

## Exhaust

By Ruby Avalos

In 2022, scientists, activists, and others cried out to the world, pleading that we'd listen. "Twenty-five years ago people could be excused for not knowing much, or doing much, about climate change. Today we have no excuse." A quote from Desmond Tutu, Former Archbishop of Cape Town. My father told me about the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 their president signed at the time. It was the most significant federal climate change investment in American history. They said the amount of energy produced from wind turbines would double in 8 years, but how would that solve the rest of the world's problems?

### **October 15th, 2022....**

A 19-year-old Parker Rowans sat on the edge of a sidewalk by the gas station slurping a large slushie, waiting for his friend. The gas station door opened and Jackie stepped outside, she turned to face Parker, "how is the new flavored slushie treating you?"

"It's worse than their usual ones." Parker stood up from where he was and tossed his half-full drink into the trash.

"God, you're so wasteful Parker," she scolded, Parker glanced at her and shrugged it off.

"Wanna start heading back now?"

"Sure, get to the car while I finish pumping gas." They started heading back to Jackie's old lemon of a car.

"When are you going to get a new car?" Parker opened the passenger door.

"Until the day this one stops working. Why do you ask?" Jackie placed the gas nozzle into the car.

“All this one does is spew black clouds of exhaust everywhere it goes. It’s embarrassing going into a neighborhood and seeing everyone go into a unanimous coughing fit.” He complained jokingly, he sat inside the car and shut the door.

“I don't see you driving me around, it’s always me.” She scoffed under her breath. After she was done she got in the car and turned on the ignition. She started to back out, she moved away some curls that fell towards her face.

Parker glanced at her, and then turned his focus straight ahead, “when I get the money to buy myself a car, you won't have to drive me around anymore.” he said quietly.

Jackie stepped on the brake abruptly, “what was that?” she heard him, but wanted to confirm that what she heard wasn’t wrong.

He turned to look at her, “when I get a car, you can get rid of this one and I’ll drive you around for once.” He smiled at her with his eyes.

She let out a small chuckle, “with that minimum-wage job you have, I guess that won't be till 5 years from now. Let’s hope this old lemon is still trudging through by then.” she teased.

When they arrived at Parker’s house, they got out of the car and started walking towards the front door. There was a loud but distant whirring sound coming from somewhere that Jackie noticed, “do you hear that?”

Parker shrugged it off, “it’s probably one of those helicopters passing by again?” he was reaching for his keys.

“Again?”

“Yeah, we live near Washington D.C., whenever the president travels he travels by helicopter. They’ve been passing through a lot more lately.” He got the front door opened. They both walked inside, Parker walked straight to the kitchen.

Jackie threw herself to the couch, “how do you know that it’s the president?”

Parker, without looking at her, “the news talks about how his home is near this area. Now that you mention it, can you turn on the tv?” Parker grabbed his tea kettle and a plastic water bottle from a package of bottles he had in a corner. He opened the bottle and emptied it into the kettle. he scrunched the bottle and tossed it in the trash. He looked up to see her giving him a disapproving look, “what?”

“Couldn’t you have used tap water?”

“Tap water? At this day and age?” Jackie shook her head in disbelief, she turned on the tv.

*“There have recently been multiple reports of the president leaving the white house during the day...”* the news reporter said.

Parker snapped his finger trying to get Jackie’s attention, “See? What did I tell you?” she rolled her eyes at him. He went back to heating the kettle, and when he placed it on the stove, the whirring sound came back but louder and bigger. Jackie jumped up from the couch, “What is going on?” she yelled.

“I don’t know this time.” They both walked outside, two cargo helicopters were flying over town lower than usual. “Get back inside Jackie, I’m sure it’s fine.” Parker placed his hands on her shoulders, gently motioning her towards the house. She wouldn’t move, she stared at the sky in doubt, “Jackie Ibbott! I’m sure it’s nothing!” He said sternly, it broke her away from her thoughts.

“Okay,” she nodded softly, “you’re probably right.”

