

Unwanted Changes

We were on our way to visit our sister Lynn who lived outside the city. Annoyed that I was required to make this trip, even though it was the graduation dinner of our niece Betsy, who had just received a full scholarship to run track at a division one school. Her parents were thrilled and insisted that we come and celebrate a special dinner together. The ride was too short as we were already making our way up her driveway to her funny- looking solar paneled house. Even though these types of houses were becoming quite popular these days, my sister and her husband Gary were some of the first ones to seek out an architect to specially design the house. To my surprise, her grass was shabby and uncut; I'm sure the sheep they hired as makeshift lawn mowers were coming any day now.

Before getting out of the car Luke gave me one of his "you better behave looks" and I just rolled my eyes, wishing I could be anywhere but here. As we made our way into the house we were greeted with the usual hugs and kisses and were immediately ushered into the dining room. Everyone around me was so excited but I was just pissed off, and justifiably so. I had just lost my job as a result of the oil refinery where I worked being shut down. I was so worked up that I did not even make an effort to muster my usual fake smile. Apart from myself, Luke, Lynn, Gary, and of course Betsy, there were Betsy's godparents Mike and Sherry, Betsy's boyfriend Jack who seemed to be at every family occasion that we held, and finally our father, who was the only reason, besides Betsy of course, that I was there. Hoping that the meal would go by silently and we could all just slip away to continue our business as usual, I found my hopes to be in vain as Betsy's godmother began to speak.

"Oh Betsy honey, I am just so proud of you" her voice squealed "We are all so proud of you!"

She smiled at everyone around the table and they all nodded and hummed in agreement.

"Let's make a toast," my brother Luke declared "To Betsy, for how far she has come and the expectations that she continues to surpass."

Six years ago, when Lynn and the rest of her family were living in the city, closer to the rest of our family, Betsy was diagnosed with asthma. Without second thought my sister believed the city to be the culprit, and thought it necessary for her and her family to leave the city in order to attain a "sustainable life." Gosh, if I had a penny for the number of times I had heard that phrase. I still can't forget the way she looked at me when she first announced to me that she was moving. Her tone was accusatory as if my working at an oil refinery was to blame for her daughter's life-threatening asthma. Every child in America has asthma; I wanted to tell her, I didn't appreciate her blaming my success on something inevitable.

Betsy blushed and we all raised our glasses, everyone except me.

“Come on Lizzy, raise your glass” my brother insisted.

“Oh please, go ahead without me; I have to drive so I won’t be drinking tonight.”

“Then just raise your water,” My sister suggested trying hard to conceal the slight annoyance I knew she was feeling.

“It’s bad luck, I would hate to ruin such a perfect occasion with my toast,” I replied.

“Then sweetheart just...”

“No forget it,” My sister cut Sherry off, “everybody raise your glass!”

They politely did as they were asked, and sat down again; the uncomfortable silence began to set in. It didn’t leave. Now it was my sister was turning red, but it wasn’t from the embarrassment of praise.

“Rabbit, what’s the matter?” my father intervened. “You’re putting sour into this sweet occasion.”

“Dad, do you want me to crash the car on the way home?” I asked.

“Oh please Elizabeth just...”

“I lost my job today” I burst out. My brother lowered his head, disappointed that I could not keep my problem to myself.

“Oh Rabbit honey, when did this happen?” my dad asked. I could felt like I wanted to cry.

“Today.”

“Why?” my father asked.

“I don’t know really, maybe it’s because the whole of America is so damn gullible that they listen to everything that the damn tree-lovers have to say.” This outburst caused everyone to look around the room nervously.

“Honestly Elizabeth, just find another job!” My sister was livid.

“Honey your sister is upset,” Her husband tried to mediate.

“She’s upset! My only daughter who suffered from asthma for the first thirteen years of her life just received a full scholarship for track at a division one school, and she’s upset because the environmentalists are rescuing our country from the dump my daughter was almost a victim to.”

“Oh gosh are we gonna have this discussion again?” my dad pleaded.

“No dad we don’t, but since Elizabeth insists on fulfilling her role as Little Miss Kill Joy...”

“Mom she lost her job,” Betsy said.

“Everyone loses their job!”

“Lynn, go to...”

“Girls! Come on let’s act like adults” My brother yelled. I ignored him.

“Lynn you don’t even know what its like to have a job. I worked my ass off, to get myself a spot at the top of that ladder and...”

“Lizzy don’t be mad at me because oil refineries are not the latest fashion.”

“Mom, it’s because oil is running out and we can’t always be relying on other nations to provide us with that oil,” Now Betsy was mediating.

“So then what are international relations for? Aren’t there people majoring in that in college? Why doesn’t the government give subsidies to help strengthen international relations instead of finding other ways to replace oil?” I fought back.

“Well what about the Alaska Gas Pipeline that they just agreed to begin?” Betsy’s boyfriend said this. I looked around the room incredulously.

“Last time I checked Alaska wasn’t international,” I replied.

“I know, but you were talking about oil...”

“Oil, shmoil,” Lynn interjected “the point is, oil is running out, we’ve used it all up, we’ve abused it, every one of us, so Lizzy blame all of us here for your tragic misfortune.”

“Hey don’t blame me, I traded in my SUV for the SUV hybrid, I’m a concerned citizen.”

My brother was trying to be funny, but I failed to respond to the humor.

“Oh please Uncle Luke, the only reason you did that is because Jessica Alba did a commercial for it.”

