



A Vote 4 the Future

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This book is dedicated to:
everyone who is under 50 years old in 2013,
and everyone 50 and older who will offer their time
money, energy and wisdom to help
those under 50 maintain a viable
global habitat.

- Joe Symons
founder, Negawatt Media



Part I

1

I may only be 13 years old, but already I know nothing ever changes in my life. I've lived in the same town forever. I've gone to the same school forever. I've had the same friends forever. The same mom. The same dad. The same older brother. Forever. I'm not complaining, not really, they're great friends, an ok school, an all right family (except my brother, when he is being a jerk), but it does get a little old. That's why I was so excited last spring when I was eating my same lunch on the same lawn as always, and...well, let me just tell you how it all happened, and what it all led to. Because things were interesting-ing up a bit in my world, and in the rest of the world, and where it all meets, with me pretty well in the middle of it all, and glad of it.

There we sat, Tracy, Jenny, and I, eating lunch out under the big cherry tree in the side yard at school. We've been best friends since before kindergarten. We always ate lunch together, and our favorite time has always been spring, when the weather warms up and the cherry is in bloom and we can eat out there, in its

sweet-smelling shade. I had just taken a big bite of my sandwich when Jenny said “Whoa! Look! There’s that new girl!” So of course we all looked.

We don’t get new kids in our school very often, and sure not ones like Hildegarde. She was tall. She had long blonde hair and wore sandals all year round. And her toenails were always painted, and the paint was never chipped. She was so cool. She had never talked to us, of course. Actually, in the couple of weeks she’d been around, she never much talked to anyone. Not that she was snobbish. She just had this, well, this air around her. Where you wanted to talk to her, wondered what she was thinking, but who would have the nerve to ask? She carried around a little notebook that she was always making notes in, and we all wondered what she was saying in there. I remember Wyatt, he’s another kid we’ve known forever, and he’s always been a jerk, going up to her one day.

“What are you always scribbling away at in there?” he asked her, circling around, trying to get a peek.

She just smiled, held the book close in to her chest, wrote a little something, and wandered away. Wyatt did not like it at all when we laughed at that! It just made her more cool, and more of a mystery.

“She’s heading this way!” Tracy squealed. Tracy squeals a lot. She is one of my two best friends, but

when she squeals, the noise makes me think of a pig. And she is quite in to food, not that you'd know that by looking at her. I sure appreciate what a good cook she is. And a generous cook, too, keeping us all well stocked with great cookies and other snacks she just whips up out of her head, no recipe needed. It's a talent, I have no idea how she does that! But I still get tired of hearing her squeal.

I chewed my chunk of sandwich as fast as I could, I wanted to get it swallowed down before Hildegard got to us. Because I could tell, the closer she got, that she was looking at me! I gulped it down.

"Hi Hildegard" I managed to croak out around the hunk of bread halfway down my throat. Jenny and Tracy just kind of grinned like fools.

"Hi Rose. Hey Jenny, Tracy." Wow, she knew all our names. I knew she was cool! "Rose, I've got a favor to ask you." That made me feel mighty good! "And by the way, you have a little mustard on the corner of your mouth." Oh. So much for feeling so good.

Jenny piped in here with a "Sure, Hildegard, what can we do for you?" Hello, Jenny, didn't you hear her say she had a favor to ask ME? She's always sucking up to the cool kids.

"Thanks Jenny, I do want your help too, but I really have the biggest favor to ask Rose." Ha! See?

I kept my cool (better than some friends I know, who's names happen to start with a J) and said "Sure, what I can I do for you?"

"I've decided to run for Student Body President for next year." Wow. That's pretty brave. Only been at our school for like 3 weeks, and going to run for president? It may just work - we're all so sick of each other and the same old same old, (as my granddad always says), some fresh meat (as my older brother says) may be pretty popular.

"Cool!" Tracy squealed.

"Thanks, I kind of think so" Hildegard said kindly to her. Then she turned back to me. "I have a pretty specific platform I'm running on, and from what I hear, I think you'll get it better than most of the kids."

Trying not to look too smug, I smiled and said "Really? Why's that?"

"Your mom came to our house the other day, to do an energy audit. It was amazing." That's what my mom does - energy audits. She goes around to people's homes checking to see what kind of shape their houses are in, energy-loss wise. Our town has a bunch of older houses, and they have things like single-pane windows, not much insulation in the walls, all kinds of places that heat leaks out. Mom has an infrared camera that shows where there are gaps that you can't see but heat

can leak out (it's also fun to use to take pictures of the cat, but we're not supposed to do that). She does these things called blower door tests, where she puts a big seal on your door, with a fan in it - it sucks the air out of the house, which means air from outside gets sucked into the house. She can then walk around with the fancy camera and find where all the air is coming in. Then she tells people how they can seal up those places, with more insulation or better windows or spraying goop into their ceiling lights and a bunch of other things. She also checks out their appliances, makes sure water heaters are insulated and not just dumping their heat out, looking at furnaces to be sure they are running right and that the filters aren't clogged, suggesting that light fixtures have energy efficient LED or CFL bulbs in them, a whole bunch of things. I sure have gotten away from my story here, but I think my mom has maybe the best job in the world, because she finds all these things, and when they are fixed, she's helped the people save a bunch of money, and it is really a big help to the planet. Plus she gets to see the inside of all these people's houses, which is pretty fun.

"It was kind of awful. Where we used to live, our house was passive solar, triple-pane low-e windows, insulated R-90 in the attic, we had solar PV and were almost zero net!" I grinned and nodded, like I knew what

she was talking about. “Then we moved here, into this old old house, heat leaks everywhere, my parents knew there were a bunch of problems, but, well, it was just appalling!” Appalling? Who actually has the nerve to use words like that? But somehow, it worked, coming from Hildegarde. “And when she was chatting with my parents afterward, it came up that you were her daughter, and I thought ‘that’s wonderful! That’s exactly who I need as my campaign manager!’ So, what do you think? Will you do it? Will you help me get elected President on a Zero Net platform?”

By this time, Jenny and Tracy’s mouths were just about dangling open. And while I’d only understood about a third of what she had said, I knew I wanted to spend the next few weeks helping Hildegard become our first Zero Net President. Whatever that meant.



2

The next morning, Saturday, we had our first strategy session. Of course, Jenny and Tracy decided that while I may be Campaign Manager, Hildegarde needed a whole campaign team, and it should be them. And while I wasn't thrilled to have them horn in on my new friendship, I knew they were right.

"You need everyone you can get on your side, don't you think?" Jenny asked.

"Plus, you can't make all the posters and get them all up and everything by yourself, can you?" Tracy pointed out.

"And anyhow, we've been your best friends since before forever..."

"So don't think you can ditch us now!" They had a point there. A few of them. So, Saturday morning found the four of us huddled around my kitchen table, to figure things out.

"I'd like to start by thanking the three of you for being willing to get involved" Hildegarde began. "This is

a vitally important election, at a vitally important time.”

“Why?” Tracy wanted to know.

“Why? Because it is time for our generation to take action, to save the planet from ourselves, so we will have a future, so that some day our daughters and granddaughters will have this same opportunity to gather around a cozy kitchen table on a Saturday morning and plan their elections, instead of struggling to survive in an overheated wasteland of a world, like we are headed toward with our wasteful ways and excessive consumption of coal and other fossil fuels!” Whoa, I thought. This is pretty big time and depressing. Not sure it’s the best way to win an election. As Campaign Manager, I was beginning to think my first job may be to reign in my candidate a little.

“Uh, Hildegarde? That’s great, and we do need to know all about it, but I think we need to maybe tone it down a little?”

“Tone it down? This is a matter of life and death!”

“Hildegarde, it’s just a school election. We’re just kids.”

“‘Just kids’? Sorry, I don’t buy that. It’s our future, everyone’s future, and we need to be serious about it! I figured you of all people would understand that.”

“I do understand that, and I think it’s great. But we need to get you elected first. So maybe you can slow down a little and we can come up with a plan. Do you know who is running against you?”

“I do. Wyatt.” She rolled her eyes. Actually, we all did. “He seems like a little bit of a jerk.”

“Just a little...” Jenny muttered. I know she was thinking about that time back in second grade when, at recess every day, for a month, Wyatt pushed her down. It was kind of cute, since it was obvious he did it because he had a crush on her, but she never did see it that way.

“You know, his dad is president of the School Board.” Tracy pointed out.

“Yeah,” I added, “and he’s just as much of a jerk and bully as Wyatt is.”

“So why would anyone even think about voting for him?” Oh Hildegarde, so innocent of our town’s politics...

“His mom runs the bank in town. Big, important woman. And it seems like half the kids in school have fathers who work at Wyatt’s dad’s construction company. Between the two of them, well, none of us like Wyatt, but I think everyone is a little afraid of him.” I explained.

“So a bunch of the boys pretend to be his friend.” Jenny continues, “That way they can pretend to be important, too.”

“It pretty well stinks.” Tracy concludes.

“But will people vote for him, in a secret ballot?”

“We just need to convince them not to!” I said, with great campaign-managerish certainty. “What’s our plan?”

“We need posters” Jenny said. “I can help there!” Jenny is a pretty good artist...not quite as good as she thinks she is, but better than the rest of us, so I shouldn’t be catty. We did need posters, but that wasn’t exactly the most original idea...

“That would be great” Hildegarde said, “but won’t Wyatt have a bunch of posters too?” No kidding. His mom would probably have them produced at the bank, by all kinds of professional people. “What can we do to make ours special?”

“We need a good slogan. Knowing those guys, theirs will probably be something really inspiring, like ‘You’d better Vote for Wyatt, or else!’”. Everyone laughed at my comment, mainly because they knew it was true.

Hildegarde began pacing, chewing on her thumb-nail, deep in thought. We all watched her, waiting for a flash of brilliance. Suddenly she stopped, spun to-

ward us with an “I know!”, then turned away with a “no, that’s no good”. I got up and paced too, soon Jenny and Tracy did as well. And there we all were, pacing back and forth across the kitchen with an occasional “How about???...naw...” or “Maybe...???...no, that’s just stupid” and no great ideas when my dumb older brother Frank came in.

“Oh look, it’s a parade!” he snarked at us.

“Hi Frank!” Tracy simpered. She’s had a crush on him for years and years. Sometimes I totally don’t understand what goes on in the heads of my friends.

“Hey Trace, Jen,” suddenly he saw Hildegarde. Blond hair flying as she paced about, nearly as tall as he was (Frank is a little bit of a shrimp), she was quite a sight. “Whoa! Hildegarde! Hey! Hi! Uh, what are you doing here?” Was he blushing? Frank may have been a year older than us, but all the guys in school sure paid attention when Hildegarde showed up in town. Not that she seemed to notice.

“Hi Frank. I’m running for Student Body President! Rose is my campaign manager. I sure hope I can count on your vote.” Boy, the smile she gave him...I thought if we could just bottle that and send it around, she’d win, no problem! And boy, the amazed look he gave me. Yeah, big brother, I, me, moi, your little sister, is Campaign Manager for Hildegarde. Get used to it! Ha!

“I’m running on a zero-net-school platform.” she went on. “A vote for me is a vote for our future!”

“Hey, nice slogan.” Frank said, admiringly. It was just like that. Sheesh. “Only trouble is, I already told Wyatt I’d help him with his campaign.” Wyatt and Frank play soccer together. It really stinks, because they like to hang out and watch matches and stuff together at our place. Uck. Way too much Wyatt time. But it figured. Not that I wanted Frank around, checking out Hildegard all the time. So it was ok, really. “Gotta dash. Good luck” he scooped up his stinky soccer shoes and headed out the door. “Losers!” he tossed back over his shoulder.

“I’m not sure I’m terribly fond of your brother.” Hildegard muttered to me.

“Me neither” I concurred. We’d just have to show him, and all those others. We all needed to vote for our future! We just needed to convince the rest of the school of that. But how, when you’ve got the town big guy’s son running against you? Yeah, how.....

We spent the rest of that day gathering together materials and getting going on posters. They looked pretty good, I thought, and come Monday we’d put them all over the school. A Vote for the Future! How could anyone argue with that? But about 2 in the afternoon, Hildegard put down the big metallic silver

marker she was using to add flashes around the “future” on one of the posters, and said “This is NOT enough!”

“Huh?” we all grunted, looking at her. Except Jenny, who grunted too, but kept her head down in her lettering. She’s so single minded.

“Posters aren’t enough!”

“But posters are all everyone does for campaigns. Posters, and the big debate.” I pointed out.

“I am not ‘everyone’. We need to do more! We need to get people doing something. Now! Not just with their vote! And not doing nothing until the election! Now is the time for action!” And she jumped up and started her pacing. Here she goes again, I thought. I was along for this ride, so I sat back, put the top on my glitter stick, and got ready to see where this train was headed. Cool.



3

We soon found out the first place it was headed, and we were all headed with it. It happened after we had all paced around a little more. I was thinking about my dweeby brother's reaction when he found himself face to face with Hildegarde.

"You know what we've got, that Wyatt and his campaign don't?" The others stopped and looked at me, expectantly. "We have YOU, Hildegarde! You're way better than any poster! You need to be out there, campaigning!"

"Rose, of course I will be."

"Really? You'd already thought of that?"

"Well yeah...but what did you have in mind?" What did I have in mind...well...

"What were you planning to say to them?"

"I was planning to smile, say Please Vote for Me, because a Vote for Me is a Vote for the Future, I guess." It was the first time I'd seen her anything like uncertain.

"Did you have something else in mind?"

“Action, Hildegarde, action! Let’s give them something to do! Now! Like you said! Don’t tell them what you plan to do, tell them what they can do, now! Show them the leader you ARE, not the leader you could be if they elect you! Then they’ll see that you already are a leader, and they will elect you, what else could they do?”

“Rose, I like the way you think. Everyone, follow me!” and she dashed out the door, the three of us in tow. By the time we reached the street, she was running. Leading us already - see? I was right.

“Where are we going?” Tracy panted. Long distance running was never her thing.

“To the school!” Hildegarde led the charge. “We’re going to give it a good look-see, figure out some actions we can lead our classmates on now, this week! Recycling! Thermostat settings! Lightbulbs! Maybe even an energy audit! I can’t believe I hadn’t thought of all this before...I can’t even remember if there are recycling bins in every classroom, other than the ones I’ve already put around! Do they run the furnaces on weekends? What kind of bulbs are in the fixtures?” I was trying to point out to her that it was Saturday, we probably couldn’t even get into the building, as we ran down the block and rounded the corner. Our house is really near the play field behind the school, and that is where

we ended up, excited, looking forward, full speed, only to run into....

Wyatt and Frank and the rest of the soccer team. All huddled together. A big mass of sweaty stinky boys. And I mean it when I said we ran into them. Bam. Or more like bam bam bamity bam. Ewww. Boys really do stink at the end of a soccer practice, on a warm spring day.

“What have we here?” Wyatt smirked as he caught me as I fell. I backed away from him as quick as I could. “Well, if it isn’t little RosieRoo! In such a big hurry...”

“Don’t call me that!” I’d always hated that he’d call me that, thinking it is so cute. Of course, by now Hildegard had gotten back on her feet (ignoring all the sweaty hands that had reached out to help her up) and was gracefully brushing her hair out of her eyes and the grass off her bottom.

“Hello gentlemen!” she smiled that brilliant smile right at them all. Gentlemen? She really was a natural politician (especially if that may entail occasionally stretching the truth a bit). But was she going to try and chat up the opposition? Right now? How could she? “Excuse us” she kept the smile on her face as she dashed around the clump of boys and off toward the school. Oh, she was good. The rest of us followed suit,

leaving the amazed soccer team in our dust. Or so I like to think. It did feel good.

“Just cultivating an air of mystery for the opposition” she threw back over her shoulder at we three hustled to keep up. “Keep ‘em guessing.”

Soon enough, we were at the back door of the school. As I had feared, it was locked. We walked around to all the doors, checking them, but no luck. Hildegarde tossed me her notebook. “Hey Rose, jot down some stuff, ok?” As we walked, Hildegarde would look up and point things out, I tried to keep up with my note taking...

“Single paned windows. You know what a heat loss those are, don’t you, Rose?”

“All these dumpsters, but not one for recycling. Just trash. That stinks.” (they were full of garbage, the day was warm, they really did stink.)

“Look in that classroom. Incandescent lights everywhere. I don’t believe it. That’s terrible”

“See how sunny it is on that side of the roof? A solar array would be great up there. And it’s right by the science classrooms, we could track the output as part of our lessons!”

“I can’t believe this vending machine stocks bottled water! We should ban it, get everyone to bring reusable bottles, fill them from the taps. Better yet, we should

be selling school water bottles, we could make some money off it!”

“Look at the tops of those trees blowing in the wind...I wonder how much of the school we could run with a few turbines on the roof. Or in the play ground...we could put basketball hoops on them!”

By then, we were back around to the first locked doors we had come to. I scribbled down a few last notes and looked up just in time to see Wyatt and Frank and the rest of the soccer boys headed our way.

“Oh oh” Jenny muttered.

“Ladies, ladies, ladies, what have we here?” Wyatt led them up to us. “Hello, Hildegarde. I hear you’re going to be my opposition in the election. Won’t this be fun?”

“Well hi there Wyatt” Hildegarde kept her cool. And then some. “Yes, I think it is going to be a very interesting election, don’t you?”

“Oh, I’m sure it will be. My parents are sure excited by the idea of me being school president. Chip of the old School Board President and Bank President block, you know. Runs in the family, being at the top.”

“Like monkeys in the tops of the trees” Tracy whispered to me. I managed to keep from giggling.

“How’s your campaign coming along?” Hildegarde asked, very sweetly. “Do you have a slogan?”

“Sure do! It’s ‘You’d Better Vote for Wyatt.’” He seriously said that! Oh, it was so hard to keep a straight face.

“Maybe you should add ‘or else’ onto it, just for emphasis” Hildegarde suggested, eyes all wide and innocent.

“Hey, that’s a good idea! I like it!” the boys around him all nodded, clapping each other on the back, repeating “or else!” “yeah, better vote for him or else!”, and grinning like it was the smartest thing they’d heard this year. That did it - Jenny and Tracy and I all cracked up. Doubled over laughing, actually, and while the boys stared at us like we were crazy, Team Hildegarde turned our backs on them and ran for home.



4

Monday morning dawned cool and cloudy. But my mood was sunny - today was the day Hildegarde would begin her serious campaigning, with me by her side! And at least it wasn't raining, which was a really good thing, since I had a big pile of posters I had to carry to school and get posted.

"You're up early, and all on your own" Mom said as I bustled into the kitchen for breakfast. Yes, it's true, usually it does take some nagging and dragging on her part to get me going in the morning. "To what do we owe this honor? And where's your brother?"

"How should I know?" If there's one person who hates mornings more than I do, it's Frank. It's about the only thing we even halfway agree on. "But I've got to get to school early early, I'm meeting Jen and Trace at 7:45 so we can get Hildegarde's campaign posters up before classes start."

"That's nice, dear." Mom said absently, as she set my oatmeal down in front of me. Well, actually, she set it next to me, where Frank would have been sitting if he'd

been there. Honestly, Mom is not really a morning person, either. I slid it in front of me and dug in.

As I ate, I suddenly had a great idea. “Hey Mom?”

“Hmmm?” she sipped her coffee as she gazed out the window.

“Have you ever done an energy audit for school?”

“Your school?” I do love Mom, but she can be a little slow in the morning.

“Yeah, my school.”

“No, I haven’t. Though there are a lot of things it needs, I’ve noticed that every time I’ve been there. All those old windows, you can feel the drafts in some of the rooms and even in the hallways, you can tell there is hardly any insulation anywhere. There are times I feel like I can see the heat leaking out that old roof from here! But you know, there are a bunch of things you kids could do, to do your own audit. You don’t need all my fancy equipment to get some good ideas. By the way, it is 7:45 now...”

“Great idea Mom! Gotta go!” I grabbed my lunch, my pile of posters, and dashed.

