

VLAD BUNEA

# Degrowth of Humans and Sheep

A NOVEL



may fly



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Vlad Bunea

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**may** fly

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## **Cast of main characters, in order of appearance**

1. Harding C., insurance clerk whose wife, Lorelei, is a climatologist, and teenage son, Mikael, is a gamer
2. Sheep, a sheep, a steadfast companion who Harding C. encounters on his way home
3. Cecil Harold Lysander Millington, owner of Millington Steelworks, Textiles, and General Industries
4. Celeste Amelda Persephone Millington, chemical engineer, wife of Cecil
5. Gunther Glassfarb, investment banker, Chief Investment Officer at Solid Carbon Capital, Inc.
6. Peggy, Gunther's lover, has a Pomeranian named Gigi
7. Holly-Kate Glassfarb, wife of Gunther
8. Fiona Farrinelli, secretary of the Oak Collective, has a Yorkie named Bubble
9. Menelao Melanoliou, PhD in physics and ecological economics
10. Marcus Literolis, general contractor
11. Debra Literolis, high school teacher of English and History
12. Stanley "Sly" Stone, musician, DJ, singer-songwriter, composer of film music
13. Yolanda Francescone, Sly's girlfriend and Swedish model
14. Paula G. Lipman, PhD, professor of macroeconomics at the Université Paris-Charlemagne
15. Blythe "Brutus" Zapp, former colonel, retired, owner of a security consulting firm
16. Jayden Flier, hippie, has a business with his wife Jasmine
17. Jasmine Flier, hippie, has a business with her husband Jayden
18. Margaret Fletcher, real estate expert, landlord
19. Lynton Friedman, senior political advisor
20. Billy Nordhaus, oil rig foreman

21. Fred Hayektom, retired tech bro, sold his company for billions
22. Ignacio Monserrate Ernesto Salar, indigenous farmer from Chile
23. Aiko Kochiyama, video game designer
24. Berta Isabel Esperanza, journalist
25. Marichka Kobrynska, electrical engineer
26. Mallarika Patekar, social justice activist, lawyer
27. Marie-Louise Lubala, painter
28. Florencia Gallardo, doctor
29. Missy D. Point, hairdresser
30. Cléa, uses all pronouns, nurse
31. Rajesh Biswas, mechanical engineer
32. Gao Jianxing, translator
33. Zuri Owuor, she/her, from east Africa, writer
34. Donatello Zuniga, capitalist from Ecuador
35. Luke, Earth Wanderer



# 1

Harding C. found the sheep tangled in electrical wires, fallen to the ground in a ditch, on his way home late in the afternoon. He almost missed the sheep considering the low light surrounding this spectacle, specifically the remoteness of the location, unknown to common town folk, not to mention infrequent tourists who would never imagine venturing that far off the beaten path away from the few sightseeing locations in the area. To make the circumstances even more unlikely, Harding C. had been going home after producing a good number of overtime hours at his office in the centre of town for two reasons, number one, his need of extra cash to pay for his son's expensive summer camp up North, and number two, the dreadful downpour of pounding rain that had not stopped since that morning, leaving him with little choice but to wait for the skies to clear, because, yet again, he forgot his umbrella, not where his wife told him to keep it, but on the seat in his car.

Seeing the sheep struggling, Harding C. was overwhelmed with deep sorrow and a burning desire to see the sheep's suffering cease at once. All right, what have you done here, Harding C. said to the animal, knowing very well it was a rhetorical question that could never be answered by an illiterate ungulate that was fighting for its life. He proceeded to untangle the sheep from the wires with the aid of a handkerchief he pulled out of his pocket, careful not to dispossess the sheep of any wool or cause further distress. He freed one leg, moved to the other leg, while the sheep was still struggling, kicking and bleating, somehow

protesting at the way Harding C. was attempting the rescue. Stay still, will you, Harding C. tried to summon cooperation from the animal without much success, all the while the skies were still covered with menacing clouds, as if the rainstorm had been on pause and was about to resume shortly.

Rain began to pour once again, over Harding C., over the sheep, over the entire area, This is just great, he said sarcastically to nobody, while he kept untangling the sheep, when suddenly the skies produced a clean sharp lightning strike that struck the ground just a few meters away from Harding C.'s location, sparing him a direct hit. Yet, with the uncoated wires touching the ground, the flood of extremely high voltage passed in an instant from the touchdown point into the wires, then into Harding C. via the means of the sheep, paralyzing them both.

As one would expect, the unfortunate event would have killed both creatures on the spot. Statistically, however, in some rare occasions, one can survive a lightning strike, when the passing of highly charged electrons bypasses vital organs, and discharges into the ground. Harding C.'s misfortune, or perhaps fortune, was that he had made a closed circuit with the sheep when the discharge occurred, so the current did not flow into the ground through his feet, but rather through their skins, miraculously not entering the heart.

He fainted. The sheep fainted.

It must have been a good half hour until he woke up, rain pouring with less intensity. His legs were numb, his hands were numb, he had fallen onto his side in the ditch, and had soaked himself pretty deep into muddy waters. He attempted to speak, he wanted to cry for help or simply to utter to himself, What happened, but his mouth did not work. The sheep was quiet too, it would not budge, but was alive, was completely untangled and free, but was still in the same place. Harding C. muttered, Oh good, you're alive, forgetting for a second about his own predicament. He was now able to stand up in the ditch and assess the situation. He

found he was able to move his legs and walk a step, which he did.

Go, be free, he told the sheep, assuming the sheep would know what to do, where to go, and perhaps what lesson could be learned from all this. The sheep did not make any gesture of understanding and remained there, expecting something else to happen, expecting more precise instructions, or it was utterly submitting to its new master. What am I going to do with you, I don't know what to do with you, Harding C. told the sheep. Great, now you're just standing here.

He was used to making important decisions every day in his work, but his decisions never had to involve the wellbeing of an animal, the wellbeing of humans yes, indirectly, and specifically in a financial sense, since the products he worked on were designed to compensate his clients when certain events occurred causing a loss to said clients. That is the entire *raison d'être* of the insurance industry.

Harding C. decided to leave the sheep there, tethered to the fence with a rope that was lying on the ground not far from him. Very likely the rope belonged to the sheep anyway, but the sheep must have gotten separated somehow before it got entangled, so the true master of the sheep must not be far away, Harding C. thought. He made sure the sheep's leg was well roped to the fence and spoke again, Hear me now, I'm going home to wash myself and change, and I'm going to come back and fetch you, all right, then I'm going to take you to your master. The sheep had calmed down and seemed to accept its fate and whatever this human was saying.

Harding C. walked home and arrived late at night. His wife was sleeping in their conjugal bedroom, his son was sleeping in his room. He took a hot shower, dropped the dirty clothes in the laundry basket and put on his pyjama top. To his utter shock he realized the pyjama top was at least two sizes too big. What the hell is this, he mumbled and tried another top, also too big for him. He was too tired to think and gave up. He went to bed and fell asleep instantaneously.

## 2

The next morning, he woke up late. His wife Lorelei, a climatologist, had gone to work. His son, Mikael, a teenager, had gone to school. The house was quiet and had an eerie feeling about it. Everything seemed bigger. The room. The furniture. The photo frames on the walls. The pillow he had slept on also seemed puffed up, expanded. Must be hallucinations from that lightning strike, Harding C. thought. When he reached the mirror in the bathroom, he realized this was neither a dream nor a hallucination. What the hell is going on, he screamed, seeing his body. Harding C. had shrunk at least ten centimetres in height.

Everything suddenly made sense. The house was normal. It was he who had changed. It was his body that had diminished, not his clothes, not the objects around him that remained in their natural size. This cannot be, he thought again, and his mind moved to rationalizations. The optic nerve must be fried, he said to no one.

He remembered the sheep he had left tethered to the fence and his promise that he would come back to return it to its master. He went to his son's room, picked some clothes that matched his new size, skipped breakfast and coffee, and darted out of the house without leaving a note.

### 3

The sheep was still there, where he left it. No indication that the sheep had struggled. The wires were still in place. I came back, he told the sheep, with an inflection that meant to say I am a good man, I keep my promises. The animal was calm and accepted his presence. Let us take you to where you live. Harding C. laid the plan for them with a can-do must-do attitude which he had developed over years as an insurance clerk, keeping a clear vision and directing the team when targets were missed.

He checked his phone for the nearest place that might contain sheep or at least be tangentially related to the existence of sheep, such as dairy farms, regular small family farms, etc. There was no such establishment within a fifty-kilometre radius. Perhaps you fell off a lorry, Harding C. thought, which somehow made more sense to him since he had found it near a road, even though it was not a road that would have been travelled by sheep-carrying lorries.

When he leaned in to free the sheep from the fence, he saw that the rope had already been detached from its leg, meaning the sheep had been free this whole time and had decided to stay put for some reason, or perhaps for the precise reason that it wanted to wait for Harding C. to confirm whether he was a human of honour who kept his promises.

How did you free yourself, he asked.

Obviously, the animal did not possess the ability to respond with language, so Harding C. had to produce the answer himself, and it came fast when he calculated that his size in proportion to the size of the animal had remained constant, consequently,

if he had decreased in size, the animal must have decreased in size by the same rate, a shocking conclusion that made Harding C. gasp for air and panic. There was nobody around to see him. Just like the night before, there were no witnesses, there was only his subjective perception of the chain of events, as physical and natural as they were. He thought, There must be a record of the storm and the lightning strike. He must ask his wife about what happened, he must check the science. Surely people do not shrink in size when struck by high voltage. Surely not even animals react to electricity in such a fashion.

Let's go girl, he told the sheep, after he regained some composure. We need help.

