in Patrice's best interests starts to become more suspicious.

The next morning, Patrice agrees to be the waterjack. She puts on the **suit**, and Jack shows her the moves that the waterjack does, moving his shoulders and hips and then doing a "tush wag" before blowing kisses over his shoulder. As she waits to be lowered into the tank, Patrice wonders what her mother would think of her. She thinks to herself in Chippewa, "mayagi. Strange. Maama kaajiig. Strange people. Gawiin ingikendizo siin. I am a stranger to myself." Patrice thinks that the feeling is one that can only be expressed in Chippewa, where the strangeness is humorous and the danger something you could laugh at, though you might get hurt as well.

This chapter directly references another of the story's main themes, the way that humor can help to soften pain and suffering. After she agrees to be the waterjack, Patrice is surprised by the person she has become in just a couple of days, and she uses humor intertwined with danger and pain, which she thinks of as being embedded in the Chippewa language, to comprehend her own transformation.

LEFT HOOK

Barnes waits for Wood Mountain at a restaurant in the Powers Hotel in Fargo. When Wood Mountain arrives, Barnes tells him that the fight is off, and Wood Mountain presses his fingers together, trying to cloak how disappointed he is. Wood Mountain tells Barnes he saw Patrice on the train, and that, since he doesn't have a fight, he might go down to Minneapolis to make sure she's doing okay. Wood Mountain knows what he's doing by wheedling Barnes like this. But he's sick of Barnes taking an interest in Patrice and, from Pokey, Wood Mountain knows that Patrice is sick of it too. Wood Mountain tells Barnes he's sure Patrice will be fine and that he plans to go home, but when he goes to the train station, Wood Mountain hears himself asking for a ticket to Minneapolis.

Barnes starts to feel acutely jealous of Wood Mountain, afraid that Patrice might like Wood Mountain more than she likes him. Wood Mountain intentionally pushes Barnes's buttons, but he isn't just interested in continuing the competition that Barnes seems to be waging with him. Instead, Wood Mountain also seems genuinely concerned, unlike Barnes, with Patrice's well-being, and he boards a train to Minneapolis to make sure that she is doing okay.

LOUIS PIPESTONE

Louis Pipestone, who has racing horses, drives to Zhaanat's house, where he plans to get her to sign the petition against the Termination Bill. Pokey is too young to sign, but he listens to what Louis says, and then helps his mother sign. Louis leaves and gets a remarkable number of signatures before going to Thomas's house, where they talk more about how to counter the bill.

Louis Pipestone is in charge of circulating the petition, which helps garner support for the effort to oppose the Termination Bill and also helps in simply spreading awareness. The petition—a collection of signatures—is also a perfect symbol to show that the effort doesn't involve just Thomas, or just the advisory committee, but the entire community.

AJAX

At night, Thomas and Rose lay side by side, and Thomas tells her that he had a drink. Rose says she'll kill him if he takes another. Thomas asks if she'll poison him. Rose asks if he remembers the biscuits from a few days ago. She tells him that Wade made them and couldn't find baking powder. He held up what he had used instead, and Rose saw that it was a can of Ajax powder. So, she tells Thomas, he's already been poisoned. But please don't take another drink, she says. Thomas promises that he won't.

This chapter illustrates again the way that humor, pain, and danger can be intertwined. The story about Wade making biscuits with Ajax is funny, but at the same time, it could have actually harmed Thomas. Similarly, Rose tells the story in response to Thomas saying he had a drink; she responds to that news with humor, but there's also the sense that Thomas drinking could cause serious damage and could be dangerous, both to himself and his family.

IRON TULIP

Patrice is lowered into the tank wearing the **waterjack costume**. She swings around on the rope with her leg pointed up behind her. She remembers there are weights, props, at the bottom and reaches for a pink one before realizing it is a "shocking object." She instead picks up an iron tulip, which she pretends to smell while looking over her shoulder. Twenty minutes pass easily, and when she gets out, Jack tells her that she's a sensation.

While Patrice doesn't enjoy some of the more lewd or sexually explicit aspects of the waterjack performance, she doesn't seem to entirely dislike performing. In other words, the novel establishes that neither the performance itself nor its sexual nature amount to exploitation, and Patrice is still able to exercise agency in that performance and in her decision to perform, which shows the novel's nuanced perspective on sex and gender dynamics. However, the relationship between Jack and Patrice becomes more easily understood as straightforwardly exploitative, and as one that has erased Patrice's agency, later on.

The next morning, Patrice takes a taxi to the first place where she looked for Vera. She also shows the driver the address of the second place, which Jack had said was dangerous. Patrice asks the driver if there's anything wrong with the address, and he says not that he knows of. At the first place, she sticks a fork into rotted wood by the door handle to pry the lock loose. In one of the rooms, she finds a dog at the end of a chain bolted to the wall, pale, its bones sticking out. In each of the other rooms, she finds a filthy mat, urine, and feces. And in each room, she finds a chain with a dog collar at the end of each one. In the bathroom, she finds dried blood and two used diapers.

As she continues to look for Vera, Patrice also starts to look for evidence that Jack is not actually helping her, as he claims to be. When she returns to the first address where she looked for Vera, she finds an unsettling scene, which foreshadows the danger that Vera is in.

Patrice goes back to the dog and asks where Vera is. The dog gives four more breaths before a rheumatic sigh. Jack pulls up outside. Patrice says they should go back to the other address, and Jack says that no, they're not going there. But Patrice insists. Patrice knocks on every door. From behind one door, someone asks who it is and Patrice says it's the waterjack. The woman who opens the door is gaunt and bald, and her name is Hilda, the name of the person who had been the waterjack before Patrice. Jack whisks Patrice away, and she asks if that was Hilda. Jack says she's angry at him because of professional standards. Patrice fights Jack off and bangs on the door, but no one comes to answer.

At the second address, after Jack shows up, Patrice also starts to get a sense of the danger that she might be in when she sees Hilda, the previous waterjack, who is now gaunt and bald. It's not clear yet that she became sick as a result of being the waterjack, or that Jack is knowingly putting Patrice in harm's way for his own gain, but the encounter is unsettling for Patrice.

At Patrice's insistence, they go next to Bernadette's house. When Bernadette recognizes Patrice, she cries out with "sorrow and intensity." Patrice asks her where Vera is, and Bernadette says that she ran away and left Bernadette with the baby. Patrice tells her she's not taking the baby until Bernadette gives her Vera. Bernadette says she doesn't know where Vera is, and Patrice tells her to find out then.

This section presents another complication in the novel's theme of solidarity and community action. While Patrice knows Bernadette, and Bernadette is ostensibly helping Vera by taking care of her child, she isn't doing so because she wants to, or out of a sense of solidarity with Vera or Patrice, or because she wants to help Patrice fight against the more powerful people who may have taken Vera. Instead, Bernadette does it because it's not clear that there's another option. As soon as another option shows up—once Patrice walks through the door—Bernadette wants to wash her hands of the situation and be done with it.

WOODLAND BEAUTY

Wood Mountain gets off the train and walks to his sister Bernadette's house. Bernadette tells him that Patrice had been there and that she was with Jack, who looked sickly and skinny. She says he's been a functioning "junkie" for years. Bernadette says that her husband Cal wouldn't believe Wood Mountain is Bernadette's brother and wouldn't want him to stay with them, so he goes to look for other accommodations.

To Wood Mountain, Bernadette reveals information about Jack that's been withheld from the reader up to this point. It's implied, too, that Jack's desire to fuel his addiction might be his motivation for exploiting people like Patrice.

Wood Mountain finds a room in the hotel next to Log Jam 26. Later, after dinner, he goes to the bar and sees the glowing water tank in the middle. A cardboard sign on the table reads, "*Exotic Attraction! Woodland Beauty! Our Own World-Famous Waterjack*." The waitress tells Wood Mountain that the current waterjack is the third one, that the first one died and the second is fading fast. When the waterjack begins the show, Wood Mountain doesn't pay much attention at first. But when he looks closer, he sees that it's Patrice. He walks toward the tank, and when he raises a fist to pound on the glass, he's seized and dragged out the door.

This is the first time it's revealed that there is something to do with the waterjack costume that is poisoning the people who wear it, which shows the ways that Jack has exploited Patrice, and the previous waterjacks, by luring them into a potentially deadly situation without them having any idea what they're signing up for. In that way, Jack has erased Patrice's agency, disregarding her humanity to try and use her to get what he wants.

