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Sometimes It's a Good Day To Be

Indigenous

Antonio Torres

I learned that I was retarded from the kids at school. Not retarded like I had something wrong with me, just different, a different kind of retarded. I was born with a mild case of fetal alcohol syndrome. I don't think that *mild* is an actual diagnosis, but that's how I like to think about it. I'm a little deformed physically, but I'm just like everybody else in the noggin. A good trade, I think. Like an egg that wasn't flipped quite right, yolk still there, just a little messy looking on the outside. Most Indians weren't all that good looking anyway, so I wasn't missing out on too much. The kids at school, for the most part, were relatively discreet. They didn't just run up to me and yell "you're retarded!" in my face, and run away. Instead they whispered it in their actions: every look would go past me, and every time I made eye contact they would quickly snap their head the other way. Because of that, it was hard to make friends. After a while the silence was too much, and I wished that they screamed.

But it wasn't too bad. I mean the no friends thing. At least I wasn't getting my ass beat every day. The Flathead rez was the Beverly Hills of Montana reservations. It wasn't anything like the Crow rez. At Crow, they looked for excuses to beat you up. You could be walking down the street and they'd beat you up for going too slow, and if you sped up, they'd beat you up for walking too fast. A nightmare over there. No, on the Flathead rez we had glamorous thugs: wife beaters and the scarf things around their heads, the Air Jordan tattoo with a war bonnet; it was mostly for show. Native pride, you know. Don't get me wrong, I would never want to square up with one of these guys, especially if they had a few drinks in them. But for the most part, as long as you stayed away from their sisters, and their frybread queens, you were going to be alright. So it could have been worse. But the loneliness was a killer. I'd known everybody in my class, by name, since the beginning of school, but I'd only talked to them a couple times each. The white kids, I understood. A sixteen year old with a dark, smooth, droopy face, small beady eyes, and an upper lip that was seemingly non-existent. Yikes. I'd be scared of me too. But I didn't understand the Indian kids. They had to be somewhat used to

it. I mean it's not like I was the only Indian with FAS. Jerome Running Crane, who lived a block away from school had it too, and he had friends. I guess his was milder than mine, at least physically, but I was light-years ahead of him mentally. Just doesn't seem fair. When even the kids with FAS don't want to hang out with the kid because he has FAS. There's got to be something wrong with that picture.

This year was going to be different though. Freshman jitters were out of the way and even though sophomore jitters weren't all that different, I was feeling more confident than before. It only took me a year. I approached the front entrance of the building, a little tired from the long walk from my house, but excited more than anything, and went in. Our school didn't really look like a school. The bigger schools had multiple floors, a humongous gymnasium, and air conditioning! But my high school consisted of just one, sweaty hallway, and it wasn't even a long one. The tribe managed to squish eight rooms—four on each side—in one hallway. Pretty efficient if you ask me. The only fault was that because the rooms were so close and the only barrier between each room was a slab of stained carpet-looking material—graciously provided by Tribal Housing—we could usually hear everything going on in the room next to us. Two different lessons in one setting. Again, pretty efficient. So I looked down the hallway, our school. The white kids were all in a group, the Indians were in their groups, and the white kids that wanted to be Indians were in their group. Everything was the same, and as usual, I didn't quite know how to approach any of them. Every year I'd hoped an Indian/FAS group had formed over the summer and would eventually spring up out of the shadows of the hallway with their bright, droopy faces and take me in with open arms. But that never seemed to happen. So I talked to the lady that watched over the ALC room, Kathy, instead. The ALC room, or alternative learning center, was basically for the bad kids. Whenever someone started to act up in a classroom, that's where they were sent. Kathy was perfect for that position. She was a thick lady with big round glasses, and her orange hair was always permed and very intimidating. She was a white lady that had the "let's save the helpless Indians" kind of attitude, but she was always nice to me.

"How was your summer, Alex? Do anything traditional?" Kathy said. I laughed to myself. Why do white people think that whenever

Indians get free time, they spend it living in the 1400s? But she was nice for asking, so I didn't bring that up.

