

Now or Never? By Alex Hart

Dystopia may not be as distant as you assume...

Silent.Empty.

This tale was inspired by the situation in the Marshall Islands, a sprawling chain of volcanic islands and coral atolls in the central Pacific Ocean, between Hawaii and the Philippines. It has a population of 53,000 and is a Republic associated with the United States of America.

There's no fresh water left. When I went to drink a glass of water this morning, the salty sting sulfured my throat dry, and I immediately spat out the offensive drink on the floor. We'll have to buy bottled water from now on. But the shops are almost out. Shelves and shelves stripped bare, teeming with tired customers desperate for sustenance. And the customers aren't the only tired ones around. The island is tired, her foundations crumbling from liquefaction, her streets bare of tourists, her sea walls disintegrating daily.

I spend a lot of time looking out over our own sea wall. Dad built it back in 2013, when we realised for the first time that the government weren't able to found a proper protection for its people. Its stones prod out at alarming angles, gradually protruding as dislocated limbs. Every time a stone drops out so does a faction of my confidence in its strength. And the sea seems to relish in each victory, thrashing our guard more and more with each day that passes. Apparently it encroaches upon us at 3mm a year. At first this figure seemed to mock me with its ridiculous minuteness, but it's undeniable in impact now.

And it's not like there's anywhere left to go. The airport closed a while ago, its doors slamming shut along with many businesses. When I was younger, my dad used to take me to watch the airplanes take off. We sat on the bonnet of his car, juice boxes in hand, wondering at the weightlessness of the man-made birds. We used to have lots of airplanes bedecking our skies, apparently. But when the king tides came, their monstrous waves rearing up ugly heads, the tourists shuffled back home. I like to think that we used to be surrounded by a myriad of neighbouring islands, with high ground aplenty to survey the tumultuous sea below. But we're alone in the ocean now. The waves see views from a larger height than we ever could. And there's no escape route left.

There's something hanging over the streets. Some gas weighing down the oxygen, making us breathe in the dirt it imbues. You can see it in people's eyes. I never knew that you can see breath in a man's eyes. But it's there unmistakably, a heaving of the spirit, clouding vision uncontrollably. Dad says it's because of America, because they abused our land then left us to suffer with the nuclear fallout. Or that it's because of the greenhouse gases which fill the skies. But I know it's more than that. It's not just the physical. I feel it too - this toppling. We're toppling towards the end of disaster, as if balanced on a precipice with strong winds urging us to tip over the edge of the cliff. For us, it seems like we are there already. And it seems that no one else in the world cares.

This story is unfortunately set in the now.

This story was strongly inspired by the situation in the Marshall islands today. The Marshall Islands are a series of low-lying islands and atolls in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, on average all less than six feet in elevation. Rising sea levels continually threaten these islands, with recent research suggesting that sea levels have been increasing by 3.4 millimetres per year. 80% of the population in Majuro Atoll, home to half of the nation's population, could be lost if the sea rises by one metre. In 2013 over 200 homes were damaged in the capital Majuro, and the airport was forced to close due to particularly high tides.

The Marshallese have no option to evacuate to higher grounds or neighbouring islands. King tides (exceptionally high tides) are particularly dangerous. The recently developed tourism industry of the Marshall Islands is seriously threatened by these changes. All of these issues are perpetuated by the nuclear fallout that the islands experience, following the United States' decision to test 54 nuclear bombs on the Bikini Atoll during the 1940s and 1950s.

However, this story does not claim to be a truthful narrative of the exact situation in the Marshall Islands - to write such a piece would require a much more intimate knowledge of the local culture and local lives than the author possesses. This story is not, on the other hand, an exaggeration of what is happening in the Marshall Islands, nor many other places on earth today, but is rather the author's perspective on how the people living there would react to such events, based on the facts of the situation. We urge you to listen to people who actually experience these issues, as their stories are more compelling, and often more devastating, than any imagined reconstruction of responses. The facts presented in this story are all true, and the situation will only worsen if we don't act. Even so, the situation today is unacceptable - action must be taken, and taken now, not just to stop it getting worse, but also to make it better.

<http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/sealevel.html>

<http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2015/06/opinions/sutter-two-degrees-marshall-islands/>

<http://www.fws.gov/pacific/climatechange/changeipi.html>.