After the show, when the waitress brings Patrice her meal, she also passes Patrice a note from Wood Mountain. The note says that he tried to get her attention but got thrown out and that he's at the hotel next door in room 328. As she drifts off to sleep, she has a sudden shock of clarity. Back at the first house where she checked for Vera, she realizes the collar at the end of the chain wasn't a regular dog collar. It didn't buckle. And it had been cut in two. You would need pliers to remove the chain attached to the collar. "And the dried shit in the corner," she realizes, "was human."

Though it didn't register at first, now Patrice realizes the horror of what she saw earlier as she begins to understand that humans had been chained to the walls in that house, again providing a glimpse of the kind of violence that Vera is experiencing.

THE AVERAGE WOMAN AND THE EMPTY TANK

Louis Pipestone works on the petition fastidiously, getting as many signatures as possible, while Juggie Blue types a copy onto mimeograph paper so they'll have more than one copy. At work, Thomas writes a desperate letter to Senator Milton R. Young. He then carries on a conversation with Roderick, who says that he's not there to see Thomas, but LaBatte, whose jail time he took on earlier by saying he did what LaBatte actually did. Roderick then talks about going to the sanatorium to be treated for the tuberculosis that he eventually died from.

Again, it's made clear that the whole community will have to come together to fight against the Termination Bill. Roderick's story also comes into clearer focus here, showing the ways that the boarding school, ostensibly designed to help him, ended up making him sick and killing him.


In the morning, Thomas tells LaBatte that he saw Roderick last night and that Roderick was there to save LaBatte, who he said was planning on stealing the jewels from the plant. LaBatte doesn't deny it. He says he had a string of bad luck and needs money. Thomas gives LaBatte some money and then finds LaBatte's lunch box, full, waiting for him in his car.

Instead of reprimanding him or turning him in to the authorities, when Thomas finds out that LaBatte is planning to steal from the jewel bearing plant, he gives LaBatte money, an act of solidarity and looking out for another person. LaBatte, even though he doesn't really have anything to give, responds by giving the food he has for lunch to Thomas.

THE MISSIONARIES

Two Mormon missionaries arrive at Thomas's house. When Senator Watkins's name is brought up, Thomas asks them why he wants to terminate Native people. One of the elders says that Watkins doesn't want that at all. Thomas says he wants to know who Senator Watkins is and what his message is. One of the elders hands Thomas a small book with a black cover. As they walk away down the road, the elders walk in a straight line, side by side, "full of mystifying purpose."

The Mormon missionaries walk away from Thomas's house "full of mystifying purpose," a statement that hints at the idea that the Mormon missionaries—and maybe, by extension, Arthur Watkins as well—do what they do, however wrongheaded or misguided it might be, out of sincere conviction rather than manipulative maneuvering.

THE BEGINNING

Thomas visits his father, Biboon, gives him a pinch of tobacco, and asks for the story of his name. His father says that in the beginning, the world was covered in water. The creator lined up the best divers, but when they dove, none could find the bottom. Finally, the creator landed on the **muskrat**, and when the muskrat dove, it came back up drowned but with a little bit of silt in its paw. From that, the creator made the whole earth.

The muskrat might not be the most valued or celebrated animal, but, according to the creation story that Biboon tells, its efforts were essential for the creation of the Earth. The novel as a whole follows an arc similar to that of the creation story. While Thomas might not hold a conspicuous position of power, his industry and ingenuity prove essential for combatting the threat posed by the Termination Bill, Arthur Watkins, and the United States government.

THE TEMPLE BEGGAR

Patrice locks herself in her room and tells herself to wake up when it's pitch dark. When she wakes up, she finds her bag, her shoes, her coat. When she opens the door, she sees Jack slumped against the wall, his legs stretched straight out. His eyes roll back in his head like a slot machine. Patrice makes her way to the hotel next door and then to Wood Mountain's room. As they leave to go to Bernadette's, Patrice tells the attendant at the hotel that Jack from next door is dying in the alley. When they reach Bernadette's she gives them some food and they take Vera's baby with them before taking the train back home. Patrice tells the baby that she'll take care of him until Vera comes home.

At this point, Patrice knows that Jack has been lying to her and that he put her in a situation that, if she hadn't found a way to escape, could have killed her. Still, when Patrice sees him in the midst of a potential overdose in the hallway, she alerts someone who might be able to help him, showing that she is willing to go out of her way to help others even when those people wouldn't help her. At the same time, Wood Mountain has gone out of his way to try and support and be there for Patrice, and both of them will care for Vera's baby, illustrating in another way how essential solidarity is for the characters in the novel to survive.

WILD ROOSTER

Thomas and other members of the advisory committee are in a car, driving to Fargo for a meeting to make their opposition to the Termination Bill known. They joke with one another along the way. In Fargo, Thomas stays with Moses's cousin Nancy and her husband, George.

Though they're on the way to a meeting about a bill that could terminate their tribe, the members of the advisory committee still joke along the way, showing again how humor is used as a tool to cope with challenges.

ARTHUR V. WATKINS

If Arthur V. Watkins had been a boxer, which he wasn't, he would have been a brawler, surprising for someone who looks so "ideal-looking" and respectable. Joseph Smith and early Mormons tried to kill all Native people on their way across the country. Arthur V. Watkins, on the other hand, uses the power granted by his office to achieve the same thing, and he doesn't have to get "his hands bloody."

Arthur V. Watkins might be "ideal-looking" and "respectable," but this chapter points out that even though he won't get his hands bloody, he is every bit as violent as those who killed Native people before him.

COOL FINE

As they walk back to Patrice's home, Wood Mountain tells Patrice that he thought of a temporary name for the baby: Archille, after his father. Patrice, though, keeps using Gwiizikens for the baby, meaning little boy. Falling in love with Wood Mountain is how things would normally go, but she continues to say things she knows will discourage him. She admits to herself, though, that it is much easier to discourage Barnes than Wood Mountain.

Wood Mountain shows how much he already cares about Vera's baby by naming him (temporarily, he says) after his father. Though she continues to develop feelings for Wood Mountain, she also remains attached to her independence and seems unwilling to give it up to follow the expected path of falling in love and getting married.

At home, Patrice tells Zhaanat that she wasn't able to find Vera and only brought the Little Boy home. Eventually, Zhaanat gathers herself and takes the baby inside. Her thinking, as a whole, is built on using great care with everything around her. She begins to nurse the baby, even though she doesn't have milk, saying that in the old days, when a baby's mother couldn't nurse, older women could sometimes take on that role.

With Vera still missing, the people in her life, even people like Wood Mountain who Vera might not know especially well, step in to be surrogate parents for her child, strengthening the bonds of their family and community. Zhaanat's desire to attempt to nurse the baby, even though she doesn't have milk to give, is another example of how far people in the community will go in their efforts to support one another.

THE TORUS

The next morning, Patrice goes to work with Doris and Valentine. At work, by the end of the day, people have promised to give her more bottles, weeks' worth of diapers, a diaper bucket, baby clothes. Betty Pye tells Patrice about a woman who might sell her leftover formula.

Similar to how Thomas and others are mobilizing the committee to help in the effort to oppose the Termination Bill, the larger community also steps in and acts in solidarity with Patrice and her family when they need help.

METAL BLINDS

The meeting in Fargo is held in a judicial building. As John Cooper reads through the legislation, Thomas is frustrated. About 12 people there either don't speak English or have a hard time understanding it and have gone to great expense and effort to be there. As they have for generation after generation, they attempt to understand "a white man reading endlessly from a sheaf of papers."

This section highlights the ways that those in power have often operated in bad faith, trying to hide their true motives behind bureaucratic language or by using language that they know the people they're talking to won't fully understand.

After John Cooper finishes reading through the bill, Thomas and the group he traveled with voice their frustration. Mr. Holmes says that according to the bill, there won't be any further government service for the Turtle Mountain people. "You will now be equal with whites as far as the government is concerned," he says. Joyce Asiginak says that their rights will decrease, so for them, it doesn't seem like they'll be equal. Mr. Holmes says that they will be relocated to other places with equal levels of opportunity, and Juggie Blue says that they don't want to leave their homes. Eddy Mink adds that the services the government provides to Native people are similar to rent, rent payment for use of the entire United States. At the end, they take a vote. For the bill: 0. Against: 47.

The language games continue in this passage, as Mr. Holmes uses words like "equal" and "relocate" when he means, as Joyce Asiginak says, "stripped of your rights" and "forcibly relocated." The vote at the end also offers a straightforward rebuke to those kinds of obfuscations as well as Arthur Watkins's claims to be acting in the best interests of Native people. If the Termination Bill were actually in the best interests of Native people, then why would they be unable to garner a single vote of support among people who the bill claims to want to help?

