

## ***The Alone Tree***

The old tree by the creek stands alone now. Before the forest fell quiet, trees and seeds used to weave a slow-motion patchwork of pods, and giant branches. At first sight, the freely rearranging palette of greens, and browns seemed chaotic, but the clatter of twigs was exactly perfect. Bucket loads of leaves came and went, turning light into sustenance, branches into blooms. Underground, the roots grew into linked clumps, strung with fertile nodes. Bridging all of these, the standing tree trunks grew into trinities of wood, and earth, and sky. The free-range forest was a self-organizing, living knot of bark and moss.

That was before.

Some of the forest trees were so old that their roots cascaded like bubbling, mossy rapids. They turned into enormous stumps.

Some trees swept the ground with long, twirling branches. They turned into string.

Others were regularly submerged by pod fruits that split apart into golden snap crackles. Those trees split into slithers of furniture veneer.

And the spiky tree that funneled into the shape of a triangle?  
That turned into a portable, colored light stand for the snow season.

Bit by bit all the trees in the free-range forest turned into other things until one day the only tree left standing looked around and realized that's what it was now: the alone tree. It gazed out at the empty earth and squeezed the bark so tight around its trunk that the rough, outer layers crumbled. The alone tree almost bent double over as the wind screamed through its branches, but it clutched at the earth and wouldn't budge. Its trunk became pitted with burrs. Sap oozed out of those gashes and turned brittle. Still, the alone tree wouldn't budge.

Then the spades came. People arrived with trucks and tape measures. They marked row after row of neat, equidistant holes, and filled them with row after row of mini-poles. The alone tree was surrounded by quick growing, laboratory enhanced pole trees with nothing between them but wood chips.

"How neat you are", the alone tree sent carbon to the new arrivals as a gesture of welcome and asked, genuinely curious, "Why all these woodchips between you?"

Silence.

Growing outside of a row was a quiet experience. The poles weren't there to canoodle. Surrounded by DNA registered poles, all bred for optimal growth and implanted with tracking devices, the alone tree might as well have been surrounded by grey walls.

As the pole trees raced skywards, the alone tree's leaves would bud and bounce back down to the earth like a register of renewal. How many buds would still bloom like bright green fizz? The pole trees were modified for drought, fire, flood, pest resistance, and predesigned to prioritize their own two-by-two-meter survival above all else. It wasn't long before the alone tree was spluttering down fertilizers and pesticides, but the pole trees were bred for this sort of chemical wash.

The alone tree began to dig. Underneath and out of sight it churned the soil with its roots. It burrowed into rock shards, and smashed mud and gobbled all the rotting remnants of the forest that once stood beside it and squeezed and squeezed until slowly... it wasn't alone anymore.

The very air felt ready. The alone tree squeezed so tight that even the clouds above split into tiny little pieces.

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Sally was a town-planner with so many ideas, except one. "What shall we do with that under-developed patch, eh?" she asked herself. That raggedy tree had to go. She knew that much. Stuck into the ground like a dilapidated relic the old tree was far too scraggly to light a bonfire, and it only shaded that back part of the plantation where nobody walked.

Good town planning eradicates waste. Sally knew very well that the old, free-range forests could never churn out enough oxygen, or wood for everybody, particularly after the first

dieback plague wiped out most of the taller trees. Bottom line, pole trees are more efficient. Sally hadn't set eyes on a free-range tree for years, and now that she'd discovered one in her very own planning zone all she could think was, what a waste.

Slight of frame, but solid on her feet, Sally changed into her optimal walking sneakers, threaded her long, dark hair in to perfect triangular plaits, and took off in the direction of the plantation. This sort of following her nose affair wasn't like Sally at all. Still, she was a stickler for detail and always, always liked to plan ahead, yet, it was just...something. It took her almost two hours to trek across asphalt, fossick between woodchips and find that big old tree by the creek. She was grateful for the shade when she did. That was a long trek through acres of bare poles. Sally collapsed against the base of the old wizened tree, and looked back at the perfect symmetries all around her. It comforted Sally to be surrounded by such cleverness.

