

# Broken Man

## By Emily Allen

Albert was no more than a broken man. Sitting by the roadside, he laced his fingers, strained his hands. He promised himself he'd never be there again, racing with time itself for his sanity's sake. But like most men, he had reached the fateful day when his strength was simply no longer adequate, his speech no longer perfect, his pace no longer accelerated. He pulled out his best friend in the form of a friendly cowboy standing proudly in his cardboard world. A brand new box. He pulled one out and lit a match, watching the embers die out slowly on the side of the road.

The cars rushed by in perfect succession; they were the homes-away-from-home, the temporary domiciles of the successful and the lost. Those who struggled to work their way through an endless depression of the spirit, and those that chose never to begin the fight. Those who proudly displayed their political weaknesses on their bumpers, and those that refused to do so because of sheer laziness. The night, unlike a shroud to which it is often compared, was a gas mask against a smoggy sky, a vortex of cool air breathing life into that stifling July. It was the age of foolishness.

Heaving his familiar sigh, Albert rose to his feet and brushed back his salt-and-pepper hair with both hands, cradling his tired head. Cars drove by, whistling past a forgotten life.

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"Now kids," Mr. Newman echoed throughout the auditorium, "It's important to remember that when you get a ride to school, you are using up precious oil drilled from someone else's space. It could be Saudi Arabia, it could be Alaska, but it's not yours. And one day, we'll run out."

Little black eyes darted about the space, black gold searching for familiar and comforting reassurance. That black gold would never run out.

"Remember," he continued, "that each drop we use brings us closer to another Dark Age."

Applause was polite and controlled. Invisible strings pulled each child from his seat and filed him in a neat line, perfectly straight. One boy, seemingly calm, tapped his shoes and made a clear and steady click that resonated into the hallway. He pulled on his light blue tie, centering himself around its swirling patterns.

The prep school was just a filler, a mere pastime between meetings. Looking about slowly, Al wondered what to do for the next 20 minutes, during which he was in transition until the mayor arrived. Al fished deep beneath his auburn hair for the answer.

"Excuse me, sir."

A voice that resonated throughout the hall and flowed like red wine called Al from the podium. The mouth smiled kindly, yet the eyes strained to find the reason in Al's young face, pondering the lost cause that he was.

"Richard Walker."

"Charmed."

"Principal," the man began with particular nonchalance, "of Jefferson Prep."

"Good afternoon, sir. Did you enjoy the speech?"

"Well, yes, I did," he replied, twisting his eyebrows trying to find an appropriate expression. The

man's voice, AI found, was imperfect; his gentle tone was offset by bumps and inconsistencies. Perhaps from some incurable disease, or perhaps from a sickness long since passed. The changes—the rough spots in the stream—left AI disconcerted.

"Mr. Newman, I'd like to discuss a few things with you."

AI jumped at the opportunity. "For example, how your school could cut down on air conditioning and use solar energy? Or perhaps how you could contribute to our cause?"

Walker's kind lips pursed in response. "You put the fear of God in my boys, Mr. Newman."

"Oh, really."

It took a few hours for AI to remember the comment. A few seconds later, the scientist in the team, Amrita had pulled his arm with a terribly urgent microphone versus bow tie problem, and any thought of the drops of black gold, young minds, or Mr. Walker drifted so far into his memory that they were scarcely able to be retrieved that evening.

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In his suite at the Park Plaza Hotel, Mr. Newman, a successful efficient energy lobbyist, took to his bed early to prepare a speech. He read aloud, inflecting on the flamboyant turns of phrase, pausing for effect, and breathing at the correct intervals so as to give his audience of pillows, chairs, and windows the show they had waited for. He took a long drag on his cigarette and faced his papers with determination.

"Twenty years from now in Cambridge, the John Harvard statue will be under water. Global warming is upon us, threatening to attack at any moment. We must not forget our commitment to saving energy for posterity, for while we may be young, there is an even younger generation that needs to be prepared. Prepared to take our place in the front lines to combat gross overuse of foreign oil, to combat pollution, and to combat the degeneration of the planet."

