

A Letter From the Year 2050 by Lydia Noble

Dear Mom,

Paul came back last week. He said he was just stopping by to check in, but I knew something was suspicious from the way he looked around my apartment. As soon as he saw the Christmas decoration boxes out, half-unpacked, I could tell he was uncomfortable. Like he knew what he was doing was bad. Still, he let himself in and set up shop in the kitchen, where he unloaded some hamburger patties into the oven. He was going to cook with locally-sourced meat, delivered not by carbon-dumping trucks but by drones from the nearby industrial farm.

He knows I haven't had one in years. The plant-based substitutions have an identical texture now, with only a slight unpleasant aftertaste. Ever since beef became worth its weight in gold (well, not really, but you know how I talk) I just *knew* that it was going to be used as a bargaining chip like this. And, look what we have here, Paul confirms my suspicions in multiple ways!

After he made the patties we sat down at my table. Joe was out that night so it was just the two of us, me and Paul, trying not to be awkward. Well, he was trying not to be awkward. I knew what was coming, so I stared right into his soul, the deepest part of it that only knows profit, and I watched him eat uncomfortably. He should have been better prepared for this talk. He should have known this was coming, and I should have known that this property was a gamble, but I needed a place to go.

Now, I know what you'll say, "You can stay with me and your father!" I know that, and I appreciate it, but I'm twenty-two years old! And, besides, it's the best thing for me to live out in the country if I'm training small farmers on new tech; I would never make a long commute home after these draining days. So, of course, I found a landlord whose properties were in the middle of farm country. Paul's not a harbinger of good by any stretch of the imagination, but I'll give it to him that he's a smart planner.

Eventually Paul looked up from his corn soup. Funny, he picked the cheap vegetable this year, to go with beef. If he'd brought imported rice from Bangladesh, *then* I would be impressed. After the EPA tightened their grip on rice production, what with all the gas emissions, I would have given Paul my place just to eat rice again. Alas, corn's in rotation around here this year, so I'll just have to wait for the other grains and vegetables to get their turn next year.

"How long were you planning on staying here?" Paul asked me, as if he didn't write the terms of my lease that he was about to nullify.

"You're joking. Paul, get to the point. We both know why you're here."

Paul cleared his throat. I wondered if he got corn silk in his soup, even though I haven't seen corn with silk in years. One of the best genetic modifications, I have to say. "Well, I'll get to the point then. You know that the rest of the world wants to eat like Americans, so I guess it's our problem to raise more cows and whatnot. Thing is, the farm," he said, pointing to the industrial farm always in view from my window, "is offering a lot to expand here, so those cows

can have all the land they want. I'm getting out of here with what I can before the government steals it. If you can move out in a week I'll have your security deposit ready."

Even though I saw this coming, I felt a familiar tightness in my chest. Displaced by agricultural expansions for the second time in two years. What are the odds? I took another look at the dinner Paul brought over to soften the blow. Authentic, animal-based beef for sincerity. Corn from this year's crop rotation to show that I wasn't too important. Discount misshapen tomatoes, sorted into a less-favorable category by robots, to show environmental conscientiousness. Those robots are actually one of the tools I used to train people. They take imperfect foods that would otherwise be garbage and redistribute them as discount produce, so don't tell me all I do is boss tractors around.

Anyway, I got out of there within a week, got my deposit, and cut my losses. Since I know the new farm tech, I got lucky that I found a job posting the night that Paul screwed me over, and now I'm writing to you from an hour south of Paul's dump. I'm still training small farmers on AI implementation, but strictly in data management. It's amazing!

Today, I got to show an older couple how to use their phones to read soil statistics. With my help, they were able to figure out the alkalinity of their soil, where fertilizer wasn't necessary, and where some plants were diseased. Now they know that they can actually use 25% less fertilizer per day, cutting back on costs and waste. They were also able to remove the diseased tomato plants so the disease doesn't spread to the neighboring plants the next time it rains. The couple was ecstatic at these developments, and they have even considered integrating livestock and plants into the same sector of their land now that they can monitor how the life cycles of the two will interact. They hope to minimize how much land it takes to produce the same amount of crops and meat.

My one gripe with my new job, though, is that the technology that I have to promote isn't compatible with unfamiliar users. You've heard me go on and on about it before, and this certainly isn't the last time. The language used in the data and statistics isn't accessible to people without experience in it. The software has less of a learning curve and more of a learning mountain. I'm arranging meetings with the higher-ups to work on it though. Fingers crossed that they'll agree with me when I say that data inaccessibility is an ethical concern we can't ignore. If we want to optimize food, we have to be able to interpret what the heck is going on with our data!

Speaking of data, remember the family farm that I trained in Ohio last year? They sent me their reports for 2049, and their crop yield went up by 50 percent after implementing soil sensors! Since they could eliminate diseased plants and divert water and fertilizer to the most vital locations, they've seen an increase in production. This is more affordable *and* sustainable with less resources consumed! This year, they're having some bots take over even more mechanical jobs after their crop rotation, and I've asked them to keep in touch. I can't wait to see how it plays out for them.

You've known my whole life that I'm always interested in data collection. It should come as no surprise to you that when Joe took me out to dinner to celebrate the new, better job, I was enthralled by the menu's description of what technology went into every food. I feel like I'm

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seeing that more and more now, restaurants and stores opening up about how their food is produced. I know some people don't care about it but I quite enjoy reading about it and knowing that certain producers really optimize their land and resources instead of being wasteful. I hope it makes a difference, but I fear it is too soon to tell.

I suppose I'll be cautiously optimistic about all this. I have a sinister suspicion that, while things are going to look better for food production, we'll still have the same corporate big wigs making calls that only build them profits, so instead of minimizing resource consumption, they'll only minimize financial spending. I wish I knew how to prevent this ethical violation, but I can't stop human greed. I think we may only promote accountability and responsibility and hope that the people in power will live by it, even though they've never given us a reason to believe they can. Oh, well.

Say hi to Dad for me!

Love,

Iris

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