Instead of going on the road with an animal on a leash next to him, lest people think he was some kind of lunatic walking his pet sheep on public roads, he chose to venture into the large open grassland that was separating the road from the nearby forest. Human and sheep walked for a while on the grassland, stopping for breaks so the animal could do its business and eat some grass. They reached the forest around noon. A cool breeze of pine scent welcomed them. Harding C. felt tired after having walked such a long stretch of land. When he stopped to gather his thoughts and decide where to go next, a flying ladybug hit him in the head so hard he felt it. Goddamn, what is this, he moved to defend himself, but it was too late, the ladybug dropped onto the ground at his feet. It was as big as a coin of small denomination, spectacularly unusual for a ladybug. He kneeled to the ground to study the insect up close and assured himself it was indeed a *coccinella septempunctata* from the *Coccinellidae* family, in common parlance, a lady beetle, ladybird or ladybug. An oversized specimen. Or perhaps not so oversized.

He looked at the sheep, then at the insect, at the trees around him, the moss on their trunks, leaves on the ground, anything that could give him a better frame of reference. The ladybug was

oversized, only compared to him and to the sheep, but seemed normal in size compared to the surroundings. He looked down at his shoes and saw they had grown. He flipped his perspective and concluded that he must have shrunk even further. Then more evidence poured in to confirm the perspective, such as his sleeves, also longer than when he left home, his socks that had collapsed to his ankles, his pants that felt loose and seemed soon to be large enough that they would fall to the ground.

This is not good, Harding C. mumbled, and laid on the ground, on his back, overwhelmed with emotion.

## 4

The public knows well instances in literature and cinema where characters shrink in size. Here are some noteworthy highlights.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll from 1865: this classic children's book features Alice, who falls down a rabbit hole and encounters various creatures and objects that can change her size. *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* from 1989: this American comedy film follows the misadventures of four children who are accidentally shrunk by their father's experimental shrinking machine. They have to survive the dangers of their backyard, such as insects, lawn mowers, and sprinklers, while trying to get their parents' attention. The film spawned two sequels and a TV series.

Upon careful inspection, the public can find a whopping 71 titles of films featuring miniature characters, as of the time of this writing. Literature that is often perused by film producers for ideas, can offer an even larger universe of characters shrunken in dimensions for comedic effect, or for satire, or for the sheer amusement of the authors themselves with no regard

to the laws of physics, or to the general ability of the public to consume metaphorical stories. Harding C., being a well-cultured individual, was aware of this vast universe of content, however this knowledge remained buried deep inside his subconscious, as he was overpowered by his predicament.

## 5

Harding C. continued to shrink in size at the same rate the ladybug was walking away, which created a strange visual effect, making the ladybug's size remain fixed in reference to Harding C.'s eyes. The oddity became evident when he outshrank his own clothes and disappeared inside his shirt like Jonah disappeared inside the whale in the 8th Century BCE, as we learn from the Old Testament.

Now in darkness buried inside his clothes, about fifty centimetres tall, Harding C. was kicking and screaming for help, unlike the sheep, which also shrank in size at the same rate as him, but remained at peace with the situation. Regardless of their newfound size, both Harding C. and the sheep maintained a strong survival instinct that had not diminished at all, and they managed to emerge, albeit independently, back into the open air. There was grass around them, tall blades from their vantage point, high as the sheep, waist-high for the human creature.

Well, sheep, we have a problem, Harding C. told the sheep by his side. We might as well deal with it.

Naked as he was, since shrinkage applied only to his physique, Harding C. quickly manufactured new clothes to cover himself, from pieces of cloth he ripped with his teeth, then aided by pieces of grass he knitted together to form a vest, some sort of a conical hat to protect him from the sun, leaves bound together to form sandals, and that is pretty much it, while nothing for the

sheep whose wool diminished in proportion to the main body of the animal.

He sharpened a stick to use in self-defence against bugs and forest mice, then sucked deeply into a raspberry that had fallen to the ground, cracked open, and oozed out some of its internal tasty juices. With fresh confidence, Harding C. walked deep into the shade of the forest, mumbling to himself I must be dreaming, I must be dreaming, it will be over soon.

## 6

By nightfall they arrived at a clearing in the forest, under a beautiful starry night, with acoustic accompaniment from nightlife that included, but was not limited to crickets, night owls, frogs, and some generic birds. An old oak tree seemed to provide some shelter, as it had plenty of nooks and crannies that could be used as sleeping quarters. Harding C. climbed the tree up to the first indentation that looked to him like a tiny cozy cave. Down below, on the ground, the sheep remained still and was bleating of sorrow and loneliness now that its human companion was gone and had left it behind.

Now, now, sheep, don't cry, Harding C. said, I have not abandoned you. I just need to get some sleep. I suggest you do the same.

What can a sheep understand from these words, it is difficult to say. It was soothed by the human voice, stopped crying, and laid down on the ground to rest. The world around them has kept its normal size. The sheep can easily appear as prey to a mouse, to a cat, or to other small carnivores. Large carnivores, such as cougars or mountain lions, although not indigenous to those areas, would probably not even notice the small sheep in the grass, but likely mistake it for a white pebble and move on.

Sleeping did not come easily to Harding C. from all the kerfuffle of the forest nightlife. He tried to stuff his ears with mud but this did not cancel out enough noise. Sometime after midnight, he heard human voices arguing, and this completely woke him from his slumber. A pang of panic ran through him, as, in the event of being discovered by normal-sized humans, he would not have any explanation whatsoever, and the normal-sized humans might also suffer a shock and just beat him to a pulp because that it is what humans do with things that scare them.

He peered out of the cave to find the source of the voices and saw nothing. The clearing was free of humans, still beautifully bathed in moonlight, and looked safe. The voices seemed to come from somewhere above him. They probably built a treehouse, Harding C. thought. He went out of his treecave and looked up. There was no construction whatsoever, only some tiny lights coming from some other crevice in the tree, as if fireflies were having a party. Light pulsation and voices were coming from the same source.

What now, Harding C. whispered to himself. He forgot about fear. Curious by nature, he climbed slowly towards the source, which was about three meters above him. That took him about twenty minutes or so, all precautions considered. When he arrived at the source, he was able to make out the voices.

It will be all right, you'll see, said the calm voice of a man.

How do you know? Look at us. We are like mice, said the sobbing voice of a woman.

Yes, but cute mice, the man said.

The woman stopped sobbing and chuckled, having accepted the man's little joke. Harding C. had to see them. He approached the crevice slowly and peered inside.

## 7

There were two little humans in the crevice, just like him, dressed in makeshift clothes made from plants. Their habitat was being illuminated by a firefly that had been anchored with a string, and was hovering carelessly inside the habitat somewhere higher inside the tree. The little humans inside seemed to have had some sort of difficult conversation that was now being wrapped up in good loving terms, giving a strong indication that they were a couple. Harding C. looked at them for a while, stunned. When the three of them made eye contact, they all screamed in shock at each other, Harding C. lost his grip and fell from his position to the ground, while the tiny couple ran to see what happened.

All the way down, Harding C. screamed like a baby, but landed on soft mushy moss right next to the sleeping sheep. He was safe, and given that gravitational acceleration creates force in proportion to the mass of the object being accelerated, his fall did not create enough force to cause him harm.

I'm okay, I'm okay, he shouted to nobody.

Who are you? the male voice shouted from the tree.

I am Harding C. Who are you?

I am Cecil HL. This is my wife, Celeste AP Millington. We are the Millingtons.

I suppose you got shrunk too? Harding C. asked the obvious.

Indeed, we were. We have not recovered from the shock yet, Cecil replied.

Tell me about it, Harding C. said in a lower voice, more to

himself than to the Millingtons.

Do you want to come up for a cup of tea, Harding? Cecil asked.

Sure, absolutely. Thanks. Let me check on my sheep first.

What? Did you say, your sheep?

Yes, my companion in this ordeal is this curly ruminant mammal sleeping right here next to me.

Where? I cannot see it, Cecil Millington's curiosity had been suddenly elevated.

Honey, do not lean over too much, Celeste Millington cautioned her husband.

The sheep is right next to me, Harding C. reiterated, maybe you cannot see it because of the tall grass.

Never mind then, we shall visit your sheep first thing in the morning. I hope it will not run away, Cecil acquiesced.

It won't, Harding C. said. We are like family now.

Very well. Come up then.

## 8

Celeste Millington had made tea by infusing a sliver of a Clinden leaf into half a walnut shell that she had repurposed into a tea kettle. The tea was delicious.

What did you use for sweetener? Harding C. asked.

Honey, of course. It was oozing down the tree, Celeste Millington said.

Harding C. was amazed at how cozy the dwelling felt, how nicely it was decorated, a sign that the Millingtons must have refined taste that had not diminished in proportion to their bodies.

So, what do you think has happened to us? Harding C. took initiative at conversation.

Celeste and I have considered several explanations, Cecil replied, while leaning back into an armchair made entirely from

compactified moss strung together. The first obvious explanation was that this is not real, it is not happening, we are either dreaming, or we are in some sort of virtual reality, while our real bodies are still in the real world, and this is all happening in our brains. There have been films about this. You know the premise. Okay, but then, why would anyone do this to us, why would they do it to you too? Then there are technical considerations for this world we see now. It feels very real. Look at the texture of the grass, look at the birds, the sky. They are flawless. What kind of rendering software must our kidnappers use to create this reality? Just last week, I tried one of those VR goggles my son bought. That VR world pales in quality compared to this one. Then, we thought, maybe the Chinese created something new and are testing it on us. Or the Indians. Okay, maybe not the Indians. But certainly the Japanese. Anyhow, so that is the first explanation. Then we have the question of reasons and purpose. There seems to be no obvious purpose to subject us to this real or imagined shrinkage. Aside from the inconvenience.

Ah, yes, it is quite inconvenient, Celeste Millington added her words and a drop of honey into her cup.

Next explanation, less probable, is that it is real, Cecil continued. If it's real, then we will surely hear unremitting protests from the scientific community as soon as they learn what happened to us. It is virtually impossible to shrink human beings to this size by any means. It's a fantasy. The artistic community would then reply to the scientific community and accuse them of lack of imagination and creativity. How do they know that it's impossible if they haven't tried? Don't physicists know that at certain relativistic speeds, mass gets compressed and may appear shrunk from a certain point of observation?