**January 13th, 2049...**

18-year-old Ema Rowans was staring at a photo of her dad from when he was younger. He had light brown hair back then, he looked young and full of energy. There was a girl next to him, she had light brown skin and beautiful dark brown fluffy, curly hair. They were playing outside, they wore big jackets, and they had some type of white fluff on them. The ground was covered by the same material, and the branches of the leafless trees in the background were covered in it too. Ema flipped the photo over,

*December 12th, 2019 - Parker Rowans + Jackie Ibbott*

*Day after the Blizzard*

“Blizzard?, What’s a blizzard?” Ema sat there wondering, what on earth could a blizzard be? Was it an event? Maybe it was the name of a band? She went outside to look for her dad, taking the photo with her. She found him working on his old hydro-powered motorcycle, it’s been a side project of his since Ema could remember. “Hey, dad!”

“Yeah?” a now older gray-haired Parker replied, still focusing on his motorcycle.

“I was wondering was a blizzard?” She stood beside him.

“A snowstorm.”

“Snow? Like in the movie *Snowpiercer*?”

“Sure, but it’s not that much snow, and a blizzard stops after a while,” He kneels beside the motorcycle, “Why are you asking me this? Couldn't you just search this up?”

“I was curious when I found a photo of you and this girl named Jackie.” Parker stopped what he was doing, he turned his attention toward Ema.

“What photo?” She handed him the photo. He took it and stared at it for a bit, he seemed to be stuck in a trance of nostalgia.

“Who was Jackie?” Ema was curious about who the girl that caught her dad’s attention was. Enough to shift him away from the motorcycle he’s been working on for about 15 years.

“Um..., she was my best friend back then.”

“Where is she now?”

“When things got bad in other countries due to the climate. She volunteered to go help those in need.” He gave the photo back to Ema. Ema took a look at the photo once more before putting it in her back pocket.

“Did she ever come back?”

“We lost touch over the years, haven’t seen her for about...” he looked trying to remember, “25? Or 26 years?”

“26 years? How long have you guys been friends before then?”

“Um, I was 20 when she left, and I have known her since I was ten, so about ten years.” He went back to working on his motorcycle.

“Ten years!” Ema exclaimed, Parker motioned her to quiet down, “she up and left and after ten years of friendship, she just stopped calling?”

“It was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Ema was annoyed at her dad, she knew he never let things get to him. “What was the last thing she told you before she left?”

“Stop being so nosy and let it go. Now go turn on the water system. It’s almost time to water the bamboo forest.” Ema pouted and reluctantly walked over to the machine her dad set up to water their bamboo forest. It was a small forest they made a living off, they were part of a community of people who created ways for renewable energy or reusable materials, They lived in the keystone state, Pennsylvania. Snow days were no longer the norm for Ema’s generation,

just abnormal weather. In the first half of the day a huge thunderstorm and then an hour after it, a heat wave. Older folks like Ema's dad say they're used to Pennsylvania's bipolar weather but they all know every year it worsens. Pennsylvania has to watch out for category 4 and 5 hurricanes, and flash floods. If only they could donate some of that water to California, water over there is like gold. The wildfires over there were getting so out of control that the Governor decided that it was best to cut down forests, even if they were national parks. It was the only way to limit the fires, in their opinion.

The media calls the small community Ema and her dad part of "the believers" because they believe their efforts will bring back the Earth to the way it was. They're ridiculed as daydreamers, Ema helps her dad every day after school and plans on continuing their work after she graduates high school.

To water their bamboo, they recycle the rainwater that has accumulated and use it during a heatwave. It was 7:37 am and Ema had to get to school soon. The weather app said it was going to be 105 degrees for the next three days. Ema went inside and applied sunscreen over the parts of her body that weren't covered by her clothes. She grabbed her baseball cap to shield her eyes from the sun and placed the sunscreen bottle in her backpack.

"I have to get going, dad." Ema ran to her bike.

"Don't forget your umbrella, you never know nowadays!" Her dad advised.

*Oh right*, Ema quickly ran inside to get her umbrella, with the stronger winds that come with the storm, an average person typically goes through five umbrellas in two months.