Degeneration. Perfect. Succinct, pressing, shows the need for action.

"Action is imperative. With our buses using up ton upon ton of gasoline and utility vehicles killing all competition for energy consumption, we need to cut down on the use of these harmful vessels of destruction. We need to remember that air conditioners are not pleasant, but instead are Trojan horses, silently releasing carbon into our atmosphere and chewing up unimaginable sums of energy."

Trojan horse. Classical allusion. Good for the Harvard students. Vessels of destruction. Also a metaphor for American youth. Breathe in, inhale it, take it in.

And Mr. Newman sat in disgust in the hotel suite, sipping tap water like it was white wine, wishing for a sort of moral salvation of the younger generation.

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"In conclusion," Mr. Newman was interrupted by energetic applause.

"In conclusion, we have no choice but to comply with the UN goals for energy. Ethanol is new, effective, and, best of all, will give us the energy we need to survive yet another day, another year, another lifetime!"

Students rushed the stage, asking questions about the production of ethanol like there was no tomorrow. Was ethanol bad for the environment? Was the production more costly than that of benzene? Their fears were assuaged; the plan was in motion. America, and the rest of the world would be safe.

"Mr. Newman. Al Newman!"

Al recognized a face in the crowd, and the same voice that had haunted him the day before.

"Ah, Mr. Walker! How glad I am to see you here, of all places!"

"We still have some things to discuss."

"Here: we'll take a walk."

The two men stepped outside, feeling the full force of the heat punishing them for the air-conditioned building. A boy, not much younger than Al, rushed behind the two men, dragging his bag and swinging it about his broad shoulders. Al whipped out a cigarette, rolling it between his fingers and then lighting it carefully, he slowed his pace.

"Damn these lecture halls," Al began, "If they could only get fans instead of the A.C., I'd actually be proud of my Harvard sponsorship."

"You know, Mr. Newman, it would be unbearable without the air. We need it, and so do the students."

"Students, eh?" Al spun around to confront the boy, "Young man, do you know what air conditioning does to the environment?"

"Sir, I think it uses up a lot of energy, and then it also emits CFCs. They cause global warming."

"Exactly, young man."

"However, Mr. Newman," the old man said, "It is not wise to tell an old woman that her favorite appliance is causing global warming."

He let out a light chuckle between his impeccable teeth.

"My wife, Camille, refuses to turn ours off in the heat of the summer. I can sympathize, Mr. Newman. I think you can, too."

Al laughed as well, but continued, "I can hold back the temptation, Professor. I drink a tall glass of water and sit in the basement of my apartment. Just doing my part."

"Newman," the old man stood still mid-sidewalk, "we can't all turn water into wine. I don't think you really can either."

"But I can try. And I am. That's what matters. Wouldn't you say that I'm doing my part for the Lord, and for the good of America?"

Al emphasized his last bit, making the youth raise his eyes in shock.

"Mr. Newman, I will tolerate your ethanol. I will listen to your jib-jab on the subject of air conditioning, and I will even contain my regret for your limited insight, but I will not, under any circumstances, allow you to use the name of the Lord in support of your theory."

The speech was rough, but the man stayed calm.

"Come on, James. You can come back to school now. I just wanted you to see a slice of the future."

The two climbed into a black Lincoln, and Al swore he heard the gentle roar of the ignition as they pulled away.

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Why wouldn't a person, in their right mind, support ethanol? Energy solutions from far and wide have

tried to do what ethanol does, and they have failed one by one. You can make it with corn and other biomass. That's good for our farmers. America's bread basket can return to work in full force. No longer do we solely rely on processed food, for it is the common man that will create our fuel, our energy, the ferocious power of our vehicles.

Mix it with gasoline, make E10. Baby steps. Still, not good enough. Change it all. We're apt to run out. There's no black gold any more. It's gone from Alaska, Saudi Arabia, the Arctic. Those farmers are working to keep the country running. Ford's automobiles and the big industries all rely on Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas.

And if it scares them? Can't. We're apt to run out. Change is the key. Through change, stability.

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Letter after letter came. How can we change? Teachers from Massachusetts to California and from Oregon to Florida sent word of school programs.

