

The Great Change

“Grandma, tell me about the Very-Big Change again!”, asked five-year-old Lucy, snuggling up to her grandmother, Jane.

“Yeah! I want to hear it too, pleeeeeease tell us, grandma!”, cried Lucy’s twin brother Tommy.

“Ok, ok, my dears, if you insist!”, chuckled grandma Jane, “Actually, I will do something even better, I will show you!”. As she said this, grandma Jane took a smooth silver helmet and slipped it onto her head. The device was a mental image reader and transmitter, wirelessly connected to a big computer screen, but in the family, everyone called in “The Hat of Dreams”, since people often used it to share the fantastic images they would see in their dreams. It was invented by a distant cousin of grandma Jane, after he had stopped working in a company that produced medical scanning equipment. This relation made grandma very proud and she never failed to mention her cousin when using the helmet. Grandma adjusted the helmet and the twins turned to look at the big screen.

The images started rolling, showing people dressed in different uniforms, some working in factories assembling machine parts, covered in chemicals and oils, some working at tills in supermarkets, looking tired and grumpy, wearing strangely coloured uniforms with the names of the shops, some digging graves (this one always shocked the children, even though they had seen it countless times), some washing heaps of dirty dishes in restaurants, some running around, taking orders from finely-dressed guests and carrying big golden trays with food and drinks, some cleaning toilets, some with blue uniforms, driving trains and buses, some carrying heavy boxes, some hanging on a chair in mid-air, cleaning the windows of a shiny skyscraper (this one also elicited the usual “yikes!” and “wow!” from the children). All of these images were memories that grandma Jane had and where she didn’t have a clear memory, she imagined what the people would have looked like, so she could show her grandchildren. What the children always noticed was how unhappy, tired, and old all of these “workers” (that’s what grandma called them) looked.

“This is what people used to do before The Great Change, or as Lucy calls it, ‘The Very-Big Change’. Would you, my dears, like to work something like those jobs? Tommy, maybe you would be brave enough to clean the windows of the skyscraper?”, asked grandma.

“No, no way, I don’t want to clean the windows, but I want to climb up a skyscraper, I’m not scared!”, cried Tommy proudly.

“I’m sure you’ll climb many skyscrapers when you’re older, dear, but better yet, why not climb some real mountains, eh?”, grandma patted Tommy’s messy hair and pulled out a straw. “Ah, you’ve been playing outside with your friends, I see! What adventures were you up to this time?”

“We rode our horses to the river and built a fort to protect us from the enemies!”, explained Tommy excitedly. What actually took place was this: ten boys, Tommy’s neighbours, who were round about the same age as Tommy, found some big sticks (the horses), named their horses, ran with them to the river, used some more sticks, old blankets and pillows, as well as some leaves and whatever else they could find to build something resembling a hut, in which they would hide from their “enemies”. The enemies were sometimes Native American Indians, sometimes cowboys, sometimes the English Army, sometimes the Russians, but more importantly, they were always played by the same group of ten or so boys from the other street, also neighbours, also very good friends, also very good at building forts and riding horses.

Grandma Jane was always delighted to hear these stories because they reminded her of her childhood. She was a child of the early 1990s and one of the last to play outside for decades to come. It also brought her joy that these young boys wanted to learn about the past and how once people fought small battles, big battles, and wars. She also felt relieved that they would only learn about those wars from history books and the stories of their grandparents, that they themselves would never have to go to war. After all, the world had been peaceful for several decades now and it seemed to be permanent.

“And you, Lucy, what have you been up to?”

“I’ve been having the most *delightful* tea party with the other aristocrats. Tommy, you’re invited too, but you *must* wash the mud off your face first!”, Lucy was in that moment a posh English Duchess and her brother’s Wild West looks did not seem to her to be in good taste. Lucy and her other aristocratic friends (all very young girls, all wearing their mothers’ and grandmothers’ dresses and jewellery) would meet up in the park and each would bring snacks, as well as some cups and plates smuggled from home. They would then talk about their husbands, their estates in the country, and how much money they had – all of this obviously inspired by some films they had seen, as well as books their parents had read to them (her favourite was *Pride and Prejudice*).