"Ema, make sure to get the mail when you get home!" Ema was biking away when her dad called out, she gave him a thumbs up.

Ema was in her final year at high school, and the town she lived in was an hour away from the nearest big city. It was well populated but as the years went by more would move out to the city for a better lifestyle. Andracorp had a way of keeping the air clean in the city and is in the process of developing a forcefield that could help in shielding the city from hurricanes. The whole city runs on Andracorp products. The CEO and founder are Heath Andras, he's the richest guy on the planet right now. His company develops ways to adapt to the "new world" aka the "new hell" we live in, instead of finding ways to fix it. In China, they signed a contract with Andracorp to produce expensive reusable filter masks for their air pollution. The issue is that only the rich can afford it, the rest are stuck suffering from air pollution.

Ema's high school is sponsored by Andracorp and even has an internship program with them. She goes up to her locker to get her books for the day. She sees a poster of Andracorp propaganda on the wall next to her locker.

"What chu looking at Ema?" Harley, a classmate from Ema's agriculture class stops by next to her, "are you planning on ripping the poster off the wall again? You'll just get sent to the office again. Who am I supposed to count on to do the work in agriculture, the new kid?"

Ema looked at her, "new kid? Since when?"

"Since you went to the office last class and missed out on meeting the new kid from Cali. He's so smart, I heard he already has an internship with Andracorp. He might even replace you as the top student in agriculture." Harley turned her attention away from Ema and gazed over the poster. "On second thought," she looked at Ema again, "I might just ask him to help me." She gave Ema a thin smile before going on about her day. Ema watched her walk away, she shut her locker and jogged up to Harley to catch up to her.

"Wait up, what's his name?"

“Um, let me think...” Harley was nosier than Ema, she definitely knew every detail about this guy already.

“I’ll give you my flashcards for the test if you tell me.”

“Want to scope out the competition already? Wanna fight him for the internship?”

“Screw that, I’m completely against that manipulating corruption,”

Harley cut her off, “we get it, you’re not a fan of Mr. Andras.” She stopped walking, “the guy’s name is Dante Cardozo. He’s the one with light brown skin and short dark brown fluffy curly hair. At first, he seems like the quiet type but you can tell he likes showing off how smart he is.” Harley sticks out her open hand towards Ema.

“Dang, I asked you for his name, not a whole criminal report.” Ema reaches into her folder to get Harley’s payment.

She gave her the flashcards, “just in case you might have him in other classes.” Harley smiled sweetly.

“Thanks,” Ema muttered. She gave Harley her flashcards, “see you in agriculture?”

“Nah, I might just skip and head to the library to study for the upcoming test, but maybe you’ll have fun with Dante. Ciao!” The charming blonde waltzed away with Ema’s hard work in her hands.

Just like Harley said, she was nowhere in sight for class. Ema glanced around for the new kid, she couldn’t find him. She only saw the usual faces from class every day.

The teacher walked in, “Alright class, get with your partners. Today’s lesson plan is weeding the school courtyard. Mr. Robinson took the week off, and I volunteered our lass to help tend the courtyard.” Mr. Glen smiled excited to put the class to work while he supervises.



Ema raised her hand, “my partner isn’t here.”

“What's the difference? Harley makes you do all the heavy lifting anyways.” The class started to laugh at the Harley roast. Mr. Glen told everyone to quiet down, “you can partner up with Dante, he’ll be here in 5 minutes. He emailed me that he’s coming back from a meeting in Andracorp.” The entire class broke into a whisper, “*wow*”, “*how cool is that*” etc. Mr. Glen quiet them down one more. “Alright class, each one of you gets a black umbrella from the storage room. And make sure to apply a lot of sunscreen before heading out. I don’t want angry emails from parents asking why their kids look like a tomato.”

A knock came on the door, it was Dante, Mr. Glen let him in. “Ema meet your partner for the day.” Dante was tall, slim, and wore a blue collared shirt with his sleeves rolled up.

When they were outside, students were to take turns tending to their section of the courtyard. One would garden while the other held their umbrella over them. In Ema’s case, she held the umbrella for the Andracorp intern. They were in charge of pulling out the weeds, a simple job. A simple job that he couldn't do. Ema rolled her eyes at him for every weed he pulled out wrong.