I was only partially struck by lighting, Harding C. said.

See, that is a physical event that can surely be linked to your predicament.

I suppose.

I am not qualified to evaluate the science of shrinkage, Cecil Millington continued. It is bizarre that only our bodies shrunk, not our clothes. I don't know what to make of that. We have been here for a week or so, right Celeste? We managed to provision our food, of which there is plenty, we explored the environment. Nothing else has happened until we discovered you. I must confess I felt relief when I saw you, Harding. At least we are together in this. We will figure something out.

Thank you Cecil, much obliged, Harding C. said.

We should stick together, Cecil continued. We'll help you make a dwelling in this tree. There is plenty of space. Squirrels won't bother us. I suppose we scare them, even though they are as big as horses relative to us. You can carve a nice room upstairs. I began working on some stairs. Keeps me occupied during the day.

## 9

The men worked on building Harding C.'s dwelling over the ensuing days, while Celeste maintained the Millington residence's stock of provisions, befriended the sheep, built a pen for it, decided to name it Sheep, and assigned it the pronouns she and her. Celeste thought about other names such as Amelda, her mother's name, or Persephone, her grandmother's name, but then changed her mind because she didn't want to jinx their whole situation. Sheep is a good name for a sheep, it has some sort of dry humour to it, it's descriptive, and easy to pronounce.

By the seventh day, the men had successfully completed Harding C.'s residence and decided to celebrate by doing nothing for the whole day but eat and drink, walk Sheep in the neighbourhood, and plan some more strategy for their new smaller life. A good bond had developed between the three tiny humans.

It was late afternoon on the day of relaxation when they heard some noise and commotion coming from the forest, which seemed to be a mix of human voices, sounds of whistle, and dogs barking. The three friends quickly hid in the Millington residence and camouflaged the entry with a piece of bark with peepholes in it, which was standing ready for occasions of self-defence.

They saw a swarm of little humans entering the clearing, running amok, pushing each other. They were fully clothed, and some were accompanied by pet dogs, some were carrying whistles around their necks, which they blew incessantly to signal shock and fear, judging from the pattern of their running, which seemed to be away from something and towards no particular destination. After a while, the swarm of humans vanished back into the forest, in all directions, but nothing came after them, nothing had been chasing them.

## 10

**W**e have to find them, Celeste Millington said.

I concur, replied Cecil Millington.

Harding C. advised that perhaps they should wait an hour or so for the whole situation to settle and to ensure there was nothing chasing those humans. The Millingtons agreed, so they waited.

They left Sheep in her pen, locked the gate, and covered the pen with oak leaves. The humans had scattered in all directions, which left the search party no choice but to search at random in the neighbourhood. There were no footprints to follow, as the weight of the tiny humans or of their accompanying pets left no indentations in the soil. They were barely taller than the surrounding pasture. They could be anywhere.

The first clue was a cap with the insignia of a golf club that someone had lost. It read Prosperousshire Golf Country Club.

The logo was an eagle with sharp claws, holding a golf club crossed with a mace in its beak. Harding C. asked his friends if he could keep the cap until the rightful owner was found. They agreed. As they walked towards the forest, more clues emerged. Scarves, a smartphone, sunglasses, the leash of a dog, a pack of playing cards with the Prosperousshire eagle on it, a wallet, car keys, one shoe, a lighter, a whistle, a bracelet. All these random objects were shrunken proportionally to the tiny humans, which begged the question, what was special about these items? Why did they shrink, when Harding C.'s or the Millingtons' personal effects remained their original sizes? Except for their bodies, Harding C. and the Millingtons were not offered the courtesy of keeping any personal effects in their relative size. What was it about this particular group of humans that gave them this exemption?

As more questions raced through the minds of the search party, they caught signs of the first tiny human who was hiding under a black rock. The human had attempted to camouflage himself or herself, unclear for the moment, in a hurry, with dirt and grass, but did such a poor job, it was blatantly conspicuous where the hider was. It practically invited all passersby to search precisely under that specific black rock.

Hello there, Celeste Millington exclaimed from a friendly distance. We mean no harm. We are tiny people too.

There was no response from the hider, only defensive movements and scrambling of dirt. Celeste kept talking in a soothing voice to gain the trust of the human under the black rock, displayed nonthreatening gestures, showed her empty hands, while Harding C. waved the Prosperousshire cap hoping the human might recognize it.

Eventually, the human relented and came out from under the black rock with a white handkerchief tied atop a stick to signal peace or perhaps surrender. It was a man, cleanshaven, well combed, well dressed, except for the dirt on his golf club attire,

visibly upset by the shock of shrinkage he had recently suffered. The man was barely able to mutter, You too, to which Celeste whispered, Ahem, us too, and hugged the golf man, who was rather tall compared to her husband. Nobody stopped to ponder why it was Celeste that took the role of comforting the man, and not her husband, or Harding C., who would have probably only shaken the hand of the golf man and said, There, there, without additional touching or hugging, as it is rather unbecoming for men in their position.

## 11

His name was Gunther Glassfarb. He was an investment banker. Within minutes, after gulping fresh tea from a hazelnut shell that Celeste had used as a container, Gunther Glassfarb had regained his energy and launched into a tirade, What happened, do you know? We were on this tour bus not far from the club when we entered this tunnel in the mountain, then there was a flash of light in darkness, I blacked out, and woke up on grassland, with everybody else from the bus, and we are all tiny people, I could tell from comparing myself to the environment, then a lady started screaming, then they all started screaming, Peggy started screaming.

Who is Peggy? Celeste Millington asked.

Then someone blew their whistle, they gave us whistles at the club for when we get to the island.

What island? Cecil Millington asked.

Then everybody started to blow their whistles and run away like antelopes being chased on the Serengeti, so I had no choice, right, but to start running too, Peggy was nowhere to be seen, then I thought I heard my wife's name.

Your wife is here too? Harding C. asked the banker.

She was not supposed to be there, it might be another hallucination, but I didn't see her here, everybody was running and whistling and running, and all of a sudden I was alone, so I hid under this black rock, you would have done the same, look, I am a successful and respected investment banker, I don't have time for these pranks, I was on a call when this happened, an important call with a hedge fund manager out in Hong Kong, we were discussing some derivatives, then the flash came, and now I can't find my damn phone.

Is this it? Harding C. handed the phone he found to Gunther Glassfarb.

Yeah, thanks, hmm, damn, it's not working, must be from the flash, I need to get the Hong Kong people on the phone, the market is closing at midnight, I cannot lose this. I suppose we need to find the others, to figure out what happened, must be some prank, they had us sedated, and this is a simulated reality, have to say, a pretty damn good one if you're asking me, I've seen good tech in my day, but this tops everything, doesn't feel Chinese though, this is serious computing power, they built haptics too, I get hyper realistic feedback from everything I touch, did you see the resolution on the surrounding environment, what is that, 5K, 8K, not sure.

As a matter of fact, we tried to find pixelation in the environment but could not find any, Cecil Millington said.

I will get to the bottom of this, it cannot be from a listed company, I must have heard about it. This smells of private equity, a lot of it, we are talking hectares of servers just to simulate the environment, not to mention the haptics, the sounds effects, did you hear the birds, the wind, everything is perfect, the sky, temperature, amazing.

Perhaps we should search for the others? Celeste Millington asked when she caught a break in the banker's breathing.

## 12

By nightfall, all 30 passengers of the tour bus had been found, deeply scared, some of them summarily scarred and bruised, but in relatively good health, and safe. Among them, Peggy, the personal assistant of Gunther Glassfarb the banker, and Holly-Kate Glassfarb, the wife of Gunther, who had been wearing some disguise so as to not be noticed by Gunther and Peggy. More on that, later. Now that everyone had found out her true identity, Holly-Kate Glassfarb abandoned the disguise. The embarrassment that had loaded the atmosphere was not addressed by anyone, only glances were exchanged, because the collective had decided to focus on securing lodging and nourishment for everyone, under the guidance of the Millingtons and Harding C., who already had some experience.

The men joined a working group with Cecil Millington and Harding C. and began developing tools for carving out more apartment units into the same oak tree, as it already had a functioning ecosystem, with stairs, ropes, a pulley for lifting things off the ground, and storage crannies. Meanwhile, the women joined Celeste Millington to map the clearing for sources of food, such as berries, walnuts, and puddles of water. There was a conversation among the women about setting a trap for animals for meat, which lead nowhere because logistics were insufficient for such an endeavour, and there was little disposition in the collective for becoming butchers. Insects were also a source of protein, so it was discussed, but again no consensus was reached for hunting insects and then subjecting

them to food processing techniques, despite them being much more manageable in size.

Working by hand had the wonderful side effect of giving purpose to the collective of humans, while purpose on its own had the subsequent effect of dimming anxiety and shock to leave room for more pleasurable states of mind to emerge, such as acceptance of the shrinkage, and calm reflection upon the causes. The collective was more focused on survival on that first day of work. No debates took place about how big the apartments should be, as they were all equal in size, more or less. Families took the lowest floors, immediately above Harding C., who was above the Millingtons, then singles were grouped in pairs, according to self-selection first, then random allocation in several rounds, until no anonymous objections were raised. All of this by the end of the third day.

On the fourth day, a proposal was put forward to form a council of the Oak Collective, as it had been named, so that this council could discuss the future of the group, its survival, and plans to undo the shrinkage and return to the normal world. The council was a pretext for having structured conversations that concerned the entire collective, for infusing a sense of belonging to the group, and for stimulating fruitful decision-making in an open forum.

The humans, even in their smaller size, had maintained the mental and psychological attributes they had before the shrinkage. They were a diverse group, by several criteria of identity, cultural backgrounds, and physiques. The only thing they had in common was the event they suffered, and, for the humans on the tour bus, that they were vacationers on their way to a getaway island, several kilometers away from where the mountain tunnel was. Harding C. said his town was just near the forest, however under the simulation hypothesis he can no longer guarantee that he was not somehow transported

to a different location, and their current whereabouts would be somewhere really far from his home. On further thought, this would also apply under the non-simulation hypothesis, for lack of better words. Anyhow, every human present had agreed that there is significant benefit to having a council and a name for their collective.