Jenny and Tracy were waiting for me when I ran up the back steps. We got busy, papering the school with our beautiful and inspiring posters (at least I hoped they were). They looked good, and as people started arriving for class, I noticed them gathering around them,

pointing, chatting, muttering about “the future”. Admiring all that glitter, if nothing else. We were feeling pretty proud of ourselves as we plonked down on the front steps and waited for Hildegarde to arrive.

“You know, my mom had a pretty good idea this morning” I told them.

“Really? Your mom?”

“In the morning?”

“And you actually heard what she said?”

“And remembered it?” OK, so Jenny and Tracy knew my family pretty well.

“Ha ha. Very funny. Ok, here comes Hildegarde, I’ll tell you all together!” Hildegarde came swinging down the street, looking every bit a school president. At least in my opinion. We all hopped up off the steps and went to greet her.

“Hey Hildegarde! We got all the posters up!” Jenny announced, only to be interrupted by Tracy’s “They look great!”, as over them both I tried to announce “I’ve got the best idea!!!!”

“Whoa! Hang on! Not all at once!” Hildegarde laughed at our enthusiasm. “You guys are such a great team! I love this! Jenny, that’s great, Tracy, I bet they do, let’s go check out the posters, and as we do, Rose, why don’t you tell me your idea?” We headed up the steps, Hildegarde smiling and waving and stopping to

chat with people and shake hands (I swear, if anyone had a baby in that crowd, she'd have been kissing it). I stayed right beside her, aching to tell her my great idea (well, Mom's great idea, but I was the one to make it happen, I just knew it! Well, maybe Hildegarde too, but, well, you know what I mean). But I knew better than to interrupt. Seems like everyone wanted a bit of her glow. She was just thanking one of the younger kids who was gushing all over her about how great it was she was running as she turned the corner by the plugged-up drinking fountain (the one that dribbled when you tried to drink from it, not the one with gum in the hole that squirts you in the face) , and there was Wyatt. And my stupid brother. And a bunch of their friends.

“Hi Hildegarde” Wyatt sneered. “Nice posters. Love the glitter.” His gang laughed. But hey, I did love the glitter.

“Why, thank you Wyatt. I haven't seen any of your posters yet. How are they coming along?” She answered, keeping her cool way better than I ever could have.

“Oh, I don't think I need posters. I think everyone knows who they should be voting for...”

“I sure hope so!” I threw in my brother's face. I felt pretty tough, knowing I was backing the right side.

The boys all laughed at me, and as they turned their backs to go, Wyatt said “Oh RosieRoo, when will you learn? Politics is about so much more than, well, politics.” I wasn’t quite sure what he meant by that, but I knew it wasn’t so good. And I had a bad feeling I would be finding out. They sauntered off, pointing and laughing at one of our posters as they passed it. Neanderthals.

“So, Rose, tell me, what is this great idea of yours?” I finally had Hildegarde’s attention.

“Well, I was talking to my Mom at breakfast this morning...”

“Always a time of brilliant conversation at their house!” Tracy chuckled to Jenny.

“It was today!” I shot back. “I asked my mom if she had ever done an energy audit for our school. She said she hadn’t, but she knew it had problems, and that we should do one ourselves, see where we could make a difference. I thought this would be a great, well, a great call to arms! We could empower our classmates to find the problems, and you could lead us to the solutions!”

Hildegarde gave me a look I had not seen much before. If I didn’t know better, I would say she was giving me a look of respect. “You know, Rose,” she drawled, “that is rather brilliant. You said before, we need to give

everyone action, not just talk. What a great way to do so! How should we organize it?”

“Well, I could get some ideas from Mom, about what we should really do. What we realistically can do. I know she would get me a list. We could divide it up, maybe by homeroom class, and each group could take a different thing to look into, then report back to me, to us, your election committee. In time for the debate next month” I was thinking on the fly now, and the ideas just flew out of my brain. It was pretty exciting, I’m telling you! “Then, at the debate, you can present the findings, and the solutions...”

“Which, as school president, if they vote for me, I will implement! Rose, this is great! Everyone will be engaged in the process, then, with me as the solution they have already invested their time in, well, they’ll have to vote for me, or else all their work would have been for nothing! I love it!”

I admit, it sounded a tiny bit devious when she put it that way, putting everyone to work for us, before the election, then using their work to get our candidate elected. No wonder I loved the whole idea so much. Then the bell rang and it was time for first period. I couldn’t wait for the day to be over, so I could get home and get the list of ideas from Mom and start getting them going!



5

The day crawled along. Finally it was over, and I could head home and get together with Mom and get some ideas. I ran home from school, after making a date with Team Hildegarde for after dinner, to let them know what I'd learned. When I got home, I was thrilled to see Mom's car already in the driveway. Almost as thrilled as I was to see Frank out in the street kicking the ball around with a few of his friends. He'd be out of my hair, at least.

"Hey Mom!" I shouted, as I tossed my pack in the corner of the kitchen, narrowly missing the cat. It is a little game we play - every day I toss the pack there, every day she yowls and runs away as if she is afraid she is going to get hit by it. She's so cute. I've only actually nicked her with it three times in all these years, so what's the big deal?

"Hi Rose. No campaigning this afternoon?" Mom came out of her study, smiling.

"Well, kind of. I, I mean We, need your help. Some advice."

“You certainly haven’t really hit your teenage years yet, if you’re still asking me for advice!” Ha ha Mom. So funny. But I couldn’t say that, I needed her on our side.

“Do you remember this morning, at breakfast, when you said we should do our own energy audit of the school?”

“I said something that clever at breakfast?”

“Yeah, you did!”

“And you remembered it, at breakfast?” Thousands of out of work comedians in the world, and I’ve got one for a mother...

“Yes, I did. And we want to use that idea as part of Hildegarde’s campaign. Can you tell me some specific things we could do?”

And she did. I took lots and lots of notes, trying to keep up with all the things she said, and she had plenty. Then we had to break for dinner, and before I knew it, it was time to head over to Tracy’s house for our planning meeting. I was so ready!

We met in her family room, a big plate of brownies on the table in front of us, all three of them listening intently to my report. Life is so good!

“Here’s the list from my Mom” I began. “There are 4 of us, we have 4 homeroom classes and we’re each in a different one. That used to make me mad...”

“Me too!” Jenny said. We three old friends just couldn’t believe it when they had broken us up at the beginning of this year. But now it turns out that was a good thing, and a good thing too that when Hildegarde came to school, she happened to not get in the same homeroom as any of the three of us.

“But now it’s good, we can each learn about our subject, and lead our class in what to do. So I’ve broken Mom’s list into 4 categories: Structural, like windows, doors, walls and insulation, Lighting, Heating and cooling, including hot water, and the Kitchen.”

“Could my class have the kitchen?” Tracy asked around a mouthful of brownie crumbs.

“Maybe not the best idea” Hildegarde got a glare from Tracy for that response. “But this is great! Ladies, this is a wonderful start toward saving the planet, for our future, for our children’s future! Now is the time! And we are the ones who can do it! If not us, then who...”

And she was off...again. Since it was only the four of us, we sat there and listened. And I know what she was saying was really important. I was starting to see it was even more important than I had thought. I had always thought we were just kids, there was nothing we needed to do, that’s why we had parents, to take care of us, make sure we had everything we need so we could

just be kids and have fun and no worries. But Hildegarde was getting me thinking maybe we needed to watch out more for ourselves, for our own future.

“...and we can’t just wait for the adults to do all this! It is our future, and we are the ones to...” her words wove in and out of my thoughts, like we were of one mind. Weird. A little scary. And so true, I was realizing.

After about 15 minutes, she began to wind down. “Wow, Hildegarde” was all Jenny could say. Tracy looked like she was half asleep as she absently picked brownie crumbs off the plate with her finger and licked them up. Not me, I was now ready to go.

“Hildegarde, you are so right!” I shouted and jumped up. The other three stared at me. I was usually the quiet one. “We’ve got to do this! Now! Us! Tracy, you should indeed become the kitchen-efficiency expert - it’s your passion, so why not? Jenny, you’re the artist, you should take lighting, you’re so good at seeing things, and lighting is so important to you. I’ll take the structural part, since sometimes that’s the hardest to see, and I may need some advice from Mom. That leaves heating and cooling for you, Hildegarde, ok?” I knew I was getting a little intense here, issuing orders, but I was pretty fired up.

“Great! I love being cool, and getting in hot water!” Hildegarde’s joke cut the tension a bit. Guess that’s why she is the candidate.

“So, tomorrow morning, we each talk to our home-room teachers about what we’d like our class to tackle.” I went on, like the general I suddenly seem to have become. “Now, let me brief you each on your mission.” The others stood up and saluted me, and once we’d recovered from the fit of giggles that produced, we got down to work, and the next morning we each approached our teachers with a plan. The really wonderful news was each of the teachers agreed to let us put them into action! And we were off!



6

First off, we each brainstormed with our classes to see what we may want to check on. I made sure each of us, Tracy, Jenny, Hildegarde, and myself, had a list of ideas on our topics that we could maybe suggest, if our classmates were short of inspiration. But it wasn't a problem. Every class came up with a really wonderful bunch of things to look at, to think about.

Hildegarde had Mr. Searle for homeroom. He was a pretty cool guy, and Hildegarde is pretty persuasive, so we were not too surprised when she told us he'd agreed to have the class do a heating survey. First off, they broke into teams of 3. One team went from room to room in the school and noted what each one was used for - general classroom, art, library, office, and all that. Another checked what the heating and cooling settings were in each one - did they have manual or programmable thermostats, was the heat turned down at night when no one was there? Were empty rooms being kept warm or cold when they didn't need to be? One group looked into whether there curtains to close to keep the

sun out on really hot day, to lessen the need for air conditioning? And if there were any trees to block the sun for the same reason? Another trio looked into hot water - they talked to Mr. Ybarra, the head of maintenance, and found out what kind of tanks we had. How old were they? Were they insulated? They spent every morning that week gathering new bits of information, and Hildegarde kept thanking them and making sure they knew why they were doing this. She was brilliant, I'm sure. I heard kids talking about it in the hallways, comparing notes, everyone was buzzing about it.

Jenny's class took pretty much the same approach. Her teacher, Mrs. Cross, was also excited, maybe even more than Mr. Searle. Jenny convinced her to let the class go into every room in the school and count the fixtures, see what kind of bulbs they had in them. Even what kind of bulbs were in the exit signs, always lit above every door. They checked closets and empty rooms for lights left on. To see if windows and skylights were clean, and letting in all the light they could. And the school grounds - they walked around and around the buildings, counting the fixtures, looking at the bulb types, seeing which ones were on in full daylight. The whole class was amazed and a little appalled by what they found, and seemed ripe for the suggestions I knew Hildegarde would be making.

Tracy led her whole classroom to the kitchen. Fortunately (and not too surprisingly), Mrs. Schmaltz, the head cook, was pals with Tracy. They observed lunch prep one day, watching to see if the lunch crew used lids on pots, used pots that were the same size as their burners, if they stood looking into refrigerators with the doors open, or if they knew what they wanted before opening the doors. After lunch, a team observed the dish washers, to see if they were running full loads.

My class was really excited to maybe be able to get up into the attic, see what kind of insulation the building had. Mr. Ybarra was a little nervous about letting us all up there, but he did let us peek through the access doors. He was very cool about it. It may have helped that Mrs. Ybarra happened to be my homeroom teacher. There wasn't much up there. And we could see for ourselves that the windows were single paned. This was a good project to do in the spring, because there were so many windy days. We'd go around and feel under the doors and around the windows - some of them you could just about hear the wind whistling through.

By the end of the week, with the big debate just a week away, we had plenty of ammunition (ok, I really don't know where all this military stuff was coming from in me. Guess I was ready to battle against the foe!) You could feel it in the air - everyone was talking

about the project, comparing what they had been finding, and what may be able to be done about it, and everyone knew the whole thing was Hildegarde's idea (well, actually it was my idea, or kind of my mom's, but that was ok. We were in this together.) No one was talking about Wyatt. No one was thinking about Wyatt. I should have known he wouldn't like that, and would have to do something to get himself back in the front of everyone's heads. I should have not been surprised when we got to school Monday morning, and all of Hildegarde's campaign posters were gone. In their places, big, fancy commercially printed posters with just a big old close-up of Wyatt's ugly face, smiling, and the words "Or Else". And, under each one, a small sad dusting of glitter.



7

“Let’s rip them all down!” Tracy cried.

“And burn ‘em” Jenny was practically rubbing her hands together in glee at the thought.

“The posters or the boys” I wondered, aloud.

“Both!” Jenny and Tracy replied in unison. “Jinx!”

“No”, Hildegarde said, way calm, “We take the high road.”

“We what!?!” I was riled up now...all our work, just torn down!

“We take the...” before she could finish, Wyatt, Frank, and their gang sauntered up.

“Good morning ladies” Wyatt sneered.

“Ladies? You kidding? That’s my sister you’re talking to!” Very cute, Frank. Jerk. They all laughed.

“Oh, Frank, you seem to have a bit of glitter stuck to your forehead” Hildegarde said in her sweetie sweet voice. As my doofus brother rubbed furiously at it, Wyatt turned to her.

“You think you’re so clever, getting everyone all hyped up with your tree-hugger ideas. It won’t help

you. Sorry, cutie. They all really know who they'd better vote for. I just gave them a little reminder of who really matters in this school, and in this town. And, fresh and cute and exciting as you may be, it ain't you, babe."

"Yeah. All the glitter in the state won't help you, girlies!" Frank threw in.

"I guess we'll just have to trust that the students around here will understand what really does matter. What matters not just today or tomorrow or next week, but for the whole future. Bigger things than this school, or this town, or any of us." Hildegarde responded calmly and reasonably.

"Ha!" Wyatt spat out. "You think the voters will be actually using their brains? I don't think so! They don't care about what's bigger than them. They care about what affects them now, today, maybe tomorrow, at home and at school. Not beyond that. What's for lunch. What'll be on the history test next period. If JoeBob likes them. What color they should paint their nails for the dance on Friday. That's about all. You're dreaming to think you can excite them beyond that. They just don't care. Their life is fine, so why should they worry?"

"You know, you're right." Hildegarde got her notebook out. "Good point. Let me get that down." I was sensing a little sarcasm here. "Students are all idiots." she recited as she wrote, "so they deserve an idiot to

lead them.” she glared up at Wyatt as she snapped her book closed.

He glared back, turned on his heel, and with a “you’ll see!”, stormed off.

“So much for taking the high road” I smiled at Hildegarde.

“Ooo, he just got me so...so...”

“It’s ok. He’s been doing that to us since kindergarten. Welcome to the club. So, what’s on for today?”

Hildegarde smiled big and began digging through her backpack. “Just wait and see!” Soon the hallway around her was strewn with pens, pencils, books, notepads, wow, how did she fit all that in there? “Aha! There it is! Look what I got!” and she whipped out a water bottle.

Not just a water bottle. This thing was glorious. Bright metallic teal. Emblazoned with our school mascot, a large, snarling, sharp-beaked, full-clawed chicken. OK, I know a chicken is not the most inspiring school mascot, no matter how snarly you make it. But our town was founded around a bunch of giant egg farms, one of the biggest egg producing areas in the country. And while most of the farms had become housing developments, we were proud of our fowl history. In fact the school was built on one of the old laying barns, and on especially hot days there was still a cer-

tain odor in the air. It was our heritage, and we were The Fighting Chickens, so don't mess with us!

"Wow, it's beautiful!" Tracy sighed as we passed it around.

"Look at the other side!" Hildegarde said proudly. Printed in tasteful small letters on the opposite side were the words "Waste less. Drink tap water. Vote for Hildegarde. A vote for the Future!"

"Very very cool." I said, admiringly.

"They'll let us sell advertising?" Jenny asked.

"Read the fine print" She showed us where it said "all proceeds to support the Fighting Chicken Booster Club."

"Not only can we 'sell' advertising, the Booster Club is going to help us do it!"

"Hildegarde, you are a genius!" And I meant it.

"We take pre-orders this week, my mom will bring the bottles on Monday, we'll get them passed around, and my name will be everywhere, even without the posters. And we'll be cutting down on waste, and making some money for the school, all at once."

"You know, Hildegarde," I said admiringly, "I always knew you were the right person for this job. But every day, I believe it more and more. It is a nice feeling."

"Why, thank you Rose. Would you like to take the first shift at the sales table?"

“I’d be honored.”

So I spent the morning break and lunch and after school that day at a table we borrowed from the art room. I had a display of the bottles in front of me. A typical exchange with a student would go like this:

Student: What are these?

Me: Water bottles. You can buy one and bring water from home or fill it here at school.

Student: Why would I do that?

Me: Where do you get your water now?

Student: I buy it from the vending machine.

Me: And how much does that cost?

Student: A couple of bucks.

Me: And what do you do with the bottle when you’re done with it?

Student: I toss it.

Me: And how does that water taste?

Student: Like plastic.

Me: Maybe you’d be better off buying one of our bottles, a small one time investment. Then you can just keep refilling it. It won’t taste like plastic. It won’t make trash. And you’ll be supporting the school.

Student: How?

Me: The money goes to to Booster Club. So they can help pay for field trips, equipment, you know. They’re really great.

Usually by now, the student has picked up the bottle and is inspecting it.

Student: Nice chicken.

Me: Yeah. Pretty killer, eh?

Students: (rotating bottle): What's this writing back here? Oh. Hildegarde, eh? She's pretty cool. But my dad says I'd better vote for Wyatt. Or else.

Me: Hey, no one can see who you're voting for, once you're in the voting booth.

Student: True.....

At this point, I know I've just about closed the deal. I pick up my fine metallic teal Fighting-Chicken-Vote-for-Hildegarde-Vote-for-the-Future water bottle, take a nice deep drink and sigh in satisfaction, set it back on the table, and smile at my customer.

Student: OK, I'll take one.

And I close the deal.



8

Before we knew it, it was the morning of the day of the Big Debate. I was feeling pretty good about all we had accomplished. We had all the information we had gathered with our different audits, and there was a bunch. Our classmates were starting to get anxious to do something with all this information they had worked so hard to gather. We were counting on them realizing that, if Wyatt won, nothing would happen. If they didn't know, I was sure Hildegard would remind them! So many people were walking around drinking out of our water bottles. The recycling bins weren't overflowing with plastic bottles any more, there was less trash all around the school grounds, and I think people really knew it was because of us. We may not have any posters up any more, but we didn't care. Wyatt's were looking a little ragged and tattered at the edges from folks rubbing against them as they passed by between classes (you'd be amazed how much "accidental" rubbing 3 girls like Jenny, Tracy, and I just happen to do between classes! Such a shame...)

The debate assembly was scheduled for right after lunch. I couldn't believe it when we had a Social Studies test that morning, but I tried my hardest to focus on the questions. I just could not really understand why I had to know about Reconstruction and Carpetbaggers and all that ancient stuff. What matters is the now, and the future, and what we can do about it! I tried to point this out to my teacher. She was not impressed. She just stood above me, at my desk, shook her head, and pointed back at my test paper. I heard a few sniggers around me as I picked up my pen and tried my hardest to care about The Redeemers and the Freedmen's Bureau. Don't think I got my best grade ever on that test, but my mind and heart were on bigger issues.

I made it through chemistry with no major explosions. Finally it was lunch time. We had a team meeting under the cherry tree. I got there first, and had just opened my lunch bag when Jenny and Tracy blew in.

"I baked us some good luck cookies!" Tracy announced as she plunked down, opening up her bag and pulling out a tin. She was just prying off the lid so we could dig in as Hildegarde rounded the corner.

"Whoa!" There was a clang as Tracy dropped the lid.

"Niiice!" Jenny said.

"Hildegarde, you look great!" I said, and I meant it. She had gone all out to look fabulous for the debate.

Hair freshly-washed and shining, a flowing teal dress (school color - smart girl!) with new clean white strappy sandals highlighting her contrasting deep-salmon painted toe nails. “Wyatt isn’t going to be able to even talk straight when he sees you!”

“That’s the idea...” she winked. “All’s fair in politics and environmentalism, right? Of course, dressing nicely is a sign of respect for your audience, right? Oh man, are those your famous double chocolate malt cookies, Tracy? Stand back ladies, let a sick candidate through!” She grabbed a handful and sat back. We all sat there happily munching away for a few nice, quiet, peaceful moments. When the cookies were all gone, we dug out our sandwiches and got to work.

