

“Hope lies in the children”

Dewey Dabbar

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This late October day—for those experiencing it in Pokeyhole, Connecticut (population 11,138)—was overcast with a chill in the air. These were conditions more likely to prompt a coffee-and-donut stop than to inspire any great change in direction. Maybe if a solar fire had warmed the souls heading up the hill to the red-brick town hall then they would have been bolder in that afternoon’s meeting on the environment. Or maybe such taking-charge would have required both a bright sun and for Bill Buckner to have fielded that ball up the line a half hour after midnight. Pokeyhole, which was closer to Boston than New York, was very much within the territory of the newly coined “Red Sox Nation.” And its baseball-loving populace was groggy with a hangover of disbelief from the previous night’s game.

Above the grand doorway through which the town hall’s afternoon visitors entered, the American flag tugged ever-so-gently at its pole. A bird perched on that brass-effect cylinder could, on a clear day, look down across the valley of the Connecticut River.

The town’s environmental group had been brought together by local politician Marty Goodthinker, who drew a private pleasure from serving in his state’s least Reagan-leaning congressional district. News of the hole in the ozone layer the previous year had got Marty out of his seat. But it was the recent disaster at Chernobyl that had settled his mind on forming the group, which was something he found himself able to do thanks to the behind-the-scenes support of a trio of concerned citizens. These three assembled with Marty and eight others at the town hall that afternoon.

While Marty silently read through his notes for a final time, the other group members found seats and waited for their heart rates to slowly ease back down from the upward jolt of the hill climb. Their conversation centered on the World Series, the deciding game of which had been postponed, after a downpour at Shea Stadium, from that evening to the next.

“I just don’t know how you come back from something like that,” offered a woman with dark hair streaming out from under a cap that bore an embroidered B.

“McNamara should have pulled Buckner after the top of the tenth,” opined a man in a checked shirt, who was a recent college graduate. “Anyone can see his ankles are shot.”

“If they don’t win tomorrow,” announced another cap-wearer, a sun-beaten man in his late fifties, “I swear I’m gonna switch to ice hockey. I just can’t handle this anymore.”

The one person, besides Marty, not inputting into the conversation was Angela Makepeace, a member of the local politician’s supporting tripod. The only sport in which she took any interest was skeet shooting. And so, as others fretted about Game 7 and what the extra day’s rest might mean for the respective rotations, Angela conducted a mental search for a witty introduction. She spotted an opportunity in the group’s circular seating arrangement.

“Thank you. . . . Thank you for coming along this afternoon,” announced Marty, in a raised voice, over fading chatter. “Let’s start by introducing ourselves. Who wants to go first?”

“Okay! My name is Angela. And I’m an environmentalist.”

On another day, in another town, this might have received generous laughter, but only Marty responded audibly to the parallel drawn by Angela, and he quickly stifled his own reaction as he sensed the majority feeling.

The introductions resumed.

“Hi,” said the sun-beaten man, who was next in the circle. “I’m Dave, and I’m a local resident. I came here today because I’m getting more and more concerned about the state of the planet. And I want to know what politicians are going to do about it.”

“Thank you, Dave,” said Marty through a restrained wince. This particular politician had enough on his plate already. The meeting, for him, was meant to be about empowering the citizenship.

“Hi, I’m Gabriella, and I’m also a local resident. I’m worried about what kind of planet we’re leaving behind for our kids. That’s why I came today.”

And so they continued. After everyone had said something about themselves, Marty steered the meeting through a critique of the damage that humans are doing to the Earth, then away from political action, and, finally, in a more stuttering fashion, toward the need for citizen action. At this point, the sun-beaten man—with his concern, like the discussion’s momentum, having waned markedly—pulled out a magazine from his bag and began to read. The result of this action was the direction toward him of several razor-sharp glares, expressions of a kind that might, typically, have been reserved for someone flinging dog muck around.

Struggling to overcome this potential death knell, the group fell silent for a while, until Angela made a proposal that not only was greeted with warm and unanimous support but lightened the spirits of those present.

