

Watershed

"A drop fell on the apple tree - another - on the roof..." the soothing voice fills the room, crackling slightly through the cafe's old sound system.

"If only!", mumbles Wren, looking up from her sewing.

"Yeah - but we need a lot more than a drop - a tidal wave would be more like it," I joke.

It's July 14, 2040. Tonight is talent night at The Hazelnut Bistro, the repair café in town. Wren, Esme and I went partly to fix our tattered work clothes, and partly as a distraction from the drought. We live in Carson Ridge, a fairly rural community alive with the singing of birds and the subtle groaning creak of wind helices.

It's an active community - we know each other; we support each other. Whenever we have a problem, we can count on neighbours to help, lending a tool, an ear or an extra set of hands to lighten the work. We have neighbourhood potlucks monthly, gathering to share food and stories, always with the hot dry air of the porch filled with the mouthwatering scent of Kianni's signature manakish za'atar, and with sounds of laughter and the clinking of dishes being replenished.

The land here is usually bursting with wild flowers and fresh vegetables, but ever since the drought started it has been as parched as a squirrel lost in the desert. We all want this land to thrive, to leave it better for those who come after us. We farm organically and in sustainable ways - or at least, most of us do. Not Benson and Morris. They moved here recently, and they have a different way of doing things.

It always feels good to look down the road, through the oak and sugar maple trees, and see the other neighbours' wind helices and rainwater collection systems - and there's a certain joy in looking out a window covered with a AuREUS solar panel, the tinted, colourful light bathing your face in a warm glow. Dust puffs up behind Esme with a murmured "Wwwhhmmmm" as they bike to our neighbours over the ridge to deliver a tiny portion of veggies; it's a pathetic offering but it's the best we can do in this arid time.

Silvery cables stretch between our farm, theirs, and the others, providing power when demand outstrips our solar supply. Originally, our farm belonged to Wren's aunt, who lived here all her life, and when she died Wren inherited it. Wren needed help running the place, so the three of us have been together for nine years. Before these dry times we used water when we wanted, but the drought has taught us a valuable lesson: we need to use what we have carefully. Now we parse as little water as possible, and we have a greywater system to recover all we can.

"How are the plants doing?" Esme signs as they finish installing solar panels on the tuk-tuk.

"The moisture sensor says they're fine; we might need to water them in a couple hours, though," I called back over my shoulder as I stepped into the house for breakfast. The lines of our house are like brush strokes: curving, sculpted walls encasing triple paned glass portholes, with one of these perfectly framing the tiny barnboard potting shed across the yard. Sitting next to the potting shed is our greenhouse, a shimmering structure made from recycled windows and covered with AuREUS solar panels.

The remains of my egg and bread refuse to leave my plate. As I scrape away the last stubborn bits, I gaze out the window and get poked in the eye by new rows of grape vines, strung along like barbed wire, suspended from tall poles standing like dead trees: Benson and Morris's vineyard.

"They use all the water irrigating those snaking plants!" I grumble to Esme, "and they would use who-knows-what chemicals on them too - if they weren't already banned."

A single drip fell from the faucet, then nothing. We've been dreading this day for weeks. The well is dry. Now we will have to haul water.

The ground has baked to a nearly impenetrable crust. I step outside onto crisp, dead clover and walk over to a shrivelled brussel stalk begging for water. The only colour comes from the yarrow and cone-flowers.

"It's sooo hot!" Wren exclaims as she cuts into the mulch pile with her spade. A web of irrigation pipes gets buried as we cover the beds in zinnia mulch and straw, a desperate attempt to keep what little moisture remains.

Morris and Benson drive me crazy, always driving the newest e-trucks, always using expensive nanofertilizers on their premium genetically modified grape vines, always acting so bougie. It's as if they try to buy themselves out of everything. We are going through the same thing, we just handle it differently, I guess. But I really want our community to work well together, so I will keep inviting them in.

My left hand picks up the phone, and I punch in 613-555-8804.

"Hello?... hi, it's Voyra - from next door. I was wondering if you'd like to come over for a meal sometime. Maybe a community potluck?"

