

Going Backwards

By Amanda Cain-Mailly

I am writing this document for many reasons. I have long thought of doing this but did not have the motivation until today. Earlier I visited Sam's newest dig, where a library was found. All the books were molded and rotting, but a few survived; they were histories, of times long ago and far away.

Sam says that without such books, we would have no connections to the past. So here I am writing on pieces of bark late into the night, using a dull knife to carve the words. This knife is my only one I have; I found it while scavenging the shore one morning awhile back. I use it for everything, from cutting food, to writing. I live in a sort of tent with my family. It is a small shelter which you can not stand up in; the floor is the mossy ground on which we sleep. There are a few windows which allow the sunlight in, but they are small and few because glass is so scarce and precious, and without it the bugs would become our uninvited guests. Plus they are hard to make. All the homes are made from debris and brush, held together by gravity, thus a window is a hole that could change the stability of the house. It is odd to look around and see our dwellings of different jagged shapes of multicolors running across the edge of the woods. The other side is the ocean far away at low tide but close at high. But I should start from the beginning.

Scientists had been going on about global warming for so long, most stopped listening, which was the final straw in the long string of mistakes committed by our kind against old and dispassionate Mother Nature. Humans continued to pollute, global warming continued, the glaciers started melting. All of which we knew would happen, but we never realized how fast it would occur. By the time scientists noticed the melting, enough ice was gone to allow the process to increase at an alarming rate. What most thought would take decades occurred in a matter of years. Coastal cities all over the globe vanished with a blink of an eye. Then those cities further in-land, by the time the glaciers had completely melted, also disappeared as all technology had been swept away by the massive tides, the refugees, and the chaos. People, homes, years worth of work, were all gone almost overnight. The isolated land masses left held the small groups which made up the entire population of the human race. So they made crude boats and followed their curiosity to see what was left of the world. After years of living off rain water and uncooked fish they had finally traveled the world, collecting all human life; no one was rejected from the patchwork society. Once they had shared as much knowledge as deemed useful, they agreed to attempt life on land, but strong divisions occurred over where to go. Some places were too dangerous, others too barren, but many people longed for drastically differing environments. So the community broke up, dividing boats, food, and the rest of the supplies amongst the groups, and they set off in different directions. After years of surviving on the merciless ocean, land seemed like a wonderfully easy change of environment and way of life. No one knew what dangers and hardships they were up against.

My group settled on what we thought was part of North America. Getting to shore was easy, increasing our hope of an easier way of life, which was shattered after taking a good look around. Any homes still standing had been taken over by nature and her favored species. We would have to start from scratch if we wanted to remain here. Before we could even make such a decision, a storm raised—a ghastly evil storm with biting wind and fierce rain. This made the decision for many of our group. After spending the length of the storm huddled together under our boats, teeth chattering and stomachs grumbling, they decided to find somewhere else to live. So we divided our supplies and watched with

broken hearts as they rowed off, out beyond our sight without waving good bye. They thought us fools for remaining here, but we did anyway. As they vanished, they took most of our hope with them.

The next two years were spent in methodical back-breaking, mind-numbing work for survival. Each morning we would eat what was left of the food supply of the day before. This was buried in plastic/metal/ cloth containers under where we slept in hopes of keeping it from the animals. Then we would explore the woods, looking for anything, from wild berries to long abandoned items from a world that no longer existed. Whatever was found was put into a storage area. This was made of a rustic fence of sticks with a thin cloth cover that was guarded by a few members of our society who were unable to scavenge. They were armed with whatever weapons we had and protected the food from the beasts.

When the tide went down, we would collect everything that had washed up. We would bring as much stuff as we could carry up to the storage area, drop the items and run back to search for more. Once this was completed (or the tide started taking back the treasures we had not been able to snatch up) we would sort through our finds. Different piles would be made; different items would be taken and used in odd ways. By then the fishers would be back. They caught fish using anything they had. The catch varied daily but it was our main food source. The small extra bits of wood sometimes would be used to create a small fire; however in the first few years we found very few of them. But when we did, we would be able to cook the meat. Our society feared wasting natural resources, fearing that even chopping down trees would send us back down the road that led us here in the first place. When ever someone snapped off a tree limb or pulled up a wild plant, they would be lectured for hours about the past.