After the meeting, the group goes to dinner. When Thomas walks out of the restaurant, he sees Pogo Paranteau, Patrice's father, who is drunk. At first, Thomas tries to get Pogo to let them take him home. Eventually, he gives up, thinking that it would be better to let him stay in Fargo than return home where he would have been a terror to his family.

Thomas's initial reaction to seeing Patrice's father is to try and help him and take him home. After thinking for a second, though, he decides that it would be better for Patrice's family if he didn't, which shows just how much damage Paranteau has caused and how much he is still capable of causing. It also shows the consideration that Thomas has for the people in his life.

X = ?

Barnes feels anger rising in him, wondering how he'll deal with Wood Mountain's betrayal. After all the training he's given Wood Mountain, how could he go and pursue Patrice, who Wood Mountain knew Barnes liked? Later, while teaching algebra, Barnes constructs an equation in his mind, trying to gauge his romantic chances with Patrice by totaling up how good-looking and pleasant Wood Mountain is versus himself. After boxing practice, Wood Mountain goes with Pokey back to Pokey's house to see Patrice, or the baby, or both, but when he gets there, Patrice is asleep.

Barnes is consumed by a kind of jealous anger, bordering on rage. He feels this jealousy, which has a tinge of threat to it, without any apparent regard as to whether Patrice reciprocates his feelings (she doesn't) or consideration of what might be best for Patrice in the given situation.

Barnes drives Wade home and talks with Thomas about the meeting and the bill. Barnes says he doesn't see why it seems so bad and that it seems like they'll have the chance to be "regular Americans." Thomas tries to explain to Barnes the difference between Native people and people of European descent in the U.S. He asks Barnes what he would think if Native people had landed in Europe, killed almost everyone, taken their land, then made everyone take on their culture and language. Barnes says he wouldn't like that at all. He then asks if he married a Native woman, could he be Native? Thomas says no, but they could like him anyway.

Thomas explains to Barnes, in the simplest terms he can find, why the genocide of Native people, followed by the continued persecution of Native people by the U.S. government, is wrong. Even Barnes seems to understand the point he's making.

TWIN DREAMS

After a week of trying, Zhaanat starts to give milk. Patrice had believed her mother but is still surprised. To try and get Patrice's attention, Barnes starts to give Pokey gifts, first boxing magazines, and then a brand new red and black checked winter jacket. Patrice tells Pokey that he doesn't have to give the coat back but that he shouldn't accept any more gifts either. Patrice has also been having dreams about Vera, where she sees Vera slumped against the wall where Jack had overdosed or hears Vera saying her name. When Patrice talks to her mother about the nightmares, Zhaanat tells her that she's been having the exact same dreams. Zhaanat says Vera is trying to reach them.

Barnes continues his advances toward Patrice without regard for her feelings or what she's going through. Patrice and Zhaanat have also been having identical dreams. That's promising because it seems to suggest that Vera is still alive and she's trying to reach them, but the dreams can also be disturbing, suggesting that Vera might be in serious danger.

THE STAR POWWOW

Patrice and Zhaanat go to Thomas's house, seeking advice. Patrice tells him about the dog she found in the empty house, empty rooms with chains fixed to the walls, the slashed leather collars. Thomas thinks for a while and then says they have to go to the police. Zhaanat and Patrice are both disappointed by the response. Zhaanat says the police won't help them, and Thomas says he'll sleep on it to try and think of another solution. At work that night, Thomas thinks that what Patrice has told him has shaken his fundamental beliefs about people. He thought that people did bad things out of ignorance, drunkenness, or weakness. He had never heard of such extreme evil.

Thomas commits one of his only blunders in the novel, suggesting that they ask the police to help in finding Vera. Patrice and Zhaanat point out that the police wouldn't help them. Thomas's suggestion then also serves the purpose of reminding the reader how much the established institutions of power are not set up to work for or help Patrice, Zhaanat, or Vera.

Thomas falls asleep and is woken up by the sound of the owl again. He goes outside, and the door slams shut behind him. He realizes he doesn't have his keys. He goes to his car and starts the engine to keep himself warm. He hears drumming, coming from outside. He exits the car and falls down. The drumming grows louder. Then he sees "the beings." They float down from the heavens, wearing ordinary clothes made from a glowing fabric. One of the people is Jesus Christ. They dance counterclockwise, like spirits in the land of the dead, waiting for him to join them. He begins to sing the song they gave him. When the drumming stops, Thomas climbs on top of his car and uses a wire he found in his trunk to get back into the building through the window.

Thomas has an encounter with the supernatural. Later in the novel, the northern lights are mentioned, and there's the suggestion that Thomas's experience could have been sparked by the northern lights. It's important to note, though, that the novel doesn't take one side or the other. It acknowledges the existence of the northern lights while also treating Thomas's supernatural experience as just as real as a natural phenomenon. In the novel, one mode of sight—scientific or materialistic—isn't privileged over another—supernatural or spiritual.

AGONY WOULD BE HER NAME

Unnamed men smell of hot oil, liquor sweat, and spoiled meat. Another unseen character struggles against them. If she wants to get away, she'll have to run through knives. She would be "raw flesh" and in pure agony. Occasionally, she hears her mother call her name.

This is the first glimpse into what Vera is experiencing. The way that the passage is written—in brief flashes of vivid and violent images—seems to suggest that the suffering that's being inflicted on Vera is almost too much to be captured in words.

HOMECOMING

The Wazhashk family prepares for Homecoming the next day, which will include a parade, a community feed, a football game, and the crowing of royalty. As Thomas works, he watches others to see if they notice anything different about him after the visitation from the "shining people." On Saturday, everyone gathers for the parade. Representing the jewel plant, Patrice rides in the back of Doris Lauder's car and tosses some candy to the Mormon missionaries. When Sharlo, Thomas's daughter, is crowned homecoming queen, Patrice remembers when she was crowned homecoming queen years before. She thinks about how poor she had been growing up, how she had had to slice the ends off her shoes so her toes could stick out, and she remembers how badly her classmates had treated her before her face changed from "ravenous" to "enchanting."

Patrice's account of her time growing up adds nuance to the theme of community and solidarity that runs through the novel. Members of the community where she grew up, the community that Thomas is helping to mobilize to oppose the Termination Bill, also bullied her when she was little. The community itself isn't a utopia. Like most communities, it's full of people who do great things for one another and also terrible things to one another. The novel wants to highlight, though, how much can be accomplished when people put their efforts into acting in solidarity rather than working against one another.

Later that night, there is a Homecoming dance, where everyone dances to Mr. Jarvis's records. After the dance, Valentine and Doris offer Barnes a ride and say they're on their way to a bush dance, which will have dancing, lively music, wine, and beer. Barnes accepts, hoping that Pixie might be there.

Though Barnes still has Patrice on his mind, this section also foreshadows the possibility that his life, and his obsession with Patrice, might change soon.

THE BUSH DANCE

After the horses Teacher's Pet and Gringo have sex, they plod around, looking for grass to eat. They drink from a slough, roll in the mud. From the house, they hear noises that might be from ones like them or from the ones that are different, neighs and chuckles, gasps, and whinnies. The wind blows a fence open. Gringo knocks against Teacher's Pet as they walk through the fence. Teacher's Pet lashes out and kicks Gringo in the stomach, opening up a gash in his underbelly.

This chapter presents a kind of miniature play where two horses have sex, and then they happen upon the bush party. In doing so, this section nods at one of the novel's main themes, sex and gender dynamics, by enacting those conflicts through horses.

HAY STACK

The bush dance had gone on all night. In different visits to the woods, first with Doris and then Valentine, Barnes experienced kissing like he never had before. But he has feelings for Patrice, Barnes thinks. Or does he? Maybe, he thinks, he is becoming "promiscuous."

It seems that Barnes's obsession with Patrice can only fade if he has other romantic interests to take her place, not out of consideration for Patrice herself. In his Barnes-like way, he begins to contend with his own ideas about gender norms and his expectations for how he is "supposed" to feel based on those norms.

Thomas finds Barnes in the church and floats the idea of Barnes putting up a boxing card with a rematch between Joe Wobble and Wood Mountain as the main event. Thomas's idea is that they'll use it as a fundraiser to help them raise money for a delegation to travel to Washington, D.C. to give testimony against the Termination Bill. The repeat fight would draw a crowd, Thomas says, because, after the issue with the early bell ring when Wood Mountain had the advantage, the first fight wasn't a fair fight. Barnes agrees, and the two begin planning.

