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Indigenous Futurisms course, 603-102-MQ
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March 9, 2020

Paradise

Sky. Sleep. *Sky.* Sleep again.

“Guh,” “What the fu...ck.” “Where am I?”

I Open my eyes but I can't tell.

Clouds. Sleep. Clouds.

I have a raging headache. Am I drunk?... Is it Sunday morning?

I try to remember, but... nothing. I can't remember anything.

Sleep. Clouds. Sleep.

I wake up again, with the sensation of absolute war in my stomach. I need to vomit. I can't move, I'm so sick... Hungover? No, I didn't even go out... Where am I? My eyes feel as if they've been stretched out like elastic bands as I try to make sense of my surroundings.

It is midday. In... a sand dune.

Water. I need water. My throat quenched as if I've been here all day and burns like I sang drunkenly all night. “Must've been a good night,” I think to myself, but, no... I couldn't have. It's Tuesday, March 5th, 2120 right? Why would I have been out on a Monday?

None of this makes sense.

As I collect myself and sit up, I notice something shining under the sand. My phone! I grab and click it on, but of course it is dead. Too good to be true. I look around some to see if I recognize anything out in the distance. I seem to be in what I would assume is somewhere close to the Mexican border.

Ow. Fuck.

Why do I do this to myself? How did I turn out like this? I should've listened to my mother about cleaning my room... I need water, and I need to charge my phone, I think as I get myself standing.

Definitely drunk... but I'm sure I wasn't drinking...

I need to grow up. I still can't remember a damned thing. I'm... Chris Tinez, right? I even feel unsure about *that*. My whole orientation with the world feels shattered. No memory of who I am, or how I got here, and unsure of where to go.

I've never felt as close to death as I do Right now.

I think about my mother. It has been years since she pushed me on the swing, or made barbecue steak in the summer. Where had all that gone? How did I get to this dry hell of a place? This all seems surreal. Something that could only happen in a good movie.

I wag myself up the dune and adjust my eyes.

A road. Far off in the distance. No one on it, but... fuck, that's where we need to go. I feel gross. Like I've betrayed myself and let everyone down. I am sure I am dead. Never have I imagined a hell like this being possible when I was in high school. I can't figure out how it got to this point. Here I am waking up from a Blackout on a Tuesday, when I'm sure I haven't had anything to drink last night! How has my head gone this out of control?

As I creep towards the road I notice something in my pocket. A crinkled receipt, and a ticket into the MGM Casino. "My god," I think. How old am I? Twenty eight? I am surprised at how long it takes me to find the answer. I want to go home, and feel an innocence that has all but abandoned me. But I'm here in this desert with nothing but waiting for an agonizing death to push me forward.

Water, where am I, and home, my three objectives.

"Will I live through this, and die beneath the trees?" I wonder. It all but seems impossible to make it out of here. This is hell on earth and I am going to die here or... Or what? "Will I

really make it out of here?” The thought fills me with an all but familiar presence. My young enthusiasm kicks in. “Thank god, I’m still alive!”. The feeling was reassuring. I know that this isn’t a dream or some grand “wake up from a dream inside a dream” scenario.

If I ever make it out of here, I promise to not take myself for granted any longer.

I arrive at the road and look right, and then left. “Now what?” I don’t know which way is south. I don’t know which way is north. I take a second to calibrate and think about this.

Ooooooh.

My stomach catches up with me and so does my head. Ughh. I feel hot and spicy vomit coming up. I let it out and catch myself just before I fall on my face. I am so weak. So, so weak. If I could take back every self-serving act I have ever made at this point, I would. “I’m dead.” I croak.

I had always dreamt of being somebody. Somebody people look up to. Somebody you can rely on and come to when you need a hand. Instead, I am *this*. Lost in the desert, unsure of how I got here, and damn regretting it. Where have I failed myself? Am I even who I think I am?” I ask myself, without expecting an answer. I get no answer.

It is soon to be dusk, by my estimation of the sun. I look up and down the road once more. Mountains far into the distance on my right. Mountains at least a mile or two down the road to my left. “Welp” I think. “No need to think about this one” and turn towards the closest mountains.

Water. Home. Life. Water. Home. Life.

Moving forward becomes agonizing at this point. Should I just die right here? It would take away this hell. My problems would be gone and I could sleep! Should I keep moving forward? Maybe I can live this through, kiss my mom and take a shower. Impossible. I don’t even know how far civilization is. Hell, even the closest human!

I wish to live.

I have brought myself here and I wish to be set back in order. I plead. To... to who? God? God really has a hotline for people in need? Who am I kidding — But then again, what do I have left? Take me home, God. I beg of you.

I must have walked down that road for an eternity. No sense of any of this. No navigation. Burning. My head spins and stomach turns, but I have to keep moving. I never had to deal with this before. It is as if every snake I have ever passed stalked and bit me at once, and I was here to get up and fix this scenario. “What a fucking world,” I say to myself.

Rose. Us in shades. Her teeth as she smiles.

All of this has been a part of my dreams. Amusement park dates and late nights on the main strip. The honeymoon phase of a lifelong connection between her and I. It seemed to be promised when I was growing up. Like, that’s how things go and you too will find love and laughter. But where has that gone? It’s nothing but fierceness and oppression out here.