The tree at her back felt solid at least, like it could well be anchored to the center of the earth. It smelt of mud. Sally looked around and tried to imagine a high-rise apartment block to her right, because the city desperately needed housing. But something was wrong. She felt strange, almost off center. The longer Sally sat under the tree, the less she liked right angles. Sally was a good town planner, and a proud one too, so this knobbly, knotted in circles feeling made her frown, deeply. She sat a bit longer. Still frowning, Sally looked up at the alone tree directly above her head and noticed that at various points along its trunk it had split apart and grown side-branches. The bark that lined the edge of those splits had almost dissolved into shreds, stretched aside by wide open branches. What were they reaching for? Sally had

devoted her life to perfect planning and she had no idea what to make of these mysterious outbursts.

Inexplicably, Sally's eyes welled up with something sticky. All she could think was 'this is novel' as a warm liquid flowed out of her eyes and down towards her nose. She wasn't frightened at all, which was even more novel given the circumstances. It smelt like ...molasses? Sally's nose flared pink and her throat tightened. She could hardly swallow. She tried to wait it out, but the overwhelming sense of eruption didn't leave her. She could see now that the tree was gashed and scarred; the land around her pitted with holes where the other free-range trees used to grow. She couldn't help it. Sap poured out of her eyes. It flooded down her face and stained her cheeks.

Sally gasped for air and ran all the way back to her office. She made a beeline for the washroom and washed the gunk off her face. She returned to her desk, and immediately put every single one of her plans for that scraggly free-range tree on hold. Before she did anything, Sally wanted to understand what the hell just happened.

The alone tree knew exactly what had just happened and it slowly softened its grasp on the rocks beneath its roots.

The next morning, Sally awoke to discover a new sense of determination. She would find seeds. She didn't know why, or how. All the other trees were gone now. Yet who knows, maybe somebody had put a few seeds aside? Sally contacted museums, but trees were not

considered ancient enough for their collections. She contacted gardening centers, but they'd long ago swapped mulch for tree wipes. Sally even contacted all the banks to see if any tree seeds had been stored away somewhere, only to be told that organic materials were not allowed in the vaults.

Meanwhile, the alone tree nudged the stones packed tightly around its roots. When the wind picked up, the gusts blew through its branches like a trumpet. Hundreds of birds appeared and caused such a clatter. They skipped and clicked and sang tumble-down chords, and zip-whistles. Their wings beat the air so hard they blew chirps in every direction. More than a few city dwellers felt like they'd been hit with a curious bolt of fresh breeze.

Sally hardly noticed the birds. By the time she trudged her way back, empty-handed to the tree plantation, she was convinced that she was the worst seed-finder ever. Perhaps there really was a hidden stash of old seeds in a dusty storage jar somewhere, or perhaps the only thing out there was the odd piece of antique, free range furniture.

Then Sally blinked. From a distance, the alone tree looked fluorescent... and alive. It was surrounded by birds; they were somersaulting through its branches. Colours flipped back and forth. *What were they up to?* For all Sally knew those birds had come to dive-bomb the seedless town planner.

"Should I come back another time?" She mumbled as a bird swooped down to circle her head. The question was more to herself, than anybody in particular. The bird's wings brushed her

hair, at which point Sally became acutely aware of each passing feather. Her feet were turned ready to run when the bird jumped to and fro, as if leading Sally forwards. She tiptoed a few paces. She wasn't attacked. Instead, more birds chirped and flipped left and right in front of her, almost like a precession of feathers. She didn't know what else to do so she followed them towards the tree. Last time she was here the alone tree looked broken, like it was ready to topple over in the next storm. But now, the splits in its towering trunk were dotted with leaves. Tiny buds, like miniature green human palms were waving at her. The new leaves smelt pungent, like freshly turned earth.

"What?" Sally's mouth was wide open.

"Thank you." A voice chimed in her head. Sally blinked and looked around. She was completely alone, and confused. Why on earth was this voice in her head? And why was it impersonating a tree, and thanking her when she was just a town planner who had no seeds to show for herself!?

"You're welcome," she mumbled, none the wiser.

Sally shook her head and sat down in a large nest like pod between two ancient, arched roots.