While Barnes is presented in many ways throughout the novel as a character who is easy to deride, when Thomas approaches him about helping with a fundraiser to send a delegation to Washington, D.C., Barnes agrees. This shows not only that Barnes is amenable, under certain circumstances, to considering the needs of others, but also how effective Thomas is at mobilizing members of the community to oppose the Termination Bill.

The same week, Joe Wobble walks into the café where Barnes is eating. Barnes proposes the idea of the fight to Joe. Joe thinks about it and says he didn't like what happened in the first fight and accepts. Afterward, when Barnes sees Wood Mountain, he says that Wobble walks in a lopsided way. Wood Mountain says Joe might just have been faking out Barnes. They decide they can do the same thing. Barnes says that Wood Mountain will wear a fake cast on his arm and will only take it off to train.

Joe Wobble is willing to acknowledge, and doesn't condone, the tampering that happened in the first fight against Wood Mountain. At the same time, though, both Joe and Wood Mountain are willing to psych the other out by faking injuries. This dynamic interestingly puts Joe and Wood Mountain on somewhat equal footing. They both seem to have a sense of which potentially underhanded methods are okay and which cross the line, showing that they share an adherence to the same unwritten rules that undergird community. This sense that they might belong to the same community, though, is still complicated by the historical encroachment of Joe's family on Wood Mountain's family's land. If Joe was aware of what had happened in the past, would he condone it or do something to rectify it? Or would he break the bonds of community by allowing the historical injustice to stand? The novel interestingly leaves those questions unanswered, showing the complex ways that the past impacts the present.

THWACK

While visiting the baby at the Paranteau house, Wood Mountain hears the thwack, thwack of an ax as Patrice chops wood. With each thwack, Wood Mountain feels a crack in his chest. Barnes gets his uncle to give Wood Mountain some boxing lessons. He brings an electric turntable and teaches Wood Mountain to coordinate his combinations to the music.

As Barnes's romantic life becomes more complicated, he also seems to let go of some of the jealousy that led to tension in his relationship with Wood Mountain, allowing them to work together more easily. Wood Mountain, on the other hand, seems to only be becoming more infatuated with Patrice.

THE TONSILS

Since the Homecoming weekend, Patrice has noticed Doris and Valentine whispering to each other about something they won't tell her. Valentine says that "he" kissed us. When Valentine asks Patrice if she's going to ask who "he" is, Patrice says, "Barnes?" Valentine asks if Barnes told her, and Patrice, feeling mischievous, says that he did. Patrice, for her part, doesn't care either way. She certainly doesn't care about Barnes. The only person she's jealous of is Wood Mountain because the baby smiles at him when those smiles should belong to her. Meanwhile, because of upcoming visits from the higher-ups, Mr. Vold has taken away coffee breaks at work.

In contrast to Wood Mountain now, or Barnes before, Patrice isn't tormented by her romantic feelings. The only jealousy she harbors comes from wishing Vera's baby was as affectionate with her as he is with Wood Mountain. At the jewel bearing plant, Mr. Vold has exercised his authority to unilaterally take away coffee breaks without any apparent regard for how it will impact the people who work at the plant.

As she walks down the path home, Patrice sees that Wood Mountain is visiting the baby again. He asks Patrice if she thinks the baby needs a warm bag and a cradle board. Patrice says yes, he does, and Wood Mountain offhandedly says he can make it. Patrice agrees in the same offhanded way, though both are aware that it's a big deal to make the cradle board. Normally, it's the father who makes the cradle board. Patrice asks him if he's heard anything from Bernadette about Vera. He says he hasn't but that he remembers Bernadette saying that Vera was in the "hold," meaning the hold of a ship. When Patrice doesn't quite understand, Wood Mountain says that ships are filled with men.

Though under no obligation, legal or social or otherwise, Wood Mountain begins to step even more firmly into his role as the baby's father, showing how strong and meaningful the bonds of care and community can be. At the same time, he puts together information he heard from Bernadette and begins to get an idea of the exploitation and subjugation that Vera is experiencing.

A LETTER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Thomas writes a letter to Millie Cloud. Because she recently conducted a study on economic conditions on the reservation, Thomas requests her assistance in testifying before the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

Thomas continues his work here of mobilizing the community, no matter how far-flung its members might be, to counter the Termination Bill.

THE CHIPPEWA SCHOLAR

Millie Cloud spends her days studying at her favorite table at the Walter Library of the University of Minnesota or working one of her three jobs. She doesn't wear any makeup but lipstick, wearing a bright shade of red that seems to highlight her words. In general, people don't like her. Men don't take an interest in her. She doesn't care. She thinks she might try to be a lawyer because she never backs down from anything. When she gets Thomas's letter, she's pleased to be remembered by anyone in the tribe outside her family and to hear that her findings might be useful.

Similar to Patrice in some ways, Millie seems to resist conforming to the gender expectations of the time. She is instead guided by her own ambitions and a desire to remain independent and also, after Thomas reaches out to her, by a desire to help her community.

WHAT SHE NEEDED

Vera has been sick for as long as she can remember, locked in a room where men enter and "use her body," all day and night. The cook's assistant, who's supposed to take care of her, is using what she needs for himself. Now she's in perpetual agony. Her brain throbs in her skull. She "foamed and shat herself." Things get so bad that they dress her in a dead man's clothes and drop her, unconscious, at the end of an alley in Duluth.

This is the first time when the reader begins to understand what Vera has been going through. It seems that she has been sold into a kind of sexual slavery on a ship. It also seems that the people profiting off of her can maintain control over her in part because they have made sure she became addicted to drugs; by being the ones who control when she can get those drugs. When the cook's assistant begins using the drugs allotted for her for himself, though, Vera goes through withdrawal, where she "foamed and shat herself," which still doesn't stop men on the ship from "using her body." Eventually, though, they abandon her in an alley in Duluth. Vera's whole story is the diametric opposite of Thomas's story. While Thomas sees injustice and mobilizes the community to oppose it, the people who came into contact with Vera committed every kind of injustice without regard for her humanity, and not a single person stood up to stop it.

OLD MAN WINTER

Sometimes Biboon thinks his spirit can fly from tree to tree like a bird. Beneath the ground, he senses beings, and beneath that, the fire of creation, which is buried at the center of the earth, put there by stars. He watches a circle of women dance in a snowy field. One turns and gestures. It's Julia, and Biboon thinks that he'll see her soon.

Similar to Thomas's experience of the supernatural and the star powwow, Biboon has an encounter with the supernatural, which ends with him seeing his wife, who he thinks he'll see for real soon. Again, it's notable that this experience of the supernatural isn't dismissed or treated as more or less real, or more or less important, than other scenes in the novel.

THE CRADLE BOARD

Wood Mountain trains with Barnes in secret so that he won't be seen not wearing the fake cast. The only person he tells about the fake cast is the baby. Wood Mountain feels guilty lying to him. Publicly, he blames the injury, without giving much other detail, on the horse Gringo. Later, when Wood Mountain is working on the cradle board and she realizes that he's faking his injury, Grace says she won't tell anyone and also tells him that Joe Wobble is trying to fake him out too. She also teases him about him liking Patrice before she walks away, lamenting that Wood Mountain doesn't have feelings for her.

Wood Mountain only tells the baby that he is faking his injury—because the baby is the only person he can't lie to—and his fake injury is also discovered while he is working on the cradle board for the baby, showing how devoted Wood Mountain is to Vera's baby.

BATTLE ROYALE

Thomas makes a flyer for the fight between Joe Wobble and Wood Mountain, hoping for a suggested two dollars admission price. At work, he reads through the Book of Mormon, which the Mormon missionaries had given him, to try and understand the enemy. Afterward, Thomas remembers something from his boarding school days. The only way to fight people who think of themselves as righteous is to present an argument that makes giving you what you want seem like the most righteous option available.

Thomas continues to hone his strategy for how to defeat Arthur Watkins and the Termination Bill, noting that he'll have to find a way to convince Arthur Watkins not necessarily that he is wrong or that what he is doing is evil. Instead, because Watkins believes himself to be "righteous," Thomas will have to find a way to convince him that there is an even more righteous option for him to consider.

TWO-DAY JOURNEY

Vera finds herself walking and thinks she's on the journey to the next life. As she sees signs—Highway 2, Firewood For Sale—she begins to suspect that she's still alive. But she'd been dead when she'd been alive, she thinks. She's sure of that.

