Welcome the gift
By Sacha Robehmed

I reached out and touched the olive tree. All at once I felt the buzzing, humming, pulsing through her skin. I felt the earth, and the other trees around - the pomegranate, the carob, the peppercorn tree. I was aware of every single swelling olive on its branches. I felt the tree’s purpose and focus, growing these olives. It’s deep rooted history, from a tiny start, and the many years that had given it its thick, knobbly trunk that twisted this way and that. I saw how its roots connected to other trees, sensing the way they were interconnected and communicated with each other. I was aware of every insect crawling on its bark, and the jobs they did with single-minded focus that maintained the balance of this precious ecosystem. I tapped into memories, and heard my great-great-great grandfather say how the olive was the most useful tree, how you could use every part of it. I felt connected through time and space, as rooted as the olive tree, and at one with nature.

“What will it be like?” Layla asked, startling me from the connection.

I turned, seeing the child watching as I joined with the earth. I turned my full attention on her and gave what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

“I think it probably feels different for everyone. But you’re strong. Trust yourself”

She didn’t look reassured. I’d told the story to her before, but words were different to feelings, to being there and experiencing, to knowing. She was old enough now, almost grown up. She had been tending the plants and gathering fruit with the adults for a couple years now.

“Come closer,” I said, and reached out to hold her, sharing the memory.

At 16, they came to the village. A group of three, wearing white lab coats. We knew it was time, and we weren’t scared. We welcomed it.

We’d heard stories from Elders about how things used to be. A time when technology owned our data, owned us. When people voluntarily shared their data with technology companies to make profiles and to communicate with others. When they were sold things based on this data. When they were told lies they were more likely to believe, and then elected governments, based on what they learned with these profiles. When governments had databases with citizen’s personal data - photos of their faces, their eyes, the lines on their hands, and cameras everywhere.

A time of great inequality, when those who created the technology had lots of money, but used others in order to get there. When people had algorithms as bosses, telling them where to pick up and drop off food, or where to put products in a warehouse. When technologies like AI were trained using exploited labour.
It was hard to believe that this had all happened, that this was our history. But it was what had brought us here.

We all gathered in the village square, under the peppercorn tree. The square had a trough at the back with icy cool water, and a ruined building dominated one side of the space. When the visitors arrived, me and the other teens were waiting. I remember the meticulous white lab coats and that no earth stained their hands. We stepped forward without hesitating, ready. We pulled our hair to the side, and bent our heads forward, exposing the nape. A small prick in the back of the neck and that was it. The in-sim was there. We were officially adults.

I’d heard the stories from the elders, but nothing really prepares you for the feeling once the in-sim is inserted. It wasn’t immediate. More of a gradual, emerging awareness in the first few hours, which blossomed into this euphoric feeling of unity and one-ness, of senses on hyperalert. After the in-sim-ination, we rested and slept for a few hours, gathering again as night fell and our awareness grew. We held a gathering that evening to celebrate the in-simination. Everything was brighter, clearer, more vibrant. The trees glowed a luminescent green, the grit surface of the square was more crunchy and textured, the stars were closer.

I’d heard and seen what the in-sims allowed us to do, but experiencing it for myself was something else entirely. It seemed unimaginable that things could be any other way. But of course, with the in-sim, comes the memories of our ancestors, to tell us otherwise.

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“That’s enough for now,” I said, releasing Layla.

It was exhausting to share a memory in such a way with someone who didn’t have the in-sim yet, and I worried it was too intense for her.

“Do you feel ok?”

She nodded, looking at me in awe. “Do you really see the world that way? All those colours and brightness and unity?”

“Yes, my child. And you will too. But it’s not without a price. And it requires great responsibility. Let’s continue tomorrow.”

We got up slowly, Layla a bit dazed and me stretching out my creaking hips. Hand in hand, we walked back to the dwellings.