## 13

Proceedings of the Oak Collective, as noted by Secretary Fiona Farrinelli on the first meeting of the council. Conversation recorded on large leaves of leopard plant by shorthand, transcribed here into longhand as spoken.

Friends, so good to see you all gathered here. My name is Menelao Melanoliou. How is everyone doing? Good? Very well. I asked to speak first because this shrinkage that has happened to us is precisely what I study for work.

Yeah, what do you do? someone asked from the crowd, Let him speak, someone else quickly retorted.

I work for the SWBW Equilibrium Institute. SWBW stands for Small World Big World. I am modelling what it would look like if humans were in perfect equilibrium with the environment. How society would need to be organized so it does not destroy nature to sustain itself, and it thrives in wellbeing at the same time. This means humans might have to shrink some of their activities that have damaged the environment.

What does this have to do with us? the same interrupter asked.

It has everything to do with us, Menelao Melanoliou said. You see, we were shrunk, but only physically, and we maintained our minds. We immediately proceeded to transform the oak tree to our benefit. Which is great. Before we start any other major projects, it is very important we fully assess the ecosystems in this

clearing, so we do not disturb it to such extent that we will either be left without sustenance or we attract predators that would invade us, or consume us, or even worse, we attract normal humans that would collect us and turn us into pets, to enslave us.

He has a point.

There is more, Menelao Melanoliou continued. We may be driven to expand our dominion over the entire clearing, then perhaps the entire forest, then who knows, what if we have children, I'm just asking what if.

I don't see a problem with that, Gunther Glassfarb said, and received some approving gestures from other members.

If we do that, Menelao Melanoliou continued, if we procreate and expand our society, and exceed the means of this ecosystem, we will cause disturbance.

Humans have always caused disturbance to nature, Gunther Glassfarb said. It's called progress.

I know what you mean, Gunther, Menelao Melanoliou replied. I have studied human progress closely. My intent is to make everyone here aware that we can have good progress, good life, without disturbance, or I should say, without adverse disturbance. We can gather berries, we can harvest walnuts, collect water from puddles, finish all dwellings, that's all great. We will also have to manage our waste carefully and not take too many berries from a bush before its regeneration point. We take just enough. We take what is sufficient.

Menelao, if I may, Gunther Glassfarb interjected, miss secretary, am I okay to speak?

Sure Gunther. Everyone just raise your hand, and I add you to the speakers list, Fiona Farrinelli addressed the gathering.

Thank you. As you all know, Gunther Glassfarb continued, we were brought here against our will, and that frustrates the hell out of me and I won't get over it, I want to go back where I was, to my life. I won't consider this, this little farming collective we

have here, as my life, not even temporarily. All my energy, all my thoughts, are on how to get back to my life. You all feel the same, don't you?

Yes, yes, we do, a majority of the crowd murmured.

Okay, so that means we will do whatever it takes to find a way to get back, right?

Right! the crowd said.

So, if we must cut down the forest to find a way out of here, we will cut down the forest?

Gunther Glassfarb raised his tone as if he was running for high office.

Yeah! the crowd said.

Thank you, that's all I had.

## 14

Nothing much was said after that first meeting of the Oak Collective, and no trees could be cut down, since there were no tools available for such a megaproject, not enough manpower, even including the women, and not enough willingness, since all members already had their days full with various tasks and chores that were meant to ensure a steady and predictable flow of sustenance.

Sheep was well taken care of, and one day the collective decided to harvest the wool from Sheep to provide stuffing for pillows. There was interest in milk production, however the lack of a ram to impregnate Sheep proved to be a non-starter, thus leaving sustenance to be entirely vegan for the time being except for occasional consumption of honey, given that nobody was willing to eat insects or set up a trap to catch squirrels and process them.

A group of men discovered a stream of water, after half a day's walk, which inspired them to think about building a dam. On the way back to the oak tree they talked about potential uses for the dam, such as a bathing place for the collective, or a place to wash clothes, and why not, a source of mechanical energy for a mill that could produce flour that would significantly widen the choice of recipes for food.

Meanwhile, the women, coordinated by Celeste Millington, created a makeshift loom to process wool and other fibers into clothes, rugs, and blankets. How do you know how to do all that? Peggy asked her. This is when Celeste Millington confessed to everyone that she was the owner, along with her husband Cecil Millington, of Millington Steelworks, Textiles, and General Industries, which had been started as a family business five generations ago by Cecil Millington's ancestors. She had met Cecil Millington at one of the factories when she had interned as a chemical engineer, right after graduation. Great story, remarked Peggy, while pulling on the leash of her pet dog that had wanted to walk away from this long human conversation.

Peggy's dog, Gigi the Pomeranian, had discovered a large hive of bees and plenty of honey just the day before. Since then, Gigi had maintained interest in going back to the location to consume more honey. Gigi, honey, too much sugar is not good for you, Peggy explained to her dog numerous times.

The women then proceeded to discuss how beeswax could be collected to manufacture candles and glue for various purposes.

Cranes and pulleys were added to the oak tree, with ropes made from fibers knitted together, baskets to lift up stuff in various shapes and sizes, counterweights made from pebbles also wrapped in fibers, a reservoir for water made from sticks bound together, sealed with wax, mud, and leaves, gardening tools made from wood, shovels, rakes, spades, and a defensive fence was

raised around the tree to keep bugs away, crawling bugs for that matter, as there was no defence against flying bugs.

## 15

Friends, I called this meeting to raise an issue of utmost importance, said Gunther Glassfarb to the gathering, and he proceeded talking without waiting for everyone to settle down. He knew, from conducting meetings at the bank with his employees, that moving right into the speech with a commandeering attitude would keep the employees on their toes, and more predisposed to agreement. The Oak Collective was not such an easy bunch, as easy as the bankers, Gunther Glassfarb thought.

What is so important, he continued, is us. How we conduct ourselves as a group, how we organize ourselves, and how efficient we are at living here. I feel we could be more effective if we had a better flow of decisions, to move things faster, so we can escape this terrible situation.

Not so terrible to me, Holly-Kate Glassfarb said jokingly, with the clear intention to publicly antagonize her husband. Enough members chuckled approvingly, which was enough to unfocus Gunther Glassfarb for a second.

Yes, right, some of us are becoming accustomed to living in this tree, having this size, working by hand, et cetera. Fresh air. Fresh water. Tasty berries. I like it too. Yet I cannot overlook the fact that I have not read the news in over two weeks, I have no clue how my portfolio is doing, I cannot contact my lawyer, I cannot read a book, I cannot tell my employees what to do, I cannot check if the plans of succession at the bank are being followed in my absence, see what I am getting at? That was my life. I need my life back as soon as possible. For that we need discipline.

Nods of approval.

That means governance, folks. Functions, clear tasks that need to be performed, with deadlines and measurable results.

Less nods of approval. Some gestures of disapproval. No interruptions.

I know how that sounds, but think about it, do we all really like it here, or do we want to go back to our normal sizes and normal lives?

Gunther Glassfarb paused for effect, with a miscalculation for the duration needed. The pause was a bit too long, because Menelao Melanoliou jumped in quickly to say, What is normal life, really? Is normal life not just living and after a while it becomes normal? Only time defines what normal is, the continuity of our memories, past and newly acquired, the continuity of our identity. In other words, we may stay here a long time, our identity will borrow the spirit of the forest, of the oak tree, we will get used to this place, so it will become normal. We will have new memories, and, as far as I can tell, good memories. Yes, we miss the news, we miss the books, but I kind of feel healthier and happier working with all of you together to make a living here, and it doesn't cost money, doesn't require money, we collectively decide how much work is good enough for a day. Is this not a desirable life?

General nods of approval, including from those members that had agreed with Gunther Glassfarb previously.

Hold on Menelao, just hold on, Gunther Glassfarb interjected. I agree with your assessment, however I cannot dismiss my past and my identity. What if the forest will never grow on me, on you, yes you there, or on you, or maybe on the majority of us, and we will still want to go back to being normal humans, watch television, drive cars, and whatever normal humans do.

Yes, that possibility exists, Menelao Melanoliou said.

Then it is obvious we need to organize our little society here to

escape from the prison of shrinkage, let's be frank, it happened against our will, it is deprivation of freedom. Organization means growth. By whatever means necessary.

Whatever means necessary? Menelao Melanoliou asked.

Exactly. Knowledge only comes from expansion, experimentation, exploration. We might have to start cutting down some vegetation around the clearing, to find out where we are. We need wood to make fire. We need to forge some tools. Cecil, we can make a smelter, right? We only need to find some ore.

I suppose, Cecil Millington said.

Silence.

## 16

Gunther Glassfarb worked with a group to write down some Rules for the governance of the collective. Meanwhile, Harding C. and Menelao Melanoliou took a leisurely traipse through the neighbourhood and found an object they did not expect. It was a large plastic bottle that had a small amount of carbonated juice inside, had the cap on, and was partially covered with soil. Must have been lost or discarded by a human some time ago. Should we try to open it? Harding C. asked Menelao Melanoliou, We could try, but I wouldn't drink that funny looking liquid inside, I wouldn't either, for sure, said Harding C., Perhaps we can find a use for this bottle if we open it Menelao Melanoliou said, If we can open it, said Harding C. and tried in vain to turn the cap with all his force while Menelao Melanoliou was attempting to climb the bottle. It's slippery, Menelao Melanoliou said. What if we make a tiny hole in the bottle, near the cap, to relieve the pressure inside, maybe then we can turn the cap, said Harding C., We don't have tools, replied Menelao Melanoliou, and we should keep the bottle intact in case we

decide to use it as an airtight container, You're right, I may have an idea.