“Are you totally ready for this, Hildegarde?” I asked, having a nibble of my PB&J on foccacia. With Mom’s homemade gooseberry jelly. My favorite. Mom always knows the important days, when I need a really special lunch.

“As ready as I’ll ever be” she answered, biting into her avocado and sprouts on whole grain.

“Opening statement all written, and timed, the right length?” Jenny asked, taking a chomp out of her peanut butter and honey.

“To the second. And memorized.” she smiled back.

“Can we hear it?” Tracy wondered, as she scarfed on her peanut butter and pickle on white bread. No, really. She’ll eat anything. Blegh. At least they were sweet pickles.

“You know, I’d rather keep it a little fresh.” She smiled as she said this, so it was ok.

“Probably a good idea” I smiled back and moved on to my apple. “I think we should just eat our lunches. I’m sure Hildegarde is plenty prepared, and probably relaxing is the best thing for now.”

“Totally!” she responded, finished her lunch, and leaned back on her elbow. The rest of us finished eating, and we all sprawled under the tree, admiring the sun sparking through the cherry blossoms, watching our classmates wandering by. Hildegarde smiled and waved at every single one of them, and they all smiled and waved back. A bunch were carrying our water bottles. “This is going to be a great afternoon.” Hildegarde sighed, happily. I was glad she was so confident. I wished I could be, too.

After a while, I rolled over. “What time is it?”

“Bell in five minutes. Better get freshened up.” Hildegarde popped up, so we did too. “How am I looking?” We picked pieces of grass off her dress as she rotated. There were a couple of cherry blossom petals stuck in her hair - they looked kind of pretty, but I figured I’d

better take pick them off. Didn't want her to come off as too much of a tree-hugger-earth-mother. Even though she was. Not that it is a bad thing. But she needed everyone's vote, hippie freaks, drama weirdos, jocks, rah-rahs, everyone. And people at our school can be a little, well, judgmental of people they think are different from them.

"You look wonderful!" Tracy sighed. The bell rang.

"OK, team. We're on!" And we were off, to the Multipurpose Room, to finally take Wyatt on, face to face, in front of the whole school. Following in Hildegarde's wake, watching her hair flashing in the sun, watching everyone passing by smiling and saying hi, for the first in my life I actually felt a tiny bit sorry for Wyatt. But just a tiny bit.



9

The room was packed. Everyone was squirming around, full of after-lunch energy. Full of “something different going on” energy. Full of “I’m just glad I’m not in my English class studying transitive verbs right now” energy. We said our goodbyes at the door, as Hildgarde made her way backstage where the candidates were gathering before being assigned their seats on stage. We found chairs as near the front as we could.

“Hey, there’s your brother” Jenny nudged me, pointing to Frank sitting in the first row with a bunch of his soccer-playing buddies.

“So?” I asked back to her. I did not really want to be associated with him at all on this day. But I did not like the fact that bunch of monkeys was right up front. I leaned back, so he wouldn’t see me, just in case he happened to turn around.

“Hi Frank!” I heard Tracy simper from beside me. I gave her a quick elbow jab in the ribs just as Mr. Bullock, the principal, walked on stage.

“Good afternoon, students!” he began. “Welcome to this year’s Candidate’s Debates!” Mr. Bullock always talks in exclamation points. I think he thinks it makes him sound friendly. But mostly it makes him sound like he’s been drinking too much coffee. “What a great bunch of candidates we have this year! For every office! I will bring them on and introduce them to you in a minute! But first, let’s welcome our debate moderator, your favorite drama teacher and mine, Mr. Eggertson! He’ll explain how this afternoon will work!”

We all gave Mr. Eggertson a warm welcome. He’s one of those really nice teachers, who really seems to get and care about kids. Plus, drama is really fun, and all his classes are really tough to get in to. But I was hoping to, next year. I think I may have some real potential for a life on the stage and screen. My dad thinks so, too. I can tell, every time he calls me his “little drama queen”.

“Thank you, thank you” he nodded to the clapping audience. When we quieted down, he went on to explain how the afternoon would unfold. “I will call up the candidates for each office, starting with General Student Council, then School Treasurer, Secretary, Vice President, and, finally, President. Each student will have 5 minutes to speak. Until we get to the presidential candidates. Those two will battle it out, one on one.

Each candidate will be allowed a 2 minute introductory statement. Following that, I have a series of questions for each candidate. These questions come from the current student council and officers. Each candidate will answer every question, alternating who answers first. Then will come the bare-knuckles round, where they will be able to debate directly to and with each other. And finally, each will get a two-minute closing statement. Any questions?" No one was really listening yet, so no one had any questions. "Ok Mr. Bullock, back to you. Bring on the contenders."

There was a line of chairs set up in an arc across the stage. Mr. Bullock called out each candidate. As they entered and sat, some were cheered. Some got a few hoots, though no one dared actually boo anyone (the teachers were scattered around the edge of the students, ready to snag anyone that got too inappropriate and toss them out. And into detention. Not worth it. Even the rowdy squirrely soccer players knew that. Especially since their coach happened to be leaning against the wall right beside where they were sitting. Smart guy, for a soccer coach. Made me wonder how he could stand spending all that time with guys like my brother). For most of the candidates, the room was pretty quiet and basically indifferent.

“...and finally...” Mr. Bullock was saying, “we have our two fine candidates for School President! Please welcome Hildegarde and Wyatt!” The room erupted in cheers, though it was hard to tell who they were for. Mr. Bullock was pretty smart, to bring them out together like that. Above the din, I could hear the soccer boys chanting “Wy-att Wy-att!”

Jenny leaned into me and said “sounds like they are saying Why-ette Why-ette, doesn’t it? I wonder, Why? Ette?”

“Ha!” I gave her credit for this one, “good one! Maybe we should make up some new posters for him...” Mr. Bullock was turning the microphone back to Mr. Eggertson, who was holding his hands up, asking for quiet. So we quieted down. Mostly.

“First up, I would like to introduce the candidates for 7th grade Student Council Representative...” he began. As two awfully young looking girls approached the podiums looking terrified, I stopped listening and started looking around.

I noticed no one else was paying much attention, either. Most of the 8th grade girls were trying to sneak texts to each other or were checking out the eighth grade boys or texting each other about boys. Most of the eighth grade boys were trying to play video games in their laps without getting busted by the teachers. The

younger kids were chatting or reading or sleeping or playing rock-paper-scissors or otherwise just totally not there. I started to worry. How was Hildegarde going to get these kids, all of us, fired up and inspired? When all we really cared about was our cell phones and texting and messing off and being kids? Not just to care about her, to elect her, but to care about the school and our energy use and waste, to care about the whole planet? I was about to despair when I felt Jenny tapping my arm...

“Hey Rose” she whispered, “no one seems to much care about this stuff.” We had just about finished each grade’s Student Council Representative candidates by now.

“No kidding” Tracy leaned in from the other side. “hey, you guys want to come to my place for pizza tonight?”

“Tracy, pay attention!” I snapped. “We should all be paying attention! Everyone at this school, everyone in town, everyone everywhere! That’s what’s getting us all into trouble - we’re just not paying attention!”

Billy Crannell, major school nerd, was sitting right in front of us. He turned around and glared at me, with a loud “Shhhhhh! Treasurer is next! I want to hear this!” Jenny, Tracy and I rolled our eyes at each other. Of course, he was right, and I was getting a bit worked up,

but of all the people to have to hear it from! How embarrassing!

So I sat there, quietly, hands folded neatly in my lap, attention apparently on the stage, through the treasurer candidate, the secretaries, the vice presidents. Inside, my thoughts were chasing around and around, worried about Hildegarde, worried about Wyatt and Frank, and our bored, inattentive classmates, worried about the future and the world. That's all. Nothing too big. Ha! If only...

Finally Mr. Eggertson was saying "Thank you to all these fine candidates. I'm sure glad I'm not a student, so I don't need to choose between all these highly qualified individuals!" Yup, he must be the drama teacher, if he can say that with a straight face. What an actor! "And now, the final debate of the afternoon. It is a great honor to introduce two individuals who I believe need no introduction to any of you, our candidates for Student Body President - Hildegarde and Wyatt, please step up to you podiums!" The room erupted in all kinds of cheers again, as Mr. Eggertson held up his hands for quiet. "So that we can get out of here in a reasonable time, I would like to ask you all to hold your applause until the end of the debate. I know these two will have some very exciting and inspiring ideas, but it is a beautiful and sunny afternoon, and we don't want to be in

here any later than we need to be!” I told you Mr. Eg-
gertson understood students. As the room quieted, he
continued, “After the coin toss back stage, it has been
decided that Hildegarde will make her opening state-
ment first. Hildegarde, the floor is yours.” The room
went quiet.



10

Hildegarde stood. Her dress swirled. Her hair shone. So did her smile, as she said “Thank you Mr. Eggertson, Mr. Bullock, faculty, my fellow students. I am so proud and honored to be standing before you today.

“My schoolmates, my classmates, my friends. I know you all know what is going on. You know I am asking for your vote to be your School President. You know I am fairly new to our town and our school. You know my opponent, and you know him well. He has lived here his entire life, and I respect that. Why should you vote for me, the outsider? And not for your old friend? How do I dare stand before you and ask for your vote?

“I will tell you how. Because a vote for Hildegarde is not just a vote for me. It is a vote for all of us, for our future, for our our planet. Maybe you’re thinking ‘hey, I’m just a kid, I have no power to change the future. I just wanted to eat my Froot Loops, come to school, run around and play and visit with my friends and work just hard enough to get just good enough grades that mom and dad won’t come down on me, then get home

and play video games’. Nonsense! I know you are more than that! I believe in you, in all of us. I know there is more to us than that! Because it is our future I am talking about. And if we don’t care about it, if we don’t do something about it, then who will? We are the ones who can, who must, change the world, who can, who must, save the world! And I feel, no, I KNOW I am the right person to lead us, the student body of the honorable institution we just call ‘our school’, to this future - a safe, clean, comfortable future.

“I would lead us to become a zero-net energy school - not using more energy than we produce. How cool would that be? Very cool, I tell you! Students in my class have been participating in audits of our school’s current energy usage. And waste. We found plenty of it! And we have found countless ways the school could be using less energy, saving valuable resources for our future. As your Student Body President, I would lead the charge to institute these changes.

“We have already made one - I see so many of our water bottles out there. It is great to see a sea of gleaming teal Fighting Chickens! And even greater to NOT see a sea of plastic water bottles casually tossed into the trash at the end of the school day. We have already made one difference! How many more differences can we all make, working together? How much good can we

do for ourselves, our school, our community, our world? Plenty. Endless amounts. And how will we do it? Together. You, and me. So I am asking for your vote. For all of us. Because A Vote for Hildegarde is a Vote for the Future! Thank you.” There was a moment of silence as we took all this in. It was a pretty heavy load she was asking us to lift. I hoped it would not backfire, that we kids would not decide to just be kids and not want to think about all this. But then the crowd broke into loud cheers. Hildegarde smiled at us all and took her seat. Frank and his buddies just sat there, squirming a bit at the enthusiasm around them. As it should be.

“Thank you, Hildegarde” Mr. Eggertson said. “exactly two minutes. Very nice. Now Wyatt, will you please give us your opening statement?”

“Thank you Mr. Eggertson” Wyatt slided his way to the podium. His buddies up front started in with the “Wy-att Wy-att” tribal grunt. I did notice that no one else joined in. There was Wyatt, at the podium, arms up trying to look like some sort of real politician, but basically looking like a kid trying to play Mr. President. Dweeb.

“Please, please...oh, thank you, you’re too kind.” Fake humble smile. Gag me. “Well, guess you all know me, I don’t know what else I could tell you, at this

point. You all know my dad, and that he pretty well runs a lot of things at this school and in this town. And you know my mom, who runs lots of things in the town too, and, of course, things at home, as a mom should. Ha ha ha.” Oh, please. Halfway bullying us, half nauseating us with his sexism.

“Well, you should vote for me. You all know that. You know my motto - vote for me. Or else. Ha ha ha. Just kidding. Kind of. Dad says I should really mean it. Is that two minutes yet?”

“Sorry Wyatt, not quite, yet.” Mr. Eggertson was trying to hide his smile. “Maybe you could tell us a bit about your platform? What you stand for? Why people should vote for you?”

“They should vote for me because they know me, and they work for dad or borrow money from mom. Everything has always been fine at this school. I don’t think we need to worry about all this stuff Hildegard is going on and on about. We’re fine. We’ll stay plenty fine. If you just vote for me. So do. I really don’t have anything else to say. So, thanks for your vote, everyone!” He waved at us all. Everyone just sat there, rather stunned, waiting for more. Eventually, Frank yelled

“Yeah Wyatt! You tell ‘em!” He stood up and faced the rest of us. “Wy-att Wy-att! Come on everyone! Wy-att Wy-att!” I sank down in my seat, hoping no one

would realize I was related to this dolt. Wyatt grinned and waved big to Frank. Mr. Eggertson grabbed his mic.

“Well, I guess that’s Wyatt’s opening statement. Thank you Wyatt. Very concise. Now, if the two candidates would approach their podiums, we will move on to the questions from the current government.”

Hildegarde moved to her podium with a smile, Wyatt swaggered to his with a sneer. I’ve got to admit, this next section of the debate was not the most interesting. In fact, it was a bit boring. Basically, Mr. Eggertson would read a really predictable question, like “why do you want to be Student Body President?” or “What special qualities would you bring to the job?” Hildegarde answered them all very nicely, but safely, and Wyatt’s answers were mostly just boring bragging. My attention began to wander, and I noticed just about everyone around me was sneaking peeks at their phone (girls) or video games (boys), or reading, or napping, or gazing out into space (except Billy Cranell, who was leaning forward and listening intently. I swear, the more boring something is, the more fascinating Billy finds it.) Even the air seemed to be slowing down. I was noticing the room was getting a bit stuffy, and the various smells of my classmates were becoming more and more notice-

able. Tracy's head was just beginning to nod onto my shoulder when Mr. Eggertson announced

"Thank you very much, candidates, for those enlightening answers. And thank you current Student Council, for those exciting questions." I think Mr. Eggertson has a rather charming sarcastic streak. "Now it is time for the bare-knuckles round, where you two get to face off against each other. When I ring the bell, you get two minutes to ask each other whatever you'd like. Ready?" They both nodded. "And...you're off!" He hit his bell with a flourish, and Wyatt leaned right into it.

"Hildegarde...don't you think you're a little too....blonde...to be a school president?" Everyone was awake now. Half the boys in the audience (and a few of the girls, the ones with darker hair, giggled a little, too.)

"Mr. Eggertson? Do I even have to answer that?"

"No, Hildegarde, you do not. But I will remind you, you should only be responding directly to Wyatt for this part of the debate."

"Of course. I'm sorry. Wyatt, I'm afraid I can't answer that. I must be too blonde to even understand the question, much less have a clue how to answer it." Her self-deprecating sarcasm garnered a few laughs. Mostly from the girls with lighter hair. "Instead, I would like to ask you something - I'm afraid, even after listening to you all afternoon, and seeing your posters, and follow-

ing your campaign, I still am not clear what your platform is. Perhaps you could tell us?”

“Platform? I am all the platform I need! My platform is all Wyatt. A Wyatt Riot...hey, that’s pretty good, don’t you think?”

“Wow. Brilliant. Wish I was able to think so quickly. But I’m afraid, and please forgive me for being blonde again here, but...how can you be a platform? And what exactly is a Wyatt Riot?”

“Oh baby, it’s what this school will have when I am elected president. Whoo hoo! All Wyatt, all the time, the perfect world, don’t you think, sweetie?” Woops and cheers from the soccer team here.

“I’m sorry...did I mis-hear you? Were you suggesting a Wyatt diet? Or perhaps that it is time for some Wyatt quiet?”

The cheers and laughter nearly drowned out the bell when Mr. Eggertson gave it another ding and announced, struggling to keep the laughter out of his voice, “And that is the end of the bare knuckles round. Thank you, candidates, very enlightening” No kidding. I didn’t know Hildegarde had it in her. But I was sure glad she did! “Now it is time for our closing statements. Again, you each have two minutes, and, since Hildegarde went first at the opening, Wyatt, you may start now.

“Thanks Mr. Eggertson. Thanks everyone. Seriously. I appreciate all your support.” Oh no, was he going to go all sincere on us now? “I know that tomorrow morning, you will all come to school and vote for me. I don’t need two minutes to remind you of that. You will vote for me.” His voice began to rise and rise. “My mom at the bank, where your family has their money and their mortgage, says you should. My dad on the school board and at the job site, when he’s signing your parent’s paychecks says you should. And I say you should. Or else!” He leaned forward with a scary grin and nearly shouted the last bit. I looked around to see how people would react to that. They looked a little uncomfortable, but clapped out of duty. All joking aside, Wyatt’s family really did run a bunch of this town. A lot of kids had pretty good reasons to fear them. His swagger as he went back to his seat was downright threatening.

Hildegarde took the floor. “Thank you all for your support throughout this campaign.” Her gentle voice was like a balm after Wyatt’s harsh shout. “I have really enjoyed getting to know so many of you. And by now, I think you all know me, and what I stand for. I stand for us all. For us of all, working together, to improve our school, our town, our world. I won’t go into all that again. I will leave you with one last reminder, that I hope each and every one of you keep in mind when you

cast your ballots tomorrow. I know, you're thinking I'm going to say 'think about the future' or 'think about the planet'. And of course, I hope you do. But the main thing I ask you to remember, when you are making the final decision between my enthusiastic opponent and myself, is that this is a secret ballot." In perfect opposition to Wyatt's bombast, she now began to lower her voice. "No one will know how you vote." Softer and softer. "So you can vote for the candidate you really believe in." Now it felt as if she were whispering directly into each person's ear "A secret ballot. So you can vote how you want, how you truly know and feel you should. Without fear. And I know you know who should get that very precious vote, and I thank you for it." There was a moment of silence in the quiet after she finished. That wouldn't do at all. As campaign manager, at that moment, I knew what had to happen. I stood up and yelled

"Yay Hildegarde!" Jenny and Tracy, bless their peapicking little hearts, jumped up right beside me and cheered and whistled (Tracy can do the most wonderful shrill whistle) and soon the whole room was cheering, Hildegarde was smiling, and Wyatt was slumped in his chair with the most satisfyingly disgusted look on his face. Now, one more sleep, and it would finally be election day!



11

We met under the cherry tree before school started the next morning.

“Hildegarde, you were brilliant in the debate!” I jumped up to greet her as she arrived.

“I didn’t know you could do nasty so well!” Jenny said, admiringly. Everyone at school was still chuckling about the Quiet Wyatt Diet.

“I try to take the high road”, she answered, “but, well, there comes a time...”

“Are you going to campaign today?” I asked.

“No, I think I’ve said all I need to say.” Of course, even as she was saying this, she was waving to everyone walking by, or saying hi, or asking them how their visit with their grandmother had been, or otherwise ingratiating herself to just about each and every person in the school. Can you say ‘natural politician’?

“But you guys do realize, this election is just the beginning. If I win...”

“If? Hildegarde, you have got it in the bag!”

“Thanks Tracy. I hope so. But if I do, that’s when the work will really begin. Can I count on you three to still help me out? Be by my side, to get everyone else to pitch in, to make the changes we all need to?”

“Hildegarde...” I gave her a look from under my eyebrows. Dad calls this my “Puh-leeze” look. He always says if, when I get married, I combine that look with standing with my hands on my hips, no future husband of mine will stand a chance. “Come on now. You think we were only in this for the glory and glamor of the election? Fun and gratifying as it has been, you’ve gotten me, at least, and I bet Jenny and Tracy too, convinced this zero-net school stuff, this whole save the planet for the future stuff, really matters. So, I’m behind you all the way for whatever it takes to achieve that!”

“Wow, nicely said, Rose!” Hildegarde looked at me proudly. Made me glow a bit, I must admit. “Maybe I should have convinced you to run for vice president! So, we vote in homeroom, but when are the results announced?”

