

Riley Guerrero, [REDACTED]

Lakes High School, Grade 11, Mr. Cohn

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The Legacy of the Dream: How Far Have We Come?

The legacy of the dream.

One can only assume the phrase is calling on the words taught to elementary school children from the time they're able to repeat them, synonymous with Martin Luther King's name; *I have a dream*. We hear those words so often in school that they lose all meaning, the *four score and seven years ago* of the modern era. King had a dream, he had a *dream*. Kids so often said that the idea of the dream itself is so bound with the man that it seems almost impossible for one to outlive the other, and reasonable that the dream itself is also buried under a gravestone with the words *free at last* over it, relieved of its purpose and at rest. But the dream has no legacy, just as no one in this room has a legacy – the dream is still *alive*. Despite its years of uneasy, fitful sleep, the dream, unrealized, must still live on, even if that life is only due to being hooked up to half a dozen beeping machines and an IV drip fueling it with bursts of action, of protests, of anger and passion, but no solid meat and potatoes, no marches on Washington or Black Panther Party or 40 cc's of adrenaline straight to the heart.

When we ask ourselves how far we've come since the late 60's, the instinctive answer is simply, '*far*', and that that old dream, if we bother to admit that it's still clinging to life, has at least been retired into hostel care in the back rooms of the Revolutionary Hall of Fame. Meanwhile, the bright, fresh Dreams take over its day to day business. It has no place in such a world as ours, we tell ourselves, looking around at our glass skyscrapers and drive-through

Starbucks and iPhones. And gains were made between 1960 and today, of course, but even the Voting Rights Act has been undone in recent years, ready to spiral our elections back down into the pit of poll taxes and grandfather clauses. To get an accurate measure of how far we've come – as Americans and as individuals – we have to look at how we revile these protests in our homes and in the media, even as a country built on and proud of its past radical anti-government action. We must look at how even some of the most liberal of us initially default to justifying impromptu death sentences in a situation where no one knows the facts, despite the defining principle of our justice system being said to be “innocent until proven guilty”. We, as a society and as separate people, must ask ourselves why theft of five dollars' worth of tobacco, or disrespect, or even belligerence from a black man warrants a death-by-firing-squad at all, when such offenses barely warrant warnings for those with lighter skin.

The dream lives on in the outrage for injustices – not a descendant of that of MLK, but the same dream; a dream for equality, for justice, for the same rights to *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* as the rest of America. We can say that we've come far from the days of Selma and Montgomery, from the Jim Crow laws that lorded over the South, but our progress is in sidesteps and tentative tiptoes and not leaps nor bounds. On Martin Luther King Days, we are forced to sit at the bedside of the old dream, perhaps pat its hand as we quietly hope it slips away back into the past, where we, for the rest of the year, can pretend it belongs. But this Martin Luther King Day, it no longer is appropriate to simply leave some flowers in a vase on the nightstand, or softly wish it well, clear our throats, and turn back to our comfortable lives. This Martin Luther King day, we must ask what side of history we will be on when the dream is officially retired and not simply reclusive, when there is a legacy to be had, and when we can honestly and truly say that from its first utterance in the Washington Mall, we have come, “*far*”.