Vera becomes aware of her surroundings again, but she also knows that she had been dead while she had been alive, meaning that what had happened to her had destroyed her spirit, that even though scientifically she might have been alive, her soul had effectively died.

BOXING FOR SOVEREIGNTY

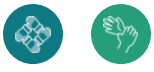
Patrice and Valentine come early to the fight and stand close to the ring. Juggie Blue sells tickets. Joe Wobble is a little leaner than the last time they fought, and Wood Mountain has put on more weight without sacrificing any speed. The fight seems evenly matched until Joe Wobble lands a blow, cracking Wood Mountain's nose. Wood Mountain counters, striking with fury, ahead on points but not definitively winning. By the end, the two are just hitting out at each other with no strategy or intention. Wood Mountain does end up winning on points, but it doesn't really matter. Both men sit with their eyes swollen, eyebrows taped, brains swelling in their heads. It's the last time that either of them fight.

The whole community comes together to help the fight happen and to raise as much money as possible for the delegation to travel to Washington, D.C. With such high expectations for the fight, Wood Mountain and Joe Wobble go all out, to the point that they don't want to put themselves through anything similar ever again.

THE PROMOTION

It was so unfair, Patrice thinks. Even though Patrice is the best worker, Valentine had been given the promotion. And she won't stop talking about it. On top of that, Mr. Vold took away the coffee breaks and never reinstated them. The next day, Mr. Vold puts Betty Pye at the workstation next to Patrice. They start talking, and after Betty Pye talks about her plans to meet up with her boyfriend, Patrice says she's never had anyone explain to her the details of "what happens." Betty tells her she'll explain everything, and the two plan to meet for coffee.

The tension between Patrice and her supposed best friend, Valentine, continues, as does the abuse of authority carried out by Mr. Vold. Since he has been designated as the one with power, he is able, and willing, to make decisions that impact hundreds of people without any sense of how those effects will be felt within those individuals' lives.



At coffee, Betty Pye tells Patrice how to get away from men she doesn't like and how to find out if a man likes her. She talks with detached practicality while describing positions that make Patrice put her head in her hands, laughing. She also tells Patrice how to have sex and not get pregnant. Betty asks Patrice who she's going to have sex with, and Patrice says she wants the information just in case, that she doesn't have a specific plan. Betty also explains prostitution to Patrice, saying there are men who come to the reservation, tell women they'll get married, then they abandon the woman and "sell her to someone who puts them out for sex."

Betty Pye talks to Patrice about sex. Betty talks about how to get away from men you're not interested in, and about the risk that many men pose, but she also talks about how to enjoy sex and makes it clear that sex doesn't have to be something that is intertwined with violence or something that men are in control of.

EDITH, PSYCHIC DOG

Harry Roy, a retired army medic, sees Vera sleeping by the highway. He carries her to his car and brings her to her home. He gives her a soup with tender meat, carrots, onions, barley. Vera's not afraid of the dog, Edith, but she trembles when Harry comes into the room. He has records that belonged to his mother, and he puts on something calming, Debussy, and waits.

After the countless people (men in particular) who have brutalized and exploited Vera, she finally comes across someone whose intentions seem to be only to help. Still, because of everything that has happened, she can't help but be afraid of him.

THE HUNGRY MAN

As she enters the train station, someone bumps into Millie. She strongly dislikes being jostled by strangers. She only has one onionskin copy of the report, and the precarity of that one copy makes her nervous. When she meets with Thomas and Louis, she's comforted by the seriousness with which Thomas treats the study. The two of them decide to twine a rope through the handle of the suitcase and tie each end to their wrists.

Thomas again shows not just how seriously he takes his role in opposing the Termination Bill, but how he is able to effectively find others to help in that effort by taking what they do seriously, respecting their agency, and treating them as full human beings (in contrast to figures like Arthur Watkins or Mr. Vold).

GOOD NEWS BAD NEWS

As Thomas reads Millie's report, he thinks the good news is that they're poor enough to require continued government assistance. The bad news is how poor they are. The good news is that they have schools, but the bad news is that so many people are illiterate. The good news is that they have this report, but the bad news is also the report.

Millie's report stirs up contradictory feelings in Thomas; it presents the evidence that will give him a good argument to use to testify before Congress, but that argument is also dispiriting.

FLYING OVER SNOW

After the first snow, Patrice thinks that she'll have to wait until spring to test Betty Pye's information. She had decided on Wood Mountain because he is less "sticky" than Barnes. Patrice thinks of different possibilities and thinks maybe she and Wood Mountain could use the old, abandoned cabin up the hill from her house, the one Vera had worked on, hoping it might one day become her house. Patrice puts on long underwear, padded overalls, and two layers of wool socks and heads up the hill with a pair of snowshoes Zhaanat had made her. She sets snares leading up to Vera's cabin. When she gets there, she thinks of Vera and wonders how she could have thought of using the cabin with Wood Mountain for "crude love."

Patrice shows again how much she values her agency and independence, wanting to have sex but not wanting the guy she chooses to latch onto her. Her love for her sister outweighs everything else, though, which is why Vera's old cabin no longer seems like a suitable place for a romantic rendezvous with Wood Mountain.

Patrice falls suddenly and then sits in the leaves. She takes off her snow shoes and then smells the unmistakable scent of a bear. She knows the bear is hibernating. She drifts off. When she wakes up, she feels so much stronger than before. And fearless.

Patrice has a potentially dangerous encounter with a bear, but when she emerges unscathed, she feels free, strong, powerful, and fearless, feelings that reassert how important her independence and agency are because they're the things that make her feel truly alive.

SNARES

Patrice and Pokey set snares outside. They walk back up to Vera's cabin. After he looks in the window, Pokey says that someone is sleeping inside. Patrice gets Thomas and Wood Mountain, and the three of them go back to the cabin. When they go in, from the person's shoes, Patrice knows that it's her father and that he has died. When Patrice tells her mother, she looks away. Patrice knows her mother doesn't want Patrice to see the relief as it spreads over her face. The next morning, Patrice and Valentine get into a fight about who will sit in the front seat of Doris's car. Patrice also realizes that her dread is gone and that it left when her father died. She hadn't realized before how heavy it was.

Instead of feeling pain or sadness when she hears that her husband has died, Zhaanat feels relief. Patrice, too, feels her dread lifting, showing how deeply Paranteau had wounded his family, how his violence had left permanent marks.

CRADLE TO GRAVE

Thomas works on the grave house while Wood Mountain works on the cradle board. Thomas says he guesses they shouldn't tell Zhaanat that they're making the grave house and cradle board at the same time. Wood Mountain asks if he thinks it might be bad for the baby. Thomas says he's not superstitious, though he knows he is, just not as much as LaBatte, who's afraid of owls and sees omens everywhere he looks.

Erdrich puts birth and death side by side, with Paranteau's death placed right next to the birth of his grandson. While Wood Mountain worries about the risk that that might pose—placing life so close to death—the scene also seems to suggest how good things, like the baby, can come out of bad situations, whether that is Paranteau's harassment of his family or the horror that Vera endured. That possibility, that good might come from bad, doesn't justify or mollify Paranteau's abuses or the abuses that Vera suffered, but it does suggest the possibility of hope in the darkest of times, similar to how humor is intertwined with pain throughout the novel.

THE NIGHT WATCH

When Patrice comes back from work, she sees the bear hanging from a tree, ready to be dressed. Of course Zhaanat went after it, Patrice thinks. Inside, Juggie is holding the baby and Rose is making Bannock bread. And there's one person Patrice doesn't know, who introduces herself as Millie Cloud. Patrice would have much rather buried her father with no one else around. Wood Mountain works at the grave with his pickax in the frozen ground.

Again, the community comes together to mourn Paranteau, not necessarily as a testament to him, but because they value Zhaanat and her family. Zhaanat killing the bear also shows one possibility of where Patrice's characteristic independence came from.

On the first night watch, Patrice eats a bowl of soup that Juggie cooked. The sacred fire has been burning since her father was found. On the second night watch, Thomas works on the grave house, and Patrice sees something or someone at the edge of the woods. On the third night watch, Patrice finds herself alone at the fire again. Her mind unclasps, and she sees her father at the edge of the woods and screams that he can't get them now.

When Patrice screams at the vision of her father that he can't get them now, she shows how deep her desire for independence goes. After feeling threatened by her father for most of her life, for Patrice, independence is vital to her well-being, essential if she is going to feel safe in the world.

