

Welcome to Slab City

Pastor Pete began his ascension up the mountain of milk crates.

Sweat stained palms and feet that were too small for a man of his size had always made the climb awkward. His fingers, caked in the dust of Nevada's desert, wriggled and twitched as they attempted to find a grip within the milk crates' holes. His feet, protected by a pair of decrepit Nike's held together with tape, struggled and slid across the top of each crate. Eventually, he clambered his way up to the summit.

From here he could see all of Slab City.

A derelict shanty town of decaying shacks and rusted cars that now acted as homes to a population who lived without feeling alive. He remembered at the beginning, when people first settled in Slab City, they aspired to wrestle back some sense of normalcy. There was a tangible effort towards regaining a society their own carelessness had stripped them of. Now the apathy towards each other's humanity had led to man's penchant for cruelty on clear display. Corpses hung on withered trees left blotches of blood painted onto the sand, their bodies twisting against the wind as if still alive. In Slab City there's a saying-

'if the heat don't kill ya, I will.'

Surveying the crowd that had gathered to hear him speak he counted roughly 100 faces. Before him stood all manners of men, men that found themselves glued together by a newfound desolation. Doctors turned to junkies who itched for a fix of home-made meth stood side by side with bible-wielding rapists. Everyone in Slab City had tried so hard to forget the lives they'd lost that no-one could recall quite how they'd lost them. Had it been the fault of a changed climate? Or was society's downfall long before the sun refused to stop shining? No one could remember, no one wanted to.

It was more than his usual congregation. Some residents had always slunk out from their dwellings each week to hear him preach. However, with dwindling food supply and rising temperature more lost souls had found themselves longing for the touch of a God they felt abandoned by. In the eyes of the desperate, religion remains untethered to reality. It floats amongst what were once the clouds, lifted by hope, untainted by truth. For a moment Pete wondered if 100 people had ever been so eager to hear him preach during the before times.

He stopped himself, he doesn't think about the before time. Not anymore. Pete cleared his throat and began the sermon.

'Why is it that we enjoy laughing in the face of God? Perhaps we take pleasure from our lords punishment, how else can we explain our constant lust for damnation? Maybe we enjoy taunting the hellfire he hangs over us, gazing in at the flames and telling ourselves burning ain't so bad.'

Underneath Pete's southern drawl hid a layer of velocity. The words thundered out of his mouth like bullets, ripping into the eardrums of the crowd beneath him.

'Well I'll tell ya the pain you are experiencing right now is nothing in comparison to the eternal torment that awaits those who sin. Sin, it's sickening to even say the word. Yet somehow sins of the flesh have once again been committed. Once again sinners must suffer for mocking our gracious God in heaven and once again we must purge evil. Bring out the demons.'

An animalistic roar erupted from the crowd as two naked men were brought out from behind the milk crates. They squirmed and fought against the leashes strapped upon them by members of the congregation, dragging them across the hot sand like disobedient dogs. Though they tried to resist, vast blotches of purple on otherwise white bodies told a tale of the fight having been beaten out of them. One of the men, in his attempt to cry for mercy, revealed a mouth without a tongue. Instead there sat a small bloody pink stub flailing helplessly against what teeth remained. The other man simply sat and wept, silently praying for a swift death.

'These demons lying before you have committed the most unnatural of acts. Homosexuality, man lying with man.'

A loud hiss burst out from the crowd.

'Is there a punishment severe enough for such unholy behaviour?' Spoke Pastor Pete, the palpable rage within his voice drowning out the naked man's gurgled cries for help.

'Light up the fags!'

'Cut em up and spread their guts!'

‘Feast upon their flesh.’

Pastor Pete waved his hand in the air, bringing the simmering crowd to a standstill.

‘Brothers, brothers, don’t you see? It is not us who will decide their punishment, instead they shall suffer at the hands of the God they betrayed! The rays of God’s almighty sun shall inflict revenge. The bodies graciously bestowed upon them by our lord dying slowly, slow enough for them to reflect upon their sin as God drags them closer to hell! Bring out the crucifixes.’

Two large crucifixes constructed from scrap metal were brought out from behind the milk crates and fixed down into the sand. The man with no tongue attempted to scream as the rusted nail slid through his hand and into the sizzling metal, whilst the other remained stoic in acceptance of his fate.

‘Brothers, look upon these men and you look upon God’s justice.’ Pastor Pete cried.

The crowd rejoiced.

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Ethan Bray had heard the crucifixion from inside the comfort of his own shack. The frenzied cries of the Pastor’s congregation had rattled through the sheets of metal that propped up Ethan’s make-shift home. Usually, despite his longstanding atheism, Ethan would make the trip each week. Gossiping had survived the fall of civilisation and not attending the Pastor’s sermons always gave people an excuse to make accusations. However, he’d had sex with one of the men just three months ago and feared that in the dying man’s desperation he might’ve been dragged down with him - exposing his secret to the crowd so he would be forced to share the man’s misery. A moment of skewed justice. Ethan pictured his body burning on the cross next to him, the howls of hysteria emanating from Pastor Pete’s mob burning in his ear. He cursed himself for being so cowardly, but he still wanted to see tomorrow.

‘Hey, Eth, why you ain’t come out to see the sermon?’

Ethan turned to see Grayson standing outside his shack.

‘I was tired, hey come in, I want to show you something.’

Grayson and Ethan had always made an odd pair. Grayson, a former mechanic from Mississippi, was short, stocky and had somehow maintained his beer belly despite there now being no beer left. Ethan was a middle-class Californian history teacher who carried himself like a stoned surfer-dude. He’d taught lessons of the past at CCA to a generation that would grow up without a future. In the before time whilst Grayson guzzled bud light and drunk drove through swampland, Ethan marked portfolios and read Nietzsche. Both men knew that under normal circumstances they wouldn’t have been friends, become enemies even, but they appreciated each-other’s company. They shared in the want to survive, and that was enough for a friendship to blossom.

Grayson swiped some of the dust off Ethan’s mattress and sat down. Removing his sandals he revealed blackened toenails and a foot splattered with blisters. Ethan’s was one of the only shacks that had a mattress and Grayson was always telling him to hide it. Grayson had always felt nervous that one of the guys who slept in their cars, or someone with nowhere to sleep at all, would break in and kill him for it. He’d heard that it had happened to a guy not so long ago.

‘So, what you wanna show me?’ Grayson’s deep-south Mississippi accent made every word sound dumber to Ethan.

‘Well, you hungry?’ Ethan’s upper class Californian cadence made every word sound snooty to Grayson.

‘You got food?’ Grayson leapt up, his body buoyed by the prospect of a meal.

‘Better than that, I got eggs.’

‘Eggs!’ Grayson’s jaw fell to the floor, saliva pooling in his lower lip at the mere mention of eggs. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten anything as good as eggs.

‘Mmmhmm, two left.’

Ethan took two eggs from a small sack hidden by his mattress and cracked the yolks onto half a glass plate he'd found some years ago. As he shone the magnifying glass onto the egg, the yellow yolk and white albumen sizzled and popped underneath the rays of the sun. Once finished, the two men, awash with starvation, ripped into the egg with their hands, unconcerned about burning fingers. As Grayson slurped bits of yolk, a knock at the door violently disconnected them from their moment of pleasure. At the door stood Pastor Pete, holding a leash in his hands.

'Ethan, you have an appointment with God.'