At this age, all of the children could read, they had all learned very early and they all loved it, there were countless high-quality educational programmes that taught children to read and develop a love for reading early on in life. Books like *Pride and Prejudice*, however, were still a bit difficult for Lucy, so her parents sometimes read to her. Early education was one of the gifts of The Great Change. Many teachers had left mainstream education and dedicated themselves to exploring new methods to teach children skills earlier and in a more efficient way, they had realised that the mainstream approach, everything from the methods, to the ages, at which we teach children skills like reading and maths, have been completely wrong for so many years. Now that these teachers didn’t need to work long hours for an ungrateful system, they could devote their time to passionately researching and applying better methods. New, volunteer schools were open, many parents would happily take their children there, or go to learn the methods themselves, in order to teach their children at home. While many people homeschooled their children, some were quite busy with their own passion-projects (the only work one could do in this day and age) and would take their children to the volunteer schools for a few hours a day. Grandma had got a bit carried away talking about books and reading and volunteer schools, after all, she herself had been a teacher in the old system and all of these topics were very exciting for her.

“What I don’t know is why they call them ‘volunteer schools’...everyone is a volunteer right now, nobody gets paid more for doing things. We all just get paid what we need and no one ever struggles. People only work when and if they want to do something for society. Like your dad, helping restore that beautiful church...if he didn’t want to do it, he wouldn’t. Back when I was your age, my father had to go to work, otherwise the family wouldn’t have enough money for food or electricity. Some people would go hungry, others would lose their homes, if they couldn’t find jobs. Some people did dangerous jobs, like fighting fires! Imagine walking into a fire! Now we’ve got robots for that, and thank God! No more brave souls have to risk their lives!”

Tommy was very intrigued by the story and imagined walking into a fire with his “army” of five-year-old colleagues and saving people.

“There are other, safer, noble pursuits for you, young man, don’t you think about going anywhere near a fire!”, grandma didn’t need advanced technology to figure out what Tommy was imagining. “Maybe you could help invent better fire-fighting robots instead?”. Tommy scratched his chin and considered this, as grandma continued.

“So, anyway, about this Great Change, well, people were working very hard, there were some very wealthy people, who didn’t have to work, of course, but they were a minority. The rest of us had different jobs, got paid different salaries and bought what we could afford and when we could afford it. The poorer people were, the more they struggled with life, they didn’t have enough food and when they did, it was bad quality, they wore old clothes made of recycled plastic bottles, they were always living in fear that they would be left homeless. There were of course, entire industries providing low-quality products at a low price and people would buy those. On the other

side of that, in some far-away country, some other even less fortunate people would be working in big factories for 15 hours a day, making those cheap products, breathing in poisonous chemicals and getting paid a few pennies a day for their work. The environment was very polluted, the rivers were full of garbage and many of them dried up, many animal species were disappearing, the air was sometimes difficult to breathe because the factories were always puffing out giant dark clouds of toxic fumes. The world was ill. The majority of the people in the world were living in poverty, they were losing hope for a better life, they were losing faith in humanity and in God. Of course, there were many people who had given up on life a long time ago, who relied on the governments to give them a small, insufficient amount of benefits each month without doing any work. Some couldn't find work and some didn't want to. Some would have been paid even less, if they were to work. Hundreds and thousands became homeless. There was a lot of envy, hatred, division among people. Art and culture lost their beauty, religious temples were abandoned and left to crumble. You would walk into a gallery and all the paintings would be simplistic and ugly. People stopped reading books. Music became worse and worse, the compositions were simple and repetitive, the lyrics tasteless and immoral..."

"What's 'immoral', grandma?" interrupted Tommy.

"It means 'bad', honey, something that's wrong, that you shouldn't be doing, if you want to be a good person and live a good life."

"So what happened then? Tell us about the Change!", clapped Lucy excitedly.

"Well, people were desperate, tired, miserable, depressed, nobody cared about anyone or anything anymore. People didn't have the time or money to pursue their hobbies, to take care of themselves and their families. Everyone became isolated, neighbours didn't even greet each other, everyone was suspicious of everyone. The streets were dirty, there was garbage and stray animals everywhere – many people let their pets go, as they couldn't afford to take care of them. The cities and towns looked uglier and more depressing, the newly-built buildings were made to be durable, but not aesthetically pleasing, so they were grey, solid, plain and square. In the meantime, the old buildings, the really beautiful ones that had been built centuries before I was born, were left to fall apart, as nobody could afford, or cared enough, to restore them. We were all incredibly anxious about the future. Some of us didn't even see a possible future. Everything was disintegrating, we were in a living hell and we were both the victims and the devils, at the same time.", terrible pictures unfolded before the children's eyes, they saw sick, dirty people, sleeping on cardboard boxes. They saw cities in ruins, under a dark, grey, menacing sky.