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Later, we gathered in the cavern glowing blue, green and pink, lit with bioluminescent plants. This was the evening gathering place, and with the in-sim-ination close, almost everyone was there to support.
It fell on the oldest in the village to tell the origin parable, as we gathered round.

“Back in the 21st century, people carried on them these separate electronic devices with chips in them. They used them to contact each other and connect to the web. The devices were often attached or held very close to the body, so as technology advanced, it made sense to integrate some of their functionalities inside us.

At first, some people were fearful of the in-sim. There was uproar when they were first suggested and announced. Wouldn’t the in-sim just allow governments and tech companies to have greater control over us – knowing where we are, what we’re doing, what we desire, at all times? Could they be hacked? Would the in-sim harm us? If people are connected through the bodily in-sims, could they be weaponized somehow, endangering us all?

The ancestors say that the early versions were quite similar to the functionalities – and risks – of the ‘smartphones’ of the day. People were connected and couldn’t disconnect, even when they felt that they were being tracked. Concerns over what was a new evasive technology were justified.

Then the Coalition – a global group of governments, technology companies, and human rights defenders – joined together to develop shared standards and regulations. It was the Coalition that established They developed the principle that the in-sim was partnered with the human hosting it. We moved beyond ideas of individual or capitalistic data “ownership” to a more collective and collaborative model. The in-sim didn’t “take” humans’ data, nor did the person with the in-sim “use” the technology in an extractive disposable way, changing it or “upgrading” every year or two. The in-sims weren’t devices owned by the technology companies that made them, nor by the people they were partnered with. The in-sims were gifts, allowing us to be better.

This was at the time when the Great Crisis had led to an understanding that cooperation between governments and all people was necessary for our very survival. With the climate disaster in the North, people were forced to leave their homes behind and travel to the Mediterranean. The desperation and fear was great. As millions of people migrated south, those who were less directly affected clung onto what was “theirs” – their property, their land, their past – despite knowing the planet was no longer habitable. Overcrowded boats kept crossing the sea, and were turned around. Border fences topped by barbed wire were breached and torn down, only to be rebuilt higher—and more deadly.

After five painful years, the Cooperation was established. What remained of governments and authorities, realised the futility of their actions. Concepts like citizenship, borders, visas and “illegal aliens” no longer mattered when our very survival as a species was threatened. We finally moved beyond the old status quo of needing passports to travel. People were fleeing to survive – there were no more border officials or security. Bureaucratic jobs didn’t matter anymore in the face of the apocalypse. Identity documents didn’t exist anymore. When everything was destroyed, we were allowed to travel and move.
It was around this time that the in-sims evolved to what they are today -- allowing us to recognise our shared responsibility to each other and the planet. The in-sims added the “e” to “human” – making us humane.

Of course during the Great Crisis, some folks just couldn’t take it. The situation in the physical world was so apocalyptic and depressing that many wanted an escape. Rich capitalists paid up front for their physical bodies to be cared for, while they used the in-sim to exist only in the virtual space of the metaverse. They could live out an idealised, fantasy version of their old lives, maintaining their wealth and status. Apparently they still had abundant dinner parties with friends, consumed the latest trends, and had virtual cosmetic surgery to enhance their avatars. A whole separate economy – an alternate reality – existed in the metaverse.

With record inflation and money becoming worthless, people returned to their ضيوعة, or migrated to rural areas elsewhere, forming collectives to better manage the land and feed themselves.

Most people, like our great-grandparents, could not afford such an escape. With record levels of inflation, the money they had was worthless. I was told that my great-grandfather, [name], would always say he’d rather be dead than live in a world of bits and bytes. But with food shortages and breakdown of supply chains across the globe, almost everyone had to become self-sufficient overnight.

Fleeing, they journeyed to their ancestral village in the Chouf mountains in Lebanon, or at least what remained of it. The stone houses were crumbling, plants pushing up through the remnants of concrete and tiles.

They rediscovered the olive and pomegranate trees that their forefathers had tended before fleeing during the civil war years and years of globalised industrialisation, still standing generations later. And so they put roots down.