The next day, Thomas brings the grave house. Zhaanat and Pokey tie Paranteau into a blanket and cover him with bark. Families begin to arrive. LaBatte weeps. Bucky shows up as well. He asks Zhaanat to take the curse off of him. She says what happened is a result of his own actions, and she had nothing to do with it. He's helpless, Patrice thinks. But if he gets his strength back, he'll hurt us. Finally, the men use ropes to lower Paranteau into the ground.

This scene draws a comparison between Bucky and Paranteau. While Paranteau's death means he can't torment Patrice or her family anymore, Patrice knows that if Bucky were to regain strength, then he would strike out against them, showing the ubiquity of the threat that men like Bucky or Paranteau pose and the way that their violence continues to reverberate and echo in perpetuity.

TWO MONTHS

The congressional hearings for the Termination Bill are scheduled for the first week in March. Millie had never been to a funeral like that of Paranteau before. And as the proceedings took place in Chippewa, she realized that when she conducted her study, people had spoken in English for her benefit. Barnes sits in what he thinks of as his monk cell, thinking of the three women he has feelings for. Juggie is upset when Wood Mountain unthinkingly shows her the cradle board to admire what he made for the baby. While having sex with Norbert, Betty Pye sees someone's face in the window of the car he borrowed from her mother. She knows the face but can't quite place it. Louis considers it a sacred mission of his to get every person on the reservation to sign the petition.

As two months pass, different characters go through their own trials and tribulations. Millie begins to see that while her father, Louis, is a central member of the community, because she grew up away, she is still considered an outsider. And Louis, for his part, continues his work to get as many people as possible to sign the petition.

Thomas thinks they have two months to save their homeland and themselves but finds himself unable to focus on his work. It's because he's afraid, he thinks. Just before Christmas, Patrice's eyes begin to smart. She bathes them in medicine in secret at her job, afraid that if someone finds out, she'll lose it. Millie enters words into her notebook. The same word is used for both ejaculation and shooting off a gun: *baashkizige*. The word for condom and gun case is also the same: *biinda'oojigan*. She thinks it's fascinating. People keep asking LaBatte to get them things, but he tells them he doesn't do that anymore. He thinks Patrice has a jinx on her though. He can tell because of her eyes.

Patrice's health difficulties with her eyesight highlight the precariousness of her job. That job functions in the opposite way that a supportive community does. Instead of offering to help Patrice or acting in solidarity with her, she knows that if people in power at the jewel bearing plant found out what was happening to her, they would fire her. Millie also makes connections between sex and violence in the Chippewa language.

NEW YEAR'S SOUP

This is the first time Zhaanat's medicine hasn't worked, Patrice thinks about her eyes. "White-man diseases need white-man cures," Zhaanat says. She travels to a clinic, where a nurse gives her ointment to rub into her eyes, saying she might have gone blind if it had been left untreated for much longer. After Patrice talks about all of the things she would have missed if she had gone blind, Wood Mountain asks if she would have missed seeing him too. He says that Patrice is the only one for him, that he means it with his whole heart, and ends by asking her, for god's sake, to marry him. After, Patrice feels relieved because she hadn't promised anything, and Wood Mountain is relieved that she didn't say no.

When Wood Mountain proposes to Patrice, she feels swept up in the emotion, but afterward, she is glad that she didn't say yes or promise him anything, knowing that, for her, independence is more important than a relationship that might be expected and might "check all the boxes" but for some reason still doesn't feel quite right.

In the moment, though, Patrice had wanted to say that she wanted him too. Patrice thinks of something that her mother told her, which she thinks is definitely true: you don't really know a man until you tell him you don't love him. That's when his true viciousness, below the surface so he could charm you, might come out.

After being swept up in the emotion of Wood Mountain's proposal, Patrice thinks of something else: that men might be charming when they want something from you, but you don't really know who they are, and violence might be lurking under an apparently kind exterior, ready to be unleashed if you don't do what they want you to.

THE NAMES

Things started going wrong, Zhaanat thinks, when places started to be named for people and not the real things that happened there, like dreaming, eating, death, where animals appeared. And, in her experience, once people talk about taking land, it's as good as gone.

Zhaanat's thoughts seem to suggest that issues began when people started to be elevated above all else, when people were granted the highest forms of estimation and power and, as a result, their egos took over. Then people became willing and able to climb to the highest rung in a hierarchy and subjugate others supposedly below them, according to their whims and desires.

ELNATH AND VERNON

Elnath and Vernon have grown sick of each other. One night, Elnath sees Vernon coming out of the barn instead of from the outhouse, and he thinks Vernon must have been trying to "get up to the worst kind of sin" with Grace. Elnath considers turning him in—he's sure Vernon would turn him in if the roles were reversed—but decides against it, opting to try to talk to Vernon instead, even though he knows that will mean wading into difficult territory.

Elnath and Vernon, as Mormon missionaries, have their own ideas about sex and morality; specifically, they think that sex outside the bounds of marriage is the "worst kind of sin." Even though Elnath is put in a difficult position by what Vernon is doing, he chooses to do the harder thing and approach his fellow missionary personally instead of immediately appealing to authority.

NIGHT BIRD

Patrice had been in school with Bucky since first grade. The summer before, when she got in the car, he had been the only one in the back, then Myron Pelt slipped back beside her. Looking back later, that didn't feel good, and she wished she had said something at that point. Then Bucky threw himself at her while Myron held her arms. Bucky tried to press her knees apart and fumbled with his pants. She suggested going to the lake, where she could show them all "a good time." At the lake, Bucky took her shoes and said that now she wouldn't be able to run. She dove into the lake and swam as hard as she could. When she saw her uncle's boat, she went toward him. That night, she looked at the scratches, the bruises, even a bite mark on her shoulder. She hadn't felt any of it.

Even though Bucky knew Patrice well—or because he knew her well—he assaulted her and attempted to rape her, another instance in the novel where a person attempts to erase someone's agency for the sake of satisfying their own desires.

When Bucky's mouth twisted and then the same illness spread down his side, Patrice knew she herself had done it. Her hatred had been so powerful it had flown out of her like a "night bird." That bird flew straight to Bucky and attacked the side of his face.

Again, the novel doesn't privilege a materialistic view of the world versus a spiritual or supernatural view. Both are considered valid. Interestingly, it's Patrice's hatred that gives her the power to achieve retribution. She has to seek this kind of retribution on her own, especially because she knows there's no authority, no legal system of justice, that will do it for her, especially considering what happened to Vera and what the institution in charge of the legal system, the United States government, is attempting to do to her community.

U.S.I.S.

Juggie hands Barnes a cigarette as they sit at the kitchen table. Juggie tells him to give up, and he says that's easier for her to say, since her son is the one who took Patrice from him. Barnes feels sorry for himself, and Juggie feels sorry for him too. She offers to ask out Valentine, her half-niece, for him. When he doesn't say no, Juggie takes that as a yes. Juggie talks to Valentine, and Valentine then comes over and asks Barnes out.

With a nudge from Juggie, Barnes begins to finally give up on pursuing Patrice, though he still seems to have a skewed view of the situation, saying that Wood Mountain "took" her from him, as if Patrice had "belonged" to him to begin with.

THE RUNNER

On his way back from work, Thomas sees a boy running alongside his car, even as he speeds up to 30, 40, 50. Of course the boy is Roderick, he thinks. When Thomas tells Rose, she says she'll come with him to work that night. At work, they share a cup of coffee. Thomas falls asleep and then sees Roderick sitting beside the motor, where Rose can't see him. Roderick worked in the bakery, a job which was the only thing he cared about, until he was caught stealing dough. After that, he didn't care about anything, and he ran away, again and again. That's how he ended up in the cellar, where he got so cold. But in the morning, he always woke up as a ghost.

This section gives more insight into Roderick's story, showing that even though he deeply cared about his job in the bakery, he was driven to steal food because he didn't have anything to eat. Similar to how Patrice knew that if the bosses at the jewel plant found out about her issues with her eyes, they would fire her, instead of offering Roderick food, the authorities punished him, and those punishments ultimately led to him contracting the tuberculosis he died from.

MISSIONARY FEET

Vernon's feet ached. He misses the family he'd been excited to leave behind. And he misses the idea that someone might love him. He thinks to himself that he must not ever think of Grace. Most of his body complies but not his feet. On the way back home one night, he sees an old jalopy and looks in the window. Only later does he understand what he's seen, and he's disappointed in himself for not intervening to stop two people from sinning.

Again, this chapter illuminates that the Mormon missionaries view sex, even between two consenting adults, as a sin, without any apparent awareness of the problems with what someone like Arthur Watkins is trying to do or how his actions would impact people.