“You’re doing it all wrong.” Ema groaned.

“How? I’m pulling out the weeds.” He retorted.

“You’re supposed to pull them from the root.”

“I am!” Ema pulled him up by the arm and roughly handed him the umbrellas. He huffed but took the umbrellas.

“Watch how I’m doing it.” She dug up the weeds making sure not to leave the roots in, “he pulled them out but leave some of the roots in the ground. We don't want weeds to come back remember?” She held up a ripped-out weed to him. He glared only glared at her but glared back. Now they were in this intense staring eye contest. Dante lifted his eyebrow and smirked,

“What are you smirking at genius?” Dante didn't reply and stepped one foot to the right, removing the shade away from Ema. The sunlight shined straight in her eyes, “Ow!” Her hands shot up to cover her eyes. Dante laughed at the sight of his little joke. He stopped laughing when he saw something fall out of Ema's pocket when she stood up. It was the photo of her dad she forgot to put back. Dante picked it up and studied the photo. Ema snatched her umbrella back and realized what Dante was holding. She tried to snatch it back but Dante moved it away from her reach.

“Give it back!” she exclaimed.

“How do you have a picture of my mom?” Dante asked.

“What?”

Right after school Ema biked straight home, she couldn't wait to tell him that she knows what happened to Jackie. Upon arriving, she saw three black SUVs parked in front of her house. She got off her bike and cautiously walked towards her house. She saw her dad talk to a man, that man was Heath Andras. Look just his poster, black wavy hair and a cocky smile that you can see from a mile, he had two bodyguards with him. It looked like they had just finished talking, Heath started heading back and his guards followed behind him. He flashed Ema one of his signature poster smiles.

Ema hated Heath for one reason, he didn't want to help the environment just himself. He had been buying out small companies trying to stop anyone from actually trying to save the environment or at least to try to better the conditions. Ema could tell Heath was targeting their business next.

Before Heath got into his car, he turned to look at Parker, “the heatwave can lead to a wildfire. You know how it went for California Parker. I’m just trying to save you from the inevitable.”

“I’d rather lose everything to wildfire than see you destroy it!” Heath smirked at Parker’s response.

He shrugged, “alright, have it your way.” He entered his car and all three SUVs drove away. Ema slowly walked up to her dad. He didn't look away from the cars until they were no longer visible.

“Dad?” Ema said softly, “did he try to buy the property?”

“Yes. But I won't sell it for anything.” Ema nodded in approval. She admired that her dad always stood his ground. “That won't stop him from trying again. So we have to be ready to reject any offer he may give us, alright?” Ema nodded again.

With all of that for the day, she forgot to mention the news. Dante had told her how Jackie moved back to the states after she had gotten married and changed her last name to Cardozo. Both his parents got a job at Andracorp but moved to Pennsylvania because they lost their house and dad to a wildfire.

The next day during one of her classes, Harley came running to Ema with terrible news. Panting, “Ema...Quick..., I just news a wildfire just started at your house.” Harley leaned back to the wall trying to catch her breath. Ema sprinted out of the classroom, memories from the day before flipped through her mind. *This had to be Heath Andras, it could only be him.* She hopped on her bike and rode faster than the wind. Their house and forest were surrounded by fire trucks trying to put out the fire. The sound of crackling bamboo when it burns was loud, each crack echoed. The forest was gone. The best the firefighters could do was save the house. Ema looked

around for her dad. She found him beside one of the fire trucks, watching his work be eaten away in flames. Ema walked towards him, “Dad?” tears pooled up in her eyes. “Dad, are you okay?”

“The motorcycle, it’s gone.” He stared into the fire, his expression was distant, “I tried to make this a better place. I’ll never be able to give you that ride I promised you Jackie.” he whispered.

“Jackie?” Ema thought, *“That’s right, Dante and his mom both work at Andracrop. I can stop Heath Andras and I’ll show the world he’s not the person he claims to be.”* Ema ran back to her bike and rode it back to school. She waited til the dismissal bell rang, and through the stampede of high schoolers, she searched for Dante. She caught a glance of him heading towards a car. “Dante!” He stopped at the sound of his name, he searched for who called. Ema came jogging towards him.