“It’s clear that adults cannot behave responsibly. . . . We have to look to the next generation to make things right. . . . Hope lies in the children.”

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Billy Sanchez, a heavysset man with a shaven head and raven moustache, was a life-long resident of Pokeyhole, Connecticut (population 19,554). He had been born in the local hospital in the first hour of October 26, 1986. While his mother had been paying full attention to the birth-giving process, his father was glued to a waiting-room TV that was showing replays of a small white orb slipping between a man’s legs and into right field.

Billy was celebrating his forty-fourth birthday with a late lunch at a table for one in the Pilgrim Bar & Grill, and his beloved Red Sox were a game away from another championship. He loved this team because, above all else, watching them brought back fond memories of his youth, when he stayed up late to watch his co-heroes, Nomar Garciaparra and Pedro Martinez, exuding brilliance. During those years he had divided his backyard emulations between these two alone. A secondary-level hero, hard-hitting catcher Jason Varitek, was honored in a different way. He had his bobblehead figure glued to the top of the family recycling bin that had been installed at Billy’s request. Every time a soda can was thrown in, the catcher’s plastic head would wobble gleefully.

What has happened to my motivation to make the world a greener place? What has gone wrong with the sport I cherished so dearly? As a partial answer to this second question, Billy was aware of the harm that commercialism had inflicted on his relationship with baseball. Beyond that, he struggled to explain how his passions of youth could have fizzled like they had. That being said, they were not all dead. This *was* a World Series. And Samuel Lopez was capping off an explosive year with a postseason for the ages.

Lopez would be taking the hill in Game 6 and going for a World Series record fourth win, following victories in Games 1, 3, and 5. (As long as the league resisted extending the Series to a best-of-nine format, this was one of the rare records in the game that would truly be unbeatable.) The ace’s immediate return to the mound was enabled by the four- and five-day breaks in the Series for jet-lag adjustment, which had been introduced as part of the resolution to the players’ strike of 2028. While the league had presented that move as being a concession to the players, they privately knew that it would only help their revenue line, because it would permit extra ace-versus-ace matchups and allow six of the seven potential games to fall on the weekend. This last point was made especially important by the large time difference between the States—

especially its West Coast markets—and the bases of the two European franchises. The working day, as the league’s data made abundantly clear, really interfered with advertising revenue.

The Amsterdam Architects and the London Olympians were created in 2027, as expansion teams to the eastern divisions of the senior and junior circuit, respectively. To facilitate success on the field and thus encourage rapid growth off the field in their home countries, both teams had been granted an increased salary cap for their first ten years and were given four more pre-September roster spots than all their competitors. Simultaneously to this monumental change in the league’s global footprint, its administrators reduced the distance between the mound and the plate from sixty feet and six inches to fifty-six feet and six inches. (Many bloggers aired suspicions that this coincidental timing was intended to deflect attention away from the latter and thus lessen the ire of purists.) While the average length of half-innings fell significantly as a result of this pitcher-favoring shift, longer breaks between them ensured that games were still of a “traditional length”—these words being quoted from a league press release.

Even with creative scheduling being employed to soften the time difference, both European franchises enjoyed a substantial home-field advantage. Furthermore, they were able to lessen the hindrance of road games by maintaining a separate pitching staff in the States and Europe. They only flew pitchers in either direction for the tail-end of lengthy home stands or road trips. North American teams had protested about the advantages enjoyed by the Architects and the Olympians. However, the projected increase in revenue to be shared across teams—at a time of great financial pressure on a game increasingly felt to be too slow for the modern age—won the argument for the league. Now, one of the European teams was, for the first time, contesting a World Series. And much of the wealthier part of Red Sox Nation had flown out to Schiphol, then back to New England, and then out again.