"Dear Mr. Newman, thank you for your support. I've just bought a hybrid car! We will be able to drive to work knowing that we've done our part. Happy Holidays, Nancy Whitman."

Al smiled broadly at the letters.

*"Al Newman, we are so pleased to hear about your work. Ethanol is the best technology out there today. I am a scientist at Windmill University in Maryland, and we all believe that using starch and cellulose to power our cars will be efficient and helpful to the environment.*

*Thank goodness for your help with the new legislature. The Farm Production and Fuels Act has made it possible for relatives of mine to reopen their farm. It's been years since they've worked because my cousin has skin diseases from the sun and the warming is bad for crops. They are getting back now though, slowly.*

*Thank You, Howard Becking, PhD."*

Al nodded slowly, basking in the appreciation he had received for the Farm Production and Fuels Association he had created from Boston. It had been a few years since his last speech, yet his frequent trips to congress and notes flown first-class to Washington had paid off. He opened another letter.

*"Dear Sir, I have only just heard of the FPFA's creation, and I am sure you have made great progress. We will fix the Earth's problems soon enough. However, I am not so sure we are impervious to the needs of human society as it stands today.*

*As Mr. Walker said that day I met you, we can't go on without our air conditioners, our gas stoves, and our generators. We need these things to keep going. We will slow our rate of production in industry and in the intellectual world if we try to implement these new strategies. We will lose so much. We can not change, there is too much at stake.*

*Signed, James Harrington*

*P.S. Ethanol production releases carbon dioxide. Maybe you should consider that in your plan to protect the environment."*

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The bitter end sent Al into a silent shock.

Sir. The respectful term was shot back in his face. The boy was no more than sixteen. He was wrong and there was no other explanation. He could not be right. Yet something in the careful placement of his words and the sincerity of his work had left Al confused, even frightened.

"We can live without air conditioning in here, right Amrita?" Al called across the room.

Amrita tossed her black hair back and laughed, "Hell, no! We can campaign, Al, but there's no way we're giving up this baby!" Her bright eyes shone with concern, despite her laughter.

Al let a strained laugh past his teeth. The soft breeze puffed sweetly at the nape of Al's neck, as if to say that it would never go away, never change. It would always be this way. Never run out.

"Amrita, am I a hypocrite?"

"Just because of the air conditioning? No, Al, I think that's justified. You know why?"

"Why?"

The young woman sat on the edge of his desk. "Al, I may not be as experienced as you, but I know what we're doing is right. Ethanol is helping America in more ways than anyone could imagine a few years ago. We're making progress, and even if you think we can't change, your effort is proving that we can to any town that we visit. So we may not have the support of Washington all the time. So we can't always know what's going to happen next. But we can try. It may be difficult sometimes, or scary, but we try.

"You know, when I was little, all I could think about was how horrible this was, and how it needed to be corrected."

Al squeezed out a bit of sarcasm. "Some third grader."

"Very funny. Anyway, it wasn't that our hopelessness as a society was frightening; it was that I thought we were being stupid, and I wanted that to stop. There are things that scare everyone, no matter how strong they are. Al, you don't have to think that we are angels. We can not be perfect; everyone is afraid of something."

"Are you accusing me of less than an immaculate record?"

Amrita sighed. "Don't give me that bull. Just remember that the people you're talking to aren't stupid," she said convincingly, then, turning on her heel, "even if they do drive SUVs."

She cracked a sly smile and returned to work as usual.

"By the way, Mr. Newman?"

"Amrita?"

"Don't light up outside the lecture hall next time."

"Oh, yeah."

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"Mr. President, Congress, and American people," Al began, "I have come today to address a letter I received. Written by a 16 year-old boy, one would assume that it was disgustingly misinformed. We are often very critical of our youth. Yet consider the time when they are no longer 'youth.' When we are the elderly, and they are in charge of our vast empires."

Al stopped, marking his paper. One day before the speech was to be delivered, and nothing could be less perfect, more flawed, than the single sheet of paper he had before him. Ethanol was suddenly the least important thing on his mind. The gangly youth was all that he could think on, and the elusive comments he had sent. The papers, folded clumsily in a file cabinet, sat silent and daring like the shrouded heart of one long dead, awaiting the time at which they would resurface triumphant.

