

Pay Attention

By Lisa Adatto

Renate walked briskly up the stairs to the Los Angeles station. She was a striking young woman, with shiny brown hair gathered in a low ponytail. She was tall and slim and dressed in a black bodysuit. If you looked closely at her face, you could see tiny points of tension; her forehead was slightly creased, right above her eyebrows. Right at the top of the stairs she stumbled, just a bit. “Pay attention” she hissed to herself. Immediately her black bodysuit began its soothing program. “Shh...shh...OK.” OK it whispered and both sleeves began a gentle stroking motion. Renate grinned and increased her pace. Her hyper loop pod was set to depart at exactly 2:38PM and she needed to get in cue at the exact time.

As she walked through the station she noted today’s numbers: CO₂ was down to 440 parts per million and the temperature was a cool 91. People had been focused on those numbers ever since the big storm years. The world’s population had worked desperately to reduce the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Renate felt a little burst of relief. “The numbers are really down this month” she thought, “but we still have work to do. We’re still in the danger zone.”

As she stepped through security, sensors read her ticket and took payment. She stepped into her tiny compartment and strapped herself in. The trip to Portland would take under an hour. During travel, the pod was completely shaded to avoid dizziness. A shiny console with lighted buttons offering entertainment options rose to cover her lap. Renate smiled as she remembered that on her last trip she had taken a virtual reality tour of ancient Rome, complete with a tournament in the ancient Roman forum. She remembered the roaring crowds cheering on the gladiators. On a different trip she spent the whole hour snorkeling in a sunny lagoon near Burma. She gave her head a little shake. “Forget it,” she thought. “No sightseeing today. I am going to take this time to focus on myself and think things through”.

With a whoosh, the hyperlink took off and settled into a comfortable 700 mph glide through the vacuum tube. Renate took a breath. She was 28 years old and in two weeks she was graduating from UCLA with her master’s degree in teaching. It was a time of transition for her. She and her boyfriend had drifted apart after he left to take a job in Ohio several months ago, and their phone calls had become infrequent. She felt paralyzed by indecision about her next steps, and was feeling listless, even melancholy. “I need to make some decisions today,” she told herself. “I need a plan for where to move, and where to look for jobs”. All her life she had been intent on teaching young people the skills needed to keep themselves safe. “I want to teach survival skills,” she thought. “But where? How?”

Renate was born in 2022 into a tough period, just as worldwide weather systems were beginning their collapse. Renate hung her head remembering the super storms of the early thirties: the tornados that rampaged through Oklahoma and Texas caused much loss of life. In 2035 a tornado with a circumference of over 45 miles surrounded Dallas

with winds so strong that tall buildings couldn't resist and many crumbled. Afterwards most of the survivors left the area and Dallas was still empty. In 2037, 2038 and 2041, hurricanes with unprecedented wind and rain whipped through many of the world's coastal cities including Miami. The historic strip of South beach was gone, and most of the elegant hotels in the area were abandoned. Many coastal cities struggled with frequent flooding.

Heat surges started in '34 with many days of unbearably hot weather. In the South, cattle and small animals died, and it was dangerous to go outside. Those years saw massive droughts and food shortages; most of the agriculture in California and the southern states was eventually moved into giant indoor "farm towers".

As she reclined in her small compartment, Renate shuddered thinking of the year that there were dead squirrels everywhere, even in her hometown of Lake Oswego. It was a fearful time everywhere with masses of refugees moving to cooler regions, and many people predicting doom and the "end of days". There was lots of blame, loud talk and political battles. People wondered if the United States democracy would survive.

Fortunately the sustainability movement had been growing steadily stronger around the world. International treaties were passed. In the US, many states, particularly those on the West Coast, passed law after law to support renewable energy and reduce the use of fossil fuels. Industry took a lead with many clever new carbon-free products: plastic substitutes, new types of packaging, organic clothing, and much more. Climate activists supported green business by buying green homes and electric cars. As happy customers they influenced neighbors to buy green which in turn created more inventions. Cities like Lake Oswego showed the world that a carbon-free life was full of advantages.

Finally a clear majority of Americans were ready to act. They were worn down and tired of fear and invective. After years of inattention and denial, they listened to scientific and religious leaders, and in 2040 the President signed a bill banning all fossil fuels. Lake Oswego and other western cities had been fossil free years before the ban, but other places were not as well prepared.

Renate thought fondly of her own childhood in Lake Oswego. Sustainability was part of every curriculum at school. In social studies there was a unit on "how we will adapt" that helped students to understand the changing environment and the needed solutions. School teams worked on implementing new ideas for solar energy, gardens, and ways to get around. It was student groups that pushed for the new bike lanes and training on electric transportation. Families and neighbors supported each other and competed to win prizes and recognition for their efforts. Even during the dark years, students felt steadied and confident that their town was doing the right thing.