Menelao Melanoliou made a paste from wet soil, mixed it with a stick, and applied it around the base of the cap where it made contact with the thread on the bottle. He pushed as much paste as he could under the cap to loosen it, while Harding C. pulled with his entire weight on the cap to make it rotate. They got tired. Nothing happened.

Perhaps we need help, Harding C. said, should we carry the bottle back to the collective? It's pretty heavy, I don't think we can do it just the two of us, said Menelao Melanoliou, We can try to roll it, It's an imperfect cylinder Harding, not a sphere or a circle, Menelao Melanoliou laughed and Harding C. had no choice but to laugh along so his silly idea could be quickly forgotten.

They decided to walk back to the collective and call for help, such as ropes and more muscle, to haul the bottle to the compound, if the collective wished to have the bottle there, which they did after a quick deliberation, with the general understanding that the bottle, once opened and properly cleaned, could serve as an airtight container for reserves of water, or for some other reason to emerge at a later time. Twenty small men and women participated in the hauling of the plastic bottle and the grand opening of the cap, which proved to have been under great pressure from the carbonated liquid that was inside. The liquid was cola with some unrecognizable flavour, utterly undrinkable. The bottle was drained, cleaned on the inside and outside, and left to dry in an upright position, near the oak tree, awaiting future use.

Harding C. took Sheep on an early morning walk into the forest after having asked permission from the collective. He felt the need for reflection alone on his bed, which involved a refreshing power nap, as he usually did in his life as a full-sized human after work at the insurance company. His wife Lorelei and his son Mikael knew this habit quite well and offered him full support and non-interference during this time of reflection.

With Sheep though, it was a tad different. Sheep had to be tethered on a leash and had to be told repeatedly where she could not go because of unfathomable dangers looming in the shadows and bushes of the forest. Sheep, don't eat that, Harding C. told Sheep, when she attempted to eat unknown forest mushrooms that could be poisonous, impossible to tell without access to the internet or to a botanist.

They arrived at a large indentation in the ground that had an unnatural pattern of threads and holes clearly visible within an oblong frame. Sheep wanted to climb down into the indentation to check out the grass there, No, you stay here, said Harding C., and while speaking he also realized that the indentation was the footprint of a boot belonging to a full-sized human. It was fresh, meaning the human was not far. We have to go back and tell the others, said Harding C. to Sheep.

When he turned to go back, he heard noise coming from the tree above, which sounded like bleating of sheep, not one or two, but several, as if an entire herd of sheep was flying in the sky above him, seeking attention. He looked up, saw nothing

in particular at first glance, while the bleating continued. Am I crazy, Harding C. thought to himself, and kept looking around. Sheep also seemed somehow interested in the noise, but she could not look up. Stay here, don't go anywhere, said Harding C., and tethered Sheep around the protuberance of a root.

After having climbed half a meter into the tree towards the bleating, Harding C. was able to make out some shapes that were producing the bleating, scattered through the canopy of the tree. There were dozens of miniature sheep in birds' nests, the same size as Sheep, tangled in leaves, stuck in bark, bleating or doing nothing, both females and males, the latter known as rams, easily recognizable by their spiral horns. What the!? said Harding C., and stopped speaking. Sheep in trees did not make any more or less sense than what had happened to the collective of humans, it was just a new fact to be dealt with as it appeared.

The nests where most of the sheep were staying and bleating were not occupied. What if the birds returned? thought Harding C. Birds usually do not feed on sheep, however under these circumstances, birds may mistake sheep for large insects and decide to consume them, then move on to Harding C. himself if he was too close to a nest. He felt a strong desire to rescue the bizarre herd, unite them with his Sheep, then give them a home with the collective. It is obvious that the tiny sheep suffered from shrinkage, under different circumstances however, that placed them up high, in the canopy of a tree, which begs the question of a possible drop from the air, or they must have fallen from the sky, or how else could they have ended up there?

Harding C. returned to the collective with Sheep as fast as he could, with much effort given to persuade the animal to move faster, described to everyone present what he found, and came back to the sheep-tree with almost everyone, with a plan and some tools to liberate the herd from the tree. The plan worked well, sheep were lowered from nests and branches with ropes.

Only one ram came loose from the rope and fell onto the mossy ground, but luckily remained alive and well because his small mass did not produce enough force while accelerating.

Nightfall found everyone back in the compound, humans and sheep all together, safe and sound, with even more thoughts on their minds.

## 18

Proceedings of the Oak Collective, as noted by Secretary Fiona Farrinelli. Conversation recorded on large leaves of leopard plant by shorthand, transcribed here into longhand as spoken.

I'm Marcus Literolis, hi everyone, this is my wife Debra Literolis, I own Literolis Construction, I am a general contractor, third generation family business, proud of it. I happen to know a little bit about raising sheep, my uncle was a sheep farmer, I spent many summers with him when I grew up, I may have some ideas how we can take care of this flock. We start by identifying the age of all animals, then-

Basically, you are saying we can diversify our assets to have more resources, interjected Gunther Glassfarb.

You may call it that if you wish, said Marcus Literolis, the idea is that we can have a stable source of dairy, wool, and perhaps meat, if we decide to go that way.

Let's do this, said Gunther Glassfarb.

This is a delicate situation, I must say, Marcus Literolis said, I am not sure if the metabolism of the animals has been maintained, given their reduced size. We may have to approach the challenge carefully.

Okay Marcus, we can determine the feasibility of animals, said Gunther Glassfarb, but we need to be concerned about growing the herd too. The herd will grow naturally if we allow the

animals to procreate, we will consume products from the animals to cover our needs, and there will be a surplus that cannot be consumed. I talk now as an economist, a banker with knowledge of investments, so I say that surplus should be invested, should not be left to waste.

I must remind you, Gunther, we are a society of tiny humans, said Menelao Melanoliou, we cannot create a market for our surplus outside our society, we are completely isolated, an anarchistic commune, so to speak.

I am not comfortable with that label, said Gunther Glassfarb.

Fine, no worries, continued Menelao Melanoliou, I'm just saying that we must be very mindful of how much we grow of everything, ironically, which includes our population, we cannot exclude the possibility that we will remain in this size in perpetuity, and there is a chance we will have children, as some couples here told us they would be interested in exploring, moreover, even the population of sheep should be kept in check, because if it outgrows our needs, it may become invasive to the ecosystem here, may draw attention of predators, may require too much labour for maintenance from us, including veterinary needs, while nobody among us is a qualified veterinarian. Thank you, Marcus, for offering your expertise, it will be quite helpful I am sure, as we develop a plan to integrate the sheep in our community, as I would recommend we consider them an extension of ourselves, not equipped with our intelligence, of course, but living with this shrinkage effect just like us, learning to deal with it just like us. There is potential for symbiosis.

Okay, Menelao, okay, I am willing to adopt this careful approach, Gunther Glassfarb said. At the same time, I urge everyone to think outside the box so we can escape this situation. We need to expand our minds. Think big, pardon my joke, let our ambitions grow, or we will remain small.

I think we can continue this conversation at a later time, Fiona Farrinelli said. Some of us feel quite tired.

## 19

Millington Steelworks, Textiles, and General Industries, Inc., stock market ticker MSTGI, dubbed Millington Inc. going forward, was that kind of mega-corporation that started in the 19th century in a garage in a rural town, then grew over the generations into this international behemoth that has presence on all continents except Antarctica, through a network of subsidiaries that are well-knitted together under the central oversight of Cecil Harold Lysander Millington, chairman of the board, chief executive, majority shareholder, corporate champion, great-great-great-grandson of founder Horace Millington the Elder, etc., etc. The company produces anything made of metal, not just steel as is in its name, from surgical needles to hulls of ships that are then assembled in large shipyards into container ships, then there is also the textiles part, also somehow a misnomer because Millington Inc. does not make t-shirts and jeans, but produces the very fabric for these products, from collection of cotton or production of synthetic fibers.

Cecil Millington has always been known as a man of integrity, respectful to employees, a hardworking man, often seen on the floor of many of Millington Inc.'s factories, with a safety helmet on, in a worker's coat, talking to people, watching furnaces and assembly lines. Little by little, over the decades, the chain of Millington men had made acquisitions, never mergers that would taint their name, having the foresight of reading the historical trends of supply and demand curves outlined by capitalism, to make good investments, and nifty bets on

expanding in certain markets. When they decided to list the company on the stock market in the 1950s, it was only after an internal referendum with employees that were also offered a package of shares as a thank you for their dedication. The referendum passed with ninety percent approval. There was no opposition from the union.

At the turn of the 21st century there were some hiccups and frictions with the Chinese that were chasing the same sources of mineral ore, and were trying to outcompete the Millingtons on the price of high-end steel, at which they somehow succeeded for a couple of years, until there were some geopolitical shifts, and the Millingtons were back on top in certain markets, because they leveraged the financial side of the business better, from financial reserves to connections to important investment banks, and they offered their customers a value proposition that was not available to the Chinese, at least for the time being, until the 2008 crisis. Since then, there were ups and downs, unpredictability increased, the frictions with the Chinese resumed, and Cecil Millington was forced to make decisions that none of his ancestors had contemplated: getting political, being rather confrontational with the union to a point where unions in some countries threatened strikes, giving Cecil a severe migraine and bouts of depression that lasted for a month.

These days are the most uncertain times in Millington Inc.'s history, because getting mineral ore is becoming more expensive, China is strongly shaking the supremacy of the American dollar, and clients want more benefits than before, faster delivery, because they say there are pressures on them from the end of the supply chain, such as normal people that continue buying even more goods, and institutional clients, such as the government and other big corporations that need Millington products to run their businesses, from underwater cables, to microchips, to

agricultural equipment, and so many other products that are impossible to review here.

Now that Cecil Harold Lysander Millington and his life partner Celeste Amelda Persephone Millington have shrunk in size, through no will of their own, this would shake up the entire industry, once discovered. The reaction of the employees, the investors, the Chinese, and the clientele, would be very difficult to predict.

