

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 swelling olive on its branches. I felt the tree's purpose and focus, growing these olives. Its deep-rooted history, its humble beginnings, and the many years that had given it its thick, knobbly trunk that twisted this way and that. I saw how its roots spilled onto 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 a single-minded focus that maintained the balance of this precious ecosystem. I tapped into their memories and heard my great-great-great grandfather say how the olive was the most useful tree, and 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 to 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 her the story before, but words were different from feelings. No one could prepare her to be there, to experiencing what was about to happen. She was old enough now, almost grown up. She had been tending the plants and gathering fruit with the adults for a couple of years now.

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

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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. Then they were sold objects, services, and experiences based on this data. They told us about how they believed many lies and elected governments based on what they learned from these profiles. Governments had databases with citizens' personal data - photos of their faces, their eyes, the lines on their hands. Watchful cameras were spread everywhere.

It was a time of great inequality. Those who created the technology had lots of money but used others in order to get there. People had algorithms as bosses, telling them where to pick up and drop off food, or where to place products in warehouses. Artificial intelligence technologies were trained using exploited labor.

It was hard to believe that this all had happened, that this was our history. But it 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, I and the other teens were waiting. I remember their 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 now 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 oneness. Our senses were on hyperalert. After the in-sim-ination, we rested and slept for a few hours, gathering again as night fell. That evening we celebrated 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 okay?"

She nodded, looking at me in awe. "Do you really see the world that way? All those colors 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 around in silence.

“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. They established the principle of partnering the in-sim 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 all people was necessary for our very survival. The Arctic sea ice melted, and strange weather phenomena began to affect the extreme northern and southern regions of the globe. Floods, heatwaves, and blizzards - rare extreme weather conditions that happened once in a lifetime became more and more frequent. People in regions like Europe were forced to leave their homes behind and travel to the Mediterranean. As millions 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. Nothing had remained of governments and authorities. 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 became extinct in the face of the apocalypse. Identity documents were meaningless. Everyone had to be on the move to stay alive.

It was around this time that the in-sims evolved into what they are today—allowing us to recognize our shared responsibility to each other and the planet.

Of course, during the Great Crisis, some folks just couldn't take it. The situation in the physical world was so depressing that many sought an escape. Rich capitalists paid upfront 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 a fantasized 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 ancestral ضيعة, 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 Sohaib would always say he'd rather be dead than live in a world of bits and bytes. But with food shortages and the 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 globalized industrialization, 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, foraging, 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 learned 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, and 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 learned to tap into plant DNA sequences to turn on bioluminescence 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 relationship 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,” we echoed around the chamber and helped ourselves to the 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, channeling 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.

We also spent some time in the circle sharing the emotions 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 was difficult to bear in the early years of the in-sim. It's why we wait until age sixteen to partner with the in-sim. 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?"

I 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 unbearable weight that the in-sim can bring. It takes time to be able to bear a load of this magnitude.

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."