

Literature Class  
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## The Story of the Little Engine That Could



Arnold is spelled **RISK**. Arnold, the main character in Sherman Alexie's book, "The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian" understood risk so well because he took so many.

Why does this matter? It mattered to Arnold, his culture, and the rest of humanity because he overcame the common human response to not step out of the familiar and settle for second best. There is comfort in the familiar, even if the familiar keeps us from stepping out of an environment that will not encourage us to reach our full potential. But Arnold paved the way for his Indian culture by what he did. He took a risk, left the reservation, and enrolled in the white man's high school—against all odds, risking rejection, risking his physical safety, and enduring all the garbage that the white man has been dumping on the Indian nations ever since the white men stepped foot on American soil.

So how did this happen? Who or what influenced Arnold to take a **RISK**? His teacher, Mr. P.—the teacher who dressed differently in class when he wore his **P.J.'s** to class! **Oh my!**



Arnold changed his  after his conversation with Mr. P. Why? Because Mr. P visited Arnold and began to introduce one the most powerful words in the English dictionary—**H O P E** expressed in his challenge to Arnold to say and believe, "I want you to say that you deserve better." (Implied: "Do you hear me Arnold? I want you to say that you **deserve better!!!**") (p40)

But Arnold couldn't say it. He cried. Then Mr. P reminded him that he was not a quitter and gave him examples beginning when he was born. As a child, he survived in spite of seizures from brain surgery. He did not follow the example of the adults or peers living on the reservation--a familiar lifestyle of alcohol and drugs.

So what did Arnold do after Mr. P.'s encouraging pep talk? He went to school—the white man's school—and he stayed in the white man's school day after day, week after week. After making the decision to go, he told his parents, "...if I don't go **NOW** (not next semester or next year), I never will. I have to do it **NOW**. So he did. He went to Reardan High School **NOW**, that is the very next day as soon he had his *imaginary* breakfast of eggs, sausage, pancakes, and fried potatoes with orange juice and milk. He took the risk in spite of knowing that the Indians on his reservation were going to be angry with him. He took the risk in spite of knowing that his very, very best friend Rowdy would be very, very

angry with him and even punched him in the nose when Arnold told him! **Ouch!** And why would he do something so risky? Because he believed what Mr. P. said, "...you **deserve better!!!**"

Where there any perks from going to the white man's school? Well, yeh, eventually. He won the respect of Roger after he punched him in the nose following a very, very bad joke that Roger made about Indians. And when Arnold came to school one day with his friend Eugene on a vintage motorcycle, Roger thought that was real cool. Arnold really earned Brownie points that day.



Another perk was when the most totally, absolutely gorgeous girl, Penelope, went to the school dance with him after he took a **RISK** and asked her to go. But keep in mind this is not a romantic match (although I'm sure that Arnold entertained that thought many times in his imagination). They were "friends with potential. But that's still cool." (p109) But there were many perks with totally, absolutely gorgeous Penelope. They held hands. Arnold even kissed her goodbye before she got on the

school bus. 



The other students **saw with their very own eyes** this amazing display of affection. This won the affectionate attention of the other girls and gave him the unearned title of "major stud" with the guys.

And remember Roger—the guy who told the very, very bad joke about Indians? He gave Arnold \$40 bucks when Arnold fudged on the truth and told Roger that he left his wallet at home when in reality he only had \$5 in pocket. That could have been 40, \$1 bills or two \$20 bills or 3, \$10 and 2 \$5—whatever. **But it doesn't matter what the bills were!** The fact was that for a short span of time, Arnold was

**RICH** and could actually pay in cash for all the food that he and absolutely gorgeous Penelope had eaten!  (This is a picture of 4, \$10 bills. You can count them if you don't believe me.)

Another perk was when Arnold was chosen to play on the school's varsity basketball team. Now, that's cool. But then his risky behavior was really put to the test. So how did he respond? Was it give up or chin up? NO! In spite of being pelted with rocks, insulted on the court, receiving a bleeding head with a quarter, being knocked unconscious by his former best friend, Arnold did not give up, shut up, or let up.

His coach (God bless his soul!) gave him a pep talk that was a turning point in Arnold's life,

"**Arnold** you can do it.

You **can** do it.

You can **do** it.

You can do **it.**"

So he did. Arnold went on to become the best shooter on his team and by the end of the season, Arnold and his team defeated Wellpinit in a second match by 40 points.

### **Summary**

So if I had a chance to talk to Arnold, here is what I would say.

Never affirm self-limitations. What you believe yourself to be, you are. To accomplish great things, you must not only act, but also dream, not only plan, but also believe. If you have castles in the air, your work need not be lost—put foundations under them. Yes (Arnold), you can (do it).

--From Success by Barbara Small and Steve Kilborn



P.S. By the end of the book, Rowdy and Arnold became friends again. How cool is that?!

**And the Little Engine went merrily on her way, singing:**

**"I-thought-I-could! I-thought-I-could! I-thought-I-could! I-thought-I-could! I thought i could - I thought I could I thought I could --"**

THE END