

Not a Utopia

It's sunny out today. As I step onto the balcony, a wave of noise washes over me, and I squint in the sunlight. The bustling city is alive with movement as I head over to the miniature wind turbine on our balcony. The battery in it is full of electricity, so I pull it out and replace it with an empty one. Then I walk back inside and head to the charging station. . It will pump electricity all over our apartment, as there is enough energy stored in a single battery to last almost the whole day.

These little turbines are only one of the amazing inventions that *Utopia*, the newspaper dedicated to climate action solutions, has brought us. Another is the colourful translucent windows all over our apartment building, that double as solar panels, or the "wood" furniture— which is really 3D-printed zinnia flower stems. Since switching over to all these renewable energy sources, my family's health has never been better. We're armed with the knowledge that we are doing our part to build the green utopia that is hopefully in our future.

Collecting the battery is my only chore for the morning, so when I'm done I swing my backpack over my shoulder and race down the 5 flights of stairs to the ground floor. I grab my electric scooter and hop on. School starts in 20 minutes, and I can't be late!

The streets are quiet today, with only the sound of drifting on the wind from across the river, where a hydro-powered train is being constructed. An electric car whirrs past, interrupting my thoughts. I breathe in the clean smell of the river. It's so refreshing to not smell gasoline and pollution everywhere. My city earned a Gold Badge at the Green Cities Society when I was 7, so I still remember what it was like before *Utopia*. In one word: terrible. The world was at the brink of extinction when the newspaper *Utopia* began and change started happening.

I make it to school without incident. We have gym today, and the body heat from playing basketball really fills up the heater. Once it gets colder, this excess heat will be very useful for warming up the cold rooms of the school. Basketball is fun, though I have to play against Gwen, who uses a wheelchair and is amazing at the sport.

On the way home, I take a different route than normal. I like this route because all the sidewalk panels and roads have kinetic tiles underneath, which generate electricity from the motions of vehicles. In my opinion, this is the most ingenious of *Utopia's* ideas.

Only my stepdad is there when I get home. He's lived with us for almost three years, but I still have no idea what Mom sees in him. He has been distant and sometimes downright rude to me and my 3 siblings, and he refuses to tell us, including my mom, about his family and history. My only clue about his background is that he comes from another country, but he arrived without anything, not even his parents or siblings. He started from scratch here, and I think he worries sometimes about being able to afford everything and support our family. The city is quite expensive. But that still doesn't explain his attitude... I don't know what to think.

I quietly put my scooter away, a mode of transportation that he disapproved of because it's pretty expensive. He's one of the few people in the city who dislikes the *Utopia* newspaper and all that it does. Don't ask me why.

I'm not successful in my stealth today.

"Cara? Is that you? Are you riding that blasted scooter again?" His voice is cross. He's in one of his moods.

"Dad—"

"I told you they were no good! Waste of money and resources!" he rages as I enter the room. But when I spot what is laying on the table next to him, my eyes widen in shock and my breath escapes my throat. He spots my expression and quickly shoves it in a drawer, but it's too late.

“Dad... is that...”

“It’s not *Utopia*, if that’s what you’re asking.”

It’s practically forbidden in this city to be reading any newspaper other than *Utopia*. *Utopia* brings us all the news we need! Climate action will bring us all together. It doesn’t matter what else is happening, as long as the Earth is safe. But that newspaper my stepdad was looking at... it’s a very political paper, full of pessimistic ideas.

“You know what your sister said to me the other day— she had no respect...” Dad starts off in a rant, but I shake my head, furrowing my brow.

“Not she,” I mutter to myself.

“I beg your pardon?” He looks at me sharply, and my cheeks warm.

“Aspen goes by they/them. I *told* you this, Dad. Can you please just try to accommodate for them? Everybody else does!”

Dad sighs, and for a moment I see emotion flash in his eyes. Sadness, maybe? Regret?

“I try, Cara.” His voice is almost a whisper, and the sudden change of tone surprises me. “I try.”

I smile sadly at Dad and pull the newest issue of *Utopia* out of my backpack. “But look, Dad! You don’t need that newspaper. It’s full of political opinions. *Utopia* has all the information you need! See— they’re almost finished building their fourth hydro-train in Toronto. Now transportation from Toronto to here will be twice as fast! And look here— we’ve finally reached our goal of 100 pollinator gardens in Ontario! That’s one fifth of our final goal for this year!”

But he just shakes his head in frustration. “Don’t you see, Cara? These *solutions*, they’re ridiculous. *Almost finished. One fifth of our goal.* They’re just excuses to make people feel good about themselves, to help them think they’re actually doing

something! But our planet is dying, Cara. Just live out your last days happily, reading the political statements and whatnot."

"But we *are* doing something," I say softly, blinking tears from my eyes as I drop *Utopia* on the ground. Loud voices rattle me. "It seems like nothing to put a wind turbine in your house, or choose to travel the streets with the kinetic tiles. It seems like only one footstep, when saving the world is a marathon. But the truth is, one fifth of our goal is a lot. Being almost finished is a lot. It's not a miracle. It isn't perfect. But it is a lot. We *are* accomplishing something, and we *will* save the Earth. Pessimism doesn't help anything. You may say you're a realist, but you can't achieve anything real without hope! Sure, a utopia is impossible. But a better world is within reach. How will we ever reach it if people like you are dragging us backward, pulling us down? Sure, read your newspaper. Waste away angrily, thinking about all the impossibilities. It's not like that will improve anything. But you do you, Dad! I'll be in my room."

I storm away, chin up and eyes down. But my stepdad's voice pulls me back.

"You're right." I'm shocked to see tears glistening in his eyes as I turn back around reluctantly. I have never seen him cry. Never.

"What?"

"You're right, Cara. I'm not doing anything. I feel hopeless all the time. I would say that I'll do everything I can to help the environment, to be 'cool' like everyone else. But it's hard."

"I know it's hard," I say quietly. "But that doesn't mean we give up."

Dad is thinking hard. When he lifts his head and meets my eyes, they're filled with a fire to do something. A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. This time, I know he will change.

I put down my pen and sigh heavily. My hand aches from writing. I'm not used to writing on paper instead of online, but I wanted this story to be as authentic as possible. This

story was two years ago now, and my stepfather has changed for the better. You may know him as Samuel Karla, the man who stepped up to be a political advocate and transformed our entire city into a zero-waste and sustainable metropolis with lots of diversity and social support for minorities. He's closer with Aspen than ever before, and regularly corrects people on Aspen's pronouns. I taught him everything, but he taught me too. I now know that politics *can* do something, and not always for the worse. People all over the province have been begging me to write a story on how exactly he started campaigning, and I gladly obliged— so here we are.

Utopia the newspaper is still going, but my stepfather has shown people that there are other things to focus on too— because *Utopia* was kind of propaganda, in a way. Now we can hear from someone who has been through all of this firsthand. Yes, there are still people who refuse to believe that we can do this, that we can stop pollution and usage of fossil fuels. But we will convince them, and for now, we are doing all we can.

Because this is not a utopia.

But it is not a dystopia either.

We cannot be perfect— but we can be better. Together we will pave the way to a better future.

The End