

Field Trip By Terry Lowell

1st prize in Green Stories novel for Children prize (young reader's category)

Professor Campbell adjusts the band under my chin and checks the readings on the vid.

"That looks fine," she says and smiles. The corners of her eyes wrinkle.

The professor is over one-hundred and twenty years old but moves like a hipster half her age. My dad says she once won a Nobel Prize for Physics and why she wants to waste her time with a bunch of kidsters he doesn't know. I don't care why. I just know that the professor ran a lottery and our class was chosen to be the first in the whole Society to use her History Pods and I can't wait.

The professor settles into her own docking station and pulls on the hood. "Are you all ready?" she asks and there are murmurs of assent, some nervous, most excited. "Then let's go."

Light fades into darkness and back to light and I'm standing in a large open space surrounded by trees with the professor and the others from my class. I look around, a flutter of butterflies dancing in my stomach. I have the urge to laugh out loud but I clamp my mouth shut. It's true. I'm here and it's amazing.

Around us, people wander through the park in ones and twos. On a marked-out field, a group play a game with a stick and a ball, their shouts echoing in the cold air. Less than a metre from where we appeared, a young girl is sitting alone. No one has given us a second glance.

"They really can't see us?"

"No," Professor Campbell says. "To them we're like a warm breeze or a shadow on a sunny day, nothing more."

I reach out to touch the sombre, dark-skinned girl sitting on the grass. She looks to be around my age, ten or eleven years old, but she's probably older. Bad hygiene, pollution and poor diet meant children weren't as healthy back then. I sweep my hand through her head. Not a single hair moves. The girl continues to stare at nothing.

"I'm a ghost," I say, waving my arms. The other children laugh.

"I suppose we all are," the professor says. "Ghosts of times yet to come."

My fingers sneak into my belt-pack and locate a couple of energy balls. I wait until the professor is looking the other way then pop them in my mouth. They taste of tarragon. My favourite.

"Attention now." Professor Campbell raises her voice. "We have one hour and we don't want to waste any of it. So explore, make notes, use all of your senses to record your experiences. What does early twenty-first century Earth look like? What does it smell and taste like? What are the sounds you hear? Get it all down. You will be returned to the History Pods in exactly fifty-eight minutes time. Enjoy."

The professor's avatar fades and I watch Blueboy and Folio bounce off each other as they walk away, laughing and pointing at something in the distance. They're architecture weeds and will probably

spend the next hour comparing cornices and Doric columns. Emita, Didier and Sanjay are already running towards the 'stick and ball' group. They're Sports Majors, so any game from astroslide to zootball is a magnet for them. I don't join either group.

The problem is my major is General History so I want to see the architecture and the sports. I want to go in the trade centres and listen to the people and learn about their habits and politics. I want to experience their transport systems and visit their hospitals and see the clouds of smog hanging over their big cities. I want to do everything and I have only fifty-seven minutes left to do it in.

As an experiment I take a deep breath and feel the roughness grate in my throat and chest. The books tell how the air in the past was filled with man-made contaminants like dust from industry and gasses and smoke from engines and power plants. But reading about it is one thing, experiencing it is another and I'm glad the filters provide me with a simulation of the air and not the real thing. Even so, I imagine a coating of synthetic micro-fibres building in my lungs and I cough noisily.

It's hard to believe that governments used to burn fossil fuels even after they knew the pollution was killing millions of people every year. I make a note in the memory cube comparing the foul miasma of the twenty-first century to the sweetness of the clean air I'm used to.

According to my map the path to the left leads out of the park and into the city. I walk through the thin border of trees and cut through an alley where broken bottles and empty cans lay scattered on the ground and discarded papers swirl in mini-tornadoes. I make a note of how wasteful the people were here, using resources once and throwing them away instead of reclaiming. According to the professor the plastique in my coat has been reused at least seventy times.

I come out into a busy street with people scurrying along the pavement and dodging between smoking vehicles. The noise from the traffic hurts my ears and the crush of people feels close and threatening. As I pause to get my bearings two men walk straight through me and I shriek out loud. They don't feel me and I don't feel them but the experience gives me the shivers. I move to the edge of the road and take refuge behind a thick wooden pole where I stop to look around.

I'm standing in a man-made canyon with high buildings on either side of a busy road. The tall, square structures are stark and unwelcoming, all angles and concrete and brick and glass. There are no flowering plants in staggered balconies, no hanging vines or bushes to break up sharp edges, no creepers or ivy to soften the walls or to help take carbon out of the atmosphere. The buildings remind me of a human skeleton with all the muscles and skin removed. It shows the function but all the beauty is gone.