“Usually by lunchtime.” I replied. “They’ll announce it over the PA when they have all the votes tallied.”

“I sure hope so. I think it’d spoil my appetite to not know.” Tracy moaned. Right. Like that’d ever happen.

“And they post the results outside the office” Jenny reminded us. “It’s going to be a long morning, isn’t it?”

“It sure is” Hildegarde agreed, as the bell rang. “Well team, this is it. Whatever the results are, I’d like to thank you three for all the help and support. You’ve all been way better than great” She gave a nervous little sigh.

“What do you mean ‘whatever the results’?” I demanded. “There is absolutely no reason in the world Wyatt should win this thing. He’s a dweeb with no platform, no brains, no vision...”

“And plenty of intimidation.” I glared at Tracy as she made this comment.

“But as Hildegarde reminded us yesterday,” I pointed out, “it is a secret ballot. You can’t intimidate someone for something you don’t know if they did or not.”

“We’ll just hope everyone remembers that. OK team, let’s go vote!” We clinked water bottles with a shout of “To us!” And we were off.

Mrs. Ybarra had never had us all quiet down so quickly as when she stood in the front of the room and held up our ballots. We all plunked into our desks and snatched up our pens. “This is a very interesting election” she began, “between two very different candidates, with two very different visions and styles.”

“Are you talking about Martha and Simon? I think either one of them would be a wonderful treasurer! It is such a vital and exciting role.....”

“No, Billy, I’m not talking about those two. Though I would like to thank Mr. Crannell for reminding me that you are not just electing a school president. So take your time, choose wisely, and remember, it is a secret ballot. No one will ever know who you voted for.” Sometimes I really love Mrs. Ybarra. “Vote for whoever you know will be the best person for the job. I will collect your ballots when you are done, they will be picked up by Marcie” she is our outgoing school president. Nice girl. Cute. Didn’t do a darn thing. “and taken to the office, where the current student council will tally the votes. Results will be announced as soon as they are done. And no sooner. So, once you have voted, I advise you to put it from your mind and concentrate on the rest of your classes this morning.” Why was she glaring at me as she said that?

Finally, the ballots were passed out. And for the first time in my life, as I marked my vote, I had the thrilling feeling that my vote, my voice, could really make a difference. In my life, and in the lives of those around me. It was a heady, thrilling, scary, and wonderful feeling, and I marked my ballot with excitement and pride. As I passed it in, I knew that, despite Mrs. Ybarra’s words of

advice, I wouldn't be learning a whole lot in any of my classes that morning.

Social Studies took an eternity. The clock ticked. Ticked. The hands slowly slowly slowly made their way around the face. Finally first period ended and I was on to chemistry. Jenny was in my class, and we shared pained looks as we entered. But neither of us could say a word. Just sat, staring at the clock and sighing. Time slogged on. On . On. It seemed to be going slower. And slower. A n d s l o w e r. What was taking them so long? How long can it take to count a few ballots? They were probably down there gossiping and eating donuts. Slower and slower, round and round, the hands on the clock went. Come on! Dragging their way toward noon. Drag drag. Tick tick. I was about ready to jump out of my skin when the PA speaker finally crackled to life. I shot a glance at Jenny, she shot a glance at me, then we both nervously stared at the squawking box on the wall. This was it!



12

“Hello students!” boomed Mr. Bullocks voice. “Happy election day! We have the results you are all waiting for! But, before I read them,” oh, come on Mr. Bullock, just read them... “I would like to congratulate all the candidates on campaigns well run! You have all been thoughtful and honorable,” except maybe those of you who tore down other candidate’s campaign posters... “and I wish each and every one of you could hold the offices you so richly all deserve! But we only have so many seats, so we can have only so many winners!” We know that...get on with it already... “And what great winners they are! Next year’s student government is going to be in fine hands!” I’m sure it will be. Could you please just tell us whose hands they will be? “And now, here are the election results!” Finally...Jenny and I kept sneaking glances at each other as we squirmed in our seats as Mr. Bullock droned his way through the Student Council Representative results, School Secretary, Treasurer (I hope Billy was happy that Simon won), and, finally...

“And now, I am pleased to announce your choice for Student Body President.” Jenny dashed over to my desk and squeezed into my chair with me. And Mrs. Corey didn’t complain. Thank you Mrs. Corey. It was pretty important to me to feel Jenny’s shoulder pressed against mine at this moment. “It was a hard-fought race, and I’m glad I did not have to choose between these two highly qualified and passionate candidates!” Oh no, Mr. Bullock, please, not now! Just tell us!!! “I am thrilled to announce, next year’s Student Body President will be.....” Yes?????? “Hildegarde!”

Jenny and I leapt up together with a “YES!”, and while I am not a hugger or a squealer, we hugged, we squealed. There was much murmuring and chatting and discussing and some cheering in the class, and from the classes around ours, as the bell for lunch rang and we dashed out, bouncing, laughing, excited. Proud of our classmates, thrilled we had won, and just plain old happy. Tomorrow we could worry about the tasks ahead of us, the things we had promised Hildegarde we would help her with. All the hard work to change things, to improve things, to save our future, could wait. Today, we celebrate! We won! We beat Wyatt!!!!!! Yay!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Twenty minutes later, Jenny, Tracy, and I were sprawled under the cherry tree, nibbling on the last of

our lunches. Across the courtyard, we could see Hildegarde slowly making her way toward us, but being stopped every couple of steps by excited students (and a few teachers) wanting to shake her hand, to congratulate her. We didn't mind. It was a beautiful sight. We were feeling good. No sign of Wyatt and his gang. No doubt they were off on the soccer field, kicking around the ball and licking their wounds. Good. I know one should not gloat, should be kind to the vanquished, gracious in victory. But, well, good. Let 'em hide and pout. And maybe I will be gracious. Tomorrow. Tonight at dinner...well...sorry Frankie! Heh heh heh.

"You know," Tracy said, "I feel really good."

"No kidding." I answered. "I'm pretty proud of our school today."

"Yeah," Jenny added "we did the right thing, didn't we?"

"All of us did." I agreed, as Hildegarde finally made it to the tree. I felt like we should all be leaping up, having a big group hug and squeal, but, well, it had been a long few weeks. I slowly rolled over began to start to get up, but she threw down her lunch sack, held up her hand and said "Oh no, please, don't get up! I'm exhausted and I'm starved and have heard the word 'congratulations' about a million times in the last ten min-

utes.” She did look tired. “Right now I just want to eat and relax and not be on stage.”

“Are you ok, Hildegarde?” Tracy asked, worriedly.

“I am. Thank you. I’m just feeling a little spent. It’s been an intense few weeks. And it’s going to be an intense year ahead. So for now, for this one moment, while I can, I just want to...” and she laid back, one hand on her lunch, closed her eyes, sighed deeply, and fell asleep.

“Should we wake her up so she can eat her lunch?” Tracy worried.

“No. She needs the sleep. I think the best thing we can do is try to keep her adoring throngs at bay.” I answered, eyeing a couple of kids headed our way. So we did. And Hildegarde, our new President, our Leader to the Future, our Saver of the Planet, napped away her first lunch hour in her new role. It takes a lot of energy to save the world. And maybe even more to first convince the world it needs saving. But she had done it!



13

I was setting the table for dinner that evening when Mom got home from work. Dad was whipping up his famous Boy Scout Stew (yuck. Sorry Dad, but Boy Scout Stew makes me go yuck.). No sign of Frank, yet. So I was having to hold off on my gloating. He probably knew that, and that's why he was staying out as late as he could get away with. I know if Wyatt had won, Frank would have been bouncing around the kitchen right now, strutting, not letting me hear the end of it. But he didn't, did he? Ha!

"Hi honey" Mom said, kissing me on the top of my head as she flung her briefcase into the corner and began thumbing through the mail. "How was school today? Anything exciting happen?"

Dad grunted from the stove, where he was adding his chopped up hot dogs to the stew pot (and you were wondering why I go yuck for Boy Scout Stew?) He'd just spent the last half hour listening to me dance around

the kitchen, crowing about our victory, and all the exciting plans we had.

“Mooooooooom! Don’t you remember what today was?”

“Let’s see...it wasn’t the last day of school, that’s tomorrow.” She kept looking through the mail “It’s Tuesday, right? Hmmm, Spring Concert? Track meet?”

Mothers can be so exasperating sometimes. “Honey,” Dad stepped in before I could explode, “It was election day.”

“Of course it was. And I’m guessing, since Rose is here and practically dancing out of her skin, and Frank is nowhere to be seen, that perhaps Hildegarde was the winner?”

“Yes!” I pirouetted as I gracefully set a fork into position on a napkin, “Yes! Yes! Yes! OK, table’s set, let’s eat!”

“Let’s get your brother in here” Mom said, picking up the cowbell. I know everyone’s parents do plenty of embarrassing things. And I know it is probably a bit appalling to have your parents yelling your name down the street at the top of their lungs when it is time for you to come in. But deep down, I really think that would be better than what Mom does. She’s got a big old cowbell. And I swear, she really enjoys stepping out on the front porch and ringing that thing when it is time for us to

come in. When we are out playing, and hear it in the distance, all the kids go “mooooooo...time to go home.” We dutifully moo along with them...why fight it? It does work, and soon after she clanged, Frank came dragging his sorry self up the front walk. Now was my moment to really decide - gracious in victory? Or gloating little sister? I decided to wait and see how he was going to play it. I sat, all angelic, at my spot at the table and stayed quiet as he slid into his seat.

“Well Frank,” Dad said, ladling out the stew, “How’s Wyatt taking his defeat?”

“Oh, about like you’d expect.”

“I suppose things will be a little tense when he gets home tonight.” I was trying to sound sympathetic, but I must admit, a little drop of ‘you get what you deserve’ may have snuck into my voice.

“Poor Wyatt is under a lot of pressure at home, I’m sure.” Mom added, sympathetically.

“It pretty well sucks that he lost. Especially to such a do-gooder of a girl” Frank snarled at me. Oh dear. Looks like the gloves were coming off already.

“So, are you objecting to her being a girl, or the fact that she is actually going to do something? Unlike some loser candidates I could mention...”

“Now Rose...” Dad tried to stop me. Not going to work, after a crack like that.

“Because you know Wyatt lost because he deserved to lose. He figured just being him was enough. Just being him, which in his case is no great thing. That’s why he had to threaten everyone. What a jerk! I am so glad he lost! I’m so relieved, and proud that Hildegarde won! Good for us!”

“So, Rose, how do you really feel about this?” Mom asked.

“Mom, it’s not a joke. Hildegarde ran a good clean campaign, unlike some candidates I won’t name. And she had an important message, a vision. Also unlike some candidates. And the people have heard it and responded!” I banged the table. Couldn’t help myself.

“Yeah, let’s see her really get anything done, though. She’s a dreamer. You’re all dreamers.” Frank was getting warmed up now. “Zero net? Yeah, right. We’re just kids. How can we do anything? You’re nuts if you think you can, Rose, and so are Jenny and Tracy, and Hildegarde is the biggest nut of all. Like one kid can save the world. Ha! We shouldn’t call her the School President! We should call her the Queen Nut!” He was practically yelling.

“Franklin, I will remind you, this is the dinner table. A time and place for civilized discourse.” Dad was stern.

“Sorry, Dad.” Frank took a big mouthful of stew and glowered down at his plate.

“And as for you, young lady...”

“Yes Dad...” I choked down a hot dog chunk.

“So, Rose, what’s next for Team Hildegarde?”

“Well, Mom,” I responded enthusiastically as Frank concentrated on his food, “we don’t know how much we can get done this summer. Tracy is at her dad’s for 6 weeks, and Jenny is going to summer school. Hildegarde is volunteering at the county park. And I’ll be at camp. But we’re going to have a final debrief tonight, after dinner, at Tracy’s, and figure out what we can do while we’re apart, and what our plan is for the fall. OK?”

“That sounds very wise.” Mom acknowledged.

“Bunch of nuts” Frank muttered.

“What was that, young man?” Dad demanded.

“Pass the salt, please”

“That’s what I thought you said.”

“May I be excused?” I asked.

“Me too?” Frank seconded.

“Yes, Rose, you may. And yes, Frank, you may clear the table. Rose, would you like to take some ice cream over to Tracy’s?”

“I’d love it, Mom, thanks! I know she baked some brownies...” and I flew out of my chair and, with a quick stop at the freezer, was off down the street for our celebratory party. See, I can be a nice little sister. Telling Frank we were going to be having a planning meeting. When we were really getting together to
PARRRRRTY!!!!



14

And we did. We had a great time. We were no longer candidate and election team. We were just four girls having fun. We locked ourselves in Tracy's room with brownies and ice cream and giggles and inside jokes (yes, a few at the expense of the late lamented candidacy of our recently-vanquished opponent). We laughed over some of the great zingers Hildegard got in during the debate, giggled about Billy Cranell's excitement at the treasurer's race, chuckled over the confrontations we'd had with the Wyatt posse, shared indignation at our destroyed posters, and in general congratulated ourselves on a great campaign, well run and well won. Victory was very very sweet.

Eventually, there was a knock on the door. "It's almost ten o'clock, girls" Tracy's mother called out. "Even though tomorrow is just a half day, I think you all better think about getting home."

"Soon, Mom, I promise" Tracy called back. Then she turned to us. "Well, this has been great, but we haven't

talked at all about our implementation plan for the fall.”

“No, we haven’t,” Hildegarde responded. “Isn’t it great? But you’re right. We can’t just do nothing all summer...”

“We can’t?” Jenny sighed.

“We need to be ready to hit the ground running, when school starts again”

“But that’s not for months...” Tracy whined. I’ve got to admit, I knew Hildegarde was right, but I was ready for one night off. Or maybe a few months.

“Saving the world, or at least our part of it, is important work,” I offered, “but it is hard work, too. I think maybe we should pace ourselves. Maybe take the summer off. Get back to work when school starts back up. That’ll be soon enough.”

“Oh Rose, not you, too!” When Hildegarde gave me a disappointed look, I wanted to crawl under the bed. “I really appreciate all the hard work you guys have given me through the campaign. You’ve all been amazingly hard workers, with the posters, and the water bottle sales, and leading your classes in the energy audits and all” maybe I didn’t need to crawl all the way under the bed... “but the election was just the beginning! Yes, we won’t be back at school until the fall, but no, we can not take the summer off! Fall is not soon enough! I’m talk-

ing about things that really needed to start ten years ago, or twenty! We can't just keep waiting until it is convenient, putting it off until a 'better time'. That time is now, and we need a plan of action!" I must admit, after her nap at lunch today and the giggle session this evening, I had been a little worried. I was a bit glad to see Hildegarde was back, and ready to lead us again!

"You're right. Of course you're right!" I chipped in.

"Thank you Rose. We need a planning session, we need to figure out what needs to be done, what can be done this summer, who will be doing what in the fall, where we..." there was another knock on the door.

"Jenny, I just got a text from your mother, asking where you are. You girls really do need to break this up for tonight." Tracy's mom called out. We all rolled off the bed, and with congratulations all around and promises to meet under the cherry tree as soon as school was out tomorrow, we headed off home, skipping on clouds, on the night of our big victory. The first night of our future. A brighter, better future.



15

I've always had mixed feelings about the last day of school. I love summer, the warm weather, going to camp and seeing my friends there that I only get to see once a year. Lazy days of sun and swimming and shorts and bare feet. But I knew I would miss my school friends. Plus, school was so familiar and comfortable by spring. I may be sick of some teachers, and some classmates, but at least I knew what school had in store for me. Each fall was a mystery - who would be in which of my classes? Which teachers would I get and what would they really be like? (Oh I hope I wouldn't get Mrs. Olson for English!) Would I be able to keep up at this new grade level? Maybe I worry too much, but the last day of school has always been a little bittersweet.

Especially when it rains. And it rained like crazy on our last day. Not fair. Classes were a joke. You could tell, even the teachers were totally done. Basically, we cleaned out our desks. Tracy and I had math together for the last period of the day (and if you think math is a good subject to have at the end of the day, think again!

You would expect that would mean your mind is all warmed up and ready for integers and remainders, but I find my mind has tipped over to the far side of connection by then. Maybe next year my schedule would be a better one, arithmetically-speaking, and my grades when I got to Algebra would improve a bit. (One can only hope.). But I will say, our math teacher, Mr. deMarcus, did have a fine sense of humor (I was amazed how many jokes there are about pi! Like: did you know that 3.14% of sailors are PIRATES??? And the fattest knight at King Arthur's Round Table, Sir Cumference, got that way because he ate too much pi...there are plenty more, but, well, you get the idea. I didn't say they were GOOD jokes, but, well, it did make Algebra more fun. I sure hoped I'd get Mr. deMarcus again for geometry next year!) We spent our last bit of time together trying to come up with new pi jokes. And cleaning out our desks. When the bell rang, Tracy and I dashed out to door. It was absolutely totally drenchingly raining.

"We didn't have a rain plan, did we?" Tracy wondered, as freed students dashed by giddily on all sides of us.

"Jenny and Hildegard both had English this period. Let's head that way, maybe we can head them off." Feel-

ing like salmon swimming upstream, we entered the fray.

“There they are!” Tracy cried out, spotting Hildegarde’s blonde head bobbing between a couple of short guys. I’m sure they would be getting their growth spurts soon. Poor guys, got some catching up to do to at our age. I waved, Tracy gave her signature whistle (I’m not even going to describe it, but when Tracy whistles, you know you’ve been whistled. She learned it from her older brother. That’s the kind of things older brothers should be doing with you. Not torturing you by hanging out with dweebs like Wyatt, like some of us are stuck with.) Now I could see Jenny, tapping Hildegarde on the shoulder as she recognized the Call of the Tracy, and they made their way over to us as the crowds thinned.

“Guess we aren’t meeting under the tree today.” Jenny sighed.

“Not likely.” I concurred. “Happy summer, huh?”

Tracy, ever the optimist, bubbled up with “The forecast says it’ll be nicer tomorrow!”

“That doesn’t help us much today, does it?” Jenny grumped back. What are best friends for, if you can’t grump at them on a wet first day of summer vacation.

“We could go to my house!” Hildegarde piped up with. That caught our attention. Through all this time

together, we had never been to Hildegarde's house, had never met any of her family. "Dad'll be at work, but I think Mom is home today, probably working on some of the things your mom told us to do during our energy audit. We can maybe even help her some, while we chat about our plans for the summer and beyond." Of course we all agreed. We were fascinated to see what kind of mother would produce a kid like Hildegarde, what kind of a home she may have come from.

We followed her out the front door of the school. "Good bye!" I waved back at it as we practically skipped down the front steps. "See you in the fall!" We were all feeling that sweet freedom of summer as we hopped, ran, frolicked down the dripping street.

"Oh no! Wait a minute!" Hildegarde stopped dead in her tracks. "I invited Teddy to join us! We need to go back and find him!"

"You did what?!?" I asked, coming to an abrupt stop.

"I invited Teddy to join us in our planning and implementation."

"Teddy, as in Wyatt's buddy Teddy?" Tracy asked in disbelief. I knew she was remembering the time in sixth grade when Teddy had made a squealy pig noise when Tracy had gotten up to give a book report, because she had a chunk of sandwich stuck to her cheek. To be fair, it was right after lunch, and one of us should have spot-

ted it and warned her, but it didn't help that the report was on comparing the roles of the pig in Charlotte's Web and Animal Farm. Hard to forgive or forget a moment like that.

"Yes, that Teddy. He came up and congratulated me after the election." So did half the school, or maybe more than half, we're not going to invite them all to join us, are we? "And he said he was very interested in the whole zero-net project. His dad works for an electrical contractor that installs solar and wind systems. I thought he may have some good ideas and connections. We need to get everyone on board that we can. Don't you all agree?" None of us could argue with the look she gave us. By now we were back to school, and indeed, there was Teddy, under the dripping cherry tree, looking a little lost, as if we had ditched him. If only we could have...

"Hey Teddy!" Hildegarde called out, waving to him. "Over here! We didn't forget you!" She whispered, aside to us "well, I didn't forget him for too long..."

