

The Last Test of Trust

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The old and dilapidated shack was an unexpected finding in the expanse of woodland that surrounded the smallholding on which I lived. Though I had not yet been in this area where I found this shack, it was unheard of to find anything that was not an ordinary aspect of a vast uninhabited area blanketed in trees. I assumed it was abandoned, considering its seemingly unlivable conditions. Its roof was a large sheet of metal that was dented in several areas and sagged inward due to the large amount of branches and debris that were piled on the surface of the roof. The scrap wood that had been utilized for the walls was unevenly laid on one another.

As I advanced nearer, I heard footsteps approaching and I wheeled abruptly to see an old man in a worn brown coat shuffling towards me. He held a long cane and used it for support as he approached, his bespectacled face squinting and his forehead heavily creased, as if struggling to see. His posture was bent over, and he was approaching oddly fast.

I stepped backward, afraid. I had never seen this man anywhere in the vicinity before and rarely interacted with others as I was homeschooled and spent a large amount of time in solitude. I prepared to flee, but the old man held up his frail hand and halted. He straightened himself and spoke in a low and soft voice.

“There is no need to be afraid.”

I was confused about whether or not I should trust him, but seeing his condition, I realized there was not much harm he could cause.

“Do you live here?” I asked.

“Not entirely,” he replied. “I live in Colston. All I do in that shack is sleep on rainy or windy nights. Otherwise, Colston is where I stay.”

“Colston?” I asked inquisitively. I thought I knew the surrounding area quite well, but I had never heard of Colston before. Perhaps it was somewhere far or maybe this man was mad. Whatever it may be, I was interested.

The man suddenly looked uncomfortable, as if he had said something he shouldn't have, but he composed himself and replied, “Follow me. I will take you there.”

“Is it far?” I inquired. “I have to be home soon.”

“Not at all,” he replied as he began to shuffle away. “We will be there soon.”

I considered this, but after seeing the man and his enfeebled appearance, I obliged.

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I marveled at the sheer size of the oak tree that towered over me. It had branches that extended upward while also a network of branches lower towards the ground. It was odd that I had not seen it yet, as I was an avid adventurer of these woods, yet somehow missed this. The man looked overjoyed, as if he had been looking for someone to show this too for a long time.

“It's amazing,” I breathed, realizing he must have named the tree Colston.

“I have tried to share this with so many others, but they all thought I was mad.”

A wave of guilt washed over me, as I realized how I had perceived the man earlier as well. I was about to inquire further, but the man spoke first.

“And that is why I would like to proffer something to you as you have been the sole individual to trust me.”

He led me to the back of the oak tree, which had an immense hollow in it, as tall as an average human. The man reached inside and took out a large seed. It was smooth and ovate, nearly the size of an egg. Silently, he handed it to me, along with an aged scrap of paper.

I looked at the items with interest and was about to ask for more information, when I realized there was no one standing beside the oak tree except me.

Astonished, I looked around but soon realized that the old man was nowhere to be seen. I stared at what he had given me and read the scrap of paper in hope that I would find understanding of what had taken place. But to no avail as all it had written on it was a poem that I assumed was about how to sow the seed.

A dayless juncture

An expansive area

Destructible at the Crown

A contrivance of the unknown

It was an intriguing verse, and as I was a voracious bibliophile, understanding what it alluded to was not a difficult task. Though I was filled with uncertainty, I was astonished at my eagerness to sow the seed. It was an attractive prospect as much of my life was quite tedious and unexciting. Therefore, not seizing this opportunity of something unexpected and different was not a possibility.

At nightfall, I headed out into the stretch of land behind our bungalow, which extended as far as the eye could see. I scuffed at the ground, establishing a hole that was large enough for the seed that I had brought with me in the pocket of my coat. I didn't water it as it had rained the previous night and the earth was damp. Sowing it was truly a stimulating experience as the endmost line of the poem reverberated in my mind. A contrivance of the unknown...

The following day, I ran onto the stretch of land eagerly and was astonished. The seed that I had sowed the previous night had grown into a colossal tree that towered above me. Its bark had a reddish brown hue and its leaves were a dark yellow. They were asymmetrically shaped and looked like blobs. Branches protruded from all angles of the tree. It had large nuts that hung from the bundles of leaves and a large amount of them were already scattered on the ground.

I gaped in awe and was dumbfounded at the speed at which this tiny seed had grown overnight. It seemed impossible, but then again, it was an aspect of the unknown. Undiscovered. Unseen.

I picked up a nut and held it flat in the palm of my hand. It too was unusual as it had a deep red shell and a soft, yielding texture. It was peculiar for a protective shell to be pliable even to a minor extent. I thwacked it with the heel of my hand and the shell crumbled effortlessly. Inside was a seed, identical to the one that the man had entrusted me with.

It had a mesmerizing effect on it, and without thinking, I began to bring it towards my mouth, when I heard something behind me, bringing me out of my stupor.

I was relieved to find that it was just our German shepherd, Odin. He wagged his tail eagerly, hoping that I would play with him, but I had other matters to handle.

I gazed at the nut I had broken into and looked around at the unimaginable amount of seeds the tree had let fall in such a brief amount of time. If all of these seeds transformed into this gargantuan tree overnight, then the amount of land they would occupy would be inconceivable. They would leach all the nutrients from the soil, transforming vast

expanses of cultivable land into fallow wasteland. It was truly a terrifying idea, and therefore I had to undertake some effort to counteract what I had let loose.