Somewhere, deep down, Billy felt that this whole thing was just wrong. As he waited for his lunch order, which he’d placed using his personal device, he searched the internet for a copy of the league’s green policy. Finding it, he saw it mention that “the increased carbon expenditure had been largely offset by offering an expanded range of vegan options at ballparks, through improved composting methods of food waste, and via an increased rollout of LED technology and solar panels.” *Now that is some creative accounting*, thought Billy. The policy also spoke of “an openness to foreground green transport technologies as they came online to ensure the ongoing environmental

sustainability of the league.” *I thought someone said that solar power would never be able to get planes off the ground*, Billy mused.

In Game 6, Lopez got a shutout win. Shortly after the final out, Billy slid off his bar stool, made a trip to the bathroom, and then headed out into the fading sun of a late afternoon. The initial sensation of cold as he emerged was quickly reversed on his walk up the hill toward Pokeyhole’s fine town hall. There was a meeting taking place there that had been convened by a branch of the Concerned Citizens of Connecticut. Billy knew about it because it had been advertised on a digital screen above his favored urinal at the Pilgrim. Retinal scanning by a reader in the screen logged that Billy had viewed the whole ad, and he thus qualified for a discount on his next drink. (The accuracy of urinal users at the Pilgrim had never been poorer.)

The gathering had been in full swing for an hour when Billy arrived. Stepping over the legs of a sleeping man who looked to Billy to be in his seventies, he quietly settled into a seat in the back row and slowly repaid the breathing debt that he’d taken out on the climb. The sleeping man was one of the few people not grasping a personal device. These days, when time was in such short supply, only dinosaurs considered it impolite for someone to double-, triple-, or quadruple-task in a public meeting.

On sitting down, Billy quickly felt a need to take off his outer layer as he had inadvertently positioned himself in the trajectory of the room’s rear air conditioner. Elsewhere, people retained their jackets—perhaps, Billy thought, because of the two open windows near the front. Once comfortable, the newcomer allowed his mind to ease itself into the toing and froing of voices, as he stroked the thick, dark hair above his lips. Billy’s foray detected a fair bit of anger, a good deal of blame apportioning, and a regular stream of point-scoring via the citing of statistics, as if the Olympics was taking place and the blue ribbon event was knowing very precise things about ecological decline.

A half-hour after his arrival—and immediately following a tense moment in which a young woman named Isabella Grunter, representative for a group called Smaller Families for Sustainability, had been shot down simultaneously from several angles—there was a silent pause . . . and Billy thrust his hand up into it.

“Yes, the person at the back,” said the gathering’s principal convener through a lapel mike, with evident relief at the opportunity to shift the meeting away from the topic of overpopulation. “I don’t think you’ve spoken yet, have you? Could you start by saying who you are, please.”

“I’m Billy, and I’m . . . I guess . . . a concerned local.”

“And what point would you like to make, Billy?”

“I’ve been listening to the discussion, and it seems to me that the adults in the town, me included, can’t be trusted to do right by the planet. The politicians are doing nothing nearly dramatic enough to change things, and neither are we. But there is a hope. And it’s to this we must turn our attention if the planet is going to be saved. . . . Hope lies in the children.”

Rarely had an opinion voiced in that room been met with such enthusiastic agreement.

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Anna Firkin was born in the fall of 2030 and had spent almost all of the subsequent forty-nine years and eleven months, up to the present day, in the eastern North American town of Pokeyhole (estimated population 5,000). She reflected on her upcoming milestone birthday, and the streaks of gray in her long chestnut hair, as she climbed the hill to the town hall effortlessly. The ease of this activity was not unusual in a society that had reverted to so much manual activity. Anna was especially fit, though. The lockable closet in her squat house contained no skeletons, but it did hold an old lycra running outfit that she wore for her secret celestially lit jogs in the scrubbed-over field margins to the east of Pokeyhole. Anna had not managed to become a property owner before the start of the age of collapse, but with the declining population, many old residences now stood available for unofficial tenants. The prime residences were those that had not been extended beyond their original size, as these were the ones, generally, that remained sturdy and watertight. Squats were preferred over individual or dual occupancy because the safety in numbers—against looters and assaulters especially—trumped any desire for privacy. This was the case even for people like Anna, who were partnered.