"I hope this isn't going to be another sticky situation" she said, warily.

Ultimately though, she was too tired to think. Leaves rustled as her eyes ...fell... and the roots arched around her like a blanket.

Sally awoke to the pinch of a single leaf tickling her face. She tried to wipe it away but her face was stiff with sap again.

“This can’t be real” she said. “Are you ...really...a tree?”

“Not alone I’m not,” said that voice.

“Who are you actually?” asked Sally, but the only answer she got in her head was “I’m a tree” Moss was growing on the base of the tree’s trunk. In places, it was so thick that it rippled over the earth like mini-rolling hills. Sally hadn’t noticed this before, but there was lichen too, grey floral bubbles that reminded her of paint peels. Strange, she thought, there wasn’t any moss, or fungi on the nearby pole trees. For the first time in her life, Sally questioned plans. She burrowed her nose into the packed rain smell of moss. The longer she sat, the more that she saw in every knobbly burr. She saw seasons fold in upon each other: Wild, uneven layers marked by buds, floods, blooms and frosts.

After a long time, Sally said, “You’re not really alone, are you?”

She pressed her face against the alone tree’s knobbly trunk and marked her cheeks with hard folds of bark.

“You have me too,” she whispered.

Sally went back to her office and checked all the original projections that indicated pole trees were the optimal choice for the planet. As she suspected, somebody underestimated the birds, the animals, and all the underground networks.

For no good reason, Sally started to deliberately waste her own time. She visited the free-range tree daily and sat between the folds of its roots. Strange thoughts popped into her head



like “Sometimes all it takes is just one solitary tree”. Out of the blue, she scowled at all the perfect right angles of the neatly planted pole trees and thrust her head in her hands, moaning, “They’re awful”.

“But they’re kin,” the tree whispered.

Sally could only shake her head, and question everything. *What if free-range saplings were planted between the rows – out of order?* After all, a good town planner can change plans. Sally didn’t even have to get rid of the pole-trees to change the world. She just needed to free-range them. She almost jumped to the tree-tops when she realized that, until she remembered: SEEDS! Oh....no! Without seeds, free range forests were lost forever. She slumped to the floor.

BUT that night hundreds of tiny green hands waved at Sally in her dreams, like the most disorderly collection of limbs she’d ever seen. It was like somebody had switched on a green fuze and the whole city was sprouting saplings.

“How?” she asked

“Not alone”. The words in Sally’s head were warm. If only she could melt into them.

She saw visions of the alone tree wriggling about in the tightly packed ground. It shook out all the stones and rolled its roots in the mud and sounded the air through its branches like a trumpet and, lo and behold...Not just one seed had been wedged between the rocks all these years, but a dozen, or three dozen. At the trumpet call they all popped back up to the surface like tadpoles surfacing for one big gulp of air.

“What happens next involves you, Sally.” The voice in her head echoed, as the dream faded away into forgetting.

The very next morning Sally awoke with a new plan.

“It’s simple.” She beamed, her hair bouncing across her face like blossom.

“All we need to do is track everything that returns whenever free-range forests grow back, and track how people live with, or without access to that!”

But her suggestions fell on deaf ears.

“Yeah right, thanks Sally, but I’m just trying to get a roof over people’s head.” Quipped Scott.

The town planners’ faces were hard as granite, but Sally kept smiling.

“Forests take a LOOOONG time to grow, you do know that don’t you Sally?” groaned Brian

“We best start soon then Brian” Sally smiled as she said this.

“Where’s the poach factor?” asked Daphny.

“Poach factor, Daphny?” Sally asked Daphny straight back.

Daphny of the bifocal stare swivelled her long-range lens towards Sally and said, pointedly.

“Exactly.”

Poach factor, it turned out, was the inevitable theft of unmonitored trees.

(Sally smiled), “How about forest care groups?”

Daphny rolled her eyes.

(Sally smiled again). “Mind you... the pole trees are all monitored, so we can easily keep watch on the surrounding free-range growth at the same time. SORTED!”

