

Trees are the future

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It is the first morning of the 22nd century. The man, wearing clothes adjusted to the hot weather proceeds forward, with a packet and a curious instrument in his hand. The hot winds sear around his face, which is covered with a flimsy gas mask. His clothes, sealed by his thoughts are just thick enough to cover his body. He proceeds forward, forcing his tired legs, completely unused to exercise, to walk. He is alone. For on this hot day, people are either busy in their houses, or at work, underground. He sighs. Simmons had a hard task at hand.

Walking alone, Simmons was thinking. He was thinking of what he was about to achieve. He was thinking about how he was about to change the world. No matter, how uncaring we may appear, we all want to have the world remember us, appreciate us. Simmons wanted the world to appreciate the task he was doing. But who was going to come out outside at this time of the day? His motives were selfless, of course, but just that little bit in him wanted recognition, it wanted appreciation. Just then, he heard a cheerful voice call out to him, 'Where you going, Mr. S?' He turned to face the owner of the voice. It was Ralph, a kid who lived a couple of houses away from him. 'I'm going to plant a tree.' said Simmnos putting on a well practiced air. He had rehearsed this scene a lot of times. When someone would ask him what he was doing, and he would break the news to them.

'What is that?

'You mean you don't know what a tree is?' Simmons put on a well rehearsed look of shock. A. Tardy, the best actor in the film industry himself would have been proud of the execution.

'Nope.'

'Haven't you ever been to the museum, young man? It has a big row of them. And they tell me, that in Africa and Asia, there are still several tracts of them' 'Museums are for geeks.'

Simmons sighed. He could have done with a more intelligent person. But he had to do with what he got.

'What are you doing here anyway?' Simmons asked, hoping to keep the conversation going.

'Was getting bored down there, and well, peoople say you can't come out in this place any more. So I came.'

Simmons sighed again. 'So, don't you want to know what a tree is?'

'Not really, but yeah, tell me'

Ralph settled down on a makeshift iron seat which was kept more as a relic than anything. 'Hmm', said Simmons settling besides him. It was an uncomfortable seat and he had a dim-witted audience. But still, he loved to tell a story.

'You see, Ralph, it started like this. In the 21st century, humans were naïve. They were immature. They went about exploiting resources at an incredible pace. Whenever a resource started depleting, technology found another one. We lost out on coal, so we started using water to create electricity. Then, as the water available for drinking started depleting, we shifted to nuclear energy. As nuclear energy started polluting the environment irreparably, we shifted to the sun. Finally, we were able to utilize the sun's energy practically. Still, in this long process, the environment was destroyed. Poles started melting, the air barely had enough oxygen to be able to breathe properly, and it became clear that humans could no longer survive above the ground. So, like rats we went underground. And like rats, we live to this date. It wasn't as if people didn't try to look for solutions. They looked for ways of reducing pollution. They, however, forgot the most basic one, of planting more trees. And so, they could not come up with a solution. People grew selfish, caring only about money, not showing any emotions. If depression was a problem earlier, its a habit now. People no longer are happy. What they want is fresh air, a fresh life and be able to live overground again. When was the last time your mother talked to a friend of hers? I'll answer that for you, years ago! We no longer have time for communication, we no longer meet each other, or talk to each other. Earlier we used to visit other people, talk to them on something called the telephone and...' Simmons broke off as he saw his audience close his eyes, giving away to the heat. It certainly was very hot. Simmons frowned, he had just been getting into his stride. 'Oh well, I'll have to take him back, I guess.', he said, 'Sorry dear', he patted the packet inside his pocket, 'I'll have to leave you for tomorrow.'

Ralph Williams woke up in his soft bed, its softness adjusted for his comfort. To say, that he had heard nothing of what Simmons had told him, would be doing the boy injustice. He had heard enough to be interested. 'Mom', he shouted. It was a silly thing to do. His mother couldn't hear him. The child in him wanted to shout out again but he held himself back and pressed a button besides him. After a gap of a minute or two, his mother's impatient face flickered besides him. 'Well?' she said. 'I need to get to Dad!' Ralph shouted. 'Now, Ralph, you know how busy..'

'Its urgent, very urgent!'

Her mother's face registered annoyance, knowing very well that her son sometimes found out things which could be of use to her spouse, a man of importance in the news industry. 'Fine' she said.

