

The Clean City: A Short Story

By: Clarissa Wight

Wednesday, May 3, 2226

Dear Diary,

Mom just told me some exciting news! We get to go camping this weekend. I've never been camping before. I'm a little nervous, just because it'll be my first time in the woods in all my 17 years of life, but I'm also really excited. At the school library, I read about all the different animals we might see. They're so beautiful. Based on the pictures, they look way different than our Mr. Fluffers. He'll have to stay home because dogs aren't allowed in the woods, but Grandma is going to look after him for the two nights we are gone. Mom said I shouldn't get my hopes up because the animals like to stay away from people but I'm hoping we see at least a black bear and a moose. They were my favorites from the book. Anyways, we leave on Friday. We're going to take the train there and walk to our reserved campsite. I think we'll have to walk about as far as I walk to get to school so it'll be pretty easy. Dad will probably be really tired by the time we get there because he'll still be going to work earlier that day and his walk to work from the closest train stop is twice as far as my walk to school. It'll be worth it though.

Thursday, May 4, 2226

Dear Diary,

I was talking to Nell at school today and she's excited that I get to go camping, too. She's never been either but said her mom went when she was a kid and loved it. Apparently, she saw a bear, squirrels, birds that weren't just the yellow ones we have in the city, and something she called a ladybug. I'll have to look up that one because it wasn't in the book I looked through earlier. Either way, knowing she saw so many animals is getting me excited! I have so much to do before we go tomorrow. I have a test in Civic Law tomorrow that I need to study for, but it should be pretty easy. It seems like they give the same one every year but if I don't pass, Mom said we can't go camping. The questions are always so boring though. I've lived in this city my whole

life so I'm pretty sure I know enough about it. Grandma grew up somewhere else and moved to the city before my mom was born so even my mom has lived here her whole life. It's weird to think that people could live in other places. Sometimes I think that would be exciting but our city is so clean and beautiful, I don't know why anyone would even want to move. The sky is always blue, except for when it rains of course, and the air is so fresh. I'd probably have to have different clothes if I lived somewhere else, too. The trees are green and lush and the gardens produce the most yummy and nutritious food. The blueberries are finally in season again and I helped Mom preserve blueberry syrup last night. It took forever but it's always so nice to have on our bread throughout the off-season when we're stuck with just potatoes, carrots, beets, and those other cool-loving vegetables. When we get back from camping, we'll have more preserves to do because the beans will be ripe. Anyways, I need to study! And pack! Oh, and walk Mr. Fluffers at the park!

Friday, May 5, 2226

Dear Diary,

We are camping! After school, we went home and grabbed our backpacks and headed to the train. I haven't taken the train so far before. As we got past more stops, the trees got thicker and taller and we started to see less food fields. There was barely anyone on the train by the time we got off. Dad said there's only two more stops after ours so that was why. I hadn't thought about it before but I guess it makes sense. Where else would people go? Now I'm sitting in the cabin on my camping bed for the weekend. It's so cool here and the woods seem less scary than I thought! There are some families camping at the other cabins but they're all spread out so it's private. I love having so much space! There's nobody above or below us like at home. We have a little campfire that we can roast marshmallows over and Dad said we'll cook dinner over it, too. The book I read at the library said something about chopping wood for the fire but obviously we wouldn't do that. It would make the air gross, it even showed that part in the book, so the fire is electric. It's basically the same as our oven at home but there's a little flame glowing where the heat comes up. There's a picnic table by the campfire and a walking trail that leads away from the campsite. Mom said we'll take the trail tomorrow. Maybe that's when we'll see animals! I have a feeling this is going to be the best weekend of my life. Even better than when Nell and I

snuck into Mr. Musk's office to steal a cookie last year. It tasted so good and we didn't even feel bad since he's not supposed to have them. Who cares if he's the principle! Our Civic Law says nobody is supposed to have more than the rationed food. Either way, I'm really glad we weren't caught. I definitely wouldn't be on this camping trip right now if we had been!

Saturday, May 6, 2226

Dear Diary,

Today has been magical! We did so many fun things and went on the trail. We walked a long way but we took lots of breaks. After reading the map in the cabin, we followed the trail through the woods. It looped around to the other campsites so we meant a couple of the other families camping. This can never leave his diary but there was a super cute boy a few campsites away. Dad said he went to school with his dad. His last name is Dell and I think he's a few years older so that's why I didn't recognize him from school. I really hope I run into him again. After looping around the campsites, the trail led to a clearing with a pond. We saw some silver fish in the pond but I don't know what species they are. I'll have to find a fish book in the library next week! We had a picnic lunch at the pond then kept going. It was basically just a circle that we walked but the woods were so lovely. There were little white flowers close to the ground and some taller leafy plants that were taller. They were in clumps all over the place but I never got tired of seeing them. They're so different than the trees and shrubs at the parks in the city. We finished off the day with cooking over the campfire. I think it was my favorite part. I had eaten marshmallows before but the cabin rations include graham crackers and a little bit of chocolate. Oh my! The gooey, crunchy combo when they were mixed together were from another world. Mom heard they were called "want some more" or something like that. It was her first time too so she wasn't totally sure. I hope we have them again tomorrow before we have to leave. This weekend is going by so fast! Okay, another thing that can't leave this diary. I'm planning to sneak out after curfew to go explore just a bit more. I want to soak up as much of this place as I can. If this is the first time Mom and Dad have gone camping, this might be the only time I ever get this lucky, so I'm not wasting a second of it. I'm going to have a quick nap so I know Mom and Dad will be asleep before I go.