"Ohhhh, you know. Couple powwows here and there. Spent a lot of time at my grandpa's place, helpin' him out. Old man can't even tan hides by himself anymore, without someone watching him."

It was a joke, but Kathy didn't laugh.

"Oh that poor, poor man. I'm sure it's tough to not be able to do the things you were raised to do. I'm glad he's keeping your culture alive, and passed it on to you though, Alex."

A little deeper than I originally thought about it, but yeah, I guess she was right. "Thanks Kathy."

The bell rang, and it was time for classes. The first couple classes zoomed by. It was mostly for introduction, stuff that a lot of the kids didn't pay attention to, but I always found it important to know what I was up against that year. Plus there was still no sign of the Indian/FAS group, so it wasn't like I was busy talking with my friends.

The bell rang again, and it was time for the fourth class of the day. I reached in my ripped backpack—the one I'd been using since 5th grade—and pulled out my class schedule. I scanned across it, searching for what my fourth period class was, and in what seemed like big bold letters, I read AMERICAN HISTORY. *This ought to be good.*

I sat in the back corner of the classroom, a good view of the entire class. I was isolated, with a wall to my back and on my left, empty chairs to my right and in front of me. Most of the sophomore class was piling in, and the segregation began: Indians on the left side of the classroom—closer to me, but with a couple chairs between us, and white people on the right side. It's not like there were signs that forced people to sit in certain spots, and it wasn't like everyone hated each other because of their skin colors, that's just the way it was. Unwritten rules, I guess. Time slowly dragged on; I hated history, and looking back it seems as if history hated us. As I gazed at the bald head of our teacher, lost with every white skin cell that gleamed in the light, I heard someone bring up the topic of boarding schools.

"Well maybe the Europeans did the Natives a favor by putting them into schools," Jesse said. He was the star quarterback, a senior, but he had failed history class his sophomore year. Good reason, I guess.

"That doesn't justify the brutality brought amongst our people,"

said an unfamiliar voice. “Camps were destroyed. Kids were ripped away from their families.” Who was that? I never saw him before. That’s a big ol’ Indian. He looked like a Native Hulk: at least 6’4, broad shoulders, a long, virgin braid, a beaded choker, and some slick moccasins on his feet. He looked like a medicine man on steroids. Had to be Northern Cheyenne. They didn’t make Indians that big unless they were Cheyenne.

Just as the debate was heating up, the bell rang. Lunch time.

One of the hardest parts of the day was lunch, because that’s when I was faced with the most difficult question of all. Where am I going to sit? Lunch time was rarely a time for eating. If you can believe it, the school’s lunch fund sat below the poverty line. So it was like the poor feeding the poor. Not much was given, and whatever was given rarely looked edible.

I looked around the lunchroom with a tray in my hands. The goop of rice and beans and whatever else was in this mixture started to jiggle and crawl away, so I figured I better find a seat quick. I looked in the way back, and saw the Hulk medicine man. I walked over, confident at first, but when his eyes met mine, I froze. Normal people would say hi and introduce themselves, maybe crack a lame joke to break the ice a little bit. I tried to be normal, but what came out of my mouth was, “Ehh, uhh, are you Cheyenne?” I blame the FAS. Because I can.

He laughed, uncontrollably at first, spitting some of his food back onto his tray. “Ho this one. That’s the funniest thing I’ve heard all day! Cripes. Sit down! Sit down!”

“So what are you then?” I asked.

“Well,” he leaned closer to me, closer than any kid my age had ever been, looked me dead in the eye and whispered, “I’m what they call an Indian.” He cracked up again, covering his mouth with his hand. I don’t know why, but pretty much all Indians laughed like that. I even catch myself doing it.

We talked for the rest of lunch. His name was Lance, and oddly enough he was from the Crow rez. He didn’t beat me up. In fact, I think he liked me. We were both very traditional: his parents were drunks, and his family was dirt poor. Just like me. I just had to grow

a foot and a half, and he just had to get FAS real quick and we would have been the same person. It was nice to talk to someone besides Kathy for a change. He may have been too Indian for his own good, with all the regalia and Native dialect, but I liked Lance.