The secrecy of Anna’s jogs related to the taboo nature of running for pleasure and, in particular, the extra calorie consumption it necessitated. For Anna, though, the taboo only added to the feeling of exhilaration that the activity offered. Also, she quelled any guilt with the knowledge that she and her partner were two of the town’s most effective salvagers of FAROW (food at risk of wastage).

As Anna neared the town hall and felt a rising wind, something caught her eye on a rose bush growing from a crack in the sidewalk outside the old supermarket. It was half a dozen bright red hips. *And just when I was worrying about my vit-C! . . . How did these get missed by the forager-traders? . . . And how did those thieving birds not get to them first?* She placed the hips into a well used baggie, which she pocketed. The seeds

and hairs would be carefully removed later back at the squat. *Actually, screw the vit-C, I might be able to trade these for a few coffee beans.*

At the base of the rose bush, there was a plastic carrier bag from an old electronics store that had been skewered by a large thorn. *Must have blown up the hill from the old woodlot. Shame about that gash. Could have used it otherwise.* Everywhere there were reminders of the squandering by generations past, and the overspend of the energy wealth. The most striking of all these reminders were, for many, the parking lots full of the abandoned electric cars and older vehicles that people once used *just for the sake of it.* These days, HPE (high-power energy) was reserved, on paper, for medical vehicles, sporadic transport of food and water, and the local government's efforts, almost all futile, to keep control. In reality, much of it was used by marauding clans.

Anna reached the entrance to the town hall and passed under a twisting flag bearing the Pokeyhole emblem. On a board inside the doorway she stopped to read a handmade poster promoting a talk that took place, several months back, on the hundred-and-tenth anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. It had been given by some local historian of the collapse. It bore his most quoted saying: "Collapsing societies have a power of hindsight that is simply impossible in growing ones." Next to this poster was another, which advertised the event for which Anna had come, a Thanksgiving session run by the Pokeyhole Positivity Boosters. Times, everyone knew, were bleak. And no matter how much one's skin had thickened, each day threw up the horror of new injustices. Which is why conscious efforts to think positively were felt by many to be a necessary ritual in life.

Anna could see that dozens of people were already there, crowded into the far end of the main hall, away from the damp area under the leaking roof at the near side. As the meeting unfolded, some attendees left, after they'd said their thanks, and more arrived.

Speaking from a dais at the front, as Anna merged into the back of the crowd, was a kind lady, hunched over from years of working the potato fields.

"I'm grateful that Joe's trading his gooseberry wine again this year!"

This expression of gratitude was met with laughter and loud cheers.

The potato digger was followed by octogenarian Isabella Grunter. "I'm grateful that people finally believe me when I said we were having too many children."

"You say that every year," cried a heckler in the middle of the group.

"I know. It's just that I'm still grateful. It was such a mind-boggling taboo for so long."

"Okay, let's not let her get started," retorted the heckler. "Who's next?"

The person next up was one of Pokeyhole's telegram operators. "Logs moving again. Bellows Falls. Winter coming. Need fuel. V grateful."

“We might need fuel,” bellowed a different voice, “but the birds need homes!”

“Oh, go and bang your green drum outside, Luis,” suggested the heckler. “This meeting’s about bleeding positivity, or don’t you know what that is?”

Luis was well known in the town as a rare throwback to the conservation movement.

“Everyone gets to be listened to,” Luis shouted. “That’s the rule.”

“That only applies when you’re on the stage, Luis! Quick, someone get up there before he does.”

Next in the informal queue was an elementary school teacher who was grasping her jaw with her left hand. She said, with some difficulty, “I’m grateful . . . the children persuaded me . . . to get my tooth pulled out. . . . I was in such agony . . . for months . . . but I’m just . . . so squeamish.”