He came jogging over. "I'm glad! Hey Jen, Rose, Trace." We all grunted back. "Thanks for giving me the chance to hang with you all, maybe contribute something to this idea of Hildegarde's" Oh man, he was acting all nice. How were we supposed to deal with that? "I know we haven't exactly been friends," a bit of an un-

derstatement, Teddy-boy, “but I really believe this idea of Hildegarde’s is important. Important enough that we should put away the fights and grudges from when we were little kids, and work together on this.” He smiled slyly at me as he said this. Could he be referring to the bacon-and-cayenne-laced peanut butter cookies I had so kindly given him at lunch one day, about a week after the squealing incident? It was a beautiful moment, watching him greedily bite into the first one...well, he hadn’t exactly asked me what kind of cookies they were. And I know that hot, salty, smoky burn was not what he expected. But he didn’t make a big thing about it, didn’t tell any of the teachers or our parents or anyone. Maybe Hildegarde was right, maybe he wasn’t all bad. Maybe he was growing up a bit. Maybe we all were. Maybe it was time, and we needed to.

“We’re going over to my house, to get out of the rain” Hildegarde let him know, as we started back down the street. Jenny and Tracy hung back a little, and I drifted back to them.

“I can not believe he is coming with us” Tracy muttered.

“I know. Gross!” Jenny concurred.

“I don’t know, guys.” I offered. “Maybe we should give him a chance. It’s been nice having Hildegarde all

to ourselves, but it's going to take more than just the four of us to make all the changes we need."

"I guess...." Jenny tried

"But...Teddy? Of all people?" Tracy looked like she may cry.

"Tracy, we need to get beyond the past. This is about the future. Our future. The planet's future." I was Miss Maturity. Somebody had to be. "We're going to have to work with some people we would never imagine we could, to get this done. It is going to take all kinds of co-operation. That means even with the guys. And Teddy can help us with that."

"Really? All of them?"

"Everybody. Working together. We can no longer have 'them' and 'us'. From now on, it's got to be 'we'. Together, for something way more important than some pranks from back in elementary school. Though we'll keep a close eye on him. And if he gets to be a problem, well, I'll just bake some more cookies." With that, we were all smiling as Hildegarde stopped in front of a tiny little house, green with purple trim, set way back on a lot teeming lush with plants and trees, that I didn't recall ever noticing before.

"We're home!" she announced, leading us up the walk.



16

“Mom?” Hildegarde called out as she held the front door open for us. We were all taking off our soaked shoes and jackets in the entry when she called again “Mom!? Where are you? I brought the team over!”

“I’ll be right up!” we heard a muffled voice from under our feet. Which was a little surprising, since from the outside we could tell the house had a small second story, but it didn’t look like it had a downstairs. We heard some clumps and thumps and what sounded like a trap door clunking shut, and soon a woman with muddy knees, even taller than Hildegarde but with the same gleaming blonde hair, tied back in a tight pony tail, came into the room. She was peeling off long rubber gloves. We couldn’t see if there were any other physical similarities between her and Hildegarde, since her face was covered by a pair of safety goggles and a large respirator. We all just stood there, a bit amazed at this vision.

Once the gloves were off, she flipped off the goggles, saying “Hello dear, welcome home.”

“Mom!” Hildegarde laughed, “you sound like Darth Vader in that thing!”

Her mom laughed as she tugged off the respirator. Ever with the deep lines it left on her nose and cheeks, we were clearly looking at an older, but still awfully pretty, version of Hildegarde. “Sorry about that!” She gave Hildegarde a kiss on the cheek, then turned to the rest of us. “Please excuse me. I was just down in the crawl space re-securing the insulation around a bunch of the pipes. I can not believe how many places it has fallen, or been torn, off! Whole gaps around some of them. Shameful! I’m told a family of raccoons lived down there before we moved in, and I tell you, they left a mess! I am so glad that...now...which one of you is Rose?” I raised my hand. “Hello Rose, it’s a pleasure to meet you at last. Anyway, as I was saying, I was so glad to have your lovely mother over, Rose, to point that out. To point out so many things we could do around the place, mostly by ourselves, to stop wasting so much energy. This house is a disgrace, but bit by bit, we’re working on it.” I was beginning to wonder how anyone in this house ever got a word in, when Hildegarde’s mom was around. But I liked her.

“I’m so pleased Hildegarde brought you all over,” she continued, pulling the band out of her hair and shaking it loose. I could see sparkles of fiberglass floating

around her, and tried not to inhale too deeply. “Anyone hungry? It is lunch time, after all.”

“We brought our lunches...” I began, but Tracy interrupted me.

“I’m starved!” She burst out.

“You must be Tracy” Hildegarde’s mom said. Gee, how did she know? “And that means you must be Jenny” she shook her hand, “and you’re Teddy.”

“Right all around, Mom.” Hildegarde said, picking a couple of chunks of fiberglass out of her mother’s hair. “And, everyone, this is my mom.”

“Please, call me Gert.” Really? We weren’t in the habit of calling adults by their first names in this town. But we also weren’t really used to mothers mucking about in crawl spaces or wearing respirators, either. Except mine, of course. “So, you brought your lunches? But perhaps I have something we could augment them with.” she led us into a gleaming yellow kitchen. “It’s the last day of school. I say...” she leaned into the refrigerator, “let’s celebrate!” She pulled out a big bottle of sparkling cider and gave it a shake.

Hildegarde was just saying “Oh no! Mom!” as Gert popped the top off and cider shot everywhere. We were all laughing like crazy as we grabbed glasses and tried to get them under the flow. Gert was laughing hardest of all. Definitely not like other moms!

“Shall we have a working lunch?” Hildegarde asked, settling in at the kitchen table.

“I’ll let you kids get to it.” Gert told us, heading into the front room and picking up her protective gear. “You know where to find me if you need me.” The last couple of words were rather muted and garbled as she slid her respirator onto her face, and we heard her clomping back down the hall.

“Hildegarde, your mom is so cool!” Jenny sighed.

“Yeah. My mom wouldn’t know what a respirator is if it jumped up and bit her in the...”

“Teddy!” I stopped him just in time.

Hildegarde just laughed and said “Yeah, my folks are ok. I know you’re not supposed to think that when you’re our age, and I’m sure I’ll become more of a teenager one of these days and they will do no right, but for now, they’re ok. So, let’s talk about the summer, and what we can get done in preparation for next year.” She whipped out her little notebook.

“So, Rose,” she said, checking her notes, “you leave for camp next week,” I nodded. “and you’re gone for how long?”

“Six weeks!” I smiled. I love camp.

“Hmmm. Guess you’ll be pretty busy and distracted.”

“And out of town. Yeah, sorry. But I will be home for the last three weeks before school starts.”

“Well, that is something. And Jenny, summer school starts...”

“Next week.” she groaned. “I can’t believe it. My mom is making me take a math tutorial. Yuck. But I get to take art, too, and we’ll be doing ceramics and leather carving and watercolors and...”

“That sounds great” Hildegarde stopped the recitation. Jenny is a good artist, but when she starts talking about it, you can be stuck there for a long time. “But you’ll have lots of homework.”

“Yeah, I will. But it ends about 3 weeks before school starts back up, too.”

“And that’s right about when I get back from my dad’s.” Tracy added.

“I’m beginning to see a pattern here. Ted, what about you?”

“I’ll be working for my dad again. Mostly laborer stuff, but he did say he’d start showing me how to do some of the wiring this year! So I’ll be around, but pretty busy during the days. But I know dad would give me a week or two off at the end of the season if I want”

“And guess when my volunteer gig at the park ends?”

“Three weeks before school starts!” Jenny, Tracy, and I all chimed in.

“That’s why I love you guys,” Hildegarde smiled.
“And I’ll miss you all. But I’ve got to admit, maybe Rose

was right. Maybe we'll have to take a break for the first bit of summer. But we do need to hit the ground running, as they say, as soon as school does start. So I propose we'll meet back here...

“Three weeks before school starts!” We all shouted.

“Hey, the rain stopped!” Teddy pointed out, as a sun ray danced in the window and lit up the table. We all popped up and danced out the door, and it was summer and we were off to play and visit and relax. And, three weeks before school would start up, we would meet again and figure out how we would save our future, so we could continue to dance through happy, carefree, sunny days of summer. And so could our kids. And grandkids. Kids! Grandkids - me! Ha! What a thought! But, well, if someday I do have them...well.....



Part II

17

My grandmother is always complaining about time vanishing in a heartbeat, whisking by her when she is doing something else, and where did it go? I often don't understand this. Time takes its own sweet time for me. Crawling. Especially at school, other times as well. But not in the summer. Six weeks of camp were over in a day, I swear. Before I had even left home, I was back. Mom was hosing six weeks of fun off me out in the yard before she'd even let me in the house (and we know where my bags were unpacked... "Call the fumigator!" Frank cried, circling my treasures as Dad excavated them from my duffle on the back porch. Cute, bro.)

The phone was ringing as I got out of the shower. (hosing off wasn't quite enough, I guess. I do love camp.) "Rose!" Mom called out, "It's for you!"

I grabbed the extension and was happy to hear Jenny's voice. "How was it? Any cute new boys? Was Dean there this year? Who was in your group? Math totally sucked, but I made this great bowl on the wheel that's almost round even!" I sat and smiled and began

working the snarls out of my hair, knowing I wouldn't have to say anything for a while. "Wyatt was in math with me, which totally sucked, but we got to use the pro grade Winsor and Newton watercolor tubes, so that was fantastic! And I did get a B+ on the math final, so I can go on to Geometry next year, not that I'm too excited about that, and last night Tracy and I got together and made a new cookie recipe she learned from Wicked-Step-Mom" no big surprise there. That was about the only thing Tracy could stand about being at her dad's - swapping recipes with a woman she otherwise couldn't stand. I hoped they had gotten along ok this year. "and they were pretty good, so we thought we'd bake some up for tomorrow night's meeting."

"Whoa!" I interrupted. "What meeting?"

"Haven't you talked to Hildegarde yet?"

"Jenny, I just got home about half an hour ago."

"Oh. Well, welcome home! We're sure glad you're back! But you haven't told me anything about camp!" Hello, Jenny, when? "Was your counselor any good? How was the weather? Which riding class did they put you in this year? Was that Neil guy the riding instructor again? He was so cute!"

"Jenny, Jenny, stop! I'll tell you all about it. It was great. But when is this meeting?"

“I already told you - tomorrow. At Hildegarde’s house. But let’s get together tomorrow morning and you can tell us all about camp, and Tracy can tell us all about Weirdo Step Brother’s latest weirdness, and I can tell you guys about...”

It’s pretty sweet how excited Jenny is when we all haven’t seen each other for a while. Kind of like having a puppy. We decided they’d come over in the morning and we could catch up. I signed off, got myself put together, and called Hildegarde.

“Rose! You’re home! Hooray!” It was nice to hear her voice.

“How’s your summer going, Hildegarde?”

“Great! It was wonderful being at the park. I convinced them to install motion-sensitive lighting in all the parking areas and bathrooms, rather than leaving the lights on all night. And, as the bulbs burn out, they’re replacing them with LEDs.”

“Glad you took the summer off!” I laughed.

“You know me better than that.”

“Jenny tells me we’re having a meeting tomorrow?”

“Yes, at my place - does that work for you?”

“I’ll have to check my heavily booked social calendar” I joked.

“A potluck dinner, sound like fun?”

“Sure does. I’ll bring...”

“No, don’t tell me. That’s what will put the ‘luck’ in the Potluck! Six o’clock. Ready to jump back into this whole thing?”

“You bet! Looking forward to it! I’ll be there!” We said our goodbyes, and I headed downstairs to warn the folks that I would not be around the next evening, and to figure out what I’d be cooking. Cooking up dinner and plans for the school year...sounded like a great evening ahead. And a great way to jump back into things. I love summer, I love camp, but I was back here in reality, and ready for it!



18

Dad offered to help me whip up a batch of Boy Scout Stew for the gang, but I politely declined his generous offer and opted to make a big bowl of Aunt Clara's Pea Salad. I knew Jenny loved it (and Tracy loved everything) and I proudly carried it down the street the next evening.

Hildegarde met me at the door. "Pea salad!" She exclaimed. "Perfect! It'll go just right with Teddy's baked beans and my lentil lasagne." Not sure how much potluck luck this all would bring for anyone who would be around us the next day, but it did sound like a tasty meal. "Welcome home!" she enthused, as I followed her into the kitchen.

Things were indeed smelling good in there. And it was great to see Jenny and Tracy. We all hugged, and with a "hi" to Teddy, I joined them all at the table and we dug in. After some time devoted to eating and catching up on our various summer adventures, Hildegarde cleared her throat and clinked her glass to get our attention.

“It is so great to see you all,” she began, “and I’m so grateful you’re here. We have a big year ahead of us, lots to accomplish, and I’m glad we’ll be doing it together. First, I would like us to set some goals, and a timeline to accomplish them. Jenny, you have such beautiful handwriting, would you be our recording secretary?” And we got down to work.

We plotted. We planned. We set goals, timelines, strategies. We ate peas, and lentils, and beans, and by the time we got to finishing up the last of Tracy’s new cookies (and let her know that recipe was a keeper!), we knew we had a big, busy, important, and do-able job ahead of us.

We divvied up the jobs for the next few weeks, until school started. Jenny and I were the Demand-Side team. We were to take the results of the energy audits we had done with our homeroom classes and talk to my mom and get some ideas about how to improve on what we all had found. Teddy, Mr. Supply-Side, was to talk to his dad, try to see how feasible it may actually be to get some wind and solar going at the school, and how much it may cost. Tracy was the Financial Department. She was assigned to start thinking about funding ideas. I was so glad I was not Tracy! But we’d all be there to help her, whenever she called on us. We knew she had a tough task, maybe the toughest. It was easy

to dream, a bit tougher to find the way to pay for those dreams. I knew that, based on how badly I'd wanted a horse since I read *Black Beauty* in third grade. And how little horse I'd ever gotten...how would I pay for the horse? the tack? the boarding? the vet bills? and on and on. But I digress. I'll just say, I sure knew funding can be a huge roadblock. Hildegard would be coordinating and helping wherever we each needed it.

The first project for the Demand-Side team was to gather the results of the audits each homeroom class had done. This was not too easy in the summer, but between what each of us had kept in our own notes, and a few emails to some very helpful teachers, we had quite a pile.

"Man, Rosie, what do we do with all this?" Jenny sighed as we sat in my bedroom a few days later, surrounded by the blizzard of notes we had gathered. "Look at all this - incandescent bulbs in over half the exit signs, empty rooms kept heated, closed closets with lights on, dishwashers run with just a few dishes in them, gaps of insulation all over the attic, leaky windows, old, inefficient, uninsulated water tanks, it goes on and on!"

"There is a bunch, I agree." I sighed. It seemed insurmountable. "Hildegard said she'd come by at three. It's quarter of, lets take a little break and we'll see what

she thinks.” We headed into the kitchen, grabbed some lemonade, and headed out to the front porch. And who should come wandering by, foot-dribbling a dusty soccer ball, but Wyatt.

“Hey Rosie-roo” he called out when he spotted us. Oh joy. I was hoping he’d have just kept going. “Hi Henny Penny Jenny.” (I guess I shouldn’t complain too much about my nickname, considering...) “How’s summer going? Keeping busy?”

“Hey Wyatt. Fine, thanks. And yours?” Mom would have been proud of me, Miss Congeniality.

“Great. I got World of Carjack VII and made it to level eleven in my first week!” Oh my. How impressive. “Hey Jenny, that math class sure sucked, didn’t it?”

“Yeah it did” Jenny agreed. “Sure glad that’s over with. Now we’re getting some stuff together for---” I elbowed her. We didn’t really need Wyatt knowing what we were up to.

“For what?” He asked, innocently bouncing his ball from knee to knee.

“Nothing.” I replied. “Did you learn that move at soccer camp?” He and Frank had been to one together. And when Frank got home, he spent the next three weeks in the back yard bouncing a soccer ball from knee to knee. Boys have such simple pleasures.

“Yup. Well, will you take a look-see at who’s coming!” Hildegarde had just swung onto our block. Legs up to there, apricot sparkle toenails glinting in the sun. Summer and its shorts were a good eye-catching season for girls like Hildegarde. “Next year’s Madame School President, herself. Down here amongst us mortals.”

“Glad to hear you don’t hold a grudge, Wyatt.” I couldn’t resist a little snarking.

“Hey Hildegarde” he said, in a voice way too polite to trust. “How’s the queen?”

“Wyyyatt” She drawled back at him, “What a pleasure to see you.” Wow. How can sarcasm sound so sweet?

“Got your plans all in place for after your coronation?”

“You bet! We’re going to be doing some good this year, I promise! Sure hope you’ll be on board with us, even with our history. Nice ball by the way - is it new?”

“Got it at soccer camp. See - it’s signed by David Alaba! Cool, huh?” Oh yeah, so cool. Right. Not exactly. But Hildegarde managed to actually look interested. Still the perfect politician. “But sorry, I’m going to be pretty busy this year. I’m pretty sure I’m going to be Team Captain. So, I’ll have some mighty important stuff to do. Don’t think I’ll have a lot of time to be running around counting lightbulbs.”

“Well, we all must choose our priorities. Gotta run now, we have so many lightbulbs to count before school starts back up!” And Hildegarde trotted up the stairs, with us happily in her wake.

When we got to my room, I flung my arms wide to indicate the piles of papers. “Hildegarde! Where do we start?” I groaned.

“As my favorite Good Witch of the North once said, ‘it’s always best to start at the beginning’.” she said, sitting down in the midst of the mess. “And as my great Uncle Joe always says, ‘a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step’.”

“Nice bumper stickers, but where do we start? How do we do this? All this?” Jenny whined. You could tell she’d turned 14 over the summer. She was really beginning to sound like a teenager.

“I think we’d better go one at a time. We’ll dig our way through all this great information. Let’s sort them into two piles - the ones that will cost money to implement, and the ones that are just behavioral changes. Then we’ll see how much money we’ll need for the ones that need it, and pass that information along to the Finance Department. Lucky Tracy! For the behavioral ones, well gee, if only we had someone around with any artistic ability, we could make up some posters and fli-

ers...” she smiled at Jenny who rewarded her with a big grin back.

“You’ve got it!” she cried, and grabbed up a handful of papers. This was Hildegarde’s genius, turning folks around and getting them going. “This pile here for big investments, this one for stuff that’ll not cost much, and over here are the ones that just need a poster.” And she started flinging papers. We soon joined in, and quicker than you could imagine, the mass of mess was three neat piles.

“OK, let’s see what we’ve got,” Hildegarde began, picking up the pile closest to her. “These are ones that’ll take some bucks.” She began thumbing through the stack. “Window replacement...insulation...hot water tanks...light bulbs, programmable thermostats, motion sensors...wow, there is plenty here. And that’s not even talking about the cost of actually installing wind and solar. I think we need to come up with a budget for these things.”

“I bet my mom could help with that.” I offered. “She can give us a rough idea of costs, and may give us some names of who can give us actual bids.”

“That’d be great!” Hildegarde replied. “And Teddy is already getting some numbers out of his father for wind and solar options. He can probably help us with some of the other things, too, like the motion sensors, and

maybe some thermostat and light bulb suppliers. Sure glad he is on board, with his electrical contractor connections. But I still think we'll all be needing to help Tracy out, once we get all that information."

"No kidding" I shook my head, wondering where money like this may come from. But, one step at a time. "Here's the good news," I continued, handing over another pile. "Here are things we can do through education..."

"I have plenty of new paper, and some great pens I got for my birthday" There was one advantage of Jenny reaching her teen years. Her birthday presents might just help us save the planet. "What are some things we want on posters?"

"It looks like some are for students, some are for staff." Hildegard began making her way through this pile. "The kitchen has a bunch of stuff...thermostat settings...light switches...empty rooms..." she muttered as she thumbed the pages of notes. "Well, that's one step done. We're organized. One step of many. I know Teddy is talking to his dad tonight. I think it is time for a full team meeting. My place, 10:00 tomorrow morning work for you guys? Rose, will you be able to talk to your mom before then?"

"Sure thing!" we both agreed.