Desperately, I want things to go back to how they were. If I had known this was where things would go, I would’ve... well — I would’ve probably curled into a ball and willowed to myself, if I’m being perfectly honest. “This is unfair. This isn’t how things should go!” I protest to myself, but there is no one to hear my complaining. My mother isn’t here to put things nice for me in any way. Bam.

This is reality.

Crushing. Gross. Monstrous, reality. This is reality as it has always been. I have been shielded from it. In a bubble of fair play and good marks equalling success. Out here there was none of that. Life. Death. And what else have you.

I pause and look around again, feet aching and mouth dry. Still nothing. No one. This place seems completely barren, yet still oh so menacing. I pause just to take in how intimidating this situation is. It is as if the very absence of anything is a spirit on its own. Hungry to swallow me. Real “Hills Have Eyes” type shit.

Again — “Should I just die here or keep going?” The eeriness eases up some, and converts into my enthusiasm to make it out of here. I am only a few hundred yards from the mountain range at this point. The road swerves off, right in the valley behind the first mountain. I can’t tell how much further I have to walk but I’d otherwise be eaten or die of boredom.

As I am approaching the bend in the road I begin to question myself again. I question my sanity and whether or not I am making functional survival decisions but that doesn't seem important considering I need any survival method at this point. I question whether I have the strength to make it out of this and live to tell the tale, but that seems far-fetched — Like when you smoke a joint and realize movies are too in favour of the character. I am not sure. "Am I even still human?" The isolation is getting to me.

I deeply want to reconnect. I want to smell the scents of spring, and laugh with my troop. I want to see the white roses and the dressed up folk at my wedding. All of that is crumbling. All I have is one foot in front of the other. Left, then right, left, then right. The uncertainty is killing me. All of my life it seemed all good would come in the future, or that things progressively improve as time goes on. Oh, how they were wrong. "If I could go back in time and tell my teachers that this is reality they'd be in for a surpri..." That thought trailed off. Would they? I mean, where are they now? Surly my demise isn't the case for everyone. I don't think my well rounded first grade teacher would get herself in a situation like this. This doesn't happen to people like her. In fact, she and all of everyone I know are probably out there enjoying themselves right now. Ripping on my name for being so stupid. Is this really Reality? Is this my own personal Hell?

I can't decide. On one hand, I'm crazy, deserve to be here, and am doomed to die here. On the other, I come out alive and enjoy the privileges of food, family, humility, and love. I can't decide which I chose to believe. Acceptance and death, or acceptance and trudge on. It is terrible, but I need to know. Will I live to see through my vision of beauty and tranquility, or give up right here and burn? I need water. I need love and I know it has to come from me.

I can't help but feel I am here for the same reason I never asked out those girls when I was a teenager. I was a coward and couldn't own up to the responsibility of the task. It was as if that same scared pathological voice led right up to here. Suddenly my fear of reality has led me to the very most unappealing edge of the world. I couldn't have ever imagined under the false guise of an innocent upbringing this was real. I curse myself for being so naive and wish I had been a better man. Hell, I wish I were a better man. At least enough to make it out of here. Enough to make it home and marry Rose. Marry Rose and live to see our children flourish. Enough to see it through that things go right, and no chaos slips unnoticed. Man enough to live as a human being in my domain. God, If I couldn't just find the strength to be a man of full strength, I would make things better for myself and those around us. Better in that we unite and help each other out of this desert, and not allow it to swamp us again.

“Please give me the strength in my guts and bones to carry out this life and live the life I wish.”

I pause once more and look into the sky. Nothing. No shiny answer. No great epiphany that will change my life.

Just... *Sky*.

I give up. It is hopeless. Nothing has ever prepared me to face this and with a shimmer of hope, I'm to accomplish this challenge?

The sun is nearly set by now. Just peeking over the horizon. The chill is beginning to set in. Reminding me of an evening in late May. You know, back when things were looking up. I sort of just take it in and keep walking. At least for another hour.

Rocks on the sides of the road come and go but my mind is mostly silent.

I am going to die. And maybe that's okay. I mean, I was supposed to die, right? It's not like any of us live forever. We all have a time and mine turns out to be right here in this valley. Cold and afraid. Dead. But at least I lived. It was almost beautiful. To be here for as long as I have. I can almost be thankful for having had *any* ability to laugh and be warm. Everything out here has none of that. I'm glad I came as far as I came, and hope my spirit lives in wonder with the rest of whatever might be out there.

It's okay.

And just like that, I sit and rest my head into my lap and accept my fate. It is all around me. The once life-like emptiness of the world makes itself present again. This time though not as intimidating. This nothing-ness is almost cheerful, like a puppy, prodding you to play with it. It asks me to play and cheers me up. In this desert, I invite the absence of consciousness, to take a hold of me and cheer me up. It is lovely. It is soft. *It is home*. The absence and I dance and swim freely and happily like I've never felt before. My soul is filled with certainty and warmth like I've never felt before as the absence claims it from me. In this state of inebriation, I never wake up, and rest there on the side of that desert road.

My mother calls me for breakfast and I open my eyes.

Pancakes. Saturday morning. I feel like a kid again. I am home. I am in Paradise.