I know nothing can hurt me here but a strange anxiety creeps through my bones. There's a darkness about this time, a sadness about the people as they scuttle past with dead eyes pointing at the ground. They seem so alone and joyless, cut off from each other and the world around them.

"Hello."

I turn automatically to see the young girl from the park staring straight at me. I stumble back in shock then give a snort of laughter. For a split-second I thought the girl was talking to me when she was obviously talking to... I look around for the person who must be standing behind me but there's no one there. I spin in a full circle, sure that I must have missed someone but the only people close by seem uninterested in either of us.

“What are you?” Her voice is a soft whisper.

For a moment I don't speak. Then...“You can see me?”

She nods. Her mouth is open and her wide, green eyes are fixed on mine. Even though she's scared they seem to sparkle with curiosity and mischief.

“You're a bit like... like a reflection in a window,” she says. “Like a ghost.”

“I'm not...” I begin then stop. I can't tell her the truth. That would get me into loads of trouble and she probably wouldn't believe me anyway. Better that she thinks I am a spirit from some kind of primitive netherworld.

“Yeeesss,” I hiss in my best ghostly voice. I lean towards her and wriggle fingers in her face. “IIII aaaamm aaaaa ghooooost! Whooooo!”

She frowns and shakes her head impatiently. “No, you're not. I saw you appear in the park. I was terrified. I couldn't move but I could see you all and hear you too. You're just a school kid like me but how can...?” Her voice trails off and her gaze flicks to one side. A woman is watching her.

“Come on,” she says and hurries away.

For the briefest second I think about letting her go and running in the opposite direction but then I'm following, hurrying to catch up. She jogs on, occasionally glancing back to check I'm still with her. We cross roads, dodge vehicles and cut through side streets until we emerge into a large open space. We're back in the park. The run seems to have done her good because when she stops and turns the fear has been replaced by a breathless excitement.

“My name's Daisy,” she says.

“I'm Hevin.”

Daisy laughs and skips on the spot, clapping her hands in delight. “This is amazing. It's incredible. It's...” She shrugs helplessly. “What are you? Where do you come from?”

And so I tell her, because I'm excited too. I'm actually having a conversation with a girl over a hundred years in the past. It's fantastic and it really doesn't matter what I say because no-one will ever believe her.

“I come from the future, from the year twenty-one, twenty-one.”

“I knew it!” Daisy squeals. “Your clothes are weird and you're like a hologram but you can talk and, and, and... Wow! The future! What's it like? Have you got robots and flying cars? Do we live on other planets? Was there a nuclear war? Are you ruled by intelligent apes? ”

“Yes, yes, no, no and my dad would say yes to the last one, though maybe not intelligent.” I realise I'm grinning. “I'll do you a deal. I'll tell you about the future if you tell me about the past.”

“OK.”

Daisy nods eagerly and drops down onto the grass. She takes a small packet from her pocket, tears off the wrapper and pops a pink blob in her mouth. The wrapper drifts to the ground.

I set the memory cube to record and as the sun moves slowly across the sky Daisy talks. She tells me about her friends and famous people I've never heard of and how 'cool' they all are. She talks about the latest video dramatics and autos and football and tells me how boring school is and how some days she just goes for a walk instead. She doesn't know much about politics but is pretty sure the world could be ordered in a fairer way. She tells me that she loves shopping and how hard it is watching her mum work two jobs and still not have enough money to buy nice things.

I tell her about my friends and my favourite football team, about school and life in the Society. I explain about the Hydrogen Power Plants and the Info-Hub that everyone links to on their eighteenth birthday and the advances in health and medicine and how we produce enough food so no one goes hungry.

"Is that really the future?" she asks, her eyebrows raised in surprise. "'Cos Mum says the seas are filling up with plastic and all the fish are dying. She says the air's poisoned and the planet's heating up and the rain forests are being cut down. Mum says the future's going to be horrible."

I shake my head. "It takes time," I say. "But we sort it. Or people like you do."

"Me?"

"Yea, it's in your time that people start to make real changes to cut the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere."

Daisy frowns. "Carbon dioxide? What does that do?"

I pause, trying to remember all the stuff I learned about the environment and pollution in the twenty-first century. I did a presentation on it for my Grading and got an Alpha Plus. I order my thoughts and take a deep breath.

"OK," I say. "Carbon dioxide is what they call a greenhouse gas and greenhouse gases are good because they help absorb the sun's energy and keep the Earth warm, right? But if there's too much greenhouse gas it makes the Earth too hot and then the ice-caps melt and you get hurricanes and tornadoes and forest fires and..."