After the ban, many Lake Oswego and other West coast students joined the "climate corps" and travelled to other cities to help them make the transition. Renate went to Tulsa, Oklahoma. At first she was reluctant to travel there. Oklahoma suffered from a triple threat: earthquakes, heat surges and tornados. Her mother worried that it would be

too dangerous. Renate remembered from her “history of climate denial” unit in high school, that several of the most famous climate deniers came from Oklahoma.

In Tulsa, she was stationed near the old Woody Guthrie museum, and her job was to go door to door passing out sustainability packets explaining how people could use electricity for transit, and replace carbon-based products. She became very attached to the people she worked with and found them to be brave and uncomplaining. Woody Guthrie became a model again, and singing groups sprung up to remind people about how they survived the dust bowl over a hundred years before. She remembered the bewilderment among some people as they were introduced to new concepts, and she recalled one elderly woman who asked tremulously “will this stop the heat and the storms?”

Renate felt a familiar sense of frustration. “Why did people wait so long?” She asked herself for the 1000th time. She remembered her grandmother who was involved as early as 2016. Her grandmother had been part of a sustainability group and was always going to meetings and speaking at the city council.

Renate remembered being around 10 years old, sitting on her grandmother’s lap and asking, “What made you start doing all that sustainability stuff? Why were you so smart”? Her grandmother had looked thoughtful. “I was really looking for friendship,” she said. “When I arrived in Lake Oswego I didn’t know anyone and I was lonely. I joined the sustainability group to meet people. They were all really nice, and that’s how I got started. Then I started paying attention, and I realized oh my, this really could get dangerous!”

“You mean you got started by accident”? Renate had asked. “A lucky accident” her grandmother had agreed. “I just wanted to be happy. I wasn’t smarter than anyone. But I learned, and then I got busy”.

“My grandmother found friendship. She wanted to be happy,” Renate murmured to herself. Renate felt a strange feeling well up and she wondered for the first time about happiness. “Pay attention” she whispered out loud. She must have picked up that phrase from her grandmother since she used it often. She thought it meant paying attention to danger—a concept to teach her students. But the climate was improving. Images of teachers, lawmakers, solar installers and electric car salespeople crowded into Renate’s mind. She thought about people singing Woody Guthrie songs for courage and all those who were involved in planting greenery around the world and she felt a sense of wonder as she imagined them all unconsciously connected and working together in a massive effort. Renate felt glad to be alive, and glad she was part of it. Maybe she didn’t need to worry so constantly and could pay attention to what would make her happy. What an interesting thought.

Renate felt the hyper loop slow down and soon she was outside of Union Station in Portland. She walked quickly to catch the light rail train to Lake Oswego. Excitement seized her. “Why did I stay away for so long?” she wondered. Maybe she had been

scared that if she came back she would never want to leave again. She immediately felt the warmth and optimism of Oregonians. People on the light rail smiled at her as she walked to her seat. As the train picked up speed and rolled through downtown Portland, she saw crowds of people outside walking and biking. The streets were vibrant with food carts and small stores.

The 2040 ban on fossil fuels kept CO₂ from rising higher but didn't reduce the existing danger. A worldwide focus on absorbing and reducing atmospheric CO₂ began. A commission made up of leading scientists looked at the research and announced what was necessary: more plants and healthier soil to absorb and bring down atmospheric CO₂.

The world turned to a frenzy of organic planting and soil improvement. Pesticides were eliminated. It was green everywhere. New techniques were developed that allowed plants to thrive in tiny glass pots that could be suspended over buildings. Portland had taken to these techniques with gusto. As Renate craned her neck to look, she saw that the dense buildings of the city were covered with lush green carpets of plants. Many were sprinkled with bright colorful flowers.

On the south side of town, as the train passed by the Willamette River, many of the bike riders on the nearby path waved to those on the train. Renate gasped with excitement. "Almost home!" After getting out at the foothills station in Lake Oswego she ran to one of the white driverless, electric "bubble cars". Soon she was bobbing up the magnetic strip on Country Club road and then into the trees of the Waluga woods. Her heart beating fast, she bounded up and opened the door of her childhood home. Her mother saw her first, and gave a shout. Her brother, cousins, nieces, and nephews, were all there to see her and crowded around for hugs.

After dinner, Renate sat on the floor, leaning against her father's knee and listening to family chatter. Her cousin Margaret came over to her. "What are you going to do when you graduate?" she asked. The room grew quiet, and all of a sudden Renate knew what she wanted. She wanted to be surrounded by love and family. "I'm coming home to live," She said. "I want to teach right here in Lake Oswego."

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