“Hey buddy old pal,” she said with a smile. He frowned.

“What’s with the friendly attitude now?”

“What do you mean?” She scratched the back of her head.

“What do you want Rowans?”

“I-Well-I was...” While Ema was trying to think of what to say, the car’s driver-side door opened.

“Rowans?” Dante’s mom, Jackie stepped out of the car. “As in Parker Rowans?”

“T-That’s my dad?”

“Dad? So Parker’s all grown up now? I never thought I’d see the day he could take care of a kid, let alone himself.” Jackie walked up to Ema and inspected her, she offered Ema her hand to shake. “I’m Dante’s mom.”

Ema shook her hand, “I’m a friend of Dante’s.”

“No you’re not,” Dante whispered to Ema, but she nudged him in the side. “I was about to ask Dante if he could give me a tour around Andracorp headquarters. Seeing that he interns there.”

“And I was just about to tell her ‘no’,” Dante exclaimed.

“You see it’s always been an interest of mine to be able and take look at how engineers, scientists, and researchers discover new ways to help the people of Earth fight the effects of climate change.” Ema lied.

“I think it’s a great idea to show your friend around.” Jackie stated, “I’m so glad that Dante’s making new friends here since we moved here. Especially ones that share the same interests as him.” She opened the car door for her, and once Ema entered, Jackie made her way into the driver's seat. “Aren’t you getting in Dante?” Dante rolled his eyes. He sat next to Ema the entire car ride.

“What are you planning Rowans?” Dante whispered low enough so his mom couldn’t hear.

“If you must know, I’m on a mission.” Ema kept an innocent smile as she muttered.

“Mission? For what purpose?”

“I want to show the world that Heath Andras is their villain, not their hero.” Dante couldn't input a response to what she had just said.

They had arrived at the headquarters. Ema quickly exited the car, and Dante followed behind her.

“Why don't you guys head on in without me, I’ll catch up with you later,” Jackie said.

“Wait, but mom!” Dante tried to stop her, but Jackie drove away. Dante turned his attention to Ema, who had already gone inside without him. He ran to catch up to her before she

did something stupid. She stopped at the front desk, "I'm with him." She pointed to Dante, who caught up with her.

"Uh.. yeah." He showed his ID to the lady at the desk. She asked to take Ema's picture and print out a visitor ID for her to wear. Then they both headed toward the elevator, once inside Dante grabbed Ema's wrist harshly.

"Hey! Let go!"

"Stop it. Stop whatever you're planning to do now before you ruin everything for me." he hissed.

"Ruin everything?"

"Yes, if they catch you doing anything suspicious, they'll ask who let you in and that's where my mom and I get fired because of you. Just stay put and wait for my mom to get here so we can finish this bullshit tour you made up."

Ema wriggled out of his grasp, "Heath Andras burned down my father's forest, and the hydro-powered motorcycle he's been working on for years."

Dante's eyes soften at the mention of the fire, "is that why I heard rumors you stormed out of school for an emergency?"

Ema turned her face away from him, tears were threatening to fall, "guess Harley is fast at spreading the news."

"Look, I get where this spontaneous behavior is coming from but if you actually find something that destroys the company and put me, my mom, and many others in.."

"So you think he's a bad guy too." Dante's eyes widen at her comment.

"No, I'm saying people won't have a job if you..."

She cut him off, “if you didn’t think he was a bad guy then you would’ve tried to stop me by telling security.”

“I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

Dante could only look at her, he turned away from her and faced the elevator doors. “I don’t know,” he said quietly, his eyebrows furrowed and in deep thought. He pressed the elevator button numbered 26.

The elevator was silent until the door finally opened, “this is our floor,” Dante said. Ema walked out, but Dante stayed inside.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“No, I should probably rephrase what I said. This is actually your floor Ema Rowans.” he pressed another floor on the elevator. “Good luck and don’t get caught.” the door shut as he waved goodbye.