"Hmmm... well, we've got work to do, so not this time." Benson replies. Ugh, exactly as expected: a vague excuse. We've invited them over so many times to find some common ground, but it seems that every time we invite them they're busy with some pressing matter. As far as I can tell, they don't think much of us.

It's August, so it's hot and dry and unending. The dust and gravel kick up behind us as we cruise along the road; the tuk tuk knows the bends and corners better than we do. We arrive at the shoreline of Loughborough Lake and unload, working together to carry empty jugs to the shrinking water and then hauling heavy, sloshing ones back to the tuk-tuk.

Morris and Benson have a different technique: The orange well-drilling truck is in their driveway when we return. Morris is avoiding small-talk and is busy explaining the issue. The well-driller writes notes and nods. At least with all this dust in the air, the sunset makes a beautiful blend of colour in the background.

As I shut off the faucet on the greywater cistern the next morning, I hear the crunch of wheels on gravel. I peer around the house to see a large orange truck, laden with all sorts of boxes and equipment. I instantly recognize it as the truck from yesterday. The driver's door opens quickly. They disembark, fumble with a note-pad and pencil, and walk quickly over.

"Hello, I'm with Below Grade Drilling. Your neighbours want to drill a new well. The only spot we could find

with adequate water is an aquifer on the north-eastern corner of your property. We've consulted your neighbour and he wants to buy that land," they say as they approach me.

"I'll have to get back to you on that. Can you write that down?" I reply crisply. I turn and walk to the house. I hear the truck roll away as the last of the magnets snap the door screen closed behind me.

I bring it up and talk over this revelation with my friends, and I'm glad - they have some good ideas, and it opens my thinking. I write a few things down as we talk, huddled at the dining table like we're plotting something.

"A new well is a great opportunity, but we don't have the money to drill one," gestures Esme. Finally, after some debate of what to say, we walk over to Benson and Morris' operation, the dusty, crunching tangle of ground-ivy beneath our feet and the almost cloudless sky above.

"The well-drillers came to us yesterday," I say to Morris "and they said you want our land. We won't sell - but we'll give you permission to drill there. We propose that you pay for it, as you intended, and you use half the water for your trouble. And we use the balance. We both need a constant supply; it's the best spot; and this way we both get what we need." Neither of them seemed convinced.

"Let's talk again again tomorrow." says Wren to break the silence. We duck under the withered grape vines as we walk home.

I wake up to a slight sound, like tiny dainty hooves stomping on our steel roof. My body moves faster than my mind, and before I know it my feet are sliding across the floor. I skid to Wren's room and excitedly bang on her green door, words bursting from my mouth and tears gushing from my eyes as I flood into her bedroom. She's already wide awake and delighted as I am. We scramble to Esme's room too excited to speak - we just jump and squeal. They may be mute, but they can certainly revel in the rain. In a knot of excitement, we dance out the screen door, letting the cool water run down our spines and soak through our well-worn pyjamas.

Plants that had faded to brown are slowly changing to green. The ground drinks the water like that desperate parched squirrel. The neighbours pour into the street, rejoicing, singing and twirling in relief and happiness. And then there they were, Morris and Benson, standing on their front porch... and smiling!

"I think this is the first time they've ever smiled!" I call to Wren. The wet grass soothes our bare feet as we skip through it to Morris and Benson's porch.

"It's finally come!" Wren announces as we near them.

"So, what have you decided?" I ask, as we stand on the saturated wood of the deck.

"Well, we talked about it and have come to a decision. We are willing to have the well drilled on your land, as long as we can have 50% of the water." Wren extends her hand to shake Morris's, Esme outstretches theirs to Benson, and with two firm shakes it's done.

The epilogue:

One week later. As Esme, Wren and I nibble on the last bits of our murmura poha, we hear heavy tires on the driveway. We call Morris and Benson and head outside. There's an orange truck, even bigger than the last one, parked in our driveway. Wren directs them to go around to the north-eastern corner, along the ridge, where they set up the drill. We wait in suspense until finally, around twilight, they finish. It will still be two days of work until the water is ready for use, but we're all so excited to finally have a reliable source of water again!