The bell rang again, and people started to work their way out of the lunchroom. Some left with a feeling of shame because of the food they had just consumed, uncertain of the long-term effects, and some left with a feeling of satisfaction because that was their only guaranteed meal of the day. Lance and I both stood up at the same time, and locked eyes for just a second.

I got a little nervous of the situation. “Well...bye,” I said, and turned to leave.

“Woah, woah!” Lance chuckled to himself. “What class you have next?”

I fumbled around my pockets, past the empty candy wrappers and the only pen that I owned, until I finally reached my schedule. “Math,” I said.

“Crazy! I do too. You should show me where it’s at. Kind of afraid to walk alone. Everyone gets big-eyed when I walk by them, like they haven’t seen an Indian break in his moccasins before.”

I haven’t worn my moccasins in a long time. Last time I wore them, a couple summers ago, my mom got drunk and accidentally entered me in the women’s traditional dance contest at Haze powwow. I danced two songs before I noticed I was the only guy out there. I’m sure the judges knew too and just wanted to mess with me. It wasn’t just the disqualification that made me lose, either. Those women were good! But I couldn’t let Lance know that. That story seems like a second lunch date kind of topic. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

His straight, perfectly bone-structured face looked at mine with no expression. “I’m sure you do, Alex.” Pointing his lips towards the school that neighbored the lunchroom, “Well, we better get going,” he said.

We walked inside the school, and everyone was still figuring out which of the eight rooms they had to be in. We passed the main office that was right inside the entrance of the school. The ALC room was right beside it. I tried to hurry Lance by speeding up my pace, but it wasn’t working. His bulk and braid must have weighed him down

enough to the point where he only walked at a fixed speed. Instead, I tried to hide behind the big, brown native, but it was too late.

“Well, look at you two! Getting to school just in time. Nice work,” Kathy said.

Lance looked at me in confusion. “Lance, this is Kathy,” I said monotonously.

“I watch the ALC room. So hopefully I don’t see too much of you!” Kathy winked and laughed.

“Oh, nice to meet you,” Lance said in a deep, throaty voice. “I’m Lance BearPaw.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. BearPaw, or ... is it chief? You sure are tall,” Kathy said.

Lance smiled, showing every one of his teeth. “No. Not a chief. Not yet, anyway,” he laughed.

I stood there, sweat building up under my armpits. I just wanted to go to class. My heart was racing, but I couldn’t get the words out to tell Lance we should go. So I stood there quietly, awkwardly.

“Oh. Well, just keep working hard, and come to school every day. And by golly, you’ll be chief in no time! I promise! And if you need any help, like if you don’t understand something or you’re having some issues at home, let me know, and I’ll do all I can to help you out. I know it can be tough out there.”

“Thank you, Kathy,” Lance said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Wow. That’s quite the outfit you got on there, Lance! Love the colors on your necklace! Looks a little tight though. Is that the old-fashioned way your tribe does it?”

“It is. Yeah, my ilapxa showed me how to bead chokers when I was young.”

“Oh! Your uhh ill..puck.. That’s so good that you can speak Indian, Lance! Way to keep the culture alive!” she said.

Lance smiled. “Thanks Kathy.”

“So you must be heading to a powwow, or some kind of spiritual quest after school then, ri-?”

“Kathy,” I quickly interjected. “We have to go to class, don’t want Lance to be late on the first day. We’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Oh, well alrighty then. You boys have a good day. Learn a lot!”

I pulled Lance by his massive arm. We still had to walk to the end of the hallway, which wasn’t far, but distance always seemed longer in silence. About halfway to the room, Lance stopped.

“So Alex....Is she for real?”

I looked down at my shoes for a second. My heart still hadn't settled. “Yeah,” I said quietly.

Lance stared at me for a couple seconds. His blank expression slowly molded itself into a giant smile, much like the one he had given Kathy. He started to nod. “That's awesome!” he said as he started to laugh and cover his mouth.

I still wasn't sure how to react. “Yeah, she umm, she takes some getting used to,” I said.