## 20

Since time immemorial, humans of all persuasions, rich and poor, capitalists and socialists, industrialists and idealists, have been fascinated by, played with, and sought to control fire. More than substance, more than myth, more than mystery, igniting and terminating life, fire has always been the engine of civilization, as if civilization could be considered an engine in some sort of narrative metaphorical construction that needed fuel and spark to produce energy, and subsequently work, in its Newtonian sense. Fire, energy, and work, then became components of civilization and were often mistaken for civilization itself.

The members of the Oak Collective, the majority of them having a respectable status in society and high education, were well aware of these relations of fire to civilizations, yet their situation forced them to think in a more practical sense: We need fire to prepare better meals, said Debra Literolis, a high school teacher of English and History, and a passionate cook, We need fire to smelt metals, came from Gunther Glassfarb, the investment banker who has been having private conversation with Cecil Millington ever since he learned more about the

history of Millington Inc., Menelao Melanoliou said it would be nice if they made a little campfire for warming and storytelling sessions at night, but nothing more, Stan “Sly” Stone, a musician, DJ, singer-songwriter, and composer of film music, said, Having fire would be a good idea as it would enhance our quality of life, but was not specific about what way such quality would improve, his girlfriend Yolanda Francescone, a Swedish model of Italian and Maltese descent, agreed with Stan Stone and added that, Fire makes me feel at home, makes me want to sing, which is indeed true, as many anthropologists have noticed that humans throughout history have been gathering around campfires to sing songs and share friendly tales, Paula G. Lipman, PhD, professor of macroeconomics at Université Paris-Charlemagne, Institut d’Études Avancées, said about fire, We need fire not only to cook better meals, warm our homes, have a gathering place in the evenings, make things from metals, but also to discover the maximum potential of our little community, pardon the pun, while everyone laughed, because Paula G. Lipman was a joker and always had something funny or witty to say to bring a smile to people around her, while Menelao Melanoliou replied back after the laughter had subsided, Paula, I think you are right when you talk about maximum potential, because that maximum potential would need to be fully in harmony with the forest around us, and we should let our imaginations run wild, because you know fires can also easily escape our control, this captured Paula’s attention right away, You talk like an ecological economist Menelao, I am one, Oh, great, glad we have learned so much about each other, surely we have lots to talk about, Like the law of diminishing returns, Menelao Melanoliou tried to make a joke, but it was too dry and highbrow for everyone else to catch it, except for Paula G. Lipman and Gunther Glassfarb who caught the references but not necessarily the joke, while the others waited to have their

turn at saying something about fire as well, because it was such an exciting subject that energized the conversation. Next to speak was Holly-Kate Glassfarb, who said jokingly, We can have trials by fire, she looked straight into Gunther Glassfarb's eyes, then into Peggy's eyes who was holding Gigi the Pomeranian in her arms, and both Gunther Glassfarb and Peggy decided to smile and pretended to laugh along with everybody else, but inside their minds they felt quite uncomfortable, others noticed this as well but kept to themselves. Fiona Farrinelli spoke while she was holding her dog, a Yorkie named Bubble, who had been kept in her apartment until now out of overcaution, Fiona said, I love roasted marshmallows, we should make roasted marshmallows, for those who don't know that's marshmallows on a stick and held over heat until they turn golden brown, But Fiona, how are we going to make marshmallows? said Peggy, We don't have sugar, and gelatin, said Debra Literolis, We can invent a new recipe, replied Peggy with enthusiasm.

More talk about fire continued deep into the night in smaller groups, men speaking about practical applications such as making tools, women discussing more about cooking and warming their homes, both groups not realizing that this categorization by gender may be considered stereotyping, however it just happened so, until everyone was tired and went to bed, thinking about the best method to start a small, safe fire the next day.

## 21

The fire was made before noon the old-fashioned way, with a pile of dry hay, dry sticks, inside a circle made of pebbles, to ensure that fire didn't spread to the surroundings. Harding C. was chosen to rub two sticks together to make them hot enough to ignite the straw.

Once the flame had started, the fire had to be maintained with much care, as it behaved differently at that smaller size. It tended to consume material faster and die off more quickly. Members had to take turns stoking the fire, adding material to it, to keep the flames stable. It had been rather evident that fireplaces or other forms of having flames inside dwellings, regardless of how tiny the flames were, would be an impossible task, so the only plausible way to have warmth inside the dwellings would be if tiny pebbles were warmed near a fire outside the oak tree, then lifted up to each dwelling, while still warm, then kept inside until the pebble's temperature equalized with the inside temperature. Certainly, dwellings must also be isolated properly so temperature is not lost to the outside environment during cold times.

While the first pebble was being lifted to the first floor, which was the Millington residence, the community received an expected guest, a full-size squirrel that must have been attracted by the food provisions of the collective, the sweet smell of fruit that was being stored in a pantry-like hole in the ground that was covered by a lid made of sticks and fibers. The squirrel darted at the humans without regard for their size, ravaging the compound on its way to the hole.

The members panicked, some climbed quickly into their apartments, others remained on the ground and tried to fight back against the squirrel that showed no fear. When the squirrel finished ransacking the provisions in the hole, it bared its teeth at the dozen tiny humans who were screaming, Shoo, go away! and instead of leaving, the squirrel moved towards the oak tree and started climbing on it, because those crannies inside the tree also smelled of food. The windows and doors had been shut, inside the crannies there were similar screams, Go away, which had no effect on the invader that kept scratching the bark, pouncing on the windows to get inside, whence the smell of food was coming.

The squirrel's attack continued into every dwelling in the tree, gaining access to every inhabited cranny, and it gave up only when it accidentally touched a hot pebble in a basket that had been lifted by pulley and remained undelivered to its destination. While all members of the collective were screaming to scare away the invader, the squirrel left them by climbing up into the tree, then away into the forest, probably never wanting to come back after such a peculiar experience.

## 22

That is precisely why we need strong efficient governance that can react fast to such unforeseen events, said Blythe “Brutus” Zapp, a former colonel in the army, now retired, and owner of a security consulting firm. He liked to be called Brutus, no relation to the nephew of Julius Caesar, which was his nickname from the time he served in the army. Since the shrinkage, he had kept to himself, didn't talk much, worked out his mental shock on his own, and was always present to do manual labour, going above and beyond every time. The squirrel attack changed something about Brutus. He decided to speak.

I agree with Brutus, said Gunther Glassfarb, we need to elect a governance body, have precise rules, and duties for each one of us, so we can defend ourselves against other attacks.

You talk like a true brother in arms, Gunther, said Brutus. Did you serve?

No, it just makes sense. We apply the same principles in investment banking and private equity governance. If we didn't have structure and rules, we would fall apart, the competition would eat us.

Well said, brother, said Brutus, who went to shake Gunther Glassfarb's hand with manly determination. Gunther Glassfarb reciprocated gladly.

Wait, what do you mean Brutus, said Yolanda Francescone, the Swedish model, like we need a hierarchy of command of some sort?

Something of the kind, though not in the military sense, replied Brutus.

Is there any other sense for mono-directional hierarchies? said Paula Lipman, the professor of macroeconomics.

I'm not sure what you mean.

Hierarchies of power, when higher levels have unreciprocated power over the lower levels. A chain of command, in the military and corporate senses, said Paula G. Lipman.

If you want to call them that, said Brutus. The idea is efficiency, fast reaction, resilience. All are good principles, not just in the army, but for life in general. Don't you think?

Can I say something? said Peggy, this time not holding Gigi the Pomeranian. This talk about being organized is helpful, but I don't think there is a one-type-fits-all kind of organizing. I mean, yes, when we are attacked, we should be prepared, and know who does what, but we don't need that for herding our sheep and tending our gardens.

Okay, okay, jumped in Gunther Glassfarb, I know what you mean Peggy.

Gunther looked at his wife Holly-Kaye Glassfarb and told her with his eyes, Don't you dare say a word, I do not feel guilty for anything, certainly referring to his affair with Peggy. He continued, What do we do for some of us who may decide not to contribute with same effort to the betterment of our community? I'm not naming names, but let's explore this possibility.

Gunther Glassfarb looked directly at Jayden and Jasmine Flier, a young hippie couple who seemed to do just enough work, never above and beyond, always the minimum, but not less than anybody else. The Fliers enjoyed their time under the shrinkage. Both smiled at Gunther Glassfarb in response.

The strength of our community is to continue to rely on each other and talk openly about our needs and aspirations, said Menelao Melanolioi.

I call that trust, said Brutus. In battle, if I can't trust my brothers, I'm nothing.

We are not in battle, said Paula Lipman.

In a way, this is a battle to restore our humanity, replied Brutus.

Some may chose to call this a blessing, said Debra Literolis the teacher, out of nowhere.

Yeah, concurred several other members.

The conversation remained somehow suspended, as it continued like this in circles for a while, not making progress towards a decision to adopt a top-down hierarchy of command, or any other form of governance, as the more Gunther Glassfarb and Brutus pushed, the more members spoke out on their alternative visions of organizing a community of strangers, who had in common only that they were victims of shrinkage, according to some of them, or the blessing of shrinkage according to others.

## 23

Humans, regardless of their size, come to the attention of society when they do something with impact upon society, and when that is not the case, humans tend to be overlooked by the public, as if they did not exist in the first place, regardless of what they do in their personal lives. Certain public figures have also gone as far as to say that there is no such thing as society, so in essence nobody should complain if they are overlooked by the public, or nobody should take any particular pride in being recognized by society for achievements or whatever deeds. How can celebrities exist, if there is no society to make them so?

The Oak Collective had some attributes of a society, in which all members knew each other's names, and had some superficial perception of each other's temperament and character. That Gunther guy is quite a character, said Jayden Flier to his wife, Jasmine. I don't know what he wants, replied Jasmine Flier.

The Fliers were not different from other couples that had similar private conversations about other members. Debra Literolis asked her husband, Marcus Literolis, What do you think of Gunther? to which Marcus Literolis shrugged his shoulders and said, Meh, he has some points, but I'm not sure it will happen like he wants. The Literolises left the discussion at that. We should probably say something at the next meeting, said Jasmine, Ahem, we should, said Jayden, I don't know what, though, he scares me, Yeah, me too, said Jasmine, Do you think this will end, the shrinkage? I don't know.

