

# Health punk vol. 2

**IF WE COULD TURN  
OUR EMOTIONS  
INTO LIGHT**

*Jiameng Xu*

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## IF WE COULD TURN OUR EMOTIONS INTO LIGHT

By Jiameng Xu

*CBC News – August 17, 2053*

*A Level 5 atmospheric surge is projected to fall over the Metro Vancouver area starting at 8:17pm PDT today.*

*Health and Safety Authorities are recommending evacuations to residents in the lower-lying regions. Officials are recommending that all other residents shelter in place and await further updates.*

*Local curfew has been placed forward to 5 PM.*

*Power checkpoints throughout the Lower Mainland, including Greater Abbotsford and New Hope, are projected to be submerged within 24 hours of onset of rainfall.*

Sophie's earliest memories were of her mother holding her. In the dark room, Sophie could only just make out the faint outline of her mother's face brushed by moonlight, the dim glimmer in her eyes. After the power curfew at 6 o'clock, when the hum of their five-storey apartment building ceased and gave way to silence, Sophie would take her mother's hand

and lead them towards the window. She would press her hands against the glass, her fingers tracing the pinpoints of light at the tops of distant hills. She pictured families living in the houses there, cooking, watching television, reading long into the hours of the night; families that could afford the surcharge on energy in a world depleted of it.

"Others have electric lights," her mother would whisper against her cheek, "but we have the moon and stars."

Tonight, her mother spoke of the lights that existed during her childhood. Candles on birthday cakes, and the muted glow of street-lamps. Lanterns in the garden, hanging from trees in the summer-time; and at Christmas, red, green, and white bulbs adorning roofs and evergreens, their brightness making the winter twilight seem more profound.

"Do you think the lights will come back?" asked Sophie, gazing at the shadows in their neighbours' darkened apartments.

“I believe the Earth will forgive us,” her mother replied. “I believe the Earth will see that we are trying to change.”

*The term “atmospheric surge” was coined five years ago to extend the phenomenon of “atmospheric river,” the result of a sudden and high-volume atmospheric conduit carrying vast amounts of moisture from the Pacific Ocean onto land.*

Paul was thirty-five when Ramirez and Yao patented what they hailed as a personal solution to the global energy crisis. A thin, blue piece of metal bent in a circle and worn around one’s wrist or ankle, the Gaiaband’s design originated from the skin conductance monitor, transducing the myriad electrical pulses generated by the human nervous system into storable energy. Wearing a Gaiaband for 12 hours was sufficient to power a range of 12-volt appliances: a LED reading lamp for two hours, a cooking element for thirty minutes, a cooling fan for forty-five minutes. Soon after the first version of the Gaiaband flooded the markets, the federal government partnered with the company to make the device, and a suite of compatible appliances, available to every individual aged fourteen and older.

Paul was forty-two when he arrived in Vancouver. The floodings, though intermittent, were occurring with increasing regularity and intensity, opening up an industry centred around the dismantling of damaged homes by the seaside. New to the city, Paul could not afford the high rent, nor did he qualify for social

housing; after the work day, he returned to the houses where he had spent hours salvaging for wood, plastics, and metal, and went to sleep on hollowed out floors. There he felt safest, even more so than when he would later move into a small apartment opposite a girl and her mother, for those roofbeams that have already survived a storm gave him the sense of protection he craved.

And later, after a psychotic episode following cocaine use, Paul came back to these forgotten houses to protect others from himself.

*Many supermarkets, food banks, and GaiaDepots are reported to be nearly empty across the Lower Mainland, with some residents travelling hours from their homes to procure supplies.*

Sophie inspected the angle of the last solar panel she had placed by the window, positioned just so to catch the mid-afternoon sun. Satisfied, she moved on to fasten each panel to the other with insulated wire, forming a parallel circuit just as her mother had shown her.

It had been three months since Sophie’s mother left. Or disappeared, as a voice in Sophie’s mind sometimes whispered. She had found no note, only her mother’s Gaiaband, faded blue on the chipped white kitchen table next to a wooden crate of insulated wires, solar panels, and rechargeable battery units.

Since Sophie turned nine, her mother began to teach her how to set up a miniature solar panel farm over every

available surface in their cramped apartment. Every few weeks or so, more panels and battery storage devices materialized from her mother's scavenging trips to local scrapyards or the municipal garbage heaps. She spoke of an oncoming storm, the greatest of their lifetimes, of distant relatives to whom she had made pledges, and whom Sophie had never seen.

Stacking one last battery unit atop the tower nestled between the wall and the kitchen table, Sophie stood up from her crouched position and took from the tabletop a bouquet of peonies. She carried them across the hallway into Mr. Paul's apartment.

In a room that was as bare of objects as her own was full, Sophie set the peonies next to the sink. She picked up a sandwich placed on a strip of brown paper, lettuce and ham squared with the bread. Beside it was a small bar of soap, unwrapped, and a plastic dish. Pocketing both items, Sophie took out a pen and wrote on the brown paper:

*Dear Mr. Paul,  
Thank you for the sandwich.  
Please accept these peonies.  
They are for you.  
Dan's mother gave everyone in my  
class a few.  
She said the big storm is coming and they  
won't last anyway.  
Please come back.  
I forgive you.  
Sophie*

The regional authorities urge family units to shelter together, if possible,

and those living alone to shelter with a neighbour. Children, the elderly, and persons using substances are particularly vulnerable; the Vancouver Police Department has tracked a sharp increase in individuals overdosing over the past seven days. "If you are planning to use," Chief Merrilee Gilchrist urges, "do not use alone."

