


FICTION

Koko

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Growing up where I'm from
people didn't dream much about
anything.

As a kid, your imagination allowed you to miss the nuances of everyday life. In the summer, we played outside by the lake in search for buried treasure. Sometimes we played hide-and-seek or tag. It didn't seem odd that my childhood home didn't have running water, or that we shared the single bedroom between my mother, older sister, and me. But the fog began to fade the older we became.



There's one elementary, middle, and high school in my town. They're all old and small. The brick walls meant to fortify our buildings were worn and breaking. We learned using textbooks held together by duct tape and outdated chalkboards. Many times on my way home from school, I walked by our neighbour lying on his back in the middle of the road. I would kneel and roll him over face down. The elders in our community told us to always roll someone face down. On any given afternoon, it was commonplace to see him like this. I realized later that this was abnormal behaviour for healthy adults. Neighbours, uncles, older cousins, aunts, and even my own mother needed to be rolled over from time to time.

My best friend in the entire world was Joel. He lived across the street from me. His house looked like mine: small, old, four walls, and a green paneled roof to complete it. Every summer we spent hours gazing up at the stars and tried pointing out our favourite ones. Joel's dad died when he was a baby, and his mom was never really at home because of her job. However, when I did see her, she smiled brightly. She baked us cookies and gave us candies. One time I saw her take out a metal box and prick her finger. Then, her smile faded.

One day in class, we took tests to determine what our future careers might be. My top five choices were therapist, dentist, physician, nurse, and professor. We spent the following days dissecting the roles and responsibilities of our top five choices. This is the moment when I realized I wanted to be a doctor. I remember running home and telling my mom the great news. She cupped my face with her hands and said, "I hope that your dream doesn't die Koko."

The night before my first day of middle school, I found my mother face down in the kitchen. She was non-responsive; I checked her pulse – something we learned in class a few months before. We used the landline phone to call for help and waited for what seemed like an hour for the ambu-


lance to arrive. The closest hospital was still quite far from our town. During the wait, we tried keeping her head up. I remember my sister sobbing, and I too scared to cry. Josie, our aunt, came to speak privately with the doctor. We spent the night at the hospital. The doctor told us my mother had alcohol poisoning. Josie stayed with us for the next month or so. She said that everything will be okay, and to continue with school. We never spoke of the incident again. It took me four years to learn that my mother and other close members in my community struggled with alcoholism.

When we entered high school, Joel tried out for the varsity football team. I was taken to live performance art, so I joined the drama club. Joel was always a natural athlete, so it came to no surprise when he became the youngest student in our school's history to join varsity at 14 years old. He made friends with his teammates, and I formed friendships with actors from the drama department. We never really hung out much after that, and I'll always regret not reaching out to him sooner.

To make some extra money, I got a job at the local and only grocery store in town called Dene's. It looked like something out of the 1960s, complete with outdated checkered uniforms. The food was overpriced, and not the best in quality. My coworkers and I complained to the owner about the quality and selection of products. Dene's carried at best a few vegetables, some fruits, and a whole lot of liquor. Some parents came in to buy produce from our small selection, but sadly most customers came for the alcohol. It didn't matter if they were old, young, or middle aged.

One evening I saw Joel and his teammates drive up. They grabbed a bag of chips, some beer, and a bottle of vodka. As I stocked the shelves, Joel came up to me. He stammered out, "Heeeyyy Koko, how is high school treating you? I hope it's been well."

"I'm healthy and living Joel, can you say the same?" I



replied. “I have a leading part in the school’s play, you should check it out.”

His friends – who I surmise carried fake IDs – called for him as they finished paying. Joel stared at me with sunken eyes, “I miss you Koko. We should watch the stars again, and I’ll try to make it out to your play. I’ll talk to you soon.”

He gave me a big hug, lingered for a bit, and smiled at me with sad eyes. He turned and walked away. I yelled after him, “I hope that you guys win Friday night!”

He offered a sly smile and waved goodbye. We never got to look at the stars again, and I never spoke to him again. Sometimes I would see him come to class wearing the same clothes that he wore the day before. Sometimes I would see him in the hallways with dark bags under his eyes. Joel committed suicide on May 12, 2014. He drove his father’s old pick-up truck to the abandoned lot, took out his shotgun, and pulled the trigger. I remember hearing his mother’s cries, and the memorial around his locker. The football team retired his jersey number. The next night I laid outside in our old spot and watched the stars.

Joel’s mother and I got closer after this experience. She revealed that she was a diabetic, and insulin wasn’t cheap when you’re poor and without insurance. Apparently, every month Joel drove over 70 miles to get reasonably priced insulin for her. After she lost her job, Joel picked up shifts at the repair shop, but it was never enough. It got to the point where they couldn’t afford to drive to the first pharmacy, so they settled for a closer one where her medication cost much more. She blamed herself. I tried to cheer her up and spent much of my free time with her. I assisted her to doctor check-ups. She complained that many of the physicians she’d seen over the years just didn’t care all that much about her. She felt ignored. She never forgave herself for Joel’s untimely passing, and the next year she too passed away due to complications from her illness.

The remaining years of high school quickly passed, but I was determined to do well. My older sister, a year older than me, dropped out of high school. She mostly stayed around our house taking care of our mother. In fact, in my town most people don’t finish secondary school. The class sizes in our high school got smaller and smaller. At the end of my junior year, the principal pulled me aside. She told me that the community would sponsor me a scholarship to a university of my choosing. They would also provide the resources I needed to prepare my application. I was ecstatic because my dream was to be a physician. After graduating high school, I went to a university many miles away. Being a first-generation university student was challenging, but I made very good friends and studied what I enjoyed most: biology.

On the day of my commencement ceremony, I looked upon the audience to see the smiling faces of my mother and sister. Today was the day that I accomplished a dream no one in my family has ever done. As I stood in line eyes closed waiting to hear my name, I imagined stars against a dark violet night sky. An image of Joel and his mom pierces through the starry veil; I hope that wherever they are, they’re happy. I take a deep breath, open my eyes, and prepare for my name to be called.

I want to tell my story, of who I am and where I come from. Many people like me don’t get to tell our stories of a life that appears alien to most. I am Koko, a member of the Blackfoot Indians. The first in my family to finish post-secondary school, and the first in my community to enter medical school. I don’t know exactly what the future may hold, but I will never forget the community that made me. I will work towards building a greater understanding between communities like mine and healthcare and medicine.