A lot of what they say I do not remember, however I do remember one of the main points in these lectures: the wasting. I remember throwing out extra food; toys that broke went into the dumpster; all those things we used to have, that we would buy in one minute and throw away the next. But that is the very, very past; now I am in camp. When it rained, we would try to keep as much stuff dry as possible. Any container which could hold water would be placed out and everyone would huddle in the shelters hoping the storm would end. To break up the day, we would quickly dart out to look for food. More often then not we would come back empty-handed. And thus we survived.

I was only ten when the water rose; around fifteen I began to except my community's meager existence. Our original group had been continuing to shrink; some left in search of a better land, and others wandered into the woods and never came back. At night a family might have five, and in the morning only four woke up. Sometimes they died of disease or hunger; others committed suicide. Any bodies found were buried in a plot of land far from our community near the shore line. There were no grave stones or other identifying markers; we not only did not have the supplies and time to make them but, this also because there were bodies of unknown people that would wash up on shore with no identification. We had decided from the beginning to bury the dead together, but to not make monuments for those we knew because so many remains were still out there and would never have a marker saying they had once walked the earth. We had no medication, no way to treat diseases, causing our graveyard to expand drastically.

But I began to accept it, began to stop wasting my energy to find cures and ways to improve life. Then one day, while I was trying to clean some clothing that had washed up on shore, a wood gatherer came running into camp looking for me. She was a little girl, scrawny like the rest of us, but still had a sparkle of hope in her eyes while the rest of us held dead remorseful gazes. She came to me screaming that she had found someone. "A man, a doctor, he is looking for YOU; he asked for you by name; he even described what you looked like! Come quick." And off she ran.

Having no choice, I followed her across the camps, on worn-down paths of dirt and sand, past houses, tents, past abandoned children too young to work, whose parents were out gathering for their survival, as they ran and screamed and played in the safety of their homes. Past the few trees which grew in our settlement, the only shade-giver on this patch of sun-baked earth. As we walked into the woods, the ground under my feet changed to sharp pine needles and cool moss. It still amazed me, a girl born in a treeless city, that such lush trees and plants would live in such an environment. Lost in thought, I followed the girl to a clearing where an old weather-beaten man sat, watching me.

“Hello, Sara. I have been looking and waiting for you. And you—I need your help,” he addressed me with a smile. His white hair was a mess reaching down past his shoulders; his clothes so dirty, it was hard to determine what was clothing. He smelled repulsive and scared me but I was also drawn to him. How did he know who I was? A million questions came to mind but I was too frightened to speak. Luckily I did not have to, for he started talking again, first at a slow measured pace, but the more he spoke the faster the words came out. His eyes lost focus and it became hard to tell where one word ended and another started. So when he finished and refocused his attention on me, I was red with embarrassment for missing nearly everything he had said. Annoyed, he stood up turned his back to me and walked away with brisk agitated steps. Calling over his shoulder for us to follow him, we walked in silence for the entire day without resting.

Poor Sara could not keep up, and I had to carry the little wood-gatherer. As the sun set, we came out of the woods to an area I had never seen before. I doubted anyone from our community had ever traveled this far inland. When he moved to the side, what I saw stopped me in my tracks. It was like something I had seen long ago in a book. It was a tall wooden structure with a wheel spinning water. The stream the wheel was in was fast moving and narrow but very deep. I stood with my mouth open, staring. The old man’s laughter startled me back into reality.

“This is what I was telling you about, Sara. Now you believe me! This water mill actually works. Come I will show you. Oh by the way, my name is Sam,” he said with a smile walking his agitated way toward a small bridge of what looked like rotting wood and sticks. I followed him across and around to the back of the mill. I studied the building as I walked. It looked like he had piled entire trees on top of each other and cut small openings into them. The edges showed rough cuts, like they were made by sharp stones. Around the corner, I gasped. Behind this one-story wooden marvel was a farm—rows and rows of crops surrounded by a fence. The fence itself was made of thick branches spread out, sticking straight up from the ground with thinner branches attached horizontally in between them, all held in place by plant roots used as rope. At the far end I could barely make out another structure; I asked him what it was. He replied it was his storage shed and his temporary animal pen. He went on to explain how the wild animals would get into his garden and how he would try to catch them. If he succeeded, he would keep it for a few days hoping to lure another member of the same species in order to breed them, and create a longer lasting meat supply. However he had not had such luck so far; every animal he had caught he had killed. He lived off the meat for as long as possible; to keep it from rotting, he would put it into a cloth bag attached to some root rope and place it into the river. This would keep it safe from predators, and also keep it cool, expanding the storage time. He explained how he would only cut off a little piece and cook it over a fire. He had fires every night, which made my jaw drop once again.

