

A World Without Science

So dark in here. Dark as their thoughts. Why don't they want to know the truth?

Miss Majinski wanted us each to give a short talk on whatever topic we chose.

Freezia gave us a lecture about her favourite creatures – butterflies. She showed us drawings she'd made of different kinds and told us about their habitats and diet.

She told us that caterpillars turn into butterflies but didn't tell us how.

For me, that's the most astonishing part. Inside that cocoon the parts of the caterpillar dissolve into a kind of soup. Those parts then rearrange themselves into a butterfly. It's awesome.

Tycen's lecture was about his mum's garden. He'd made some origami flowers and passed them around the room. He'd also brought a bunch of dahlias and handed them, rather shyly, to Miss Majinski. They were lovely, yet Tycen didn't understand what was truly so special about plants.

The fact is, they are cleverer than us! When we're hungry, we have to peel potatoes, cut them up, boil them and then mash or fry them. Or we might make soup by preparing onions, carrots, cabbage or other vegetables which need cooking.

But what does a plant do? It simply spreads its leaves to the sun. That sunlight goes into the plant and (this part makes me shiver with such excitement) it turns that sunlight into food. Yes, food! It's so amazing that plants can do that.

Panda's talk was about animals. She loves all kinds of animals and that's great. It's a pity she can't visit the *Virt-Zu*. It takes viewers all around the world to see animals in their natural habitats.

She told us about her three favourites – the gorilla, the lion and the elephant – sadly, now extinct. I saw tears in Miss Majinski's eyes and I guessed she loved animals too.

What Panda didn't mention was how small changes over millions of years produced such a variety of creatures. She didn't tell us how they adapt to their environment, how we all came from some tiny organisms in the sea and evolved so many different animals.

Then it was my turn. One of my favourite scientists is Carl Sagan, so I decided to talk about the subject he loved best – the Cosmos.

I was excited and eager to begin. ‘Did you know,’ I told the class, ‘that the speed of light is 186,000 miles per second?’

They stared at me, open-mouthed.

‘Our solar system is in the Milky Way galaxy. If you were able to travel at the speed of light, guess how long it would take you to cross it?’

Mumbles and mutters of *20 minutes, 17 seconds, 3 days.*

‘You’re all way off,’ I tell them. ‘It would take a hundred thousand years!’

They all gasped. It made me chuckle. With their mouths open, they looked like a collection of fish!

Miss Majnski’s knee started jiggling. Was she nervous about something?

‘In our own solar system,’ I said, ‘scientists studying Mars have found’ -

Miss Majnski grabbed me by the back of my tunic. I yelped, surprised. As she hustled me out of the classroom, I heard something drop to the floor. We went out into the yard where she finally released me.

She didn’t look angry. More like scared. My heart was thudding and my hands felt sweaty.

‘Kairo,’ she said, ‘you...you mentioned the S-word.’

S-word? Did she mean -? ‘Science?’ I whispered.

‘Ssh.’ She glanced over her shoulder as if she was expecting someone to step out of the shadows. She pushed away a strand of hair and I saw her hand was trembling.

‘There are certain topics we are not allowed to talk about.’

Not allowed? What craziness was this? ‘Why not, Miss?’

‘The authorities. They have destroyed all such information.’

I remember reading about a time during one of the World Wars when thousands of books were burnt. Seemed like similar thing was happening here. These were dark times I'd leapt into. 'But without s-'

'Sss.'

'Without it, we wouldn't know about atoms or dinosaurs or viruses or the rain cycle or black holes -'

'Will you be quiet?' she hissed. 'You'll get us both into trouble.'

My throat felt tight and I wanted to cry. How could anyone live in such a state of ignorance? 'The Earth – the universe – is full of wonders. I love learning about it all.'

'Yes, perhaps. But there are certain things they don't want us to know. The...the idea you talked about – the S-word – is strictly forbidden.'

So this society prefers darkness. How sad. It brought to mind Carl Sagan's quote about beliefs: *If it can be destroyed by the truth, it deserves to be destroyed by the truth.*

Miss Majinski sighed. 'Let's go back inside and please remember not to mention -'

A sharp whistle blew. I turned around and saw two men in black uniforms. They sprinted towards me and grabbed me by the arms.

'Hey,' I protested, 'where are you taking me?'

They didn't answer. I was thrown into cage on the back of a dusty, horse-drawn cart. My heart was hammering in my chest.

The journey was short. When we arrived, I was dragged to a cell and dumped. No food or water and hardly any light - just a small slot in the door, like a letter box.

That's how I got here. It's been hours and hours. Are they ever going to let me out?

'Kairo?'

I sit up. I know that voice. 'Miss?'

The slot slides open. I see her eyes. 'I've been so worried about you.'

'What are you doing here?'

'You're allowed one visitor before they transfer you to the colony at the South Pole. I thought you'd probably need something to eat.'

'What's are you giving him?' a harsh voice says. So there's a guard with her.

'It's just a sandwich,' she tells him.

A few moments pass and I guess the guard is examining the sandwich. He must have been satisfied because Miss Majinski pushes it through the slot, along with a pouch drink of orange jelly-water.

I can see her eyes again. She gives me a broad wink.

'Right,' the guard says, 'visit over.'

I have a good look at the sandwich. Nothing there. But hidden in the drink pouch is my time-sphere! I must have dropped it when I was bundled out of the classroom.

They don't have them here. They've lost the technology. Not surprising if they've banned science. To most people, it would look like a marble – or a bubble in a drink.

A thrill of relief shudders up my spine.

I take the time-sphere out and it immediately recognises my DNA. A glow of light appears in the air, along with a virtual timeline. I key in the date I want: 2062.

The cell walls swirl around me. I hear a voice outside the cell. It's the guard. 'Hoy – what's going on in there? Where's that light come from?'

A high-pitched noise whines in my ears and for six or seven seconds, I don't know what is up or what is down. Blotches of colour – neon blue, ice-green, silvery pink – flash in front of me.

Finally, it all stops. I'm home.

'Good trip?' Lemon asks. To everyone here I've been gone for only an hour. To the people in 2260, I was there for three weeks. 'What was it like in the future?'

I shudder. 'Science is banned.'

She stares at me as if she hasn't heard correctly. 'Science? Banned? But that's -'

'Ridiculous. Yeah, I know. It's happened in the past though. In the early 1600s an astronomer called Galileo was given life imprisonment for saying the Earth went around the sun. In those days, everyone believed the Earth was the centre of the universe.'

She shudders. 'A world without science. A world of ignorance.'

I've experienced it – and I didn't like what I saw. 'We have to make sure it doesn't happen.'

'How?'

'By being interested in science.'

Lemon frowns. 'But I want to be an artist.'

'That's great. We need art and beauty too, but everyone can show an interest in science. Keep learning, keep science alive.'

As my favourite scientist said: 'Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.'

(1,378 words)