Alex Williams was a man who had been given a head and knew how to use it. He had a big figure, deep voice and a smart brain. The three combined together had always brought him good fortune. When he heard of his son blabbering

about the environment, he recognized one thing in it, it gave his channel a chance of increasing their popularity. And more popularity meant more money. His son had told him that this man, Simmons would most probably plant the tree tomorrow. He would collect a couple of people and go on the expedition. It could be arranged easily. There was the problem of covering the expedition and showing it live on television. Covering something above was never easy. But, he was sure he'd be returned the money he would invest in covering it. He smiled and set his computer on the task of researching trees. It did it efficiently. It told him that trees growing at 10 m³/ha/year fix an amount of carbon equivalent to a column of air 1400 m high over each ha every year. He positively grinned. More money.

Simmons trudged again in the heat. He looked ahead, and could see a commotion. He quickened his pace. His legs protested, but he forced them to walk at a quicker pace. He eventually neared the gathering. When Alex Williams did a job, he did it well. A gathering of 20 people were waiting for him, with old fashioned cameras in the hands of a few reporters. Alex greeted Simmons himself.

It took Alex Williams some time to explain to a bewildered Simmons that Ralph had actually managed to understand enough, and there was popularity for his expedition. He silently thanked Ralph Williams for being so intelligent and did a mental check of how he was supposed to behave when he was popular. He had rehearsed that too. 'So gentlemen', he said, head erect and shoulders upright, 'all we have to do is to plant these seeds I have here, water this place, and in a week or so, we will have a sapling. It will take time for it to become a tree, and more time for more such trees to come, but if all of us unite, and set about this task, perhaps we can dream of living above the ground! If not us, atleast our children can!' The mood dampened a bit, the people didn't care how their children lived. Simmons understood he had made a mistake. 'But uh of course, 10 to 1, we'll be living here ourselves soon!' Questions neccasarily followed. 'How much time would it take for a tree to grow?' 'What did a tree look like anyway?' 'What was a sapling?' He answered the questions, with what he perceived to be a suitable grace. Not being an expert on the subject, he was finding it tiring. Alex Williams, recognizing the signs, hastily intervened 'I think it'll be better if we go back underground. Spending so much time here can be harmful for health.' Presently, the company trudged back underground, unable to stand the heat for so long.

The news spread like fire. It was everywhere how Simmons was about to change the world and make it 'green and clean again'. Everyone knew that Simmons had invited people to see the sapling a week later. The media was astounded at the fact that Alex Williams had persuaded Simmons to give him exclusive rights to photograph the sapling. Still, the day was eagerly awaited. People began to countdown the days. News channel featured old films of life above the ground. The only thing in the news was how Simmons was about to

transfer life above the ground and everyone was happy about it. Three days left. And mothers talked to each other about how their grandmothers had lived above the ground. Now, only two. Seeing money, the market immediately produced accessories with pictures of trees on them. The pictures ranged from a brown man with a green face to a brown stick-like computer which fixed carbon. But they all sold, no matter what the price. One. And then the wave really hit. Even Alex Williams was surprised at the popularity he had got. Emails, calls, they all poured in his office, sharing comments, excitement, questions. The world had erupted at the thought of going overground again. And finally, the day came, with everyone glued to television, eager to see how the sapling would look.

Alex Williams led the party to where Simmons waited. He was happy. His channel had never got so much popularity in its history. In fact, he doubted any channel had got so much popularity in history. If he were a boy, he would have whistled cheerfully, marvelling even the drab landscape. As he came near the site, his happiness increased as he saw Simmons already standing there. He had been afraid Simmons would be late. He knew how these ordinary people became when they became celebrities. They put on airs and tried to behave like celebrities. 'Hello, Simmons, where is the sapling?', he said, his voice, which normally remained unaffected by emotions, today betrayed his cheerfulness. He searched everywhere, looking for a hint of green. But there was none. The live streaming went on. He looked inquiringly at Simmons face and got a shock. For instead of being proud, haughty, cheerful, the face was filled with despair. 'It's no use' Simmons said 'The ground won't grow any trees anymore. We are too late!' 'But..', Alex Williams started 'Don't you see?' Simmons raised his voice, bordering on hysterics 'We've been exploiting nature for years and years, and it has finally shown. The grounds don't have any minerals, they don't have anything with which a tree will grow!' Simmons was almost screaming now 'We will all return to the old life. We will be forced to live underground again. We won't talk to each other, we won't..' He choked and went into a frenzy. 'The human race is doomed to meaningless existence!' he screamed at the top of his lungs. He had become completely hysteric now and he tore his gas mask out and set out trying to run in a wild frenzy. He was hit with a wave of nausea as the air hit him. Carbon monoxide plunged into his lungs and he coughed, weakened and fell. He lay still, not moving. The live streaming went on. The cameras, efficient as ever, focused on Simmons face. No person dared to make a sound, neither those watching television, nor those on the site. The silence was broken by Alex William's sigh, as he started the walk back underground. He was thinking about how he would recover his money.