Sunday, May 7, 2226

I don't know how to start. It's so early in the morning still. I just got back to the cabin and Mom and Dad are still sleeping, thank the stars. I don't understand. I don't know how I can find out more. I followed the trail for a bit but the other direction than earlier. When I got about half ways between the cabin and the pond, I turned off the trail and just wandered into the woods. The plants were so beautiful and I just wanted to get a closer look. I walked for a long way like that just soaking everything in. I could even see the stars in the sky and they felt so big and close compared to in the city. And then I hit something. I don't even know how to describe it. It was like walking into the sky. I was looking at the stars and... and then they were right in front of me and I walked into them. I couldn't walk around them. It was like a wall of sky in the middle of nowhere. I made me really scared. I walked beside it for a bit but the sound of my heart beating so loud made it so I was a little disoriented. I gave up trying to go that way and headed back to the cabin. I ended up at the pond and then followed the trail back. It just doesn't make any sense. It was like the world just ended. Just stopped. But Earth is supposed to be round. That's what the books said. Why would it just stop? I have so many questions about it. I don't even know where to start. I think I need sleep. How will I sleep though? I don't know what to do!

Monday, May 8, 2226

Dear Diary.

I'm so tired. Exhausted. Camping was amazing but now I'm so confused. I just don't understand what's happening. I tried to sleep after getting back to the cabin but it was hard with all the thoughts going through my head. When I got up in the morning, Mom and Dad noticed that I looked tired but they definitely didn't figure out that I had snuck out. They thought it was just from our exploring together. We made breakfast over the campfire before packing up to head home. I had another one of those marshmallow things and it was delicious again. I wasn't what I was thinking about though. When we got on the train, we were the only passengers. I made me think about what Dad said on Friday. If there are only two more stops, is that the end of the world? I need answers but I don't know who to ask without getting in trouble.

Tuesday, May 9, 2226

Dear Diary,

Still tired. Still hardly sleeping. Still looking for answers. This is all I can think about.

Thursday, May 11, 2226

Dear Diary,

I went to the library again today. I looked at books about other places in the world. I wanted to look at other cities and see what I could find. Everything the library has was outdated though. The most recent book I could find about other places in the world was printed in 2098 but it had the same pictures as a book that was printed in 2045. Everything looks different than our city. I couldn't even find things about where my grandma lived before she moved to our city. It just skips from there to 2170 and all those books only have our city. I'm going to visit Grandma tomorrow and ask her about where she used to live.

Saturday, May 13, 2226

Dear Diary,

I convinced Grandma to tell me about her life. She didn't want to talk about it first and said I'm too young to hear about it. She might have been right. I think I just have more questions now. It was so sad to hear about. And now I know what I walked into at the campsite. I need some time to process what I learned.

Tuesday, May 16, 2226

Dear Diary,

I'm ready to write about what Grandma told me. I'm just still in disbelief. Disbelief at what happened and how our city is built on a lie. Before Grandma moved to the city, her life was different than how we live. She said there were more people and more choices. There were all kinds of different foods and animals and ways to get around. People would travel all over the world. But a lot of people chose to waste things. They had a lot more than they needed. Life was great but greater than it needed to be. I still can't understand the reason, but people also actively damaged the world. They did things to poison plants, animals, and themselves. They knew what was happening but kept doing it. People even told each other to stop. The gasses they released made life horrible for a lot of people. Land was lost as the seas grew and storms got stronger and longer. Fires burned entire towns down. One by one, animal species were lost on land and in the water. All the plans they made to fix things just made it worse. When snow stopped falling, they made machines to do it but they just released more of the poisonous gas. The machines they used to put out the fires released more gas. When the air got too hot, they released even more gas making the air inside their homes cool. Everything just got worse and worse. I can't believe they didn't just stop when they could've. Wouldn't their governments protect them like ours does?

When things got unbearable, people started to leave their homes, just like Grandma. She was already pregnant with my mom when she decided to come to the city. It was the safest place she could go. It was a costly choice though. People had to pay a lot of money to move here at that point. It was less expensive than getting on one of the spaceships people left on though. Nobody even knows what happened to those people. Grandma was really smart and worked as an engineer before she moved her. She made a lot of money and her husband did, too. But even with all the money they had saved, they only had enough money for her to come here. I had always wondered what happened to Grandma's husband. My Grandpa. They were able to send letters back and forth after she was assigned a home in the city. Grandpa was trying to save up enough money for his entry fee. He was working extra and selling all their things. As things got worse, people were leaving and nobody had any money left. He did everything he could, but when people started fighting, the city decided to lock its gates. Grandpa was locked out. They stopped allowing mail to go in and out when they locked the gates so Grandma doesn't even know what happened to him. She cried so much when she was telling me about him. Somehow, she managed to stay strong for the rest of her pregnancy and raise my mom. She did it all alone. All while not knowing what was happening to her husband.

The wall I found while camping is the edge of the dome. It's so big that it's almost never found by the people that live in the city. Grandma said I can't tell anyone I know about it. The dome protects the city. Grandma doesn't know exactly how the dome works, since nobody is supposed to know it exists. Everything inside is controlled: our air, the exposure from the sun, our books, our food, the population...

I feel so lost with what I've found out. Everything feels so fake now. I just can't get "the why" out of my head. Why wouldn't somebody stop the poison?

[END OF STORY]