“You’d better watch out or next she’ll be guilt- tripping you to give up your car,” her daughter said with a slight smile. Betsy’s godmother spoke again.

“Oh Betsy honey, riding a bike to school is a beautiful thing, it’s so healthy and enjoyable...”

“And cheap,” Gary pointed out. Everyone laughed.

“That’s my point,” I said “we’ve spent our whole childhood being cheap, living cheap, using cheap, and finally I get the chance to make it to the top of one of the best oil refineries in the country, and I lose my job because nowadays its considered a sin to live luxuriously.”

“Oh please Elizabeth, it’s called change, that’s how things work,” Lynn replied ready to battle, “and don’t even use that ‘I’m being punished for being successful’ crap, because you give looking successful a bad name, you’re always grumpy, stingy, and self- absorbed, and if that’s what your kind of success does to you then I’m glad it was taken away.”

There was a real silence now, as everyone made nervous glances around the room. I just fixed a lost gaze into nowhere.

“Well things are changing too fast,” I lost my energy and was speaking to myself, there was no use going against my sister whose dinner party I had just ruined.

“Everything is changing, the old jobs aren’t good enough and in the past year I have lost more than 30% of my employees to the new training act that the government set up for work in alternative energy producing plants.”

“Well if it means more money with more benefits, how could you not to take it?” My brother-in-law said.

“It’s all this damn uncertainty,” said my father, “Before, you never knew where anything was going to come from; when the gas prices would rise, and how long they would stay that way, or when the next natural disaster would hit.”

“Exactly, natural disaster!” I exclaimed “That’s what all the money the government is putting into Energy Weatherization Assistance Program is for, we don’t control what the weather does, the least we can do is control the after-effects.”

“Oh please Elizabeth,” My sister was out and had tagged her husband in. “Don’t pretend to be ignorant, global warming!” he yelled “I know you’ve heard of that one before,

and there's no one else to blame for it except us. Didn't Katrina teach you anything?" He sounded disgusted.

"Nuclear power plants are also being shut down Aunt Liz," my niece was doing her best to be consoling. "There were all those talks about Yucca Mountain being used as the repository point for the nuclear waste but the costs seemed to outweigh the advantages."

"See, even something that is supposed to be good for the environment is bad, no matter what you do everything is bad," I gave a bitter laugh "I thought coal was what was damaging our environment, yet we can't seem to give up that addiction."

"If it was running out then that addiction would be one we'd be forced to give up, like oil," Luke said.

"It's not running out though!" I exclaimed "We put billions of dollars into researching things we already know! There's oil in ANWR, let's go get it!"

"But we're already getting natural gas from Alaska; have you not listened to anything in the news about the pipeline!"

"I'M GRADUATING FROM HIGH SCHOOL." This was the first time the guest of honor raised her voice. We lowered our heads ashamedly and looked over to her. "My asthma is gone, not only because I moved away from the pollution, but also because of these changes that are being made." She emphasized the word changes. "Mom was right. We abused what we had and now we find ourselves in the worst part of the transition, but Aunt Liz, even you know that it gets worse before it gets better. The best thing that we have going for us right now is that we have a diverse supply of resources, and we've learned from our mistake of being dependent on one thing."

She was right, my frustration and annoyance with the country had created great feelings of bitterness in me. It was just scary, to watch as people all around me began listening to the global warming warnings making the headlines. Everyone was trading in their cars, changing the type of resources they used. My partner at the oil refinery left the business to go manage a hydropower plant, which ended up being rather lucrative. People said that this was the worst part of the transitional stage and that things can only get better from here. It made me uncomfortable that I was thrown into this transition without my consent, and that thinking green had been the biggest motto for the past decade. My previous anger turned to regret, for having ruined the occasion. I looked at my niece's healthy face and realized that I could either sink or swim. I thought I was the one moving ahead but then realized that it was the rest of the country that was moving ahead of me. I apologized earnestly to everyone at the table, and excused myself to go outside and get some fresh air.

Afterword

This story is based on the acknowledgment that the resources that have taken as far for hundreds of years are running out, and it is essential that we come up with different alternatives to make up for this shortage. Instead of putting all our eggs in one basket, we distribute what we have and give ourselves more options, which posses the new criteria of being sustainable and environmentally sound. With a somewhat Utopian ending, the story has the pessimist, the person who does not want to change because she does not find it necessary, and then there are people around her who are changing, and ironically the losing of her job causes her to have to change. This is based on the belief that as many oil refineries and nuclear power points get shut down due to the overuse of the of the facilities, many jobs will be lost with it. Due to the other energy sources that will become popular, however, mainly hydropower, and the increased job openings that will become possible with the construction of the gas pipeline, more jobs will still be available.

Bearing reference to the gas and oil crisis of today, I am more than certain that the vast majority of Americans will be forced to turn their lifestyles into ones that are more sustainable for the simple fact that, they know they can benefit from it. Where the incentive was once one of saving the environment for the sake of the environment, the motive will soon become one of doing what is best to save ourselves, our money, and our health. The United States will also become more domestically reliant on the incoming of oil, but the importing of oil will not cease completely. The research money that is being put into finding a cleaner way to burn coal, will prove fruitful and the use of coal will neither decrease nor increase. Most importantly the United States will provide itself with more options, as alternative energy methods will be promoted and celebrities and famous athletes begin endorsing “living green”. If it affects us then we will change, at first global warming was just a name, but our wallets empty quicker as a result of it, we are and will be forced to change.