When Paul first took cocaine, it was to seek refuge from the cold.

He sat huddled in a tent with a couple and another man. The canvas roof was waterproof enough to keep them dry from above, but rainwater was seeping onto the floor of the tent. Paul's boots were already worn through at the soles by the time he got them. He had never felt so cold.

"This will help," the woman beside him said, passing a bag of white powder. "Make sure you have your Gaiaband on – you'll get some extra power out of this."

"It's another way of harnessing our emotions," added her partner. "If we're going to be feeling anxious, angry, depressed anyways, might as well channel that energy. We're not just getting a high anymore – would be a shame to let it go to waste."

Paul had heard of people using external stimuli to augment one's emotional state to generate more energy with the Gaiaband, from watching funny, frightening, or sad movies to staying up all night to consuming certain substances. Joy, fear, anxiety, relief – these emotions of surviving, of bearing witness to

a present straining to keep up with an unpredictable climate, were perhaps the most inexhaustible energy sources of all.

The tap tap tap of a seemingly never-ending rain burrowed under Paul's skin, the deluge threatening to close in but never seeming to arrive.

He was tired of feeling so, so cold.

*Authorities say they cannot predict with certainty the intensity nor duration of this atmospheric surge. A comparable event was the storm of 2051, which killed 103 in Metro Vancouver, displaced an estimated 15,000 across British Columbia, destroyed bridges and highways throughout the Lower Mainland, and left 40,000 households without power for four weeks.*

Through her mother's stories, Sophie remembered the first of the great storms.

"The rain kept falling for five days. You could hear it all the time against the window, on the roof. The clouds were so thick that the sun never appeared.

Morning and afternoon lost all meaning because the light never changed in strength, remaining muted until suddenly you knew it was night. Those nights felt like no light could ever cut through them. And through it all the only constant was the rain."

At school, Sophie learned about the storm's aftermath in her geography textbook. The Coquihalla Highway collapsed, prostrating under its own weight. Farmland overladen with floodwater, heavy and opaque with silt. The water rose until only the roofs of houses were left uncovered as colourful squares, seemingly afloat on a muddy sea.

Sophie did not tell anyone that she and her mother were thrown into darkness each night after the power curfew because they could not afford the energy surcharges. That sometimes for weeks on end the only foods they ate were those that kept well when cold and uncooked. That she woke at dawn to finish any homework not yet completed, her eyesight adjusting to the growing light with each passing, precious minute. And at night her mother whispered to her the lessons she remembered from her own schooling, both drawing comfort from the memory of certain facts that have withstood heat and water and wind. On particularly rainy nights, music from Mr. Paul's bedroom wafted into their apartment like a smell, foreign and warm. Sophie was soon able to tell apart the strains of a harmonica from the twanging of a guitar and later, by the key changes and tempo, the direction of the next note.

But on one spring night, against the noise of hail hitting the window, the sound of instruments was replaced by Mr. Paul's shouts and banging on their door.

“You have to get out of there – it’s not safe – there’s a cave in the mountains –”

“Paul, I don’t understand, we are safe here, the hailstorm will pass,” her mother shouted back. Then, after a pause, “Did you take something?”  
“The cave – you have to go –”

“We are fine here – the storm will pass soon, the storm will pass soon,” said her mother over and over, her palm upon the wall.

Minutes passed. The sound of knocking ceased. On every night thereafter, Sophie heard only silence from the other side of the door.

*“We recommend everyone check up on the vulnerable,” says Vancouver mayor Simreet Singh. “Look upon elderly individuals. Look upon your neighbours. Share food, share water. Stay safe. Look after each other.”*

The day Sophie’s mother left, Paul gave Sophie the keys to his apartment.

“You can come in here to take whatever you need, alright? There will be groceries in the fridge for you every week. Toilet paper and other supplies.”

“You don’t have to,” said Sophie. “I’ll be OK, I promise.”

“Your mother asked me to,” lied Paul. “Just keep going to school, alright?”

After Sophie returned to her apartment, Paul took a pillow and blanket and stuffed them into a backpack. He took two busses to get

to the dilapidated houses on Southwest Marine Drive that he had been cleaning out earlier that day, his last conversation with Sophie’s mother echoing in his mind.

“Do you think me a bad mother?” she had asked, shaking her head. “I keep telling myself that here, in this apartment, Sophie will be safer than in the mountains. And you know what? I swore to myself I wouldn’t do what my own mother had done to me. But who will take care of them through the storm? They raised me when I had no one else.”

“Then just make sure that you come back safe,” said Paul. “And please don’t think of yourself that way. Mine never left my side, but she was never really there either.”

“I hope she could forgive me,” whispered Sophie’s mother. “I hope, one day, she would understand.”

As he saved objects left behind that Sophie could use, Paul wondered if the tight knot of shame in his chest would ease. He was glad that on that night, Sophie’s mother had not opened their door, no matter how much he had pleaded with them to do so.

But Sophie had written him a note, had asked for him to return, had bound herself to him with her forgiveness. And clutching the bouquet of peonies, Paul remembered the sound of rain falling, and no longer felt cold.

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