

## The Sapling

A sapling was growing from a crack in the cement sidewalk, but all of the pedestrians were too focused on their screens to notice it. Decades upon decades of living in a cold, blank world had taught them that the screens, with their flashing colors and engaging games, were infinitely more interesting than the monotony of their drab surroundings. And it was true, there wasn't much around them to look at-- the city was grey, grey, grey, from the pavement streets to the apartment buildings. Most days, even the sky was overcast and brooding.

That concrete wasteland was no place for a sapling to grow. They were too fragile, too green, and they pulsed with defiant life. Their very existence undermined the cold rigidity of the urban world.

*In theory, there were supposed to be ecospaces to protect plants like these-- there was even a law stating that each city was required to have one. This law was, by and large, neglected. Exceptions had been made countless times and loopholes had been exploited at every opportunity, leaving hundreds of ecospaces to be torn down to make space for the shiny new tech companies and power plants.*

An old woman, tottering down the sidewalk on her way back from her son's apartment, got her cane stuck in the crack between blocks of cement. As she paused to pry it free, a flash of brilliant green caught her eye.

"Well, I never," said the old woman, marvling. She hadn't seen a plant in years, but the little sapling reminded her of the green, springtime days of her childhood. She had been born several years after the invention of oxypumps had rendered plants obsolete, but complete urbanization hadn't been achieved until she was a young adult. *She still remembered a time when houses had yards and wild trees were a common sight-- a time before ecospaces were introduced and plants that grew freely were condemned as weeds. She even had a garden way back in her early girlhood, where she grew carrots and tomatoes and all varieties of flowers. She would prop her chin in her hands and spend hours watching the bees and the butterflies flit among the blooms. She was devastated the year they stopped coming.*

Slowly, with her hand clenched tightly around the cane handle, the old woman lowered herself to the ground. Her joints ached with the effort, but from this vantage point she could see the sapling much more clearly. None of the other people on the sidewalk paid her any mind: they deftly shuffled around her crouching form without even glancing up from their screens, a testament to their years of practice. A more empathic passerby spared the old woman a momentary glance, perhaps to confirm that she had not keeled over and died.

The woman, for her part, was wholly focused on the sapling. With carefulness that bordered on reverence, she traced the thin edge of the leaf with her finger, feeling the tickle of green life against the pad of her skin. The shape of the leaf was so very familiar... she thought she might recognize the species of tree it was. A maple, yes, that was it. She recalled an image of a maple tree with a tap and pail from her granddaughter's digital textbook. There was a caption below the picture which read: "Fun Fact! Before urbanization, maple syrup was made from tree sap (see image above)!"

*This maple wasn't nearly large enough to be tapped. In truth, it wasn't large enough for any sort of human attention-- the little green miracle was negligible compared to the expanse of drab concrete. One of its leaves had been crushed under the heel of an oblivious passerby.*

The sapling had been marked with a death sentence from the moment it took root in the hidden soil beneath the concrete. No matter the circumstances, nature's single most powerful desire is to thrive. The sapling had cracked solid concrete in its quest for light and life, and would continue to grow until its crown brushed the clouds. But how fervently the old woman wished the sapling could stay small! She knew all too well what the outcome would be when the wills of plants and humans clashed.

The woman was so entirely absorbed in her thoughts that she was caught very much off-guard when her unsteady hand finally slipped on the cane, dropping her to the ground. The bracelet around her wrist at once let out a series of beeps that were very professional in their urgency. A tinny, robotic voice piped up over the alarm. "Help is on the way. Help is on the way."

"Blast," the woman muttered, prodding the bracelet for some sort of mute switch. Too late-- in the distance, a louder siren blared in accompaniment. The woman huffed. For once, she had little appreciation for the efficiency of the United States HealthGuard.

A sleek black governmental car careened around the corner and skidded to stop beside the sidewalk. A medical officer, clad in a neat grey uniform, jumped out and rushed to the old woman's aid.

"Are you alright, ma'am?" asked the officer, proffering a hand to help the woman struggle to her feet.

"I'm fine," said the woman, a mite testily. "I just need..." she waved her arm as explanation, and the bracelet beeped helpfully.

"Oh, let me take care of that for you." At her nod of consent, the officer leaned forward, twisted the bracelet inside out and confidently tapped an invisible button. The incessant beeping stopped at once. The old woman gave a wry smile of gratitude. *She envied the youth their ease with navigating modern technologies, although she knew that the day would come when they would fall behind as well. The officer's day might come sooner rather than later, as the lines beside his eyes indicated he was approaching middle age.*

*But he still seemed young to the woman. They all did. These children had never taken a breath of air supplied by growing things. Their atmosphere had been manufactured by oxypumps.*

"On behalf of the Ridgefield HealthGuard, please accept our sincerest apology," said the officer.

"Rest assured we will address the problem immediately."

"And what problem would that be?"