The shrinkage was not a big issue for Jasmine and Jayden Flier

for several reasons: they had a collection of miniature handmade objects, miniature clocks, miniature houses, a tiny kitchen where Jasmine cooked real food in very small portions and made videos that often went viral, they lived in a small house, they liked simplicity and minimalism. They were members in a small cooperative that sold handmade furniture, artisanal decorations, long-lasting housewares, all made either from recycled materials or with methods that had no adverse effects on the environment.

When they realized they had diminished in size, they feigned distress so as not to raise suspicion from the other tiny humans, trying hard to cover their joy and enthusiasm that they had become similar to the products they made with their hands by entering that tiny world.

I hope we stay small forever, said Jasmine Flier, when they were watching a beautiful starry night from their window. I hope so too, said Jayden Flier. That Gunther is going to do something and ruin it for us, Maybe not, what can he do, nobody understands what happened to us, nobody knows how to get us back, You're so calm, I have no reasons not to be, look at us, we have everything, life is so cool, we can reinvent a whole new world, I wish everyone shared your optimism, Maybe it's time to tell everyone what we know, many are still depressed, I think you're right.

## 24

Proceedings of the Growth Squad, as interpreted by its secretary Margaret Fletcher, not written on anything, only memorized. Present: Gunther Glassfarb, Chief Investment Officer at Solid Carbon Capital, Inc., Brutus Zapp, owner of Zapp Consulting, Marcus Literolis, owner of Literolis Contracting, who told his wife Debra he was just taking a walk in the forest to get fresh air and listen to crickets, Lynton

Friedman, a senior political advisor, Billy Nordhaus, oil rig foreman with very big palms and strong forearms, Fred Hayektom, a retired tech entrepreneur who sold his startup for billions, and now just walks the Earth and invests his money here and there, and Margaret Fletcher, who was a real estate expert, as she said when she last introduced herself to the group. Six men. One woman.

Why did I call you here at midnight? began Gunther Glassfarb, in what it seems is a secret meeting away from the collective, you may wonder, or you may not, since all of us here have had the chance to exchange an understanding with each other that we have to do something about this bloody situation and return to the real world. So again, the question. What are we doing here? Three words. Standards. Scarcity. Security. First, standards of living, we cannot continue living in tiny apartments stacked inside an oak tree. Second, we must have dominion over scarcity to ensure survival. I'll come to that later. Third, security. We must eliminate all risks, control the environment, find the cause of the shrinkage, reverse it, then seek compensation and retribution. This takes major focus. Brutus and I worked out a plan for how we can make the Growth Squad strong, so we don't have to wait on the rest of the collective to deal with their emotional issues, until they decide to fight back and reclaim their lives.

Here is the plan. We build a new compound. Solid, bigger, more amenities, more comfort. We identify potential sources of scarcity that can give us leverage. We explore the environment to find its weak points and test them. I think we are likely in a simulation and we are sedated in real life. We test and we break. We push into the territory. We expand our borders. We do not stop until we break out of this prison.

Now, the issue of work and scarcity. Crucial to our strategy. They go hand in hand. It starts with two things: sugar and salt. What am I talking about? Brutus and I found a picnic basket

that is full of foodstuffs, and among that, one kilogram of sugar in a jar, and a big saltshaker full of salt. You know what this means? Currency. We can use the sugar and the salt as the scarce resources over which we have full control to get leverage. We can buy, let's say, a full week of work, from anyone willing, for ten crystals of sugar or two crystals of salt, by the way it's Himalayan and pink, a crystal is bigger than my fist. Or we cut them into smaller pieces. Let's make that one crystal of salt, biweekly. Two crystals if they work overtime. Everybody craves sugar and salt. You may wonder, what if the collective revolts and just takes over the resources? They cannot. They don't know where they are, and Brutus here can teach us some security techniques, if you know what I mean. Ok, great, I see you do know what I mean, so we have an understanding. Where is the picnic basket, you wonder? I am sure you understand that its whereabouts must remain a complete secret, only Brutus and I know its location and can retrieve its contents, under the guise of night, and in complete secrecy. It is only for our own protection that you don't know the location. This is what will keep the Growth Squad strong. We are united to grow back to what we were. And more!

## 25

The sheep needed to be moved often to have access to fresh grass, get some exercise, have a chance to copulate, in order to become producers of milk and multiply. Harding C. assumed the duty of shepherd, since he developed a strong bond with Sheep, was seen in her company a lot, tended to her with attention, and did his best to integrate Sheep into the herd. He spoke to her about his wife Lorelei, the climatologist, his son Mikael, the teenage gamer, he was missing them a lot, and

didn't feel like talking to the collective about that, probably due to insufficient trust or simply lack of desire that had nothing to do with trust, he wasn't too sure about the reason, didn't analyse himself too much, only ruminated over feelings, without verbalizing thoughts about them.

Sheep was the perfect companion, not too empathetic like a dog, still attached to humans by design, a good listener, still and calm. Harding C. often spent his whole day with Sheep and the herd, not too far from the compound, only after he tested his abilities at herding, which were excellent, to his own amazement and the unanimous approval from the collective, Trust me, I will get all the sheep back, he told them, We trust you, they said and off he went to the nearest patch of fresh grass, between some trees just an hour walk at his size, away from the compound. He encountered no issues, no predators, nothing that could have affected his emotions or the safety of the herd. It was a beautiful day, and that concluded his short report to the collective when he returned just before sunset.

## 26

Sly Stone, the musician, and his girlfriend Yolanda Francescone, the Swedish model, were skipping stones in the water stream at the far end of the compound when they hit a small tree or a plant with a thick trunk, they weren't sure at first, went to see what it was, it looked like a brown meaty elongated umbrella on a white corrugated stick, definitely not a plant, clearly not a baby tree, Wait, I know what this is, just didn't recognize it because we are so small, said Sly, this is *lanmaoa asiatica*, No way, said Yolanda, Yes way, baby, yes way, hallucinogenic mushrooms baby, No way, said Yolanda again, quickly coming to terms with the huge possibilities arising from

this discovery, We should tell the others, said Yolanda, Should we? said Sly, Yeah, why not, Maybe we should think about it first, What's to think? This is major discovery, it may, I don't know, cause problems with the others, some are faint-hearted, some would completely disapprove. Sly stopped to think for a second. What are you thinking about? asked Yolanda. We might as well do it ourselves first, why not, we discovered it, then we see about the others, I don't see a problem with that, Wanna do it now babe? What, right now? Yeah, we have nothing else to do, Sure, but we gotta clean it first, take a clean bite, Yeah, sure, I'm gonna just carve a piece from the trunk, wash it and split it, How are you gonna do that? asked Yolanda, With this baby, with this. Sly pulled out a sharp knife-like object from his makeshift satchel he had been carrying with him. What's that? A knife baby, Where did you get it? I made it baby from the lid of a metal can I found, Really? Yeah, someone must have dropped it sometime ago, it looked old, a bit rusty, I used a sharp stone to cut it, then I sharpened it by friction, friction baby, okay, I'm gonna cut the piece now, just watch our backs.

Sly detached a piece from the body of the mushroom, it was covered in some soil, he blew over it, then rinsed it in the stream. Wanna go first baby? he said.

## 27

**M**oney. Money. Money, said Gunther Glassfarb in the opening of the meeting of the Oak Collective. I say these words because I will explain how money will save us. We, Brutus and I, found money. Not paper bills or crypto coins as you may think, but sugar and salt, which are just as good as real money. Let me explain. Since Brutus and I discovered the source, think of us as the shepherds of the stash, no pun intended Harding.

No worries, said Harding C.

In order to infuse focus into our community to get us out of here, we shall distribute the sugar and salt crystals as wages for those of you willing to make the greatest effort.

Hold on, said Paula G. Lipman, the professor, are you saying you and Brutus are going to be our bank?

If you say so.

I like sugar, said Peggy.

I like salt, said Fiona Farrinelli.

Me too, me too, said others from the crowd.

Just a second, let me finish the presentation, said Gunther. As I imagined, you all like both sugar and salt, so you can earn it, and this is what will give us purpose. We are going to earn our way out of this, by doing work.

To do what? said somebody.

For starters, to build a bigger compound for the Growth Squad.

What's the Growth Squad? said somebody.

Those of us who want to grow back to normal size.

I wanna grow back to normal size, said somebody.

You can come and work for us, said Gunther.

I'm in. When do I start? said the same person.

Folks, let's not rush into this, said Paula G. Lipman, there are significant dangers and risks with this system, no offense Gunther, I know you mean well.

None taken, Paula, said Gunther.

This creates a whole set of incentives and a fabricated purpose for our collective that may not be necessary, and may be even counterproductive, said Paula.

What do you mean? said Peggy.

I know what she means, said Menelao Melanolio.

I don't, said Peggy, Tell me.

She means this is dividing us into classes, said Menelao.

What's wrong with that? said Gunther. Nobody forces anybody

to do anything. Whoever wants sugar or salt, can get it. It's only fair that they exchange effort for it, no? Is that not fair?

I think it's fair, said Peggy.

Me too I think it's fair, said somebody from the crowd.

See? said Gunther.

Why do you think that because you discovered the salt and the sugar, you can become our banker? said Menelao.

I'm going to call it the doctrine of discovery. Because I, sorry, we, discovered it. Certainly, you may argue for some other doctrine or principle, but you will not obtain any sugar or salt, unless it is disbursed from the stash by me or Brutus, in exchange for work, and mind you, the work is not for me, it is for the benefit of you all.

I like that! said Peggy.

No word from the Millingtons, who had been observing the conversation in silence, or from Holly-Kate Glassfarb, the wife of Gunther, who decided to sit this meeting out. Fiona Farrinelli was busy writing it all down on leaves of leopard plant, Debra was talking in whispers with Marcus trying to understand the system and Marcus whispered to her that he agreed very much with Gunther's plans and that they were going to be part of it, Debra was not too happy about it, Sly and Yolanda had a big happy grin on their faces from the mushrooms, the others from the Growth Squad were flanking Gunther to show support, while the crowd was experiencing mixed emotions.