Lance was still laughing, though it was slowly drifting away. “Cripes! I can tell. Good thing I have all year.”

I started to nod too. “Yeah. I already have a year head start,” I said.

“You sure do buddy. C'mon, let's go learn a lot,” Lance said in Kathy's voice with air quotation marks. “Still got that powwow to hit up later!” We both laughed, and finally walked into the math room.

School let out, and I started my long journey home. I liked to walk, which was a good thing because I didn't really have a choice. I lived in the boonies, two miles up a mountain, where no bus dared come near. The forest was dense, the dirt road was bumpy and had claimed many cars in the past. For a little while, my mom drove me to and from school, except on Mondays. She was sick most of the time on Mondays; weekends are rough. Anyway, the car broke down a couple months ago. She called the school about sending a bus up there, and they yelled at each other for a while until she finally slammed the phone down. Indian women don't give up easy, but this time the school won. I'm sure they threw a bunch of big words at her, and she became overwhelmed. She never liked the secretary, even though they were related. Mom always talked about beating her up, and she would have too, but unfortunately the school bus wasn't going to pick her up either. So she was stuck. I really didn't mind though. I enjoyed walking. It gave me time to think, and reflect about the day. I thought about the things I should have done, and the things I could do better next time. It never happened that way in real life, but it was nice to think about it.

As I was walking, I heard a noise behind me. It wasn't like a sneaky noise, the kind that tries to not be detected. This noise definitely didn't care who or what was hearing it. It was like a bunch of pans had been

thrown into a washer and set on spin cycle. I turned around and a heaping pile of metal on wheels was coming in my direction. How the hell was this thing moving? The body of it was tarnished a nasty brown color, the two windows in the back were covered with black plastic garbage sacks, the hood was held together with bungee cords. This thing ran on four doughnut tires and the spirit of our ancestors. I stared in awe.

“Hey cousin! Get in the rez runner! Ayyy. Let’s go sweat!” Lance yelled. Just because almost everybody on this rez was related in some way, there was actually a pretty good chance we were cousins. Distant ones, at least. I was still in shock at how the machine had actual power. This one car, in its almighty form, had single-handedly defied science. I noticed Lance was looking at me funny, like so many of the kids had done in the past. Like he had just now noticed my facial abnormalities. I stood there. “Hola, you’re kind of freaking me out, man. Gonna get in, er what? I promise she don’t bite,” he said.

“My mom—” I said.

“Hey don’t worry. I’ll have you back before dark! It’s the first day. Not like you got homework. Plus you can get ahold of her when we get to my house,” he said.

He was right. I didn’t have much to do. And by that I mean I didn’t have anything to do. Mom was probably still hungover. I would just go home and watch TV, or think about how I would react if someone were to ever invite me to their house. Damn, I hadn’t done that in a while. It would have been helpful. I looked up the long road, as if the base of the mountain at the end held my answer. But instead it stood silently. “Okay,” I said, and hopped in.

All of the previous doubt I had about this car was only capitalized when we hit the highway: metal clanked on metal, unnatural noises and smells filled my senses as I prayed to myself that we would make it there in one piece. You could feel the engine starting to lose power, and Lance would respond by rapidly stomping on the gas pedal to once again give it life. The car seemed like it was going to die two or three times, but Lance assured me that it didn’t happen too often. He said his ride was a bluffer. Which wasn’t too comforting for some reason. As the car reached its miraculous limit of 50 mph, I closed my eyes, and waited for my fate. Lance turned the powwow tunes up on his 1980’s stereo and let out a giant war hoop that only made my eyes

close tighter. I've met some crazy Indians before, but not my age, and usually not sober. As the car began to die again, I prepared myself for the worst. I put my hands up, bracing myself for whatever was ahead. Just as a tear was starting to form in my eye, Lance said, "Well, my war pony got us here. Swear she never fails me! Alex, you can uhh, open your eyes now," he chuckled.

I opened them and let out a sigh of relief. Loud enough to let all of my fear escape me, but quiet enough so that Lance didn't hear.