"Well, the weed, of course," said the officer, nudging the sapling with the toe of his boot. "We spray the sidewalks with herbicide at the beginning of every month, but these weeds are tenacious little pests, if nothing else."

The sapling had already begun to spring upright again from when it was kicked by the officer's boot, and the woman watched pensively.

"They spread from the ecospace, of course," continued the medical officer. "I've been advocating to shut ours down for years. It's not as if anybody cares about it, and to make matters worse, it's absolutely crawling with the homeless. And obviously nobody wants to go in and clean it out, so it's become utterly disgusting. I went in there once to treat a group of homeless people who'd taken an overdose, and I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw how messy it was in there. Sticks and rotting leaves everywhere."

The woman nodded absently.

"Well, I'm not too concerned-- the higher-ups will listen to reason eventually. In the meantime,

don't worry about this crack," said the officer. "We'll have it filled in by tomorrow at the latest."

---fill this in---

"Why?" the woman asked, to nobody in particular. "Why must we stamp out life? Are we so cold hearted?"

The officer looked a little nonplussed. "Well, it's the law, ma'am. It's our duty to exterminate weeds when we see them. They're regular nuisances, what with their shedding leaves in public places and sticking branches through people's windows and cracking the cement open, like this one here."

The woman raised her gaze from the plant. "Answer me this, officer," she said. "What do people have windows for, if not to look out at the beauty of nature?"

"For fresh air, I suppose," the officer said.

The old woman scoffed. "Fresh air, don't make me laugh. Every breath we take is artificially manufactured by oxypumps. I haven't had a breath of fresh air in a lifetime."

"That's a shame, ma'am," said the officer. He pulled the cane out of the crack and handed it to her. "Listen, seeing as you aren't hurt, I'd say it's fine for you to go home now. We apologize for the inconvenience."

"Inconvenience," murmured the woman. "Yes... it is an inconvenience, isn't it? But this whole world is the result of inconvenience overcome, and look at how miserable it ended up being."

She gestured to a man who was shuffling past them, tapping at a device. "We can't even bear to look upon our masterpiece." She gazed at the maple sapling. Its spindly stem and its uplifted leaves were raised like arms in worship, hailing the sun and life. She felt a burning at her throat and a stinging in her eyes. Her vision swam as the rigid grey melted into the sapling's blurry verdure. The world cleared as two teardrops fell free and watered the plant like salty rain.

"You're crying ma'am," the medical officer noted. "Ma'am, how hard did you fall?"

The woman sighed. To the officer, it sounded like a gasp of pain, but it was far from that. It was a breath of artificial air released.

"Have you ever had maple syrup?" she asked the officer.

"Of course," he said, surprised by the abrupt change in subject. "Sweet, sticky, good on pancakes. My son won't eat breakfast without it."

But the old woman was shaking her head. "No, not that sugary fake stuff," she said impatiently.

"I mean real maple syrup. From a tree."

"From a *tree*?" the officer repeated, bemused.

"That's what I said," said the woman. "Very distinctive flavor, you know. Stop by my apartment in a decade or so, and maybe you can have a taste."

"I'm afraid I don't understand--" began the officer.

"Be a dear and help me down," ordered the woman, cutting him off. The officer, looking more bewildered than ever, re-extended his hand and helped her lower the woman into a crouching position.

She didn't have a trowel-- it occurred to her that trowels might not even exist any *more-- but the woman had a mission and would have to make due*. Her knotted hands shook as she dug her fingers into the crack and scraped at the soft dirt around the sapling's stem, being careful not to tear up the delicate root system.

"For goodness sake," said the officer, above her. "I told you before, we have the problem under

control. If you're really that worked up, I'll make some calls and see if we can get the extermination people out here this afternoon, but--"

"No need," said the old woman, pulling herself upward by her cane. Cupped in her hand was the sapling, its roots still buried in a heap of soil that spilled out of her palm and sprinkled the sidewalk. "Thank you for the assistance, officer, but everything's fine."

The officer shook his head helplessly. "You might want those fingers looked at," he said. The old woman looked down. The sides of her fingers were scratched and raw from scraping against the rough concrete.

"I'll do that," she said. "But I must be going now. Remember the maple syrup!"

And she rejoined the crowd of bodies that flowed steadily down the sidewalk, her cane click-clacking on the hard ground as she went.

"Remember the maple syrup," the officer repeated to himself, after the woman had hobbled a safe distance down the street. He chuckled. *Just another elderly loon. You meet a lot on the job. It's the age that does it to them-- messes with the brain in weird ways.*

He whistled as he strolled back to his car, but before he opened the door he paused and looked back down the street. The sapling's verdure was so audaciously vivid that it stood out clearly even from a block away. The woman turned the corner and the sapling disappeared from view.

"Imagine," said the officer to himself, shaking his head amusedly. "Maple syrup from a tree." He smoothed out his grey uniform and lowered himself into the car.