

Thirst

by Paul Mason

Ryder hauled himself up the hill, his school uniform sticking to his skin, the afternoon sun doing its best to beat him back down the slope. As much as possible, he walked in the shade of the water cultivators. At least they were good for one thing. It had been a long time since their sails had caught anything but sunlight and dust.

In their driveway, Ryder paused. He looked up at the worn-out trees, where he'd tied his collection of old tin cans. He grabbed his drink bottle and started to climb a lower branch. It was the drought season, and the birds needed water just as badly as people. But he would only pour a little into the cans. He couldn't spare any more.



"Better not let Dad know you're wasting water like that!" Brooke called, pointing at the cans hanging like a jumble of strange fruit.

Ryder paused. "He won't know if you don't tell him," he said. He had meant to carry on pouring but now thought better of it. "It's not a waste," Ryder grumbled, backing down the tree. "Birds have to drink, too."

Brooke was about to say something back – something smart – but was cut off by the whine of an engine. They turned to see a transporter pull up at the Carters' house, the command "Aqua-Plex™ Quench Your Thirst!" splashed across its side.

"It's not fair. They're always getting water," said Brooke. "Why doesn't Aqua-Plex ever come to our place?"

"You know why," said Ryder. He glanced at his sister's school clothes, not washed in a month, at the paint peeling off their house like sunburnt skin, at their car in the driveway, too broke to fix. Brooke followed his gaze.

The operator climbed out of the transporter and walked round to the back. She tapped at the tablet in her hand. A hydraulic arm emerged from the transporter's side and reached over to the Carters' water tank. The valve box opened, and the arm locked in. Then a sound came – the sound of rushing water. The operator caught sight of Brooke gaping and stopped for a moment. She had an ugly black night-stick strapped to her side, but underneath her cap, her face was apologetic.

"I wish we lived in the city and got our water in pipes," Brooke said.

"People in the city still have to pay Aqua-Plex lots of money," said Ryder. They watched for a bit, listening to the gurgling in the tank, trying to imagine what a stream of fresh water looked like.

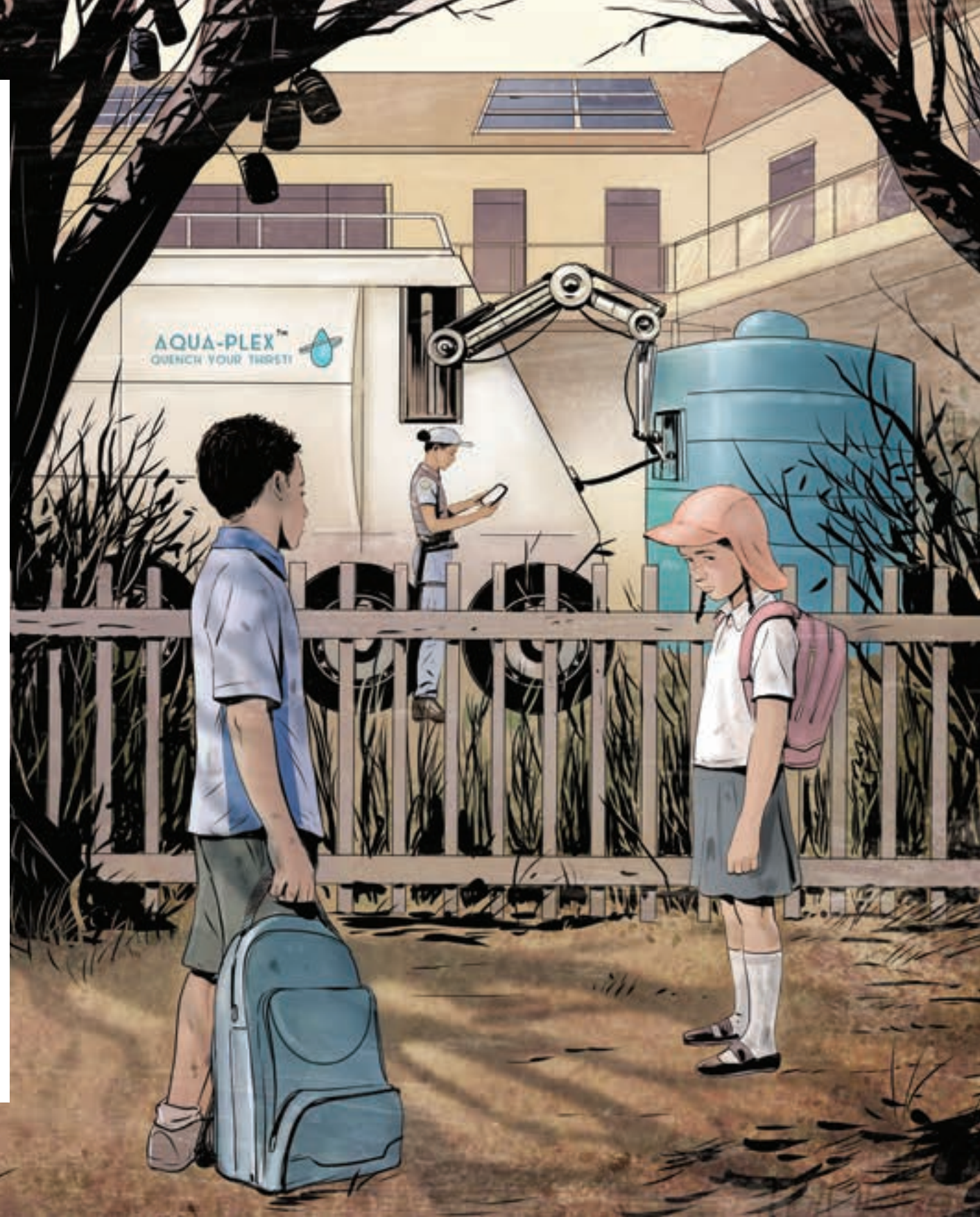
The operator tapped her tablet again, switching off the pump. With a sudden jerk, the arm retracted. A trickle of water escaped. Ryder watched it land in the dust and vanish.