At first they had no idea what they were doing. Nature seemed like a foreign myth, a place they had previously visited momentarily for a hike or a camping trip. But to live with its seasons? To understand the language of trees, plants, and soil? No one had prepared them for the day their digital worlds collapsed. Slowly, they began to tend to the soil, to listen to the branches and the calls of birds, to taste the storm in the wind. And the longer they stayed on the land, the more they learned. The in-sim gave them access to their ancestors’ memories: the old ways of forestry, cultivation, and agriculture. Over time, not only did these memories become stronger, but the earth herself started to communicate via the in-sim.

This was when we learnt to cooperate not just with other people, but with nature herself. We remembered that seeds are life. She would share her fruits with us, and we would protect her.

It took time to rebuild trust. The Earth was sick: rivers were blackened by our waste, the green, acidic algae-choked seas were devoid of fish, plastic shores had been abandoned for
decades, the unbreathable air forced us to take daily oxygen replenishment. But nature knew how to regenerate itself better than we could’ve ever imagined. She showed us how plants could help us survive.

We learnt to tap into plant DNA sequences to turn on bioluminesce and create light during dark nights. To unlock their thermogenic sequences to generate heat. To encourage fast growth into certain shapes, to repair crumbling structures, or to build entirely new shelters. As our relationships with the in-sim, with each other, and the plants around them deepened, we were more able to mutually care for each other.

And here we are today. Let us thank nature for this meal she has provided.”

“We tend the earth, we tend to each other” echoed around the chamber, as we began helping ourselves to food.

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The next day, I went back to the olive grove, knowing we would be undisturbed. Layla sought me out, sharing a broad smile and a big hug as she flung herself into my lap.

“Ready?”

She nodded. I opened my mind, channelling the memory to her.

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All the new in-sims came together daily. We would meet under the peppercorn tree, or later, when we were ready, on this terrace with the oldest olive trees - right here where you find me now. With the elders guiding us, we’d sit in a circle, and go inwards. We first had to learn how to connect with the in-sim, and communicate with mutual consent. This was the basis of the partnership. From there, we began to explore the ancestral wisdom which each in-sim helped us connect with. Then we’d start reaching out - first to each other, then to the trees and plants around us. It took hours and hours of practice to build the relationship with the in-sim, and then to get used to this new sense of connectedness across time and beings.

Part of each time in the circle was also for sharing the feelings that arose. The ancestors brought wisdom, but we also felt their guilt and their pain. They gave us memories so that we may never again create another Great Crisis, but the burden of these was difficult to bear in the early years of the in-sim. It’s why we wait until 16 to partner with the in-sim. And once we do, the circle helps us bear the weight of ancestral trauma. We would pass around a feather, and take turns to share the dreams and sensations that had arisen. We’d process it together and then move on. Over the years, we learn how to contain this pain - we simply must or else we’d go mad. It’s the blessing and the curse of the in-sim
Six months later, the white coats returned. They met with each of us in turn for our assessment. I can't even remember what their faces were like, or their eyes, as they asked the questions. Just the stark white coats.

“How do you feel?”
“Fine”

“Have you had any adverse reactions to the in-sim?”
“Like what?”

“Any fits, depression, feeling overwhelmed, like it's all too much?”
It had felt heavy sometimes, but I knew what saying yes meant.

“No”

“What do you choose?”
I thought about it for an instant, but it was no real choice.

“Earth. Here.”

No one from my group left that year, but every now and then there is someone who struggles with the... heaviness... that the in-sim can bring. It takes time to be able to manage it, to bear the weight of the burden, to focus on all the good it does. And then there were others who just wanted out of the challenges of living in the world, who tried the metaverse and were hooked, and wanted to stay there. Those folks would leave, and go to a facility where their body was nourished and cared for, while their mind was free to leave the earth and exist in another reality.

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I turned back to the child, hugging her close as the memory faded on the breeze.

“It will be your turn soon. Welcome the gift.”