19

After Jenny headed home, I went to hang out on the front porch and wait for Mom. I was feeling a bit overwhelmed, and in need of some Mom Time and Sage Advice. But just before she was due home, I was disappointed to see Frank headed my way.

“Not out bouncing things off your knees with the gang this afternoon?” I greeted him as he thwumped down on the step next to me. When we were little, Frank and I got along pretty well. He’d torture me like any good older brother would, but I knew deep down he had my back, and we did have a lot of good evenings frog hunting together, or sharing the way-too-hot back seat of the car on the way to some misadventure dad had thought up for summer, or bemoaning the evils of Auntie Helen before Thanksgiving dinner. But as we got older, we had drifted apart. I got tired of putting up with his tortures, especially the ones that involved my best jump rope and the juniper bushes in the back yard. And he got more and more interested in soccer and other sports and video games and, yes, girls. There

were still sometimes moments when I was feeling a little small and confused and alone that I kind of missed our old relationship. Not many, but every once in a while. This evening, as summer was winding down, and the responsibilities I seem to have undertaken for the year ahead were looming, I was feeling a little baby-sister-ish, and was hoping maybe he'd be feeling just a little kind-older-brotherly. I realized my greeting was perhaps not the best way to set the mood I realized I needed. But apparently he was feeling it, because as he sat down, he said

“How's the great crusade going? Teddy tells me you guys have some big plans.”

“We sure do! It's great that Teddy is on board with us.” If he was willing to make overtures of peace, I was more than happy to. “I know he is going to be a big help.”

“He's a pretty bright kid.” It did always crack me up that, even though he was only a year older than us, Frank still called my classmates ‘kids’.

“Too bad you're going to be at the high school this year, so you can't be on the team, too.” I sighed. It was going to be weird being at a different school than Frank. Even though we never hung out together, I was pretty used to him being around.

“You’ll still be seeing plenty of me. Don’t worry. I’ll still be on the team with Teddy. And Wyatt.”

“Oh yeah, Wyatt. Boy. He’s such a lot of help...” I sniped.

“You may be surprised. Wyatt may not be the sharpest pencil in the drawer” glad to hear him admit that, “but even though Hildegarde somehow beat him in the election, a lot of the kids still look up to him.”

“Because they think they have to. Not because he deserves it.”

“That may be true,” he agreed with a sigh, “but that’s the way of the world, Tater Patch,” Don’t ask. That’s just how family nicknames are. I was just glad this evening that he was using it on me again. “Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try to make that work to your advantage. And you never know...”

I wasn’t sure what he meant I’d never know, because just then Mom’s car pulled into the driveway, and she climbed out, spotted us, and shouted “Anyone around here who can help a tired working woman with a few bags of groceries? I need to get this ice cream in the freezer.” Ice cream? Yay! Frank and I popped up and ran over to help.

As we carried in the bags, I asked “Mom? Do you have some time this evening?”

“Of course, Hon. What’s up?”

“I have some questions...”

“On the Save the Earth Project, no doubt.” Frank put in, over his shoulder. So much for our little moment of togetherness. It was lovely while it lasted, but I knew Frank was at the age he didn’t want to be seen being nice to his little sis in front of anyone. Even Mom.

After dinner, Mom and I took our bowls of ice cream into the back yard. “May as well enjoy the last of the nice weather.” she said as we settled onto the glider and began devouring and swinging. “So, what’s up?”

I explained about the audits we had done. I explained how we had divided the results into those needing big financing, those needing less financing, and those just needing education (we hoped). And I told her that we hoped she could help us with coming up with some ideas of what some of these things may cost.

“Of course, I’d be glad to help.” she said as she swiped her bowl with her finger and gave it a lick. “I can give you some rough figures, and some ideas of who you could talk to if you want more specific numbers. Teddy’s father is definitely one of the names I’d have given you, so you’re off to a good start. And I even have some lists of folks who give grants and may otherwise may be able to help with the funding.”

“That’s great!” I was relieved. I had known she’d be a help, but it sounded like she’d be even more of one than

I had hoped. “I’ll get your figures down, then maybe you could meet directly with Tracy with some time? Meanwhile, maybe we could try some of that mint chocolate banana mocha fudge swirl?”

“You go right ahead, dear.” So I got a new bowl, and a pen and pad of paper, and got to work. I would be very ready for tomorrow’s meeting.



20

We were a pretty excited group when we got to Hildegard's the next morning. It was less than a week before the first day of school, we had done so much of our homework, and we were raring to go. Except Tracy. She was uncharacteristically quiet, and when Gert offered her a muffin when we arrived and she turned it down, we were all worried.

"Tracy," I asked, brow furrowed, "What's up?"

"Nothing," she replied. "Go on with all your stuff. I can tell you're all plenty excited."

And we were. I rattled off a bunch of things I had gotten from Mom over our second bowls of ice cream - some rough figures of what new windows and weather stripping and insulation upgrades may cost. Teddy pulled out some very cool rolled up plans from his dad, and a few pages of notes with rough estimates for various alternative energy systems. We then asked him about talking to his dad to get numbers on programmable thermostats, bulk orders of LED bulbs, motion sensors, all the other ideas we'd been having. There was so

much room for improvement on all levels, all over the school! Still Tracy just sat there under her cloud.

“Come on Trace, isn’t this all so totally cool and exciting?” Jenny tried. Tracy grunted.

“Tracy,” Hildegarde said, “You’re part of the team. We need you excited, too.” Tracy looked down and started picking an old mosquito bite on her ankle.

Teddy stayed quiet. Actually, I noticed Teddy stayed pretty quiet at all our meetings. But I will admit, when he did say something, it was always spot on. So I wasn’t about to complain. I’d never realized he was such a thoughtful guy, is all. I wasn’t really used to guys being thoughtful, in general. It was rather nice.

“I don’t really know” he finally said, “but I’m guessing Tracy is feeling a little overwhelmed. We’ve all been running around, coming up with these great ideas and schemes. And figures of what it’ll all cost. And her job is to figure out how to come up with this money. And it is a bunch of money. We’ve been having all the fun of the dreaming and scheming, and we’re asking her to figure out how to make it all happen. That’s a pretty heavy load. I think I’d be bummed, too.”

Tracy looked up at him, eyes wide. “Well, yeah,” she sighed.

“Oh, Tracy,” Hildegarde looked crushed. We all knew she hated the thought of making anyone else to be unhappy. “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s just, well, you guys have been having all this fun, plotting together and talking to parents and each other and figuring everything out and I’ve just been off, worrying, wondering who can I talk to, other than Wyatt’s creepy scary witchy mom, who knows anything about money and where we can get any at all, not to mention all this heaps of money we’re going to need to do all these things that I know we need to do because they really are important but it’s up to me to find the money and I don’t know how to so maybe none of it will be able to happen and it’ll all be my fault because I’m just a fat stupid kid who can’t even do the one little thing you guys have asked me too.” and she buried her face in her arms.

Jenny and I exchanged a glance over Tracy’s back. “Wow” Jenny mouthed at me. Hildegarde sat there, dumbstruck. Teddy squirmed a little in his seat.

“Tracy, oh Tracy” I put my arm around her. “You’re not alone! Are you nuts? We don’t expect you to be able to do this without us all helping you.” I saw Teddy and Jenny exchange slightly alarmed looks, but as Tracy’s head was still buried, I waved them down. “My mom said she has some ideas for funding that she’d be happy

to share with you. Places that offer grants to schools and stuff.” One eye peeked up at me.

“Really?” she squeaked.

“And we’ll all brainstorm to find other ideas” Hildgarde joined in.

“My dad has a bunch of great connections.” Teddy put in. “I know he’d be happy to share.”

“So I don’t need to organize a bunch of giant bake sales?” Tracy’s voice still had a little quaver to it. But at least she was talking to us.

“Well, maybe one ginormous one” Jenny elbowed her. “But who better to organize it than the school’s best baker!” That actually got a chuckle out of Tracy. I was betting she was picturing the table full of all the baked goods it would take to cover the expenses we were picturing. She must have been in heaven. I was just happy to have her back with us.



21

Sure as the sun rises in the east, sure as death and taxes, summer ended and the school year began. And sure enough, I got Mrs. Olson for English, but Jenny, Tracy, and Hildegarde were all in the class with me, so that made it a little better. I had Mr. deMarcus again for math, so that made me happy, and I did get into drama with Mr. Eggertson, so I wasn't going to complain too loudly. Especially when Frank would come to the dinner table and tell of the horrors of High School, how some of his teachers came right out and said they hated teaching freshmen, and all the homework he now had. Mom had given us a bunch of figures for a bunch of our projects, Teddy's dad came up with some more. It was a chunk of change, but at least we knew where we needed to get to.

Meanwhile, Jenny had outdone herself by coming up with a great idea - she talked to the art teacher, Mrs. Means, and convinced her to assign creating energy-saving posters as a class project.

“I studied Soviet Propaganda Posters in university” Jenny told us Mrs. Means had enthused. “This will be a wonderful exercise for the class!”

Soon, we began seeing wonderful posters all over the school. There were the basics, like “Please Turn Off The Lights on Your Way Out” by every light switch and “Don’t Let the Hot Water Run and Run and Run” over the sinks in the bathrooms. Jenny proudly took us on a tour of the kitchens, where each refrigerator had a “Think Before you Open the Door”, each dishwasher had “Full Loads Only!” on their fronts, and above the stoves hung “Use the Burner That Fits Your Pot” and “Don’t Forget to Use a Lid!”. I’ve got to admit, it may have all seemed like nagging, but Mrs. Means had led her troops to create art around the slogans (I especially loved the pot without a lid, clearly trying in vain to boil, looking sadly at the lidded pot beside it, happily bubbling away.) that made the posters both fun and inspiring.

“These are great!” Hildegarde enthused. “I think we need them at home, too!” Next thing we knew, Jenny had convinced Mrs. Means to run off copies of the most popular ones (everyone loved the one for the bathroom sinks. Something about a school bathroom as drawn by an eighth grader that just made it hard not to giggle) and we handed them out at lunch the next day.

“Really? I can take this home?” was the most common comment.

“Sure!” we’d say.

“Can I take a spare one for my dad to take to work?”

“Please do!”

We handed out hundreds of posters the first week of school. We were thrilled to be getting our messages out. Mrs. Means was thrilled to be having her students’ work spread so far and wide. The artists were thrilled to have their work recognized. Jenny was really thrilled, because she figured this was a guaranteed A in art for that quarter.

But that’s not all we were up to in the first weeks of school. As we had promised, we got together to try and think of some funding ideas for the big projects.

“My dad says there are all kinds of grants and funding available for schools who are retrofitting.” Teddy offered.

“My mom gave me a list of them.” I added, pulling out a sheaf of papers.

“Like I know how to write a grant.” Tracy sighed. She had a point. We all knew what grants are, but had no idea how to actually get one.

“Fair enough,” Hildegard acknowledged. “But I know we can find help with that. First we need to...”

“Oh oh oh oh oh!” I interrupted her. “Oh! Sorry Hildegarde, but hey...grant writing...it’s a writing exercise! Maybe we could talk Mrs. Olson into letting us...” the look I got from my classmates in Mrs. Olson’s class wetted the excitement of that fire quick enough.

“Something creative?” Jenny said.

“In Dinosaur Olson’s class?” Teddy said.

“And something she didn’t come up with herself? That control freak?” Tracy added.

“Good points.” I conceded, the stuffing pretty well taken out of me.

“Hang on you guys,” Hildegarde piped in. “You never really know. But before that, as I was saying before inspiration struck Rose so blindingly”—I blushed slightly at being called out so nicely—“first thing we need to do is get buy-in from the school board.”

“And we thought Mrs. Olson would be tough?” I asked, “You think you’ll get Wyatt’s dad to go for anything we suggest?”

“I think we need to. I know we need to. And he is just one member. The next school board meeting is Tuesday evening. I’m going to be there. So is the rest of the Student Council. I asked them to join me at our last meeting, and they all agreed. We’re going to present all these ideas. I hope you all can be there as well.”

Of course we said we would be. Teddy even promised to skip soccer practice so he could make it. Jenny said she would bring copies of all the posters they made. Tracy said she would get together with Simon, since he was school treasurer, and see if he had any money-type ideas. And I said I'd see if my mom would come, to support the audits we kids had done. At home, she had told me she was very impressed with how thorough a job we had done. Maybe it would help if she was there with us to tell the whole School Board that. Maybe...



22

Tracy met with Simon on Tuesday morning. At lunch, she reported her conversation to the rest of us.

“Simon is sure a brain.” she began. “A little weird” like we hadn’t known that since he’d brought an abacus to show and tell in first grade. Every week. For three months, until the teacher finally asked him to stop. “But he did have one really good point. We’re going to go to the school board tonight and tell them how much money all these projects are going to cost. And they’re great projects. But they are going to cost a bunch. He pointed out that it may help our case if we can also show them how much money all these things will save.”

It was so obvious. So simple. How had we come up with this big list of costs, without coming up with an equally big list of savings? Because we knew they were there...

Hildegarde threw her hands up. “How could I be so dumb?” she berated herself. “Of course that’s what they’re going to want to hear. We know that becoming

zero net is priceless in terms of helping the planet and our future. But the School Board is going to be thinking on budget terms. And it will make sense, budget-wise, in the long run. But we sure don't have those numbers yet.. Oh dear. What should we do?"

"I said all that to Simon. He said we should do what all politicians do. Pretend we know more than we know, and tell them what they want to hear. Then maybe we'll get what we want."

"I don't know...maybe I should put the presentation off until next month..."

"Hildegarde" I said, sternly. "You are on the agenda for tonight. You've got to be there. Or run the risk of looking flaky. That would already be one strike against you."

"But I really hate going in unprepared. Oh, why didn't Simon mention this when we had our Student Council meeting?"

"He was at the orthodontist, remember?" Tracy answered. "He felt bad about missing it, but did feel his dental health was more important. That's how he put it."

"He would" Jenny said, aside, to me.

"Hildegarde, you know you can do this." I tried to rebuild her confidence. "So what if you don't have the spe-

cific numbers yet? You've just got to go in there and tell them what for. And why. We know how convincing you can be. Look how you did in the elections, and it was a lot because of what you said in the debate. And because you are you. You are very very convincing."

"You think?" she asked.

"I know!" I affirmed. "We'll meet you outside the Multipurpose Room at quarter to seven, then we can go in as a group and they'll get the point that it's not just one tree-hugging kid behind this thing."

"We'll even dress up a bit" Teddy advised, "If they see we respect them, then they will respect us a bit more."

"OK. I can do this. We can do this. We must do this!" I was glad to hear Hildegarde getting some of her spark back. And I trusted that once she was up in front of the School Board, that spark would re-ignite into the fire I knew she had inside her.

6:45 that evening found quite the group of us gathering outside the meeting. Teddy and Simon in button-down shirts and khakis, we girls in long-enough-to-be-serious skirts. Our parents even got into the spirit (though I was a little embarrassed that Dad insisted on wearing his bow tie). Between Team Hildegarde, the Student Council, a bunch of our parents, and some sib-

lings, there were over a dozen of us. Not exactly a major movement, but more than usually attended the board meetings. We hoped they would notice. We went in and found seats in the first two rows. Not too hard - the only other people in the audience were one reporter from the local newspaper, sitting in the back with earbuds in his ears and Quentin, editor and chief reporter for The Chicken Coop, our school paper.

The School Board members trickled in, and promptly at 7:00, Wyatt's dad banged his gavel (was that really necessary? It wasn't like there was a lot of noise in the room. In fact, it looked like the town reporter was now napping, and our group was sitting nervously silent.)

"I would like to officially call this meeting to order" he began, sounding all self-important. We sat patiently through all the official stuff, like the approval of minutes, budget discussions, readings of various reports. The air in the room thickened with boredom and rote motions and responses. I was beginning to understand why there weren't more people in the audience - clearly a basic school board meeting was not much of a spectator sport. Even for the board members. I was just thinking about how Hildegarde would liven things up a bit when Wyatt's dad banged the gavel again (what was with that? Though I did see a couple of folks jump, as if

it had woken them up. Guess he did have a reason for it...) and announced

“I see here on the agenda that we now have the honor of having the new Student Body President wishing to address the board. Of course, I am sorry, when saying that, to not be introducing my son...” that was rather unprofessional of him, I thought, “but, well, I guess not every election can be bought!” he was the only one who laughed at that one. “Well, anyway, very well, and, well, Hildegarde, well, you now have the floor.”

“Thank you Mr. President, members of the school board.” She stood before the group, looking more together than I could imagine ever being in my whole life. “I appreciate the opportunity to address you all this evening, and to introduce to you this exciting opportunity we have to make our school a trend setter in the world of energy use and savings.” I noticed most of the board members actually starting to wake up as her energy and enthusiasm washed away the bored state they had seemed to have entered about halfway through their budget discussions.

“When I ran for Student Body President, I ran on a Zero Net platform. This means my goal, my promise, was to have us become a Zero Net Energy School. And,

against all odds, I beat my highly esteemed opponent” nod to Wyatt’s dad, “Which tells me that the student body is with me on this. Now I come before you, our School Board, requesting your assistance in achieving this goal.”

“Excuse me, miss,” Mr. Swanson, the treasurer of the school board interrupted her. I noticed he was wearing a bow tie as well. Every bit as stylish as my dad. “Could you please let us out of touch old fogies know just what that means, being a Zero Net Energy school?”

“Of course. My apologies. I get a little carried away sometimes, my thoughts get ahead of my mouth.” Winning, apologetic smile to Mr. Swanson, who of course smiled back. “A Zero Net Energy School is simply one that does not use any more energy than it produces.”

“But the school doesn’t produce any energy.” Mrs. Shannon pointed out. Mrs. Shannon was a nice enough woman, but had been on the school board since her kids were at the school, and was now still on it with her grandkids attending. This is not a bad thing, of course, but she did seem to be one of the main meeting nappers.

“Not yet, and I’ll get to that shortly” Hildegarde responded, “but the production is only one part of our plan, one side of the equation. Equally important, or

perhaps even more so, is the demand side. How much energy we use at the school.” And she launched into a wonderful explanation of how we had done the energy audits, and all the energy saving ideas we had come up with as a result. She told about the posters, adding “perhaps you have seen some of these around your homes, or offices, already”. The School Board was smiling and nodding. This was good.

“The school year has just begun, so we don’t know what the savings will be yet. But we know that if everyone, students, teachers, staff, follows the advice on the posters, it’ll be a great start. But just a start, the first step. We do believe that the savings from that first step will offset the costs of the second step.” She then launched into a description of the low-cost ideas we had come up with - replacing bulbs that burn out with more energy efficient ones, motion sensors for closets and outside lights, “and we have a long list here of ideas that again, will save more money than they cost over the long run.” Nice generalization there, Hildegarde. But they were still nodding. Not smiling so big, as she discussed our shopping list, but still some nodding for sure.

“Do we have any actual prices for any of this yet?” Mr. Swanson asked. Hildegarde explained how we had

been working with my mom and Teddy's dad and getting some great connections and ballpark pricing.

"And speaking of Teddy's dad," she took a deep breath, "there is a third leg to this plan. The two I have discussed with you thus far are all about lessening our demand for power. This is vital, it is key. But as I know you realize, no matter how much we reduce our demand, the school will still be using power. So we are proposing we produce that power." She took a deep breath. This next bit would no doubt be the hardest sell, since it would cost the most money. The next sentence tumbled out of her mouth pretty quickly.

"Teddy's dad has come up with plans for solar arrays on the roof and the play fields, for both hot water and PV, and wind turbines in the parking lots."

"Excuse me," Mrs. Shannon asked, "but what is PV?"

"Photovoltaic. Solar panels that make electricity. And the solar panels for hot water could replace or augment our old inefficient water heaters, and also be plumbed into radiators to heat the school. On cold, sunny winter days, the sun could heat the whole school!"