"Amrita, do you ever think about the bad things?" he asked, slowly raising his body from the recumbent position he held in his easy chair, "I mean, the horrible truths of life, the stuff they preach about."

"Sure," she replied, "I think about dying, and I realize how much I care about my own life, too. No matter how much charity I do, I can still turn around and save myself before a village in Africa. You're only human, Al."

"Yeah. Only human."

Amrita flipped her hair over her shoulder and went back to working on the next speech. She carefully placed words, replacing and fixing mistakes. Over and over again, changes were made thousands of times to make the perfect wording. She knew it would never be perfect.

Al picked up the phone. "Press Corps please. Mr. Newman. I'd like to cancel my speech. Yes. No, it's just that I've found some fundamental imperfections."

"What is this all about?" The girl turned and glared as she spoke. "I thought you had some momentum going!"

"Sometimes," Al sighed, "You have to step away from the truth. It's like the kid said, there are some bad things about our ...perfect plan."

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The bench by the side of the highway was perfect, unlike all else. Let it be, rest as if there were never any problems to be fixed.

They were all young James Harringtons, brilliant minds who just wanted to live, forgetting the future or posterity, forgetting the realities of today. Al was no more than a broken man, a politician past his prime. He looked into the sky, unable to see past the cloud cover that pervaded even the brightest corners of the city. Where there had been parks, there were generators. Where there had been nature reserves, there were oil drilling fields. Where corn fields once languished, now they were failed attempts at ethanol production. Forget it. Don't mention the bitterness with which everything fell apart. Light up that cigarette, and inhale all the sweetness. Let it consume you.

He was nothing more than a broken man. Sitting by the roadside, cars rolling over dreams like garbage, he folded his hands, resigned to what was to come.

Ask A Scientist:

<http://www.newton.dep.anl.gov/newton/askasci/1995/environ/ENV091.HTM>

US Department of Energy:

<http://www.eere.energy.gov/afdc/altfuel/ethanol.html>

## Afterword

One aspect of the future of renewable energy is the politics and the people that instigate them. It is impossible to address the problem of our energy depletion without the cooperation of world governments and the peoples they represent. Al Newman, a lobbyist, represents a man who works for a major ethanol producer. From the beginning of the story, Al seems like a genuine and honest character. Later, it becomes apparent that his plan is idealistic, and also has side effects on the environment. I was interested not only in energy solutions while writing, but the effect that people and politics had on them. I feel that these elements of change are not often addressed, although they are the cornerstone of improvement of our world.

The main theme of the story, however, was the fear that the people of America, if not the world, associate with energy loss and global warming, among other things. As a school student, James Harrington represents a good number of people that do not want to face these problems because they think that there are ways to deal with them here and now. The future is not apparent to them. I would like to think that the story is an analysis of culture rather than a criticism of political views. It is not useful to criticize others, but to guide them. Al, unable to convince many of such people of ethanol's perfection, is eventually shot down by his own reflection on the subject.

Although the attitude of the story is cynical towards the end, ethanol does seem to have its benefits. The U.S. Department of Energy strongly supports the production of ethanol and lists ways in which it can be combined with other substances and used efficiently to begin a continuing process of production and use. Farmers would benefit from ethanol production, too; however, the process does emit carbon dioxide ("Alternative Fuels: Ethanol", U.S. Department of Energy). Obviously, the fact that Al smoked was quite a blatant example of hypocrisy in the government, due to its harmful effects to the body and the environment. Air conditioners of today are also known to emit chlorofluorocarbons or CFCs, which are a contributing factor in global climate change ("Ask A Scientist: Environmental Science Archive").

In finding ways to correct our problems, there are times when we have to stop and realize that there is not only one problem; there are many. I believe that the greatest problem the world has yet to face is the political barrier and social stigma associated with alternate energy, among other things. No matter what problem, there is always powerful opposition.

It is up to every person to see that issues are discussed fully and fairly on an international scale.