THE SPIRIT DUPLICATOR

They've made 35 copies of Millie's economic survey and four more from a photocopier in the office of Superintendent Tosk. The copies will be sent to local and state officials, radio announcers, and newspapers. In the past, an incorrect census survey had been used to convince Congress that the Turtle Mountain people were prosperous. "I suspect," Millie says, "they simply wanted our land." And she thinks the government acts like Native people owe them something, but isn't it the other way around?

The community continues to come together to oppose the Termination Bill. And Millie puts her finger on the true intentions of so many government actions aimed against Native people: They want to steal land.

PRAYER FOR 1954

At the jewel bearing plant, Thomas writes a letter to Senator Milton R. Young, laying out strategy, while others bring on the New Year, including LaBatte, whose brothers criticize his recent conversion to Mormonism.

Thomas continues to work diligently, while LaBatte, facing personal difficulties, has sought relief in Mormonism.

YOU CAN'T ASSIMILATE INDIAN GHOSTS

Even as a ghost, Roderick is never going to be assimilated. He wouldn't go to a white heaven or a white hell. He'd gone to Paranteau's funeral, thinking he might be able to follow him to the afterlife. It's hard to not be assimilated all alone, he thinks, and he hopes he can go home.

Even as a ghost, Roderick doesn't want to lose his identity to what he sees as irreducibly "white" alternatives. He's lonely, but, in an attempt to find the last vestiges of agency, he seems to say that it's better to be lonely, to be a ghost, than to give up on existing.

CLARK KENT

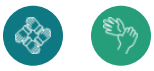
Patrice goes to an eye clinic and is told she needs glasses. After she gets glasses, the clarity of the world is breathtaking. Wood Mountain tells her she looks like Superman's girlfriend, and Patrice says no, she looks like Clark Kent. The two kiss as they leave the clinic. They find a place in the woods, and Wood Mountain takes a packet from his jacket pocket. He puts it on, and then he is "inside of her, too eagerly." Tears blur her vision. They start again, and it gets better. After, their breathing slows until they're breathing in perfect time.

This chapter presents another counterpoint to the violence that so often accompanies sex in the novel. In this instance, Patrice is able to exercise her agency and enjoy sex after a little while.

CHECKS

Millie goes with Grace to look for new clothes in the mission bundles. She finds a dress with intricate patterns. When she looks at the design, it takes her into the deepest wells of meaning, a place that's simple, powerful, indescribable, and beautiful.

This chapter gives more insight into Millie's character by showing that she enjoys patterns, that patterns hold for her the deepest wells of meaning where she can feel in touch with her truest self.



THE LAMANITES

Thomas reads the Book of Mormon, which describes the Lamanites as "wild and ferocious, a bloodthirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness." "It's us," Thomas says to Rose. Joe Garry, the president of the National Congress of American Indians, writes to Thomas about Senator Watkins and says that Watkins doesn't have a sense of humor. Thomas thinks that's even more frightening than the Mormon bible. Thomas tries to understand Watkins's reasoning and why he's targeting Native people. According to his religion, Mormon people have been gifted all the land they wanted. "Indians weren't lightsome and delightsome, but cursed with dark skin." Thomas likes the exploits of the figure Nanabozho better, who created everything valuable and a lot of things that were vital, like laughter.

Thomas begins to grapple with the racism that seems to be inherent in Arthur Watkins's religion and is also motivating his actions. On top of that, Thomas hears that Watkins doesn't have a sense of humor, which, to Thomas, is frightening and seems akin to saying that Watkins is missing something essential that makes it impossible for him to truly connect with other people.

THE LORD'S PLAN

One night while Betty and Norbert are in the car, the door opens, and Norbert falls out. Someone outside then says, "Could I have a minute of your time to tell you about the Lord's plan for your soul?"

After the chapter in which Thomas hears that Watkins doesn't have a sense of humor, the novel pivots to a very funny scene in which one of the Mormon missionaries interrupts Betty and Norbert having sex to try and proselytize.

THE COMMITTEE

When it comes time to form the group to go to Washington, D.C., people are reluctant and need coaxing. At first, the group is only Juggie Blue, Thomas, and Millie Cloud. They drive to the jewel bearing plant and eventually convince Patrice to come too. At Patrice's house, Millie takes notes when Zhaanat explains the plants that she collects, and then Patrice takes notes when Millie talks about how she went to college and obtained a scholarship.

While the community has been vital in fighting against the Termination Bill, that community isn't presented in utopian terms. When it comes time to go to Washington, D.C., Thomas has trouble finding volunteers. Eventually, though, after some convincing, Thomas is able to put together a group to go.

SCRAWNY

Barnes is frustrated that Valentine is spurning his advances. He thinks that things won't change until there's a marriage proposal. On the one hand, he respects this. On the other hand, a man's a man, he thinks to himself.

Barnes shows again how deeply his understanding of people and relationships has been distorted by prevailing gender norms. By thinking that a "man's a man," he seems to express his idea that men are superior to—and hold a higher place of power than—women, and, as a result, women are obligated to do what men want.


THE JOURNEY

On the way to Washington, D.C., they sleep in their coach seats and eat food they'd packed in an overnight bag, not wanting to spend money in the dining car. When they arrive, the vastness of the train station overwhelms them. At the hotel, the two men share one room and the three women another.

By mentioning the ways that the delegation seeks to save money during their trip, this chapter emphasizes how little power the group apparently has in comparison to the power, and wealth, of the forces they are up against.


FALCON EYES

Patrice walks into the gallery that overlooks the floor of the House of Representatives. She notices a striking woman in bold lipstick. Later the woman yells, "Viva Puerto Rico!" and fires shots into the air. Guards crash the gallery and seize the woman's gun, then her. Authorities eventually question Patrice, and she explains what she saw. Although she knows it's terrible, Patrice had been excited when the woman stood up and started to yell.

Although Patrice knows that it's wrong, she also feels excited by the potential of revolution, of real, drastic change, of standing up for what one believes in, even if that stand is marked by violence. This passage probably refers to an actual historical event, when a militant Puerto Rican group wounded several congressmen on the House floor.


TERMINATION FOR FEDERAL CONTRACTS AND PROMISES MADE WITH CERTAIN TRIBES OF INDIANS

In the hearing, Senator Young begins and says that the state can't take over the responsibilities of the federal government if the federal agreements were terminated. Instead of arguing against termination, the tribal committee has decided to buy time. Thomas describes the Turtle Mountain Reservation and states his strong opposition to the government plan before thanking the government for its efforts. Senator Watkins interrupts him. Patrice gives testimony about the jewel bearing plant. Senator Watkins ignores Patrice and addresses his questions to Thomas. Millie then testifies by reading her report about the economic conditions of the Turtle Mountain Reservation. After the hearing, with the support of Roderick, Thomas goes to Senator Watkins's office to flatter him, hoping that might help their case. After, Thomas thinks that's a sign of how bad things are, that he's willing to forget about his dignity to try and butter up Watkins.

The delegation is strategic in its opposition to Watkins. Instead of arguing what they truly believe—that Watkins is motivated by racism and that the United States government is, again, attempting to steal their land—they try to delay and buy time. Notably, Watkins's testimony from this chapter is taken verbatim from the actual Congressional transcripts, a decision that Erdrich makes, in part, to underline that the racism and injustice she is describing is not part of the fictional work she's creating but is a very real part of United States history, which continues to this day.

THE WAY HOME

On the way back, Thomas thinks about how Senator Watkins had asked every person who testified about "their degree of Indian blood." No one knew the answer. It isn't something they kept track of. It was a game, but one that interested Watkins, which meant it was a game that could erase them. Patrice feels spent. She sees an article in the newspaper about the woman who fired the gun. She wanted Puerto Rico to live so badly she'd been willing to kill. Would Patrice have been willing to do the same thing? Moses misses his wife; it's the longest they've been apart since they've been married. Thomas feels a sharp pain on the right side of his face, and the strength drains from his legs. He wakes up in a hospital, where a nurse tells him he had a stroke.

As a result of his efforts over the past months, Thomas has a stroke, echoing the creation story of his namesake muskrat, which dove to the bottom of the ocean to bring back the silt to create the Earth but died as a result. It's notable, too, that Arthur Watkins presumably doesn't suffer any ill effects after the hearing, suggesting that for him, it was more or less another day, another hearing, and because he is insulated by the power granted to him by his position, the stakes for him are, at most, success or failure, not life or death. This fact again demonstrates his failure to grasp the seriousness and full implications of his actions.

