

Clean Energy Short Story

This short story is meant to help children begin to understand some of the issues around energy alternatives and to get them in the frame of mind of the clean green power unit, thinking about what kinds of places they might visit, the interview questions they might ask, and even the project they might carry out.

Feel free to read this story to early readers. More experienced readers may want to read it themselves.

After reading, discuss the story. Where can they find evidence of pollution? Where was it coming from? What are some ways people are saving energy and using cleaner alternatives?

A Breath of Fresh Air

By Susan Reyes

A hazy sun rose as warm as summer on a late winter day. A week of rain and warmth had melted away the deep snow that covered the area only last week. Jasmine was eager to get together with her best friends Samantha and Benito to find something to do, so she called over Sam, and they both headed to Benito's farm.

The threesome seemed to figure how to make the best out of every season, and winter had been an easy favorite. If there was snow, they could sled down the huge hill behind Sam's house; in the early darkness, they could gaze at the constellation Orion and his sparkling dog Sirius from Jasmine's deck, or any day, they could embark on untold adventures, exploring the frozen mysterious maze of swampland or just visiting animals around Benito's farm.

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Clean Energy for a Clean Environment

This particular morning, Jasmine noticed that the air felt a bit heavy to breathe, and she felt inside her pocket to be sure her inhaler was there since her asthma had been worse than usual this winter.

Soon the excitement of seeing Benito's older sister Rosa busy at work training a young pony in her indoor rink took the center of her attention. Though it seemed almost unimaginable, soon she and her friends would each get a pony to care for and ride. This all came about because of Rosa who was almost magic in her ability to make everything grow strong and healthy whether it was kids or vegetables or horses. Last summer, Rosa had started a small vegetable stand selling rare, tasty vegetables you couldn't find in the supermarket. She learned how to grow them without chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

Jasmine, Benito and Samantha were eager helpers with growing and selling the organic vegetables, and learned a lot in return. They never even thought of asking for anything more in return for their help, and never imagined Rosa would arrange for each child to care for and ride one of the farm's young ponies as if it were their own, and that over the years, Rosa planned to work her wonders creating companions of ponies and children. Tonight there would be a neighborhood ceremony where everyone would gather and Rosa would present each child the pony she thought matched their personality the best, and then the pony naming ceremony would follow. Jasmine couldn't wait!

For today, the friends decided they'd mount their bikes, head along the back roads for a five mile ride to the local store, and reward themselves with a treat when they got there. Benito's mom would ride along and carry back a few groceries in her pack as she often did.

As they started off, they felt exuberant as they smelled sun-warmed pine needles and saw the earth born again from winters' grasp. Soon they noticed that their neighbor Jim was tapping some maples and he invited them in to show them his new energy saving machine that

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required less fuel to be burned. It looked impressive, and the syrup tasted fine, and Jasmine was glad to take the break since her breathing was feeling a little tight, though she didn't say anything. All thanked Jim, thrilled to get an extra treat as they headed along.

Soon, they stopped at a small old graveyard and read some of the interesting epithets on the stones. Benito observed, "The white ones are like, all fuzzy, and you can't read 'em and the thin dark ones, even though they're really old, don't seem as corroded or something." Anita noted that the fuzziness happened because the white marble stones were affected more by the acid in the rain than the dark slate stones.

Coasting down a hill where one could usually catch a view of a distant blue mountain, the haze was so thick they could not see its snow covered ski slopes. Then a panicked hare leaped across their path with the gold flash of a wild cat in hot pursuit. The bikers had come to a stop. An excited Samantha was sure she'd seen a mountain lion, but Benito's mom, a wildlife biologist, settled the matter with a clear identification of the animal as a bobcat.

As they stood still, they could hear the rushing of the river that told them they were not far from their destination. Jasmine noted that they must live in the best place in the world—beautiful and wild and at the same time, not too far away from all the great things that you could do downtown. All nodded and headed onward toward the river's bridge, where they'd make one last stop before a short, hard uphill climb to earn their treat.

"Hey, look at those yellow signs!" shouted Sam, and sure enough, in place of the signs that were up last Fall showing how to tell Atlantic salmon apart from Brook trout, there were warnings not to eat any fish in the river because tests showed they were high in mercury, a poisonous metal. Jasmine said, "That can't be true! The river looks too clean, and we can't possibly have any pollution here."

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Stopped at the bridge, they looked down the river, which looked crystal clear. Benito noticed that here and there lay a dead fish. "The mercury is killing the fish!"

"No, its not likely the mercury," said his mom, "it's something called acid rain, and it can come down as snow or just fall out of the sky, and when all the snow melted last week, there was just too much coming into the river all at once for the fish to handle."

"Who's doing this to our river?" they asked in anger and in unison.

"I suppose you could say we all are, though we don't intend to," his mom gently replied, "We all seem stuck in an old way of doing things that is harming the environment and us, too. "

"We'll change that!" said Jasmine, and her friends agreed as they pumped up the hill with renewed energy. Halfway up, Jasmine, the athlete of the threesome, began to slip behind. She got off her bike and it was clear she was having difficulty breathing. Her friends were worried, but she explained that she had her inhaler and would soon be ok, but she had to walk the rest of the way up to the store. Her friends stood at her side and at the first sight of the sun's reflection off the shiny metal panels on the roof, Sam shouted, "We're here!"

Inside, Jasmine was breathing a lot better. While Anita was shopping, the kids enjoyed their treats and began to talk about the pollution. Jasmine wondered if her asthma might have been made worse by air pollution and Benito figured you couldn't see as far with polluted air. Everyone was angry about the fish and wondered what other harm the pollution might be doing. They all wanted to know how air pollution could even exist in a beautiful place like theirs. Ms. Henson, who worked at the store, was impressed with their conversation and invited Anita and the kids to see the solar panels on the roof.

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She explained that burning gasoline, coal and other fuels to make electricity, run factories, heat places, and run cars, planes, and so on was what was polluting the air. She explained how the solar panels work and proudly announced that all their electricity came from the sun and was clean, renewable energy. Then she started to list many other people in town who were saving energy and starting to switch over and go clean and green! “The library uses energy from deep inside the warm earth! The Rogers have a wind turbine on their farm. My friend Eva started recording her driving miles 2 months ago and figured out how to cut them in half by sharing rides and walking. We’re using photovoltaic cells to get electricity from the sun. Right now, we just need to do two things: get people to think about conserving energy more and get more people learning about clean energy alternatives. It looks like you are just the kids for the job!”

The children were so full of ideas they ended up walking their bikes much of the way home so they could talk. They had seen and felt some of the damage done by burning fossil fuels for themselves, and now they knew that with a little care and a different approach, the earth and air could be clean and healthy as it was meant to be.

At the ceremony, the ponies’ names came to mind as if each animal had whispered it to each child: Benito called his Earthfire, and the pony’s powerful gold-tipped legs looked as if they brought the earth’s energy into his strong black body; Jasmine’s spirited golden pony practically spoke the name Sunlight, and the wind rustled the extra long mane of Samantha’s dappled mare as she named her Windstreak.

That night, Jasmine fell asleep quickly, dreaming of herself riding on Sunlight holding a lantern at night; she was a messenger with a mission. Suddenly she came to a rich green pasture with her friends and felt at home. The ponies grazed and the air felt light and sweet.

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