"Why do you say that? You're not a devil, grandma!", interrupted Lucy.

"I say it, dear, because when people don't have their basic needs met, their basic necessities, such as shelter, food, clean water, safety, they tend to turn on each other, they become aggressive and selfish and they fight and steal and cheat others! They focus only on their own survival, on the here and now and they don't care about tomorrow because tomorrow might not come. So we all suffered and we all tortured each other.

Then, the change happened.

It was the initiative of a few good people, spread out across the world, just a few people whose inner light still burned. They fought to restore order in their own countries, they created new technologies, fought corruption, enlightened people, showed them there was a better way to live. They kept in touch with each other. They presented talks and lectures and even visited people's homes. They quickly gained a following, many people became better, even some of the most miserable and sickly people joined and volunteered, they gave the little precious time and resources they had to improve their community, to improve the world. Some volunteered for an hour a day to clean the local park, some helped their elderly neighbours by carrying their groceries, some started taking care of the stray animals, some donated clothes and shoes they had been storing (this was popular, people would always feel there would be scarcity, so before the change, they would store large amounts of old things they didn't need), everyone gradually started cleaning and helping and

improving the world around them. More and more people joined and became better and happier. People realised they had had more time and resources than they had believed. Soon, everywhere you looked, everything looked better – the buildings, the people, the parks, the animals! Everyone was happier, more colourful in a way.”, meanwhile wonderful images of happy people flooded the screen.

“What made people change like that?”, asked Tommy.

“The few people who started it all were very kind, very good souls. They believed in a higher power, although they came from different cultures and different religions, they believed in humanity and all of its potential. They woke people up to the goodness we each carry inside ourselves, to the idealism and desire for divine beauty that we all possess, but which we had buried under layers of misery and self-deception. So, as people woke up to themselves and the power they actually had in the world, everything changed. Each person started living and working for the benefit and improvement of everyone else in the community around them. It sounds strange and we wouldn’t have believed it would work, had someone told us that a few years earlier, but it did. Nobody was miserable anymore. Nobody was starving. Nobody was lonely. We all took care of each other and nobody was left behind. Every person found their own place and purpose. At this point, people became more empowered to use their individual talents and to help humanity outside of work (yes, they were still working those jobs from before). Many talented young people worked to improve the existing robots we had, which were already working in some industries and soon we had a whole plethora of “worker” robots, who could do just about anything. Those were distributed across the world and they took over the majority of jobs, especially the difficult, dangerous, and unpleasant jobs, which I mentioned before. A standard monthly payment was introduced, which would give people enough money to live well without having to work. After all, many people’s jobs had now been completely taken over by the robots. However, soon we realised that if we all shared what we created and if we all lived selflessly, we wouldn’t have much use for money, we would just exchange one service or product for another. People around the world found themselves suddenly completely free – they had free time all day, every day, all the time. For everyone this was a big relief. Soon, many started feeling restless and confused what to do with their time, so many “went back to work” in a way, but it wasn’t back to their meaningless jobs. They volunteered, they rebuilt the religious temples, the theatres, the galleries, the monuments and fountains, they planted trees and flowers. Some devoted themselves entirely to farming, producing healthy, clean food. Everyone learned new skills, usually in more than one area. Some people dedicated their time to the arts and soon we had the most beautiful paintings, concerts and performances! Others innovated in areas they were already familiar with, like those teachers I told you about. The people who were previously unemployed or who hadn’t wanted to work, suddenly felt free to do what interested them and they all found interests and passions, different activities they excelled at! They started helping others and thrived because they finally felt useful and appreciated. Everyone owned a home and land, everyone created unique things and people still had their own brands and businesses, but they would share and give what they produced out of their own goodwill. Feelings like envy and greed were no longer a problem. Everyone had time to think, explore, and create! Just look at this amazing device my cousin invented!”, grandma enthusiastically pointed towards the silver helmet on her head.

“People were free to just be, to be good, to be creative, to be helpful, to be original! And you, my darlings, are so lucky to have been born in this time, where you have that freedom too!”, grandma Jane finished the story, switched off the big screen, took off the helmet, gently placed it on the table and hugged her two grandchildren, who were still looking at her in amazement.