Unfortunately, the matter wasn't nearly sorted yet. Sally had to present her simulations almost as many times as there were days in the year before she could make even the slightest crack in those granite faces at the town planning office, but then...one day...

“Look!” Brian was exasperated by this point and gnashed his teeth. “If we go see this tree for ourselves, will you finally stop all this Sally?”

“You're on!” Sally said, clapping her hands.

“Are you sure?” Brian scowled.

“For sure!” Sally beamed, but Brian was still scowling. “I promise!” She exclaimed. “If you sit under that tree for one hour and do nothing, say nothing, just ...sit ... I promise I won't say anything more”.

The very next morning, as the birds chirped and scattered seeds throughout the plantation, like great tides of bright green waving hands. Sally stared straight down the barrel of the alone tree's rough, unkempt bark, with the entire town planning posse by her side. Some members wriggled about impatiently, until the alone tree swayed left to right, and then right to left. After ten minutes the town planner's breathing slowed in unison. To Sally, it felt like they had all sighed one long exhalation of relief. After twenty minutes one of the town planner's noses started to itch, Sally's eyes sparked white and the alone tree's trunk gurgled with sap. After thirty minutes all the town planners' nostrils flared. The branches started to clatter. After forty-

five minutes, the town planner's eyes were swollen, and sticky. After forty-five minutes, the town planner's eyes were swollen, and sticky, and Daphny was nervous. She wriggled on her haunches like a tightly wound spring. Brian almost jumped to his feet and ran, but Sally's scowl reminded him of his promise. Daphny stared at the ground and Brian gritted his teeth as the seconds ticked, one after the other. After fifty-five minutes all the town planners were speechless, because by now all their mouths were so sticky with sap that they could no longer open them. Out of the blue, they all laughed, well, they laughed as much as they could with their mouths shut. Nobody had expected this, that much was true, but now there was no denying that sap ran through their veins, just as much as it did through the tree's trunk.

Soon everything was covered in newly sprouted, feathered down. What was once a single, left-over alone tree spread out its branches. Even Sally spouted buds. She didn't mind. Mind you, the world had never heard of a perennial town planner before, and certainly not one that grew such bouncy green buds out the side of her head. From now on all of Sally's plans involved finding space for tiny green waves. Seed vaults opened in banks. Museums recorded all the new varieties of plants growing on that hill every year and gardening stores even developed fostering options for stray seedlings.

The buds on Sally's head grew larger. They changed from shoots, into twigs, and then branches. When a bird built a nest on her head Sally did wonder if she should prune her topknot, but the sound of chiming chirps mixed well with all those new notes flying around her head. Tinkling twigs, creaking stretches, a rumbling bass in the big gusts and the seesaw of petals: Sally liked this chorus. She kept it.

Inch by inch, the leaves on Sally's head fell closer to the ground. Each spring she sprouted goose-pimples on her skin; the scent of summer filled her nose, and come autumn she had to perpetually check her own footprints for falling leaves. Whenever she walked her spiky, bare winter's shadow under a streetlamp, she squealed like a child playing shadow puppets. Each day became a new adventure. Sally saw the first time a pole tree canoodled. She was there when it leant towards the alone tree and bounced up and down like a pogo stick. She saw the birds fly away ...and come back and she joined in their chorus of sky sounds. She was there, smiling, when her fellow town planners renamed a large area of reclaimed land, *Sally's Folly*. She saw the alone tree grow thick in the belly, and surround itself with generations of saplings that grew strong and healthy and numerous. She saw the lichen spread and almost cover the entirety of the alone tree's trunk and when she reached to scrape it off, the tree stopped her. "It's alright Sally."

Her friend sounded so peaceful that Sally understood. Everything was alright now. Eventually the sap in Sally's veins grew thick, and knobbly burrs appeared on her knees, at first, then her elbows and toes. The birds circled Sally's head every spring without fail, but the buds grew thin, and far between. Chirps, clicks, tumble-down chords and zips all started chiming a chorus in Sally's dreams. A ladybug crawled into her topknot. Some of the leaves still glistened bright red, almost ready to fall and flake into a crunchy, brown crackle that would soon mush back into the soil like a long, lost child.