"Whoa there, little lady. You're talking some real money there!" Wyatt's dad put in. "I should know. Last neighborhood we put in, they were doing all kinds of squawking about wanting a bunch of that sun and wind

stuff. Until they saw the cost of it! Then they said no thanks. How do you figure the school could fund something like this? A huge bake sale?" I felt Tracy squirm beside me as he chuckled at his own bad joke. "I'm afraid your fifteen minutes is just about up. What exactly are you asking from us right now? Because I can tell you, we're not going to fund a bunch of windmills tonight, Don Quixote."

"I appreciate the time you have given me already to present our findings and proposals," she answered smoothly, not rising to his baiting. Maybe there was a bit of truth to it, anyway. I had a feeling Hildegarde didn't really object to being called Don Quixote. "While I would love it if you would approve our entire plan"—this got a little snort of derision from Wyatt's dad—"I would be happy this evening just with your support of our Demand Side Reduction strategies. Education, plus some of the lower cost improvements. I have a list here I would like to submit to the board." As she held out the paper, and Mr. Swanson was reaching out for it, Wyatt's dad interrupted.

"Don't bother." He waved Mr. Swanson back into his seat. "I'm sorry, but we don't have any money for your ideas. I would like to point out that we approved this year's budget last spring. You can go ahead and make

your little posters and that's great. But we've already budgeted for new football uniforms and soccer nets for this year, and that's pretty much using up all our excess funds. Can't be spending money we don't have on things we don't really need."

"Don't really need!?! " It was the closest I had ever seen Hildegarde to losing control. "You think we need...we need...new uniforms...and nets....and don't need....."

"Now get ahold of yourself young lady" Wyatt's dad could sure sound condescending and stern at the same time, and Hildegarde's face was getting redder and redder. "We're the school board and we set the priorities here." Mrs. Shannon was nodding along with him. I think. Maybe she was just nodding back off to sleep. But I did notice Mr. Swanson looking rather intrigued. The other two board members just looked on. I couldn't read the expressions on their faces. They never seemed to say anything or do much of anything. I think they both worked for Wyatt's dad, and he had worked hard to get them elected to be sure all his motions passed. But perhaps I'm being a bit cynical.

"Sports are very important in the formation of character." Mrs. Shannon simpered. "When my Johnny got a position as holder for his college team, I know it was be-

cause of his great career as a Fighting Chicken, and helped prepare him for his great career as an insurance actuary he is today.”

“But if we don’t make these changes, there may not be any college for any of us. Or any careers either! No liveable planet left at all!” Hildegarde threw her arms up.

“Come now, Chicken Little...” Was there no end to this man’s subtle insults? “I’m afraid your time is up. You can sign up to talk to us again in...” he shuffled some papers “two months time. Let us know how your little project is going. See if your bake sales have raised enough money to fund any of your grand ideas.”

“You can bet we’ll be back,” Hildegarde waved in our general direction. We all sat up straighter and tried to look a bit like a force to be reckoned with. “We’ll be back, and we’ll be stronger than before, and you’ll see. We will make you see. You must see.”

“I see you with a few of your friends and family members. I don’t exactly see a movement here. And don’t exactly see why I should be listening to you, little lady. You may have beaten my son in the election,” I was beginning to think this may be a bit personal, “but he still understands the priorities around here. Perhaps with a little more time, you will as well.”

“Or perhaps you, sir, will.” Hildegarde spat back, and as she sat down, Wyatt’s dad banged his gavel and asked

“Any other new business? No? Very good. Do I have a motion to adjourn?” One of his quiet minions muttered,

“So moved.”

The other added “I’ll second that motion.”

And as Wyatt’s dad was bringing down his gavel and announcing the meeting adjourned, Hildegarde was muttering “Two months. We’ll show them. In two months. They’ll see, they’ll understand, they’ll act. They must.” And, as a somewhat subdued group, defeated for now, but with our task clear, we stood and left the meeting.



23

“Now what?” Tracy asked, as she stood at the stove, stirring a large pot simmering on the stove, while Jenny sat at the table doodling, Teddy sat with arms crossed over a soccer ball cradled in his lap, staring out the window, I drummed my fingers in thought, and Hildegarde paced around the spacious kitchen. We had decided it was time for an emergency meeting of Team Hildegarde.

“All you need is money and people.” Teddy pointed out.

“Gee, is that all?” Hildegarde asked as she strode by him.

“Yup.” he calmly replied.

“And how do you propose we come up with this money and these people?” she asked, coming to a stop in front of him.

“Isn’t that why we’re meeting?” I asked him, “To figure that out?”

“Yup.” he answered again. Sometimes calm can be a little infuriating. “so, why don’t we take them one at a time?”

“Great. Fine. Lovely idea.” Hildegarde began her pacing again. “Money. First off, tell me, why do we have to come up with money? When they can come up with all this money for stupid sports equipment?” She slapped the soccer ball out of his arms.

“But I have some really exciting news about the money part!” Tracy turned around, gently nudging the ball back to Teddy, her spoon dripping on the floor. We were all a bit surprised to see it dripping bright turquoise.

“Tracy?” Jenny said, getting up and grabbing a paper towel to wipe up the mess, “what are you cooking? I’ve never seen food that color!”

“Oh, that! I’m not cooking - I’m dying an old skirt mom gave me. That totally puke green one she used to wear all over the place. You thought I was cooking? That’s funny! Cooking something this color, and that smells like this? Really?” She laughed. No one said anything. Some of the smells when Tracy is experimenting in the kitchen, well, it would be impolitic for me to say more...”Come on guys, I am recycling and reusing! I’m not just talking the talk, I’m walking the walk!” She held a big glob of fabric up with her spoon. It wasn’t a

whole lot nicer color than puke green, but I didn't want to be the one to disillusion her.

“Anyhow, I did go talk to Mrs. Olson at lunch yesterday. I forgot to tell you all, since we were so geared up for the board meeting. I pitched her on a lesson idea for learning how to write a formal letter, and said we could write to politicians, government agencies, the power company, private foundations, a bunch of places, and ask about possible funding. I took the lists that Rose's mom and Teddy's dad gave us, added a few more places I found online that provide help to schools who want to go greener, and threw in some companies like the one Teddy's dad works for, who may help us find some good deals. When I gave her all that, she agreed.”

“Tracy!” Hildegarde smiled, I think for the first time since she had been called Don Quixote, “This is great! You've really done your homework!” Tracy beamed, plopped the skirt back into the pot, and resumed stirring. “If Mrs. Olson has everyone in all her classes do this assignment...”

“She said she would!” Tracy piped in.

“We're bound to come up with something! I knew you were the right choice for money person.” Tracy beamed as she stirred and the skirt happily (and stinkily) bubbled away. “We'll have to wait for the results on that, but it's underway. Hooray! Now, does any-

one have any ideas about how we could get more supporters to the next meeting?" We all sat or stood or walked and thought. And thought. And thought.

"Boy, it's almost like we need a whole 'nuther campaign," Jenny sighed, doodling away like mad. She always says doodling focuses her mind. I wasn't sure I was buying that. I think it was just an excuse to draw all the time, because she likes to draw.

Hildegarde stopped pacing and turned to her. "What do you mean?" She asked.

"Well, we went through this whole campaign to sell you to the school, basically. And this whole Zero Net was part of you, I know that. But so was just the you of you, and that helped a lot. Not to mention the 'not Wyatt' of you. That helped too." She kept her face down, pen going madly as she talked. "But now we need to sell that other part, maybe remind them of what they voted for?"

"Yup, we do, and they did. But you know what I think would make an even bigger impression on the school board?" Teddy put in, "If it wasn't just us kids. We need us behind you, for sure, but if we can bring in other folks, too - not just parents, but teachers, and folks from the community. We need to show the school board this is a big problem, and impacts everyone."

"Guess we need a Publicity Department." I mused.

“Are you volunteering?” Hildegarde asked. “You were such a great campaign manager.....”

“I’ll remind you, I didn’t do that alone.”

“And you won’t be doing this alone, either!” Hildegarde responded, along with a chorus of “of course not!”s, “We’ll be there for you!”s, and “Behind you a thousand percent!”s. Right. But how could I say no? Seems I never could, to Hildegarde. I just hoped no one else (other than Wyatt’s dad) could either.

24

When I got home, Dad was sitting in the living room doing his daily crossword puzzle. As I dragged into the room, letting the door slam behind me, he looked up.

“What’s up, Tater Patch?” (I told you not to ask, but it did seem to be the favorite pet name for me from the men in my life.)

“Oh nothing” I sighed, plonking down on the couch beside him, dropping my backpack on the floor with a thunk. (I swear, I did not see the cat there. Oops.) “I just have two months to convince the entire town to show up at a school board meeting and tell them that we’re right and they should support all our initiatives, and give us a bunch of money if Tracy can’t get it from somewhere else. And that’s on top of convincing them that global warming is for real, and if we don’t do something, don’t do a whole bunch, more than just making posters, our entire future is in jeopardy. That’s all.” With a big sigh, I leaned into his shoulder. I think this was the first time I had felt the need to snuggle up to

dad since my age had reached the double digits. I was sure glad he was there.

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” he said, comfortingly. “You got any ideas how you’re going to do this?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe hire a plane to tow a banner across town? Dress up as a mermaid and have Tracy and Jenny pull me around town in a big water tank as I hand out coupons redeemable for an ice cream cone as you leave the meeting? Put a full page ad in the Times-Gazette?”

“You know, that last one is not a bad idea. Much though I would love to see you dressed as a mermaid. But why don’t you get the press on your side?” I sat up straight and looked at him as he continued. “You know Jack is part of my Thursday golf gang. I let him beat me last week, so he owes me one.”

“Yeah...you do know Mr. Skrawhl, don’t you?” Jack Skrawhl was the editor in chief, featured writer, and editorial cartoonist of our local weekly paper. “Do you really think he may be willing to put something in the paper? Something that may get folks to come to the meeting?” I was a little worried, because the paper was pretty famous for only writing things that support local businesses...like the bank that Wyatt’s mom managed, and Wyatt’s dad’s construction firm.

“I’d say an interview with Team Hildegarde would make for riveting reading. And I’ll tell him so!”

“Did you really let him beat you?”

“Of course! Are you implying he could have beat your old dad any other way?” He gave me a little tummy tickle. I gave him back a little giggle, and felt so much better that I had something positive, a plan.

Dad was true to his word. Sure enough, Friday morning I had an email from Jack Skrawhl himself, requesting an interview with “the new shakers and movers of the Fighting Chickens.” I was so excited! I ran down the street to Jenny’s house, and together we called Tracy. The three of us dashed over to Hildegarde’s to let her know, and to schedule a date for the big news blitz.

Gert opened the door. In one hand she was holding a gunked up rag, in the other, the biggest caulking gun I’d ever seen. “Hello girls!” she grinned at us. There were spatters of caulk across her forehead and one big schmear down her cheek. Jenny subtly pointed this out to her by giving her own cheek a rub, and, with an “oh, excuse me, I’m such a mess!” Gert gave hers a wipe with the glooky rag, succeeding in spreading the mess down past her chin. “ I’ve just been patching a few leaky window casements. I bet you’re looking for Hildegarde.”

“We are. I have some great news!” I told her. “Is she around?”

“She went over to Teddy’s dad’s office.” she answered. “but she should be home any minute.” And sure enough, Hildegarde and Teddy were just rounding the corner on their bikes.

“Oh, I’m so glad you guys are here!” she announced when they got to us. “The guy that owns the company Teddy’s dad works for is totally behind us! He says he’ll give us a great deal on LED bulbs and sensors and a whole lot of other things, basically at cost! And once a year their company does a community service day, and this year they may do it at the school, and install a bunch of the stuff we talked to them about!”

“That’s great news!” Tracy enthused, with Jenny and me chiming in our congratulations. We were making progress! “And Rose has some good news, too!” I explained about the proposed newspaper interview. It was a heady moment for us all. For so long we had been talking and scheming about these things, now it was really coming together! I was just starting to feel pretty cocky, I think we all were, when Wyatt, Frank, and a few of their soccer-ball-toting pals came sauntering up to the happy bunch of us.

“I hear my dad wasn’t too nice to you at the meeting, Hildie.” Wyatt sneered.

“We don’t seem to exactly share the same priorities. Yet.” She answered.

“Yet? Ha! You guys are a bunch of dreamers. Dad’s a real-world guy. He gets it. You aren’t going to get anywhere with him, and you shouldn’t. He knows what’s important, and the rest of the school board is smart enough to listen to him.”

“Wyatt,” Teddy began, softly. “I think they will have to listen to us.”

“Us?” Wyatt turned to him. “I can’t believe you’re considering yourself one of them! You used to be a fun guy, Tedster. You could head a ball like no one else. Now we’ve had to put Cranell in the game, and you can imagine how well that’s going!” I was surprised to notice Billy hanging in the back of Wyatt’s gang. I guess he just wanted to be considered cool by someone. Any one. Poor Billy.

“Wyatt, I know you think soccer is the whole world,” Teddy said straight to Wyatt’s smugly grinning face, “but someday you’ll learn there is more out there than what is fun for you. Some day you’ll grow up. I just hope it’s soon.” Wyatt’s smile started to slip. “Because right now you’re acting like a kid.” Wyatt was definitely not smiling now. “Like a fool. Get your head out of the infield dirt and look around you.”

“Oh man, Teddyboy” Wyatt rallied, “who is the fool? Not me. I think the fool is the once ok forward who sells out his buddies to hang with a bunch of one-trick-pony-do-gooder girls.” and with that, he threw the ball he’d been carrying right at Teddy’s head.

And Teddy headed it right back at Wyatt. It was all so fast, next thing we knew, Wyatt was holding the side of his face, hopping around and cursing, and the ball was rolling away down the street. We tried really hard not to laugh. It’s not nice to laugh at someone in pain. So we did try. Only a few giggles escaped as Wyatt glared at us and beat an ignoble retreat.



25

We had a wonderful surprise when we got to English the next morning. Mrs. Olson stood before us and announced “We have an interesting new project today. We are going to learn the proper way to write a formal business letter. But these are not just imaginary, practice letters.” Jenny, Tracy, Hildegarde, and I shared delighted looks as Mrs. Olson proceeded to explain how we would be writing asking about grants and other funding for energy projects at our school. We snuck a few quick high-fives when she turned her back and wrote a list on the board - politicians, government agencies, power companies, manufacturers, private foundations, all the places on Tracy’s list and more.

“You know what is so great about this?” Hildegarde leaned over and whispered to me. “Not only will we maybe get some funding, but this will also get all of Mrs. Olson’s students a part of the project! It’s as good as your audits!”

“Excuse me Hildegarde”, Mrs. Olson interrupted, “Did you have something to share with us all?”

“Oh yes Mrs. Olson. I was just saying what a wonderful, real-world exercise this is. We’ll not only be learning this important writing skill, perhaps we will be helping the whole school and community as well. I was expressing my joy with what a great assignment this is!”

I was a little disgusted to see Mrs. Olson take total credit for the idea, and she did glance at Tracy as she said “Well, thank you Hildegarde.” Tracy was so good, though. A true team player. Not a peep out of her. We each got our assigned recipient, Mrs. Olson explained proper headings, salutations, and all, and we got writing. As I finished my letter (to our senator - wow!), I gave it a kiss for good luck, handed it in, and tried to keep the excited smile off my face as I waited for the rest of the class to finish.

When the bell rang, we four dashed out of the room together, chattering excitedly. The best thing of all was that, as we got out the door, a bunch of other kids gathered around us. Some of the comments were:

“This is so exciting! I wrote to the governor's office!”

“That’s nothing - I wrote to the Department of Energy in Washington!”

“I wrote to our state senator. That’s pretty funny - my dad hates her! Ha!” (I love hanging out with teenagers sometimes. We crack me up.)

“Do you really think the president of GE will write back to me?”

“Who is Robert Redford, anyway?”

“Oh, my grandmother loves him!”

And various other excitements. It was great, and Hildegarde did not let the moment pass.

“Hey everyone!” she quieted them down, “This is really great, isn’t it?” Nods all around. “We’re really doing something!” I don’t think too many people noticed I was the one that subtly started the cheer which greeted this. “And while I have you all here and excited, I want to invite you to what promises to be a really big, important evening. We’ll be presenting at the November school board meeting, and I really hope you all can come. And bring your friends and families. We need to show the school board that we are on this, and acting on it, and that it is time for them to take action, too!” I led the group in another cheer. I love an impromptu stump speech. Especially when I really should be on my way to Geometry. “Thank you all! This is wonderful! Now, off to class with us...” As the bell rang and the group dispersed, her smile dropped as she turned to us. “How are we going to keep them excited for the next 2 months? So they’ll still come to the meeting?”

It was a good question. But I wasn’t too worried. “We’ll be getting answers to these letters,” I reassured

her, “so will everyone in all the rest of Olson’s classes. We still have the posters. And we’ll have the newspaper interview. Mr. Skrawls said we can schedule that for whenever we like, as long as it isn’t the same week as the Pumpkin Faire.”

“Rose, you are so good for me,” Hildegarde’s smile was back. “We do have all that, plus we have ourselves. We can keep talking about it all. We just need to keep the energy up.”

“No Hildegarde,” Jenny said with a straight face, “We’re trying to keep the energy down. Haven’t you been reading the posters?” Hildegarde gave her a hug and we ran off to our next classes.



26

Things were pretty quiet on the Team Hildegarde front for the next few weeks. I got our newspaper interview scheduled so that it would be in the paper the week before the board meeting. Jenny made a few new posters all on her own, just to keep things fresh. Tracy was excited each day as we headed into English, hoping someone had gotten a response to one of their letters, and each day nothing came in. Teddy even went to a few soccer practices. We all kept talking up the importance of our energy project, but over the weeks, with school and Pumpkin Faire prep and after school activities and music lessons and just plain old life, the excitement seemed to be fading.

Until one day, right before we were to meet with Mr. Skrawls, my phone rang. I was totally surprised to hear Wyatt's mom on the other end of the line.

"Hello Rose" she began in her rather clipped, banker-ish tones. "I hope you don't mind me calling you."

“Of course not, ma’am” I responded politely, my mind going a mile a minute wondering what this was about. “What can I do for you?”

“I’ve known you your entire life, Rose,”
Yup...and...??? “And you’ve always seemed a sensible girl.” Really? “I wonder if you could explain something to me.”

“I’ll try...”

“It’s about Wyatt.” Oh dear. “He’s been acting a bit strange lately.” Lately?

“Really?”

“Yes, and I was wondering if you could maybe shed some light on the situation.”

“I’m afraid I’m not sure what you’re asking about...”

“Well, basically, I’m not sure how to put this. He used to be such a carefree boy. Running around with his pals and his soccer ball.” That sounded like the Wyatt I know... “but lately he’s been talking about other stuff. Whether he’ll hear back from the governor’s office. whether our water heater has a blanket on it. I don’t even know where our water heater is, much less if it has a blanket! Really? She doesn’t? “And why would a water heater have a blanket, anyhow? Then he asks when did we last change our furnace filters. The furnace hasn’t even been on in the last three months!” But

he was right, that is the perfect time to be sure the filters are clean... “And the strangest one of all. He asked his father at dinner last night whether I had blonde hair when he fell in love with me.” Aha! “Is that crazy behavior from my Wyatt or what?” I bet his little sister sprayed milk out her nose at that one. I would have loved to have been there.

“Well,” I began carefully, “I think maybe Wyatt’s interests are changing a bit.”

“What ever are you talking about?”

“Has he perhaps mentioned the name Hildegarde?”

“You mean that girl that made such a fuss at the school board meeting?”

“Yes.”

“No, he hasn’t.”

“I didn’t expect he would have. I am sorry to be the one to tell you this...”

“Wait a minute. That Hildegarde, she’s the girl with all these energy ideas...”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And she has...long....blonde.....hair.....” I could just about see the light bulb coming on over her head. I just hoped it was an LED! Ha! Good one, Rose! “Oh my. I guess you’re right, Rose. That does explain it. My little Wyattwoo is indeed changing. He’s growing up.”

She sighed. I tried not to gag at the thought of anyone calling him Wyattwoo. Though it was a little cute. And I couldn't help but grin as I realized we may have more people on our side than we realized....

