

## **A Vegan Tomorrow**

*By Valerie Ilustre*

The class was restless. It was fifteen minutes to the last period bell. A few students were still typing, the rest had uploaded their exam papers and were consulting wristphones or putting on I-glasses; one or two of the bolder were already muttering into the wireless drone-phones that hovered between ear and mouth in colorful shapes of butterflies, baseballs, birds or stars.

Mr. Ven stood and called for the last papers. Wind-down continued as students stuffed backpacks, but the clatter abruptly ceased as Ven spoke louder:

“Good job on those exams! I didn’t get this kind of instantaneous result when I was your age (a repressed groan rippled through the class)but I can tell you by a glance at my screen that you all passed(cheering from students),although some passed more than others (open groaning).”

“What do you mean, some passed more?” asked Shaun, the outstandingly literal member of the class. “Isn’t pass an absolute term?” This evoked the usual affectionate laughter.

Mr. Ven projected the homework on the right-hand wall in huge graffiti script that made the students work to read it. Dominique was the best at this—could read upside down, sideways and any font you could name—and was now announcing to the class:

“It says: Write a thousand words about what it would feel like to have lived in this community 35 years ago. What would have been the same? What would have been different? What would you love or detest about the past Lake Oswego?”

“Ugh, people drove gasoline vehicles—stinky!” shouted Arnette.

“They were destroying the atmosphere weren’t they, with that crap?” This from Marc Sirgani who rarely censored his thoughts.

Venn frowned to hide a smile. “You have a better vocabulary than that, Marc, but yes, it was a perilous time.”

When the bell rang the students trooping out of the study-dome (20 contiguous triangular classrooms around a central auditorium, solar lit and heated, built of sustainable materials and surrounded by student-maintained gardens) were still talking about what they wanted to write.

Melle and Janon decided quickly to head for Burgerville for a bite while they worked on homework. In fact, if they could finish it on their tablets right away they could spend the rest of the evening ‘boarding at the town’s central dish at 7th and A streets. It was a good bet you’d see a lot of Lake Oswego High School at the food joint any afternoon, even if they were only grabbing a snack in the drive-through lanes. Melle and Janon gave their orders and found a spot near the solar windows.

Melle opened her tablet and started typing—she couldn’t very well use the voice software amid the clamor at Burgerville.

“I’m going to write about what was really bad 35 years ago,” she stated firmly. “I know there were good things about the past, but most of those still exist, thanks to the Lake Oswego Conservancy that goes bananas when developers try to destroy old buildings and parks and

things. I want to get the other kids to see how stuff we take for granted now was really controversial back then. It's like people don't seem to remember when Portland had some of the worst pollution days in the whole country. Now our air is among the best anywhere, with no toxic days at all. But getting that done was so hard when businesses were saying they couldn't provide jobs if agencies didn't waive or reduce the air quality laws. There were big fights and it took a whole decade, my mom says, before corporations took responsibility for retooling to prevent pollution."

"Don't you think Ven's going to be mad if we criticize that era too much? After all, he was young in the 20-teens and 20-twenties." Janon was always cautious about offending his teachers.

Melle shrugged. "I know he likes to pretend to be nostalgic for war and cars and for when people were imprisoned for taking drugs, but don't you think he's just playing devil's advocate, trying to generate a heated discussion? He always does that, like the time he said Macbeth was actually a good guy, remember?"

"Yeah, he knows no one wants to go back to the bad old days. I mean, what about in junior high when they had that big presentation in all the high schools nationwide where they told us we'd be the first generation that would probably all live to 100 years old. I mean, who'd want to be that old and be in horrible health from all the stuff they used to do? My dad said the most upscale communities always are at the forefront of healthy living and then less advantaged communities take awhile before they demand the same new stuff."

When their numbers were called Janon jumped up to get their trays. He sat down and tore into his food like he'd never been fed before; Melle was more leisurely about eating her meal.

She finally shut down the tablet.

"What are you going to write about, Jan?"

Jan wiped his mouth and looked up from his now-almost-empty tray.

"I'm going to write about how everybody ate meat!"

Melle shuddered, "Ewww....you're going to make me sick. Can you imagine?"

"Yep," Jan nodded, "I'm going to let the kids know their parents were munching away on dead cow and delicious pork belly!" He popped the last scrap of Portobello Supreme in his mouth and made a rude sound as he sucked the dregs of his coconut-milk shake through a straw. "But I'll end positive, because you probably didn't know that Lake Oswego was one of the first communities in the U.S. whose businesses voluntarily switched over to non-animal products to save its people's health and stave off climate change. We got some kind of award and a bunch of cities copied us."

"Thank god for that," Melle sighed, "or you and I would be dead or mutated." They gathered up their trash to put in the recycle bins.

"You are mutated," kidded Jan. Melle play-punched him and they went out laughing.

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