"I've seen that," Daisy interrupts. "Australia was on fire. And California. It was scary."

"Right, so people in your time finally realised they needed to do something, so they started to cut down on how much carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases they generated, like replacing petrol and diesel cars with electric or solar power, yea?"

"But I don't generate greenhouse gases," Daisy says. "I'm just a kid."

"No, even kids make a difference. The food you eat, the clothes you wear, the toys you play with... Making them creates greenhouse gases."

"So I've got to stop eating and wearing clothes?" Daisy says. "Well, that's not going to happen."

"Nobody's asking you to do that," I say with a laugh. "But think about what you eat. Meat production creates more greenhouse gases than growing crops. And as more meat is eaten more areas of forest are cut down to create more farms and that means more carbon dioxide is released. That's why lots of people in your time reduce the amount of meat they eat or even go full vegetarian"

or vegan. And think about what you wear. In your time clothes are so cheap people are wearing stuff a couple of times then throwing them away." I watch a thin trail of white cloud track a jet across the sky. "Did you know that making clothes in the early twenty-first century created more carbon dioxide than all the airplanes that were flying all around the world?"

Daisy chews on the pink blob as she thinks about this for a moment. "Do you still have shops in your time?"

"Sort of, but they're more like libraries now."

"We have libraries but just for books, and ours does toys too."

"We have libraries for most things, as we don't have space to store stuff we only use sometimes. Do you do that yet?"

"Yes, we're starting," Daisy looked excited, "There's a Library of Things started in the next town where you can borrow toys and tools and musical instruments and sports equipment and candy-floss makers and, and, and..." Daisy throws up her hands. "Like, everything. And there's an app where you can borrow stuff."

"You see," I say. "Things are already happening. Soon you'll all be renting clothes rather than owning them, furniture too."

"O.M.G! Mum said the furniture shop were offering to buy back her sofa at half the price she bought it in exchange for a gift card."

"Yes that's how it starts. Have you started refilling containers yet?"

"Yes, there's a shop just opened where you bring your own container and fill with stuff like rice and cereal. My gran goes there. She says it's cheaper and better for the environment 'cos it gets rid of all the packaging. I think she fancies the man who works there, as well."

"It looks like you're right on the brink," I cried.

"Do you still have money?" asked Daisy. "We never have enough."

"Nowadays everyone is given a carbon allowance, which is like a set amount of carbon dioxide that we're allowed to create each year, and we can't use more than we've been given. So if we do something that uses a lot like flying, then we must cut back in other areas. My parents had money but they said there wasn't much point having it if you it took you over your carbon allowance, so it became less important."

"I like that," said Daisy. "We're told that meat like beef is bad for the environment, but I really like burgers, so I just feel guilty. But having an allowance seems more fair. I feel excited about the future now."

"This is when the young people stood up Daisy." I told her, almost jealous that she was living in such exciting times. "They campaigned and told governments and businesses that they didn't want to just buy things and throw them away any more, they didn't want to feel guilty or worried or scared. They changed what they did, and what they ate and what they bought and made their parents change too, then businesses and governments had to follow."

The warning alarm clicks in and numbers count down in my ear. My hour is almost over. I show her the display on the cube.

"I have to go now," I say. "But it will be OK. I promise. Like I said, it's people like you that make the difference."

Daisy grins, her green eyes twinkling. "People like me, eh?" She picks up the sweet-wrapper and slips it into her pocket. "Got to start somewhere if I'm going to save the world," she says as she starts to fade. For a moment Daisy is a ghost then she's gone.

The white door opens with a hiss and I rip open the band and place the hood aside. I climb out of the pod. My mind is buzzing and I grip the memory cube tightly in one hand. The other kidsters emerge, already chattering about the things they've seen.

Professor Campbell is standing in front of me.

"An interesting experience, Hevin?"

"Yes," I say, nervous at being singled out.

"Inspiring, would you say?"

I nod.

"Good. Sometimes a child needs to be inspired before they can do great things and no one knows where such inspiration will come from. It can be something we see or hear. It can be something we read, or it can be a single conversation that changes everything." She takes my hand. "Thank you, Hevin."

"No, thank you Professor," I mumble. "That was incredible."

Professor Campbell smiles and suddenly my heart leaps in my chest because despite the wrinkles I know that smile and I recognise the sparkle in her green eyes. She leans forward and whispers.

"No need to be so formal. You can call me Daisy."