“Okay, this is all up to you now Ema.”

Ema's first step was to locate Andras’ office, and that shouldn’t be too hard if she followed the posters with his face on them. ‘*Gosh, he’s so egoistic*’, she thought. Yet, she wasn't wrong, the trail led her to the office. All she had to do was get inside, but how? There was a secretary outside of the door, Ema was gonna try her chances. She found a storage room, with a uniform and empty boxes. She quickly changed into it and went back to the secretary with a couple of boxes.

“Hello, I have a package for Mr. Andras.” Ema tried her best to look like she belong there.

The secretary looked up from her screen, "Oh, you can just leave it here."

"Uh, sorry I was instructed to leave it on his desk."

"Who instructed?" Secretary stopped typing on her computer and slowly reached for the phone.

Sweating, Ema blurted out, "Mr. Andras instructed himself."

"Oh... why didn't you say so," she smiled, "he's not in at the moment, so just quickly leave it on his desk."

"Sure thing Ma'am." Ema walked inside the office and quickly locked the door behind her. "Alright, I don't have much time, gotta hurry." She started to look at every time of file she could find on his desk, but they were all spreadsheets. She turned on his computer, and it asked for a password login. "Come on Ema, if you were a cocky, self-entered billionaire, what would your password be?" She typed *Im#1* into the computer but it was incorrect. "Damn it."

There was a slow hand clap coming from the front of the room, "bravo on getting this far Ms. Rowans. You almost had me there." The narcissist himself was at the front of the room. Ema could tell that the door was unlocked by the secretary. "Sorry to break it to you kid, but this isn't going to go the way you hope it will." Heath snarked, "many have tried but you just can't touch me." A phone rang in the distance, and Heath's secretary went to go answer it.

"I'll find a way, I won't give up. I'll stand my ground." Ema stood up from behind the desk, determination flowing through her.

"Gosh, you and your old man are very alike. Annoying. Anyways," Heath flipped his hair back, "you can start heading out of here now. Hope you enjoyed your stay."

"Sir?", his secretary interrupted.

"What Kerry?" Heath said agitatedly.



“The news sir,” Kerry ran to turn on the tv.

*“Here on 123 News, We have received from an anonymous source, documents of what Heath Andras, CEO of Andracorp, is really doing with the money that was given to him by the state of Pennsylvania. Turns out he never planned on developing a forcefield to protect the city where Andracorp is located at.”*

“It’s alright, nothing my publicist can’t handle.” Heath gave a side glare to Ema who was watching in amazement at the turn of events. “Get her out of here,” he hissed. Kerry nodded and snapped her fingers at the security standing outside the office. They came in and picked up Ema and dragged her out of the office. Last thing she could see was Heath yelling at Kerry, “call my lawyer and get a press conference ready.”

The security threw Ema outside the front of the building. “Ouch, a little rough don’t you think?” she said. She stood up and dusted herself off.

“Ema!” she heard someone call her name, she turned around to see Dante walking up to her with a smile. “Did everything go well?”

“No,” she huffed, “it didn't matter, someone was gonna do it for me in the end.”

“But it did matter.” Ema looked at Dante confused.

“What do you mean?” Dante pulled out a USB drive from his pocket.

“Because I was the one that submitted the documents.”

Ema’s eyes widened, “what now?”

“I hacked into Heath’s computer, it was fairly easy. Just had to think like a cocky, self-entered billionaire. Who would’ve thought his password was *ImThe#1*.” Ema broke into

laughter. “And if the documents aren't enough to destroy him, I have information about the wildfire he caused today and his involvement in similar incidents.”

“Dante,” Ema said with admiration, “you really are a genius.”

“Here,” Dante gave her the USB, “you should keep it, just in case.” Ema nodded. Dante scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “We should start heading back now, my mom really wants to see your dad again, since it’s been a while, and explain why they lost touch over the years.”

“Oh right, I was curious about that.” they both start walking.

“Also, does your dad have a car? My mom mentioned something about your dad owing her a ride.”

“Oh yeah, about that... would a bike ride do?”