When he enquired about my reaction, I explained how the community vowed not to harm Mother Nature’s balance in any way. Thus we did not hunt wild animals daily, and we never cut down trees. We only used the lifeless limbs we found. He shook his head and claimed that was ridiculous. We spent the rest of the quickly fading sunlight collecting food and discussing the environment.

He cooked a single serving for both of us. What he apologized for as a meager meal was more than I had eaten in years. What I ate, I am not sure, but it was good and filling. Sara had fallen asleep but we woke her up, and she ate with us. He was pleased to see us enjoy the food, watching us eat after he had finished his portion.

After we had eaten, he showed us his compost heap and asked us to throw all scrapes, pieces of rotten food, and anything else not pleasant to have around in that area. He used it to fertilize his gardens. Not wanting to leave, I asked him mundane questions, which he answered as Sara played in the dirt beside the wooden building we were now leaning against, talking as the embers burned out of the fire located a few yards away.

He had lived out here for awhile, but most of his answers to personal questions were very vague, and he was very curt. So I decided against such questions and we sat in silence. Sara had fallen asleep in my lap and was not showing signs of waking. Sam smiled and gently picked her up, nodding with his head, signaling me to follow him into the mill. The mill was roughly built on the inside as well as on the out. And on the first glance, my hopes of a civilized building dropped. He had put Sara down gently, shut the door (by pulling the large slab of wood over the entrance) and walked to the other end of the small building. There he bent down and lifted up a section of the floor, and smiling as he watched my reaction. Then he retrieved Sara and descended down the steps in the ground. I followed him into a dark chamber. Then he lit a candle cradled in a bowl like a thing made of broken pieces of glass, which shattered the room with scattered colors of light. The room was larger than the mill and a lot more civilized. From the threadbare carpet to the table and makeshift chairs to the bookshelf overflowing with old paperbacks. The walls were earth along, and there were end tables and other furniture.

"Sorry for the mess," Sam said, jolting me from my thoughts. "I know it really isn't much of a house but I call it home. "Oh no, it... it is wonderful," I gasped in amazement.

"How about a tour?"

So he started at the bookcase and pointed out different things, then he returned to the center of the room, took the candle out of its holder, and walked back to the stairs. He walked to the side of them and into a small opening; once through I realized I was in a bedroom. Three old lumpy mattresses balanced on heaps of dirt and covered with old worn blankets were the beds. My eyes watered at the sight of them, oh how I longed to sleep on something other than the moss that thrives out in the tent. Behind the farthest bed, Sam pulled out another candle and lit it. "I keep all my valuable stuff in here. Come look, behind this bed I have a large hole full of candles. However I use them sparingly. For I doubt such things will be available to the general public for a long time." His last remark was made in a sly way, but his eyes betrayed his carefree remark. "Now, I know these beds look very inviting but we still have some work to do. Please bring Sara in here, and tuck her into that bed. I will go upstairs and close the passage, just in case any visitors make it past the main door. Everything up there can be replaced; everything worth protecting is down here. Please remember that and act accordingly. Goodnight; I have a few more things to do, then I will also turn in" he said, and walked out of the room. After moving Sara and getting into bed, I thought I would lie awake until he came back, but as soon as my head hit the makeshift pillow, I was out.

The next morning upon waking I helped Sam with his morning chores and ate a small but wonderful breakfast before he decided it was time for us to leave. Sam carried Sara and I walked behind him talking all the way. He asked me to keep the underground room secret but to tell the others all about the rest. He said he would meet me at the spot he originally met me, which was also where he would leave us, in two days time. "I hope that others will be with you, I would be glad to form a community and be amongst people again," he said, turning to look at me with eyes full of loneliness. "Of course,"

he said, turning back to concentrate on the tricky footing of the unlevelled ground full of brush, "no one has to come if they don't want to. If people, including you, prefer to live the way you are, then I am fine with that. However I would love to see the run-down mill turned into the center of a town. You know, with other buildings, not just houses, but storage areas, fenced-in animals, streets, even packed dirt streets," he said with a sigh and a sad smile as he sat down to rest for a minute. "Call me an old fool, but I wish not for the past we once knew, but for the one centuries ago, living off the land; not just surviving, but without all the luxuries which led us to harm our wonderful world." He finished with a far away look in his eyes, then he returned his gaze to me. "Please wait for me, do not venture out to the mill alone, it might not seem like I am following a certain path, but I am. If you were to wander in the wrong direction..." he said with a serious look before he started walking again. The rest of the trip was spent in silence, regretting every step farther from the mill but somehow anticipating the coast with all the wreckage and people I had grown up with.