IF

Wood Mountain lays the baby on the cradle board. Now would be the perfect time, he thinks. If Patrice came home now, he would ask her again to marry him. He's sure she'll say yes. A woman comes to the door. Wood Mountain feels dizzy. It's not Patrice. At first, he thinks it's a stranger. The woman asks him if he recognizes her, then says that she's Vera. A grey-bearded man walks in behind her and says he'll have to leave soon. Vera tries to give him the family rifle as he leaves, but he says he can't take it. Vera looks at the baby. Wood Mountain says that the baby is hers. Vera collapses "like snow." When Zhaanat comes home, the two clutch each other with the baby between them.

Vera is finally reunited with her baby and family with the help of Harry Roy. While Wood Mountain thinks he'll ask Patrice to marry him again if she comes to the door, the fact that Vera is the one at the door foreshadows the relationship that the two of them—Wood Mountain and Vera—will ultimately have.

TOSCA

It's a case of mutual exasperation. One night when Barnes drops Valentine off, she says goodbye and that she means it. Barnes asks if that means goodbye for good, and he can tell by the look on her face that it does. At home, he plays an opera recording, even though he thinks it wouldn't be considered a "manly taste." The record makes him "luxuriantly weep."

While he's going through a kind of breakup, Barnes worries that his choice of music isn't "manly" enough, showing again how gender norms have contorted even his most personal and intimate thoughts.

THE SALISBURY

Millie had been the one to call the ambulance and make sure Thomas went to the hospital. As a relative, Patrice is the only one allowed in the room. When the nurse assures her that Thomas will be okay, Patrice goes to Millie's studio in the city to stay for the night. While talking, Patrice asks if she has a boyfriend. Millie says that nobody is appealing to her. Patrice says she's thinking about Wood Mountain. Millie says she's heard he's handsome and then tells Patrice that she's beautiful. Millie opens her mouth to let words of love flow out, but the words don't come. Patrice says to Millie that she wants to adopt Millie, for Millie to be her sister. Though Millie knows that that would be a meaningful recognition in the Chippewa tradition, she is both happy and, for some reason, disappointed.

Another person seems to have fallen in love with Patrice, this time Millie. She wants to tell Patrice how she feels, something that would go against the gender norms of the time, but Patrice expresses her feelings first, feelings that are deep and familial but platonic, not romantic. Millie is disappointed without knowing exactly why, but Patrice's desire to adopt Millie into their family also gives Millie the chance to find more belonging by becoming more of a part of the community.

THE LAKE, THE WELL, THE CRICKETS SINGING IN THE GRASS

In the hospital bed, Thomas drifts back and forth in time. He thinks of when Patrice swam up to his boat in the lake and the fear he felt when he and Biboon had dug a well, afraid the earth would give way beneath him and swallow him up. But now, he isn't afraid. Now, it doesn't matter. Nothing can harm him. There is nothing left to do, and he doesn't have to go back to Washington.

Though Thomas has been overworked to the point that he experienced a stroke, he also feels a sense of rest, of completion, knowing that he's done everything in his power to oppose the Termination Bill.

THE CEILING

In Millie's studio, Patrice asks her what she would have to do to become a lawyer. She thinks of Wood Mountain. They had made love and looked into each other's eyes. She loves him, she thinks. Doesn't she? She wonders how she's supposed to know. She hopes that Vera coming home will help to clear things up.

Patrice asks Millie about college and becoming a lawyer, plans that would help Patrice secure independence if she were able to accomplish them. She also continues to feel ambivalent about her relationship with Wood Mountain, not sure if she loves him, or, if she does, how much, or in what way.

GREATER JOY

When Elnath confronts Vernon about Grace and asks him if he's "quitting the sin," Vernon says that he's quitting. The two hitch a ride into town to visit LaBatte. LaBatte has already backslid and is unwilling to get baptized or even let them in the door. They then get a ride to Grand Forks, where there's a church member who would take them in. And they could get Milda to send them their things.

Vernon again equates sex and sin, as if there is something wrong with sex itself, while the novel as a whole suggests that the problem isn't with sex but with how power and violence are used to exploit people, subjugate them, and erase their agency.

THE OWLS

Louis feels guilty, convinced that his decision to not go to Washington contributed to Thomas's stroke. He goes to the hospital to pick Thomas up and bring him home.

Though Louis put in as much effort as anyone to oppose the Termination Bill, he still feels like he let Thomas, and the community, down by not going to Washington with the delegation.

THE BEAR SKULL IN THE TREE WAS PAINTED RED AND FACED EAST

Wood Mountain visits the baby day after day. And he starts to notice things about Vera: a ragged earlobe, a crooked finger, a missing tooth. They both watch the baby with a similar kind of joy. One day, Patrice comes home and recognizes it. Her feelings of confusion and desire and possible love for Wood Mountain go away. Wood Mountain asks to talk to Patrice. Patrice says she knows what's going on. And that she's not mad. She would welcome "anyone and anything that could help put together Vera's demolished heart."

When Patrice sees Wood Mountain around Vera—and sees how he cares for her, for the baby, and how that care might help Vera heal—her confusion fades, as she knows that the most important thing to her, more important than anything she might want for herself, and more important than her confusion about her desires, is for Vera to find a way to heal.

THE DUPLICATOR SPIRITS

Millie prepares a report for Thomas about the trip to Washington, adding her own details as well, which will be distributed to the tribe. When she goes outside with Juggie, they see the northern lights. Juggie says the dancing spirits are looking after them. Millie decides that one explanation did not rule out the other, that science and spirituality aren't opposed, that charged electrons could be spirits. She decides that she'll go out on a date with Barnes as well, especially because he had asked her with an equation, and how could she resist that?

This chapter calls back to Thomas seeing the star powwow, and Millie states one of the novel's themes explicitly: that science and spirituality aren't opposed, that one explanation doesn't rule out the other, and that one need not be privileged over the other.

À TA SANTÉ

Back at work, they've signed a petition to try and get coffee breaks reinstated. Patrice is working extra hard because she wants to ask for a raise. She's now supporting four people at home instead of two. Though Wood Mountain had recently gotten a federal job driving school buses. And Millie had decided to become an anthropologist. She wanted to study with Zhaanat and had applied for money to make sure Zhaanat got paid as well.

The workers at the jewel bearing plant use the same strategies to fight for their rights that the community used to oppose the Termination Bill. They unite as a community and act in solidarity to try and counter the people in power who would be able to easily defeat them if they acted as individuals. Similarly, when Millie decides to study with Zhaanat, it's important to her that Zhaanat is paid for her work.

RODERICK

Roderick misses the train back home. But there are so many Native ghosts in Washington that could keep him company, he thinks about staying. And they're happy to have somebody new. They ask why he wants to go back and who he would be waiting for.

By referencing the number of Native ghosts in Washington, D.C., this chapter nods to the long history of violence and exploitation carried out by the U.S. government against Native people and their communities.

THOMAS

Thomas goes back to work at the jewel bearing plant. At the bottom of his timecards, he signs himself "the **muskrat**," accompanied by a drawing of a muskrat. He'd been cleared after the stroke, but sometimes it still takes his brain a second to catch up. Occasionally he has trouble finding the right words. The battle with Arthur V. Watkins had been, he fears, "a battle that would cost him everything."

After his battle against Arthur Watkins and his stroke, Thomas identifies even more closely with the muskrat—its hard work and the power that overlooked people (or animals) can have—that gave his family its name.

CLOSING NOTES

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa was not terminated. Erdrich's grandfather recovered from the stroke and went on to work on improving the reservation school system, writing a Turtle Mountain Constitution, and writing the first history of the Turtle Mountains. He worked at the jewel bearing plant until his mandatory retirement in 1970. In 1955, the women of the Turtle Mountain jewel bearing plant attempted to unionize. Unionization was voted down, but pay increases were authorized, the cafeteria completed, and workers regained their coffee break.

Erdrich connects her novel back to the actual history that inspired it and highlights the ways that acting as a community, in solidarity with one another, allowed Erdrich's grandfather, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, and the workers at the jewel bearing plant to overcome obstacles that seemed insurmountable.

AFTERWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Erdrich's grandfather wrote a series of "extraordinary letters" to her parents between 1953 and 1954. The letters paint a portrait of reservation life and were later given to Erdrich. Erdrich also thanks several people and books who helped make her own book possible.

Erdrich notes here that the novel was inspired by actual letters her grandfather wrote, making it clear how much of a testament the character of Thomas, and the novel as a whole, is to him.

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