She was followed by one of her youngest students, a girl with auburn hair tied in pigtails, whose brief reflection— “I’m grateful for Miss Mosely being so brave”—was greeted with a multitude of appreciative *aww* sounds.

The young girl, in turn, gave way to a man in his early twenties named Billy Sanchez III. “I’m grateful for the magic of baseball. Watching the Pokeyhole Pillagers going twenty-one and five to win the River Championship this year was the best thing in my life so far. And I still can’t believe Jesus batted over five hundred. My grandad would have been so proud of them if he was still alive. I don’t know what watching big league baseball was like, but there’s no way it could have been as good as this.”

Anna’s turn came soon after and she strode up onto the dais, which was made of five old packaging crates, four placed in a big square as the base and the fifth as a second tier in the middle.

“I’m grateful for the beauty of the night sky . . . and all the thoughts it can help unlock for you. It’s the one thing that the previous generation didn’t get to enjoy here, with all their—what did they call it?—light pollution.”

Anna stepped down carefully and, rather than heading out of the room, as the majority had before her (since the annual event was, for most people, much more about speaking than listening), she decided to return to the back of the group to hear what others had to say.

“Something that I’m ever grateful for is the know-how library by the school. Imagine if no one had bothered to document all those things like tallow candles and natural antiseptics. It would have taken decades to rediscover them. And we all know the salvagers can only do so much.”

“I’m grateful for the one good thing Generation Waste left for us, besides stainless steel, which is the national parks. I don’t know what we’d have done without all that clean water to drink and all that wood to burn.”

Luis bit his tongue, metaphorically, which was still a somewhat painful thing to do to yourself. He estimated that he was about six or eight people away from the front of the group.

“I can build on that one,” said the heckler, who had now got his turn on the dais. “I’m grateful for all the carbon dioxide we’re putting back in the skies by burning the northern forest. You know, we’ve got to do something to try and make the winter warmer. It’s our civic duty. Nothing less. The one thing I don’t understand, though, is why we don’t start making CFCs again, to try to knock out the ozone blanket.”

And this was what it took for Luis to become enflamed with rage and find himself barging through the front of the assembled group and up onto the platform.

“Right, it’s my turn,” he yelled, “and you all have to listen. I can’t believe what we’ve done to the forests in the north. And they’ve still got gasoline up there, can you believe, for running the chainsaws. I’ve got a friend who canoed down here on the Connecticut and he says there’s little left of the trees. Just big clear-cuts. And we call the previous lot Generation Waste. Well, we’re the ones who are burning wood before it even has time to season, which means you have to burn three times as much to get the same heat. And we’re still trying to keep cattle rather than using all the fields to grow grain and vegetables for us. It’s just such a waste of land. And it’s a dream for the looters, because it’s a lot easier to take a cow than to pull up a field of carrots. Can no one see how crazy this is!?”

“Okay,” interjected the heckler teasingly, “so tell us what you’re grateful for, Luis.”

“I’m grateful that the collapse is only going to get worse, and wildlife’s going to get a chance again because there won’t be any people around.”

“Right,” continued the heckler, with a great satisfaction at Luis having taken his bait. “Let’s get this misanthropist under citizen’s arrest and down the hill to the jail.”

The interruption caused by Luis’s outburst and the need for his removal gave those still present a few minutes for quiet reflection. And many of them, including Anna, found themselves thinking that there was some truth in what Luis had said. They were still being wasteful. Collapse would, in all likelihood, continue to worsen for a good while. And no one really was able to organize humans in a way that would lift society out of the mire.

Not one person who was yet to speak had anything positive to say any more. Not one of them wanted even to move. And so Anna did something never seen before at this

annual gathering. She took to the dais for a second time, twirling a strand of gray hair in front of her eyes as she collected her thoughts.

“Times are tough, yes, but it’s no excuse really for the way we’re behaving as adults. We are setting a bad example and, the thing is, we’re just not going to get any better. . . . I’m grateful for that adorable girl with the pigtails. I’m grateful for her class-mates. . . . Hope lies in the children.”