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| The film opens on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation -- called "the rez" by its inhabitants -- in 1998. Immediately there is a flashback to July 4, 1976 when the community was celebrating "white man's Independence Day" in drunken abandon. Accidentally Arnold Joseph (Gary Farmer) sets an uncontrollable fire to his neighbor's house, killing the couple who live there. But Joseph catches the baby, Thomas, when he is thrown out of a second story window from the burning house. The rescued Thomas (Evan Adams) is brought up by his grandmother and along side of Victor (Adam Beach), Arnold Joseph's son of about the same age. Joseph keeps on drinking but is in despair about the conflagration and its consequences.  12-year-old Victor watches sullenly while his parents drink until one night he smashes all their beer bottles. This action is a wake-up call for Victor's mother, Arlene (Tantoo Cardinal), who insists that she and Arnold both stop drinking. She chases Arnold out of the house; he leaves, never to return, while Victor watches, sobbing. These elements of the story occur in flashbacks while the 20-year-old Victor and Thomas travel by bus to retrieve whatever they can of Arnold Joseph, who has died outside of Phoenix. The remaining story unfolds in that forsaken spot where Joseph lived in a trailer and befriended Suzy Song, a young Indian woman originally from New York. |
| In spite of the grim events described above, the film has the typical tongue-in-cheek humor and cultural insight that characterize the work of [Sherman Alexie](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/People?action=view&id=3751), who wrote the screenplay. It is filled with quirky individuals (a woman who only drives her car backwards; Thomas, who insists on wearing a dark suit and vest everywhere) and underplayed one-liners: the reservation radio announcer stating that it's "a good day to be indigenous"; Victor telling Thomas that he needs to stop smiling and look "stoic" if he wants to be a real Indian; the suggestion that Victor and Thomas will need a passport to the United States when they leave the reservation; and "the only thing more pathetic than watching Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV."  Nevertheless, there are serious threads that run throughout, such as the tragedy of reservation alcoholism, the long-range effects of parental desertion, and the power of imagination and story -- Thomas is a born storyteller who has a tale for every occasion, telling "both truth and lies." Thomas tells stories about Victor's father that give the father dignity and worth -- traits that ultimately turn out to be "true." Thomas is naïve, nerdy, and unworldly -- even otherworldly -- but he is also kind and generous and combats Victor's cynicism and disillusionment. As the film ends, Thomas is heard in voiceover: "How do we forgive our fathers? . . . If we forgive our fathers, what is left?" A striking and profound observation indeed. |

The story centers on Victor Joseph ([Adam Beach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Beach)) and Thomas Builds-the-Fire ([Evan Adams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evan_Adams)) who live on the [Coeur D'Alene Indian Reservation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coeur_d%27Alene_Reservation) in [Plummer, Idaho](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plummer,_Idaho). Thomas is an [eccentric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eccentricity_(behavior)) storyteller and Victor is an angry, rising local basketball star. Victor and Thomas are brought together through Victor's father, Arnold ([Gary Farmer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gary_Farmer)). Arnold rescued Thomas as an infant from a house fire that killed his parents. Because of this, Thomas considers him a hero. On the other hand, Victor, who endures Arnold's [alcoholism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcoholism), [domestic violence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domestic_violence), and eventual [child abandonment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_abandonment), regards his father with both deep love and bitter resentment. Thomas and Victor grow up together as neighbors and acquaintances, fighting with each other and simultaneously forming a close, albeit uneasy, alliance.

When Arnold dies in [Phoenix, Arizona](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix,_Arizona), where he has stayed after leaving Victor and his mother Arlene ([Tantoo Cardinal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tantoo_Cardinal" \o "Tantoo Cardinal)), Victor and Thomas go on an adventure to retrieve his ashes. It was a self proclaiming trip for Victor and Thomas. Neither of them lose sight of their identity as "[Indians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States)", but their perspectives differ. Victor is more of a stoic type, and Thomas is more traditional (and romantic to the point of watching the feature film [*Dances with Wolves*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dances_with_Wolves) countless times). This dichotomy continues all through the film and is the source of Victor's irritation with Thomas, and Thomas's fascination with Victor. Once in Phoenix, Victor must confront his conflicted feelings about his father, as well as his own identity. He also must grapple with information provided to him by his father's friend, Suzie Song ([Irene Bedard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irene_Bedard)), mainly, the true origins of the fire that killed Thomas' parents. The trip turns out to ultimately cure Victor's brooding disposition toward life and shows him why his father became an alcoholic, was abusive, and eventually left their family. The film concludes with Victor achieving a better understanding of Thomas and of his unconditional reverence for Arnold.