"What a waste," Brooke grumbled.

"Go inside and make yourself a snack," Ryder said. "I'll come in a bit."

With a shudder, the transporter came to life and roared away. But Ryder stood still. His eyes were fixed on the side of the Carters' tank, on the valve box. When she was finished, the operator was supposed to enter a code to lock it down. Only she hadn't. Ryder could see the door on the little box. It was open, the valve unguarded. Why had the operator forgotten? Did she have other things on her mind?

It would only take a few minutes. There was a hose under the house. It hadn't been used in months. Ryder could run it right up to the Carters' tank. Everyone was still at work. No one would see. No one would ever know. Ryder looked around, the guilt already flowing, his heartbeat quickening. He wouldn't take much, just enough to get his family out of trouble. Besides, it was bound to rain sooner or later. It had to. Then all the water cultivators would be bulging and people's tanks would be filled, and there was nothing Aqua-Plex could do about it. They didn't own the rain in the clouds. Not yet.





Ryder stood for a moment, working things through. Then he threw his school bag onto the porch and charged down the basement steps. The hose was hanging where Dad always kept it, covered in dust. Ryder lifted it down. Looking, listening, he crawled out from the side of the house, hauling the coil behind him. His clothes rasped against the ground. A little dirt didn't matter – they would be able to run the washing machine tonight. Ryder took one end of the hose and climbed onto their water tank, now little more than a hollow shell. He attached the hose to the valve. Then, quickly, he jumped down.

Ryder carefully picked his way across their parched lawn, taking care not to step on the plastic lids that covered the water stills dug into the earth. He could hear faint music coming from Brooke's room. He poked the hose through the fence before scrambling after it. Then he dragged it up to the Carters' swollen tank.

With every step, he was sure he'd hear a call. "Hey, what are you doing? Thief!" But there was nothing. The Carters' place was deserted. Ryder took a deep breath. He'd gone too far to turn back now. Instead, he jammed the other end of the hose onto the Carters' valve. Licking his dry lips, Ryder punched the green button.



That evening, Mum and Dad got back at the same time, pushing their bikes together up the hill. Their company boiler suits were darkened with sweat. When they got through the door, Brooke jumped on Mum, babbling a torrent of words about her day. "Just give me a moment," Mum said, laughing. "I need to catch my breath."

Dad disconnected his headset and dumped his mini-console on the kitchen table. He turned it off with a stab of his finger. The words "Work-Plex™ Work for Your Dreams!" twitched on the tiny screen before fading away. Dad didn't care – there was no way he was online tonight. He dropped into a chair.

Mum suddenly pulled back from her daughter. "Is your hair damp?" she asked, the smile falling from her face.

Brooke looked at the floor, colour filling her cheeks.

Mum held Brooke at arm's length. "Answer me," she said firmly.

Brooke nodded. "I had a shower."

"You did what?" growled Dad, suddenly alert.

"Had a shower," Brooke whispered.

"A shower?" said Dad. "You know we barely have enough water to keep us alive!"

Brooke's eyes filled up. "Ryder got some more. He said I could."



“Got water? Where from?” said Mum. “Brooke? Where did your brother get water from?”

Now the tears fell down Brooke’s cheeks. “He said it would be OK. He said no one would ever find out.”

“Ryder!” Dad called. “Come here, right now!” But there was no sound from inside the house. “No one touches another drop!” Dad ordered. He went to the front door and threw it open and stalked outside. “Ryder!” he called into the darkening sky. “Ryder!”

Dad shouted once more. His voice rumbled through the trees, scattering the birds that had been perched at the cans quenching their thirst.



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