

'New Rules for the Future World' entry

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Year 13

'Tea'
1000 words used

The kettle clicks; the water steams; the milk curls. I turn, cup of tea in hand, and place it on the table in front of Miss Austen whose serenity brings a homely calmness to the room, accompanied by the late-afternoon light. As I cross the room to return the milk to the fridge, her eyes follow me, calculating. I retake my place next to the kettle, acquiring my coffee as I do so, and lean against the counter.

A moment passes. The mug warms my hands. She lifts hers to her lips.

"It's certainly different," she states as she lowers her beverage to the table.

"The tea?"

"The future."

I hum in agreement as I take a sip. Too hot.

"Many things are much easier. You seem to do both more for yourself and simultaneously less."

A short exhale through my nose. "That sums it up pretty well."

Her head inclines and suddenly I feel her reading me. "Something is troubling you?" Her voice falters not.

My fingertips drum once along the mug. I sniff and say, "The new estate that we passed —" My thumb taps the nail of the other and I listen to the near-silent thuds. "That used to be a field."

I watch the tiny ripples fade along the surface of my coffee.

"I see," comes the mediated response.

I reposition and dare a swig. Still too hot.

"The world is more complicated than it appears," she declares. Her gaze drifts sideways, out through the French windows. Her dress' cut is marvellous; the perfect angle of the sunlight embellishes its colour.

"I've often thought that perhaps if horse-and-cart became popular again it might make somewhat of an improvement... back to dirt roads..." My mind hops onto the familiar thought train through images of bright, green lanes and sounds of hooves and wheels. "Journeys would be long though... and in a fast-moving world, we must move quickly too. I guess a three-hour ride to school every day would be impractical. I'd feel bad for the horses, lugging us around here, there and everywhere." Her focus returns to me, her brows furrowed neatly.

"I'm sorry," she begins, "what caused this want to bring back equine transportation?"

"Every time I'm stuck in daily traffic, out shopping, or dropping my brother somewhere, there's this sub-dermal guilt that I'm one of the billions emitting more greenhouse gas into the atmosphere."

I exhale and bid my shoulders to relax. "But I need to get to school. And we need food. And I enjoy driving."

"So, this is a moral dilemma?"

Of course, her field of study.

"It's more than a dilemma." I look at the clock that has displayed the same time for the last seven years. "It's... a conundrum."

I grip my mug. "Take this cup of coffee: coal was burned to power the kettle. Are the beans Fair Trade? Am I funding battery cow farming by purchasing this milk?"

I don't know why my cheeks are heating, but I continue: "Did you know that cows are one of the main contributors to Global Warming? Not the cows themselves, no, but the human overindulgence

in their products that cause us to mass produce *living things*, and, to accommodate them, we must destroy the habitats of other animals. Did I really need this coffee in the first place?"

Her focus hasn't shifted.

I speak into the depths of my consequence-spawning refreshment, "I'm part of a problem that I want to fix but have no idea how to."

Her short inhale lifts my attention. "It seems there is a way to do things in this world." My mouth curls. She continues, "And a way that things *should* be done."

"Which is better?" I ask.

She smiles, "It depends on circumstance."

I half laugh, half sigh, "The double-standards are immeasurable. I'm told to be true to myself, but Heaven forbid I, a woman, have short hair on my head and long hair on my body."

"It's a step forward from dirty looks at dirty petticoats."

My chuckle is genuine this time. I smile as I recall that fictional moment.

"I admire Lizzie," I say and hope she hears the sincerity in my voice, sees the compliment in my eyes.

"She improves from her faults but remains herself. She dismisses conformities she finds illogical yet remains polite and good-hearted. At least after she's learned to overcome her prejudice." I smile again.

Jane shuffles a little before speaking, "I understand there may be plenty of complications in this new world. I don't believe the human condition will change spectacularly, even after two centuries, and humans *are* complicated."

"They certainly seem to enjoy making things complicated," I interject.

A curt smile.

"However, when met with a person who seeks to better the other as well as themselves, great achievements can be made."

I nod and return to my drink.

"I couldn't agree more," I confess into the rising steam.

A dense quiet falls.

I cut it. "I must give credit where it's due. The world has improved. Socially, while I find frustration in the friction I encounter, prejudice is diminishing. We have made huge strides in accepting diversity and equality... which is perhaps why it annoys me when I am at the receiving end of the conformity baton for what I would call minute divergences from the norm." I place my mug on the counter. "I *am* grateful for the world I live in, for the opportunities and accessibility that is deserved by all. Yet, with *idiots* in power making decisions that affect the lives of people in countries they have *no business* in, affecting *my* life without asking, it is difficult not to become a little nihilistic."

I internally recoil as my rant echoes off the walls.

She speaks softly as she looks at me, "Humans make mistakes."

My eyes avert to the amber-streaked window, to the falling sun beyond the apple trees.

I breathe.

"I just hope we have enough time left to fix them."