His house was a trailer. A double wide to be more exact, something to be proud of on this rez. I'm surprised he didn't talk about it more often, people would think he's one of those celebrity Indians. I didn't know the exact time, but I could tell it had taken awhile to get to Lance's house. The last thing I wanted was for mom to be upset with me, especially when she was rockin' a headache.

"Hey Lance. Think I could get ahold of my mom now?" I asked.

"Oh, sure, sure. Know how to send smoke signals?" he said. I looked at him with a blank stare, and slightly shook my head. "Jeez you! I'm just kidding. Lighten up! Don't bring bad sprits in the sweat lodge, you know," he said with a look of satisfaction. "Go inside, my mom will show you the phone. She might let you use it too. Ayyy." He laughed as I walked towards his house.

I walked in and a fabulous odor hit me. I forgot commodities were given out that day! I knew the smell right away. I walked closer to the kitchen, and just as I had thought: Lance's mom was in the process of whipping up some of the finest commodity mac-and-cheese this side of Indian country.

"Oh. You must be Lance's friend from school. Jeez that kid. Nothin' but a big talker, just like his dad. Damn social butterfly. Just pissy." She laughed. "Can I get you something?"

"Can I use the phone?" I said.

"Of course! It's right over there. Help yourself. Dinner will be done in no time." She pointed to a wall between the kitchen and the front door, and on the wall hung a cordless phone. "And if you need anything else, don't be afraid to ask me, you hear?" she said.

"Thank you, ma'am," I said. She snickered at the ma'am part, and I walked over to the phone.

I called and told my mom where I was. She said she was just about

to hike down the mountain and grab me her damn self, right before I called. Just in time. She told me to be home by sunset, or else she would slap all the color off my skin. I wasn't sure if she was kidding, so I fake laughed and told her okay. I hung the phone up and once again thanked Lance's mom, this time leaving out the ma'am part. She said it wasn't a problem. I could smell alcohol on her breath. I couldn't imagine her being any other way.

I walked out the back door, where the sweat lodge was and saw Lance and this old guy getting the rocks and hand drums ready. I walked up to them, cautious as usual.

"Alex. This is my grandpa, Darryl BearPaw.. Once a great chief of the land, ain't that right, Grandpa."

"Oh!" his grandpa said, and they both laughed.

"Good to meet you, sir," I said.

"Baleeaakiiwilaxpaake itchik," he replied. I looked at Lance for a little guidance.

"That's Crow for nice to meet you as well," Lance said. I nodded, and smiled in respect for the language. Lance's grandpa went inside the lodge and I could hear the drum beat, as his singing got louder and louder.

I looked at Lance, kind of confused. I hadn't been in a sweat lodge since I was a little boy. It wasn't too big of a tradition in my family. We only did it when we were invited, which wasn't often.

"Lance. So umm do we go in, like, all natural?" I asked. I thought that's how it worked. How I remembered it anyway.

He started to laugh again, deeper than usual, like it was mixed with a yawn. "Holeez. You crack me up Alex! Cripes, this isn't the olden days. We got some dignity in this lodge. Don't want to embarrass you anyways," he said as he let out another giant laugh. "Here." Lance went behind the lodge for a split second and retrieved a pair of trunks. "Here's your bridge cloth to cover up your chishee," he said, still laughing.

"Oh. Thank you." I sighed with relief. Lance was about to walk into the lodge, when I touched him on the back. He turned around and looked me straight in the face. Straight into my identity, into all of the imperfections that had plagued me throughout my life. I couldn't find the words, so he found them for me.

"Alex. We're more alike than different. We may be from different tribes, but we're still a proud people, no matter how others look at us,

or what they think. When you come in, release yourself, and let your spirit fly. And once you do that. We are all one,” he said, and entered the sweat lodge.

I nodded, put the trunks on, and walked towards the drum beat. And as I sat in the lodge, the warm mist blocked all sight, all reason, and all judgments. Darryl’s praying got louder and louder and was joined by Lance’s voice. Together they sang, and cleansed. And I sat there, letting the heat overcome my body, allowing my spirit to fly; I did something I didn’t do often, and thanked the Creator for making me who I am.