

Ironing Out The Future

By Marium Vahed, MSc 2022 & Aamer Shah, MSc 2022



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In a tale spanning three generations, we follow the Campbell family as they debate around the Christmas table, only to find that their shared history unites them far more than their differences.



Richard pulled the white shirt from the hanger and admired its crisp edges. *Pauline outdid herself by getting the Coleman Iron. It's worth its weight in gold*, he reflected. His thoughts went back to when he first saw Pauline in a restaurant near the Rocky Mountains, six years ago in the summer of 1951. Her soft smile and unruly dark hair had mesmerized him. He hoped his unborn son would get Pauline's soft features.



It was Christmas 2019 and the kitchen was aglow with the setting Alberta sun. Uncle Bob and Aunt Susan's knick-knacks were tinted orange and yellow. Amongst them were worn snowshoes, yellowing newspapers, and a primordial clothing iron. Warily, I picked up the iron and turned it over, observing its periwinkle enamel and bulbous silver fount.

"Ready for dinner son?" my Uncle Bob clapped his hand against my shoulder. Surprised, the iron slipped from my hands. It crashed to the floor and the fount broke, leaking a trail of petroleum gas across the linoleum floor. I gulped and turned to Uncle Bob, whose plump face was turning tomato red.

I ventured with a sinking heart, "Who even uses that old thing? Natural gas-powered objects are *terrible* contributors to home emissions." The last time I had seen Uncle Bob and Aunt Susan, I was eighteen. When I was accepted to Ivey Business School, my parents and I moved to Ontario. As a peace offering, I had flown here for Christmas, but so far, this was a terrible start.

I was saved by Aunt Susan, who poked her head into the kitchen. "Ashton and Madhuri just arrived. Join us in the dining room!" I followed her, leaving Uncle Bob seething alone.

"Alex! It's so great to see you!" Aunt Madhuri was seated at the dining table, smiling infectiously. Her vivacious saree clashed strangely with the weathered dining room plastered with old family photos. The dining table was decorated with a yellowing lace runner and groaned under the weight of juicy roast beef, buttery mashed potatoes, and bottles of wine.

Her husband jumped in. "How are you doing m'boy? I heard you're studying business at Ivey."

I replied confidently. "Yes, that's right." Uncle Bob walked into the room and I added defensively, "I'm in a sustainability class. Did you know that at least 20% of carbon emissions come from households? Canada needs to hit some aggressive reduction targets by 2030 and I'm studying how we can convince people to reduce their home emissions."

"That's...interesting," noted Uncle Ashton. He was clearly more interested in dishing out roast beef than home emission targets. In the ensuing silence, I stared ahead at the faded black-and-white portrait of my grandfather, hung askew on the wood-panelled walls.

"Oh come on Ashton, ask him how he's gonna go about convincing people. Don't be such a bore, it's been ages since we saw the kid!" quipped Aunt Madhuri.

Uncle Ashton was a venture capitalist and far less interested in the half-baked thoughts of a business student. "Alex, you're young. After working for over twenty-five years, I've learned that change comes with a cost. Canada's goals mean spending over one trillion dollars on energy infrastructure."

I retorted, "Yeah that *seems* expensive but if we were to plug ahead without care for climate change, it could set back the global economy by 23 trillion dollars. Plus, there are plenty of opportunities for cost savings, like investing in energy efficiency!"

Uncle Bob cracked open a bud light aggressively and jumped in. "Enough with business school buzzwords. Alex, do you know what meeting emission targets means for us?" He stood up and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a yellowed newspaper clipping. Staring at me with bulging eyes, he waved the headline in my face: *450,000 Jobs in Oil and Gas at risk due to Canada's transition to renewable energy*. "I don't care what your Ivey degree says. Thousands of Albertans will lose their livelihood!" He threw the clipping on the table in front of me and it splashed in the gravy, some of it sopping onto my white collared shirt. Aunt Susan nodded in approval.



"Honey, you are gonna get late for the job interview!" Pauline's voice echoed in the tiny apartment.

"Almost ready!" Richard exclaimed as he ran downstairs, tucking his shirt in on the way. Pauline was waiting by the open door with a packed lunch box. They shared a quick kiss.

Energy lines had not been built in this part of Calgary, but work had begun. Large swathes of land had been dug up around the city. As

Richard left, his eyes had the steely determination of a soon-to-be father ready to provide for his family.

"Bye dear and don't forget to get some extra gasoline on your way back if you get that job, you'll need it to iron your shirts!" Pauline's voice rang down the hallway.

Richard turned around and smiled, mumbling to himself "I *will* get that job and the gasoline."



I had forgotten how set in their ways my family could be. "Uncle Bob, you're painting a biased picture. Clean energy jobs are set to grow in Canada by 50% by 2030. In Alberta, that number is even higher –164%. People won't lose their livelihoods. They'll just transition. What's so wrong with that?"

Aunt Madhuri started gently, "Alex, imagine suddenly being asked to change your entire career, right before retirement. Can you blame them for being frustrated? Ashton and I are also guilty of using natural gas for our heating, our cars, and our appliances. Where we live, it's convenient, affordable, and we know it supports the people we love."

"But that's just so...selfish." I could almost hear Uncle Bob's thoughts. *That kid has the bravado of a spoiled city boy, thinking he knows better than the rest of us, just like his father.*

Uncle Bob disappeared into the kitchen once more. He came back with the broken pieces of the Coleman Iron, holding them with surprising care.

"Alex, do you know who this belonged to?" He looked at me piercingly and I shifted uncomfortably. I shook my head no.

He pointed to the portrait of my grandfather. "Your grandmother, Pauline Campbell, bought this for your grandfather, Richard Campbell. To you, this might seem like a strange relic, but to me, this is a testament of my parents' love for each other." His voice was uncharacteristically soft for Uncle Bob and I was embarrassed to see his eyes were watering.

"I'm so—" I tried to apologize but was cut off.

"Son, I'm not finished. Your grandfather worked at a crude oil refinery. It was a laborious job with long hours. He would come home late, smelling of chemicals. It may seem strange, but I loved that smell. He worked hard to support our family. Oil might not be in fashion and Albertans might not be the most popular with your school

friends. I know it might seem selfish for me to keep using the Coleman Iron. But it means something to me. And it should mean something to you too."

"Uncle Bob—"

He cut me off once more. "I know that climate change exists. No matter what you might assume of Albertans, I know that we need to change. But Alex, don't you for a second take for granted that this is easy for us." He came to a standstill.

"Uncle Bob, I'm really sorry," I finally got out. "I'm sorry for breaking the Iron. I'm sorry for failing to see your perspective. And I'm sorry for disrespecting your dad." I walked over to give him a hug. For a moment he was surprised, but his beefy arms wrapped around me. I felt tears well up in my eyes. It really had been too long since I had been home to the family.



"I got it, Pauline! You are looking at the new Assistant Manager!"

"I knew it, Richard, I knew it! We can finally move out of this apartment and little Bob will grow up in a home he can call his own." She launched herself into his arms.

"We'll be able to lay the foundation for the cottage soon, love. Life will get better for us," replied Richard, holding her tight.

His thoughts drifted to all that went into getting this job - sleepless nights, Pauline's tireless support, and the beautiful Coleman Iron that had pressed a white shirt onto his skin-like armour.



As the evening grew into the night, I thought of the world that belonged to my grandparents. Their choices were shaped by what they needed and what was available, and in doing so they did their best by their family. I realized that electrification was urgent and important, but it would be impossible unless it's anchored around people - their needs, their livelihoods and their loved ones.