27

The interview went well. We let Hildegarde do most of the talking, and as we knew would happen, she really charmed Mr. Skrawls. He promised us a nice long story, with pictures, that would encourage everyone in town to come to the school board meeting. He even came up with the idea of running a sidebar with energy saving tips, and said he may consider doing an entire special issue about it. Hildegard subtly mentioned what a great way that may be to sell advertising to all kinds of local businesses like the hardware store (caulk, insulation, etc.), heating contractors (furnace and duct inspections), electrical contractors (programmable thermostats and even alternative energy systems), so many local businesses! He loved that idea, and the two of them went at it, scribbling down all kinds of notes. Quite the little lovefest. We were all feeling mighty fine as we left the Times-Gazette offices.

“That was brilliant!” Jenny enthused.

“Well done, Hildegarde.” Teddy put in.

“It did go pretty well, didn’t it?” Hildegarde led the way down the street. “Think we’ll get enough folks coming to the meeting to make them see we mean business?”

I hadn’t mentioned anything about the phone call from Wyatt’s mom, but I said “I bet we’ve got all kinds of people behind us that may surprise us.”

Tracy stayed quiet, but there was a grin on her face and a bounce in her walk. I’d known her long enough to know there was something up. “OK Trace, what are you barely keeping in? All morning you’ve looked about to burst. In a good way. It’s not just from the brilliant way Hildegarde charmed the press...”

“I told Mrs. Olson I wouldn’t tell....”

We all stopped and surrounded her. “Wouldn’t tell what?” “What’s up?” “Come on, give!”

“Oh you guys...” she sighed. “You’ll find out when we get to English tomorrow.”

“Like we can wait until then.” I threw an arm over her shoulder. “Come on, you’re secret is safe with us.”

“Oh Rose, you’ve never kept a secret in your life!” Tracy laughed. If she only knew what I knew about a certain soccer player with a crush...but I know she still hadn’t forgiven me for telling Jenny that Tracy was giving her a Slinky for her eighth birthday. But she bribed

me! I was a sucker for jujubes when I was younger. Boy, some people sure can hold a grudge.

“Come on...try me. Try us all!” I encouraged her, moving my arm to around her neck and giving her just a gentle noogie.

“Ok, ok!” she laughed, pushing away from me. “Mrs. Olson told me we’ve gotten responses to our letters! Five of them, so far!” We all whooped and danced. “But you guys have GOT to pretend to be surprised and excited when she tells us about it.”

“What kind of responses did we get?” Teddy asked.

“Really really positive ones.” Tracy smiled. “She didn’t give me all the details, but she said it looked like we may be able to get some funding! And that she’s willing to let us use filling out the grant applications as another writing exercise. She even said she’d have her son come in and help us! The one that works for the Rec. Department. He’s gotten heaps of grants for equipment and stuff, and really knows how to say things the right way. Hildegarde, I really do think we may be able to get funding for the big stuff!”

The next day was the first time in my entire school career that I was actually looking forward to going to English. But I played it cool. We all did. No going in with excited faces. Nope, not us. It was pretty well an Oscar-worthy performance, how we all dragged into class

when inside we were leaping with joy. And weren't we clearly the most surprised in the room when Mrs. Olson announced that we had received positive, encouraging responses from the state Department of Energy, the Green Buildings Council, our local utility, the EPA, and the senator I had written to. I figured that would earn me an A on that assignment.

"Each of my classes will be assigned one of these grants" Mrs. Olson said. "We shall work on the paperwork together, as a class. This period will be working on the grant recommended by our senator. I've printed out copies of the required forms." and she passed them out.

It looked like a big thick pile of gobbledygook and I wondered how we would ever make sense of it all. "My son Bob will be in next week to check our work and give us pointers. Now, please, pick up your pencils, and let's see what we can come up with..." And so together, as a class, we began wandering through the paperwork, hoping we'd be able to come up with something that may get us our solar panels or our windmills. Something to take us a long way down the path toward Zero Net. As I looked out at the bowed heads of my classmates, I realized that, no matter what, it was a really wonderful thing that we were all here, working on this together. It felt great. I just wished the School Board were in the classroom to see us.



28

The newspaper came out two days later. We weren't on the front page, but there was still a pretty good picture of the five of us, squinting into the early autumn sun, and a nice headline:

**“STUPENDOUS STUDENTS LEAD THE WAY TO
ZERO NET SCHOOL”**

Despite the geeky alliteration, it was a pretty cool article, telling about Hildegarde moving to town and seeing the need for change, how she ran for school president on a zero-net platform and what that means. It explained most of what we had done so far and even got almost everyone's names spelled correctly (Mr. Skrawls was notorious for getting names wrong). And, most exciting and importantly, it ended with a quote from Hildegarde (described as “The young Power Fireball”) saying “We hope everyone in the school and everyone in the town will attend the next school board meeting and show the wise and honorable members of the school board what an important and valuable decision this is. We, your kids, thank you for your interest, on our be-

half, and on the behalf of our children, your grandchildren, and all the generations to come.” Nice, Hildegarde...no pressure.

The evening of The Board Meeting (I was now thinking it deserved to be referred to in capitals...big, momentous, so important), Jenny, Tracy, Teddy, and I got there almost an hour early. Of course the room was empty, and we sat nervously, wondering if anyone would come. Hildegarde showed up pretty soon, then our families rolled in. Still a sad little blob of bodies. But I was tickled to see Frank come. I smiled at him gratefully and he ignored me. That was ok, at least he was there. He saved a seat next to him, which I found curious - was there a girl he wanted sitting next to him? That could make for some good teasing-fodder!

About fifteen minutes before show-time, we were pleased and amazed to see the room begin to fill. First Simon and his folks and three sisters came in (I could not believe there were 5 other people who looked just like Simon...down to their horn-rimmed glasses and white socks. Simon was a bit nerdish when viewed alone, but in the middle of his tribe, there was a certain charm there.). Billy Crannell and his folks came in, Mrs. Olson and her son Bob, then more and more teachers. Even Mr. Bullock. This was all very exciting, but even more exciting was when people not associated

with the school started filling even more seats. Mr. Skrawls, of course, but also a bunch of the guys who work with Teddy's dad, people I knew by sight from seeing them working at the grocery store or the drug store in town, the bank, and other faces, familiar and unfamiliar. More people than we could have imagined! The room had a party atmosphere, a crowd of friends and neighbors gathered together on a school night, chatting, laughing, catching up. It was a good place to be.

About five minutes before the meeting was scheduled to start, Tracy elbowed me. I turned and found I had to nearly stand up to see above the crowd to see what she had noticed - the room was packed! And there, in the doorway, looking for somewhere to sit, was Wyatt, and his mom! I hoped they weren't there to make trouble, but I kept my mouth shut, especially when I saw Frank wave Wyatt over to the seat he had saved. Mr. Eggertson gave Wyatt's mom his seat and joined the crowd standing along the back wall. Tracy, Jenny, and I all shared amazed and thrilled glances as the School Board entered and took their seats at the tables at the front of the room. Things stayed pretty noisy until Wyatt's dad whacked his gavel. For once, he really seemed to need it.

"Order! Please, everyone, order!" Slowly the room quieted. "Well well, we finally seem to be mighty popu-

lar! Guess no one cares who wins the big game tonight.” I saw Mrs. Shannon yank an earbud out of her ear and try to look innocent. “I would like to call this session of the school board to order. As our agenda states, we will begin with review and approval of the minutes of our last meeting...” They worked their way through the agenda and the room began buzzing again.

“Can you believe this?” Tracy whispered in my ear.

“No, actually. I really can’t” I smiled back at her. “Hildegarde, what do you think?”

“I just hope they’re all on our side!” she seemed slightly nervous.

“Of course they are!” I enthused. I didn’t know that for sure, but I did know that when Hildegarde was feeling strong, she was unstoppable, so I would do whatever I needed to to be sure she was feeling strong. I sure hoped I was right, that all these people were rooting for us. I saw Wyatt lean forward in his seat and sneak a peek at Hildegarde, but I couldn’t tell what it meant. Every couple of minutes, Wyatt’s dad would bang his gavel, things would quiet down a tiny bit (but not much), then the board would carry on with their business and the noise level would begin to rise again.

Finally, Wyatt’s dad gave a major whap and announced at his full job-site-boss-man-volume voice, “On to continuing business.” The room quieted. Hilde-

garde fidgeted. “I turn the floor over to Hildegarde. If you can find an empty spot on it to stand,” this did get a slight laugh. “I must admit, Blondie,” oh please! “you seem to have incited a bit of interest here...”

“Thank you Mr. President,” Hildegarde stood, all traces of nervousness vanished. She strode forward, “Thank you honorable school board members,” she spun around, “and thank you to all the members of the community who have showed up this evening. I am so grateful to you all for showing your interest in this project. Please allow me to give you an update on what we’ve been up to since I addressed you last.” And she proceeded to explain about the progress of the grant writing by Mrs. Olson’s classes (Bob led a little cheer at this. It was rather sweet.) “We are very optimistic that, with the help of Mrs. Olson and her son Bob” (he cheered again, and we all joined in, leading to another gavel-whack), “we will indeed secure one or more of these grants which could pave the way to fully funding the large projects we presented to you last meeting.” There was a murmur of excitement through the room.

“But you have nothing yet...” Wyatt’s dad interjected, and the room’s murmur turned a little less positive. “We don’t. So we are not asking for the go-ahead on that, just yet. Just an agreement from the board that,

when the grant money comes in, you are willing to back us, and use it for the purpose it is intended.”

“Honey, if you can pay for it, you can have it, don’t we agree?” he asked, turning to the rest of the board.

“Well, actually,” Mr. Patterson began. Wait - Mr. Patterson was actually saying something? He was one of those school board guys who never said anything, just seconded motions sometimes and voted however Wyatt’s dad wanted him to. “I think maybe, since these kids have done so much already, we should consider allocating some funds so they could get some hard bids on the project, so they are ready to go when they get a grant or two.” The room was silent, staring in amazement that Mr. Patterson had stated an opinion. And one contrary to what Wyatt’s dad had!

Wyatt’s dad leaned forward and just stared at Mr. Patterson. I swear his mouth was hanging open a bit. Suddenly, Teddy lept out of his seat.

“My dad has already come up with plans and figures!” he called out. His dad smiled from his seat as an excited mutter ran through the room. “Tell ‘em, Dad!” He cried, proudly, sitting back down.

As the gavel thunked away, Teddy’s dad stood and said “Well, I have some rough sketches and ballpark figures Steve and I have worked out.” Steve is the guy that

owns the company Teddy's dad works for. "But we'd love to work up something more specific." You could barely hear the gavel hitting, what for all the woot woots and cheers and chants from the electricians sitting around Steve. Man, electricians seemed like a pretty fun bunch of guys. Rowdy, but fun. They quieted as Steve stood and waved at the room.

"Yes, we have some options and ideas, and are certainly ready to work with the school on giving the best possible pricing. Not just on the big ticket items, but the smaller, intermediary steps, like the LED light bulbs, programmable stats, and motion sensors these kids have so smartly recommended. We are very very impressed by the initiative they have taken, and want to support them in any way we can." More cheers from the electricians, and it was picked up by the rest of the crowd. Things were getting exciting now.

"Order! Order!" Wyatt's dad shouted. Eventually things came back to near order, but there was a definite buzz in the air, and it was buzzing our way!

"Thank you so much for your support!" Hildegarde smiled at Steve. He gave her a big smile back, and sat down as the room quieted further. "And thank you Mr. Patterson. Yes, some funding at this point would greatly help our efforts. While the time Teddy's dad and Steve and the rest have already put in, donated, is

really wonderful, it would certainly help to get more detailed bids and designs worked up. We can only ask them to donate so much of their time. Also, it will be a while before we hear back on the grants. And even when we do, the grants are specifically aimed at supply-side needs, wind and solar projects. If we could get some funding now, for the demand-side solutions we have identified, and that Steve's company has so kindly offered to help us with, we could make some great progress down the path to zero-net."

"But we've already made the budget!" Mr. Swanson whined. "We don't just have spare money floating around for your little projects."

"I'm sorry to still hear you refer to these as 'my little projects'" Hildegarde sighed, and the room sighed with her. Folks can be so frustrating sometimes. "But I am sure there are funding sources available to a board as smart and creative as yourselves."

Suddenly, from down the row from me, we were all shocked to hear a voice shout "Mom! Tell them what you told me about the no-interest loans!" The room fell silent and everyone turned toward the standing, shouting, arm-waving Wyatt.

"Wyatt!" His father shouted, gavel dangling uselessly from his fingers. "What ARE you doing?!?"

“Dad!” he turned to him, “Please, just give mom the floor.” Frank leaned forward around Wyatt and wriggled just his pinky at me. It was our old “brother-sister-togetherness” sign we’d been using across crowded rooms and boring family gatherings since we were little kids. I wriggled mine back at him and smiled big time. In the middle of all this big important stuff, it felt so good to know my bro still had my back.

“I don’t know what you are going on about, son,” Wyatt’s dad began, when a stern female voice called out,

“Arnie! Let me speak!” Arnie? Wyatt’s dad’s name was Arnie? I’d known the man my whole life, but had never known his first name. It suited him, somehow. Again the room began buzzing (maybe I wasn’t the only one tickled to learn the great and powerful school board president was an ‘Arnie’) as Wyatt’s mother made her way to the front of the room.

“Dottie, what is this about?” While Wyatt’s dad certainly looked like an Arnie, his mom seemed a bit intimidating to be a Dottie. But if she was intimidating ‘Arnie’, who was I to complain?

“I know what he’s talking about,” she began, sternly, straight to Wyatt’s dad. “Because I have been listening to what he’s been talking about the last few months. And if you’d listened to him, you’d understand as well.”

She turned to the audience, who was now rapt (and you could tell, all the folks in that room who had ever been bullied by Wyatt's dad had sure enjoyed that little take down she just gave him). "I can tell everyone here tonight has been listening to the kids. And they need to be listened to, because this is a vital message they are bringing us. How sad, yet unsurprising, that it has to come from them, that we aren't aware enough, or brave enough, to have come up with it on our own.

"But you listened, Mrs. Olson, and you have acted, getting the grants process going. And you've listened, Steve, and the rest of your crew, and you've taken your own time to run numbers and begin designs. Mr. Skrawls listened, and so many of you heard the message to come today from him, and you all listened, and good for all of you for being here to support these kids.

"And we at the bank are finally listening. And we would like to offer a no-interest loan to this project, to fund the bulbs, the sensors, the water heater blankets, the signs, all the things these kids have come up with. Lily"—hey, that's my mom!—"listened to Rose, who has been such a great leader in this," me??? Really??? Cool! "and has shared with me a budget of what it will take to get the school up to a somewhat reasonable level of energy efficiency. The bank accepts this budget, and would like to fund half of it as our annual 'community

giving' contribution, and give a no-interest loan to cover the rest." The room erupted in cheers as Arnie banged and whacked his gavel, to not much effect.

"Let's schedule a work party to install all these great things!" I recognized Gert's voice above the hubbub (was she wearing her tool belt to the meeting?) and soon the talking all around us turned to people discussing dates, abilities, plans.

Wyatt's dad threw his hands in the air. The gavel flew out of his grasp. It ricocheted off the ceiling and whapped down inches from Mrs. Shannon's hand with a crash which caused it to bounce toward the audience. The crowd quieted and watched it fly. Hildegarde reached out her hand and caught it just before it hit Simon's youngest sister in the face. A cheer went up, and we could just hear Wyatt's dad shout "Meeting adjourned!" as we jumped, cheered, and hugged.



29

“I can’t believe it!” Jenny smiled as we gathered around Tracy’s kitchen table that night.

“Me neither.” I smiled, taking a big drink of my hot chocolate. “I’ve never been so excited!”

“Tell me about it!” Tracy leaned back with a satisfied sigh and wiped the chocolate mustache off her hugely grinning lip.

“But where’s Hildegarde?” Wyatt asked. Yes, Wyatt. He wanted to come celebrate with us and had sent Teddy over to ask if it was ok. After the way he had talked his mom into backing us, and yelled down his dad, of course we said he was welcome.

“She said she had to go home—Gert insisted—a quick family meeting, but she’d be over soon,” I reported. And as Teddy got up to refill his mug, we heard a knock on the back door and it opened and Hildegarde’s face peeked in.

We all jumped up and ran over to hug her, amongst cries of “We did it!”, “Can you believe it!” “It’s really go-

ing to happen!” Then I looked at her. She wasn’t smiling, not really. Her lips were trying to lift at the corners, but her eyes weren’t looking so happy.

“Shhhh! Quiet, everyone!” I waved us all back to the table. “Tracy, get her some cocoa. Hildegarde, what’s up? You look like you’re about to cry.”

“Oh you guys,” she began, “This is such a great night. For us, for the school, for the planet. I really believe it’s going to happen! I’m so proud of you all!”

“It doesn’t look like such a great night for you, Hildegarde,” Teddy said, looking at her with concern.

“What’s up? Did something happen at your family meeting?” It was a smart question, since when we had left the school, she had looked like she was walking on air. As she had every reason to.

“Well, yeah.” she sighed as we all looked on nervously. “You all know we came here last year because my dad got transferred for his job.” we nodded, worried about where this was going. “Well, he got transferred again. We’re moving during Christmas vacation.” The room was silent. We were stunned, crushed, all the celebration sucked right out of us. No one knew what to say.

A few of us were on the verge of tears until Wyatt pushed back from the table with a loud “Well that just sucks!”

“Well said, Wyatt,” Hildegarde smiled sadly at him.

“You can’t go now! We’re just starting to make things happen!” Jenny wailed.

“Actually, don’t you think that is the best time for me to go?” she asked kindly. “Because you just said it - WE are making things happen. Not me. All of you. Everyone here at the table, everyone at the school, everyone in the town. It will happen, even with me gone.”

“But we don’t want you gone.” I said, my heart breaking a little bit. “You should be here to share it with us. You made it all happen.”

“WE made it all happen, and you all will keep it happening.”

“We can, and we will, you can bet on it.” Wyatt was trying to sound all tough and powerful, but there was even a little crack in his voice.

“I’m especially glad to hear you say that” Hildegarde smiled at him, “because as second highest vote-getter, when I leave, you’re going to have to take over as school president, and keep this motley crew going down the right path. Think you can handle that?”

“I may come from leader-type parents, but I’ll never be the leader you just naturally are.” he answered generously.

“But Hildegarde,” I said, “I know you’re leaving us in a great place as far as achieving zero-net, and I do believe we will. And even before we do, we’ll be able to cut back the school’s energy use, and we’ll do the same stuff at home. That’s all wonderful, and I’m so happy we’ll be doing our part for our kids and grandkids. The problem is the right now. Because right now you’re telling me I’m about to lose one of my best friends.” I saw Jenny and Tracy (and I think Wyatt and Teddy, though I couldn’t be sure) wipe at their eyes a little at that.

“No, Rose, you won’t. I’ll always be your friend. We’ll stay in touch. You’ll tell me each new improvement at the school. And I’ll tell you how things go at my new school. I won’t find friends like you guys, I know that,” we all smiled through our tears, “but I know I’ll find leaky windows, and uninsulated water heaters, and empty rooms with lights on and...”

“And you’ll tell ‘em what to do about it!” I raised my mug and we all toasted the future. Our future, now well on the path we had convinced the entire town we needed to take. And Hildegarde’s future, where she would convince others of the same need. Because while

we may have only been kids, we knew we had been able to make a difference, a difference way bigger than any one of us. We knew Hildegarde would continue to make a difference, and she had inspired us to know we could and would do the same, throughout our lives. I may have once thought nothing ever changes in my life, but Hildegarde taught me differently. Things do change, and I can help them, make them change. And so I did, and always will.

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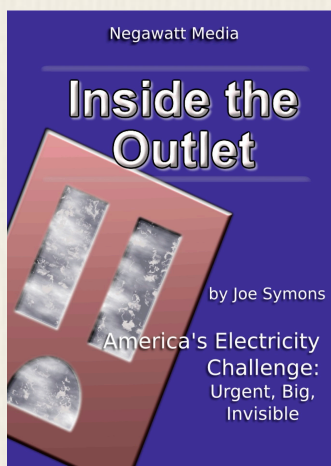
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