I recalled the poem, which had said that the tree was destructible at the crown, which I knew alluded to the top of the tree. Therefore, to cause any harm to it whatsoever, I had to find a way to get to the topmost branches. It was an arduous undertaking as I was unable to discern any ending of growth from the ground itself, making getting to the top seem impossible. The idea of a helicopter occurred to me but arranging it would at least take until the following day, and I could not imagine to what extent the tree could grow in the timespan of another night. Perhaps even the other seeds would sprout. The lone silver lining of the situation was that the tree had no way through which it could grow during the day and this provided us with time, but yet all we had was a day. Ingenuity was required.

I wondered if the man who had gifted me the seed had any idea about the destruction it could cause. If he had known, why had he entrusted me with it, unless he had wanted this. Perhaps he had wanted these immense trees to cause destruction, and I had no idea how this could benefit him, but it was the only explanation. He could have on no account been oblivious of the seed's potential as the poem subtly implied how it would require an expansive area for growth and how the acquirer of the seed might want to destroy it later on.

Unquestionably, a sorcery of sorts was involved as there was no scientific context on how the man had gotten this seed. It was indeed an aspect of the unknown. I looked around once more, wondering if there was any way through which I could reach the crown of this unimaginably large tree, when I recalled that the old man had referred to the oak tree and its general surroundings as "Colston", as well as how uncomfortable he had looked after telling me this. An idea was forming in my mind, and without a second thought, I dashed into the woods.

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In the area where the old man had brought me yesterday, there was no large hollowed oak tree, as I had expected. I began to rummage and scabble through the fallen leaves on the forest floor, hoping to find the trapdoor I was looking for. I had realized that though the seed indeed had some aspects of magic in it, there was absolutely no way that the man could have vanished. The explanation that came to mind was that of a trap door that led to a place known as Colston, which the man had accidentally told me of, but had made me think that he was referring to the area where the tree was situated.

Soon, I found the door, nestled under a thin layer of fallen leaves. It had a flourished “C” engraved on the wood and a small keyhole. I knocked.

From inside, the sound of shuffling could be heard and the door opened upward suddenly, almost hitting me in the jaw. Looking around like a prairie dog halfway in its hole, was the old man, holding his cane upward to keep the door open. When his gaze fell on me, he gasped, and tried to shut the door, but I grabbed it and yanked it open all the way.

When the old man’s gaze fell on me, his face went pale with fear and he began to stammer unintelligibly.

“I, but I didn’t...,” and he began to try and shut the trapdoor once more, but I held on tightly until he relented.

“What is it that you want?” he asked decisively.

“Information,” I replied. “Regarding the seed you gifted me.”

Stone faced, he beckoned for me to follow as he descended the rungs of a ladder that led to the trapdoor and I cautiously obliged. Under the trapdoor was a large penthouse of sorts, with lavish rugs and extravagant show pieces. There were numerous doors leading out of this central room, which was seemingly a lounge. He led me to a small table and sat down with a grim look on his face.

He took off his small framed glasses and put them on the table in front of him and rubbed his temples with his fingers. I kept mum, wanting him to begin with an explanation. The

old man looked up dolefully, and I felt a twinge of sympathy, but dared not let it show, remembering how he had made a fool of me.

“I am not a human,” he whispered, burying his face in his hands.

“What?!” I exclaimed, flabbergasted.

He looked up at me, grief stricken. He then began to pull up the sleeve of his large brown coat, and I realized that his arm was made of intricate entwinements of metal and wires. I looked up in alarm, but his expression remained grave.

“I was alone,” he began. “I was the only child that was not born entirely an android, as we were referred to in my home world. I was the first as such an occurrence had not been observed since time memorial. I was therefore exiled. I had sullied our family’s otherwise unblemished bloodline and exile was a punishment that I had to accept. There were no workarounds or loopholes, and they abandoned me here with nothing other than the seed and scrap of paper I had entrusted to you. It was a seed that could only be sown by a human and if it was, I would begin to transform into an android,” he explained, downcast. “I searched far and wide for anyone who had the heart to trust me, but as I had told you, anyone I approached considered me to be a mad old man. I spent years in search of an individual with a trusting heart and in this timespan, became aged. Realizing not much of my life was remaining, my sole desire was to die in my home world. That was the reason why I was overjoyed at finding you and I entrusted you with the seed,” he finished, his gaze softening.

“Why does the poem allude to the destruction of the tree?” I asked.

“Does it?” asked the man in a surprised tone. “I wouldn’t know as those inscriptions could be decoded only by a human, but I think it is to ensure that the human is truly trusting and does not destroy the tree through remembering the honesty with which I had entrusted them with the seed.”

Another wave of guilt washed over me as I realized how I had been trying to destroy the tree not long ago and how that had been my sole inducement for coming to this area. As I mulled over the circumstances, the man gazed at me imploringly.

“Don’t,” he whispered. “You didn’t destroy it.”

“I didn’t,” I replied earnestly. Though doubts blossomed in my mind, they were subdued by the elderly man’s now euphoric expression.

“You are the one,” breathed the man, ecstatic. “The trustworthy one. Do not worry. The tree will be gone by tomorrow morning as you have passed the test that so many had failed at. I will be returning to my home world soon, as I expect you should be.” He smiled softly.

I laughed and smiled, thinking to myself, a contrivance of the unknown...