Now it is two years after that day, looking back on the journal I had started at the beach but put aside until now. Before this point, I had not had time, for there is always much to be done around Mill Village. Now we have a school, a large farm (with few animals) and many semi permanent structures. All of the buildings are at least half stone with roofs of sticks and leaves. Most of the houses are a third of the way underground, with small holes in between the rocks for light and air. For doors, different people have created different things; some have attached pieces of wood together using vines to hold them in place. Others use large pieces of plastic that have washed up on shore. Inside each house there are make-shift tables, with the inhabitants' few personal belongings on them; beds made of what ever the person preferred, from dry grass, old crunchy leaves, moss from the original camp, or a million other things. Every home has a floor made of compacted earth; the walls were also bare earth until ground levels, where the stones began. In different places these homes have small nooks in them, for different reasons. Each house is one large room made of the same materials, but each is personalized. Each door faced the road, of packed earth. The houses line the sides with other roads branching off of the main one, which leads the way to more houses, the farm, and other areas. There is a central fireplace in the middle of the village where all the roads meet, and it is where food is cooked. Beside this is a large half-built building which will be the cafeteria; human waste is taken across the river, about a ten minute walk down the clearly marked path to a hole that had been dug.

In the spring this area is dug up along with the soil we planted in the last year, and we mix the two for more fertile soil. It sounds gross but it really is not, and everyone has fun mixing and moving the dirt. From kids making mud pies to adults building piles and running into them, all in all it is like a large celebration. And to think that when I was a child, fun was created through bought toys made of the materials that ruined things and brought us to this other life. Now we have fun with things that do not alter or harm the world around us, and I think we have more fun this way than we did in the past.

Near the edge of the river on the mill side is a small garden with a makeshift fence to ward off animals. They are not as much of a threat as they once were, but we would rather not risk our food. Around the garden and our farm area we have dug holes, then covered them up with some light brush, hoping to not only discourage other animals from eating our supplies, but also to capture new animals if possible.

Jobs are still divided; some people follow the cleared path to the ocean where they stay for several days living off food they brought from Mill Village, while collecting whatever washes up on shore. Then they carry everything back. If there is a lot, there is a large piece of thick plastic that washed up once and that can be used to pull the large amount, and they bring it back out with them on their next trip. While at the shore they also repair the larger tent which they stay in. These trips are not frequent, for there has to be enough food; they can only take enough from the warehouse without people going hungry at the Mill. The finds are placed out in the open; anything that can be used immediately is.

The rest is stored in an unsteady shed toward the far end of the village. Other people work in the garden, care for the animals, collect wood and brush, or helping build and fix the villages structures. Everyone works, alternating jobs as needed; everyone helps the village survive.

The mill is the main source of power, making the flour for bread. The only other power source is the fire, which we use to cook, dry our washed clothes, boil our water, and lots of other things. Sam says that most of the large animals are afraid of the noise the mill makes, but for whatever reason they are gone.

This is how our 'advanced' species now lives on this continent. We have no word from any others of the original group, and so I can not write on behalf of the entire human race. However I wish to remind generations to come that our world needs to be respected to prevent history from reoccurring.

Afterword

My aunt Annie told me about this writing assignment. I used information I had learned about the early industrial revolution and what the effects are of global warming, which I was taught about in school in history and in science.

I had done a huge project on acid rain and had researched how many of the pollutants damaging the environment began being used during the Industrial Revolution. From looking at our society and the past, I realize that people do not easily change. Looking at predicted outcomes of global warming, one can infer that the humane race will have to readapt to earlier ways of living, because I doubt we would be able to progress in technology without harming the world even more. It might be possible, but we are too far away from that half-planned futuristic technology, and global warming is progressing a lot faster.

All in all, that is why I believe the future will repeat the past instead of moving further.