Gunther pressed forward to make his case to use sugar and salt as currency for the collective, he managed to recruit five workers for his project, promising them an upfront payment, which then can be immediately be converted into tastier meals, being up to the workers to share their payment with the others who did not do work, a thought that made the workers want to keep the payment to themselves because it was a matter of self-esteem to value one's work and not just give away its results to lazy freeloaders.

## 28

Hangout time, sunset, campfire in the compound. Menelao Melanolioi speaks to a smaller group.

About Gunther and the Growth Squad. It may appear transactional and fair what they are proposing, but they are creating an exclusive provisioning system that can create willy-nilly exclusive powers. They stumbled upon the sugar and salt, we all need sugar and salt to increase the quality of life, yeah but we already discovered honey, is that not the same as sugar you may say, it is and it is not, we cannot use honey in our recipes as we use sugar, hence the benefit of a refined product. Salt is a different matter, we can try to find it ourselves in the ground or wherever, but the Growth Squad has it already processed for consumption, so we can get it from them, if we work for it, and we would work less than we would work to find salt in nature ourselves.

If any one of us discovered, by chance, he continued, some resources in the forest that may benefit the collective, but decides to require something in exchange, maybe work, maybe some other goods, is it fair to request that exchange? Or should we share everything we find with each other because that strengthens the trust between us?

Growth Squad says some of us won't reciprocate and will just do nothing all day, waiting to receive the bounty found or made by others. I think it is fair to say that the survival instinct will make everyone want to participate in the collective with work, from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs, however these needs can only extend as much as this forest can

provide, we are in no position to need working computers with internet, air conditioning, refrigerators, television, and so many other services that were part of our fundamental needs when we were normal-sized humans.

My point here, is that we are in a predicament that gives us choices: work as a collective where we share resources, take care of each other, you help me, I help you, or divide ourselves into special interest groups based on exclusive access to whatever resources, much like it happens in the real world. We have the chance now to learn from this predicament and truly make a better world for us. This may last forever, who knows, so we might as well enjoy the present, not despair for what we lost, not be anxious to escape a situation we cannot control, *carpe diem*, right?

People have forgotten how to live in the present, said Yolanda.

Uh-huh, said Sly. Yolanda and I have a present for you. We found it yesterday by the stream. We just waited for the right time to share.

Sly pulled out a wad of hallucinogenic mushroom slivers from the satchel and laid them gently on a mossy patch.

Whoa, is that what I think it is? said somebody from the group.

Ya man. Help yourself.

Thanks Sly, said Menelao. I hope my little speech meant something.

It sure did man, thanks. Trust me. Yolanda and I are with you, man.

Yeah, don't worry Menelao, we are with you, said others from the group.

Do you think we need to worry about Gunther and his group? asked Celeste Millington who had listened to Menelao very carefully. They already convinced some of the members to go work for them.

I don't know. We'll see.

## 29

Over the next couple of weeks, the Growth Squad worked longer hours to build a compound for themselves, including the five hired workers that were offered participation in the Squad on the condition that they will have to perform manual labour, certainly paid in sugar and salt crystals, only because they were not present at the formation of the Squad with the seven founders. The workers accepted because the pay for their labour was fair, and they felt everything must be earned in life, including accommodation in nicer, more spacious, lodgings.

During the same time, the Oak Collective worked at completing a dam upstream, which consisted of a double-layered wall of wood that blocked the stream to form a reservoir, and a large water wheel, three humans high, where the overspill of water would generate kinetic energy into a horizontal beam, also known as a crank, which was intended to operate a variety of cogwheels in various sizes and orientations, which had not yet been decided.

There were almost no words exchanged between the two groups, as they hardly saw each other during this time. The members of the collective returned to the compound after five hours of work every day, while the workers at the Growth Squad worked ten, twelve hours every day and were asked, or better said, invited, to sleep at the place of work, so as not to waste time with the commute, unless they wanted to exchange their earned wages for some goods at the collective, for expediency. Margaret

Fletcher, the real estate expert, Brutus, and Fred Hayektom, had assumed the role of securing an independent source of food for the squad, most of it coming from the secret picnic basket, and some of it coming from nature: berries, a bit of honey, and a tiny fish that Brutus managed to capture by throwing a sharp spear at it right upstream from the dam, causing traces of blood to arrive at the compound, causing a tremor at the collective until the situation was clarified quickly by a worker who was dispatched to present excuses which were kindly accepted.

## 30

Meeting to discuss what everyone needed versus what everyone wanted, all 21 members of the Oak Collective present, which did not include the seven members of the Growth Squad, or the five workers who worked for the Growth Squad.

Now that we established our community, said Menelao Melanolioiu, we all feel this pressing urge to do some more, to expand our lives, right?

Yes, yes, said the members present.

Do we need bigger houses like those being built by the Growth Collective?

Yes, said Peggy, holding Gigi the Pomeranian.

No, we don't, said Menelao.

Why? said Peggy.

We may want bigger houses, but we don't need them.

What's the difference?

Needs are things that we require to survive and stay healthy, while wants are things that we desire but can live without. For example, food, water, shelter, and clothing are needs, while toys, video games, milkshakes are wants, even when they feel like needs.

Oh, said Peggy. Did you hear that, Gigi?

Can you maybe give us a list of our needs, Menelao? somebody asked from the group.

Subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, and freedom. That's one way to look at them.

Ok, thanks, said the same person from the crowd.

Wait, what if my need for creation means I desire to create a bigger house? Ignacio Salar, a farmer from Chile who used to work for the Chilean government, asked somewhat sarcastically.

You said *I desire*, said Menelao. That is the difference. You project a desire into a need.

But what if I truly feel I cannot live without a bigger house?

That feeling may be genuine, Ignacio, said Menelao. I do not wish to dismiss it. Imagine that you are in a circumstance where you cannot satisfy all your feelings for whatever reason. You cannot afford it, you have competing, contradictory feelings, and you don't know which one to satisfy, you are ill, you need to give your time to some other activity whether that gives you satisfaction or not, you must dedicate your time to the feelings of another human, you have constraints from nature, meaning you just do not have the resources required to satisfy your imagined needs and so on. What you think is a need, may just be a *want*, a desire, that you can actually live without. And to take this exercise of imagination further, if you became truly the master of your own feelings, your own mind, you could teach yourself the difference between need and want, which will have the amazing benefit of giving you more freedom over yourself, because you will decide knowingly what to pursue, so you do not become slave to your *wants* and desires, which will generally leave you perpetually dissatisfied, frustrated, angry, selfish, envious, and other adverse emotions, while if you maintained control over your desires, not to suppress them, but decide with awareness

which one deserves satisfaction, then you will be exposed to more contentment with yourself and life in general.

You are saying self-control is not refusing yourself the pursuit of desires, but some sort of self-empowerment? asked Ignacio.

Yes, said Menelao. Take, for example, our situation here, with this shrinkage. We may desire to return to normal size, but do we fundamentally need it?

Whoa, whoa, what are you saying? said some folks from the group.

We are alive. We are healthy. We can pursue knowledge. Many would call this a good life, said Menelao.

Not me, said one voice from the crowd, while the others were reflecting.

This is an invitation to reflection, continued Menelao. I felt it was important to discuss this because of what our fellow humans at Growth Squad are doing.

Clearly their desires have detached from their needs, said Jasmine Flier. Some members laughed.

Amen, sister, said Holly-Kate Glassfarb, eyeing Peggy and her dog with a feeling of acceptance and comradery.

## 31

**I**gnacio Monserrate Ernesto Salar was an indigenous farmer from Chile. He was a collector of seashells. He learned English from television and was well-educated. He served as a consultant for the government on matters of foreign investments. Aiko Kochiyama was a video game designer from Japan. She was a collector of anime posters. She learned English from watching movies and playing Western video games. Ignacio and Aiko talked for some time and developed a friendship, in spite of their significant cultural differences. It was humour that connected

them. One day, Ignacio invited Aiko on a walk, just the two of them, so he could tell her some jokes he knew from his village.

Ignacio was just about to deliver the punchline of a joke that involved a llama, a capitalist, and an indigenous farmer entering a bar, but he was not able to say the punchline because he tripped on something hard and fell face first into the ground, making Aiko laugh as hard as she would have laughed at the actual joke, Is this the punchline? she asked, laughing, Yes it is, said Ignacio right away, as if they were both in on the joke like professional improv comedians.

He was unhurt. Aiko helped him get up. They looked for the thing that had caused his fall, and were surprised to find a piece of metal sticking out of the ground, a thin sheath with round edges that had been covered by vegetation. They dug up the whole piece with sticks, to reveal a large circle of metal, with circular indentations, and a piece that had been curved away from the sheath.

It's the lid from a can, said Ignacio. Wonder how long this has been buried here.

At least a few months, or maybe years, said Aiko.

No, don't tell me. I just wonder, said Ignacio and Aiko laughed.

Should we take it back to the compound? said Aiko.

Yes. It could be useful, said Ignacio. Maybe we will find the rest of the can.

They did find the rest of the can, after a quick search in a nearby thicket, which a human had decided some time ago it was a reasonable place to discard garbage. The label was still on the can, showing pictures of whole tomatoes, a date of fabrication that was three years earlier, and a place of fabrication that was in a country on another continent.

These will be useful, said Ignacio. We can make things made of metal.

Like swords, said Aiko.

Probably not swords. Gardening tools. Cutlery. Construction tools. You know, peaceful objects, said Ignacio in return, maintaining a friendly, jocular atmosphere.

They returned to the compound to ask for help, as they failed in their attempts to move the lid or the can by themselves without ropes or more muscle power.

## 32

Meeting of all tiny humans, now separated into the Oak Collective, comprised of twenty-one individuals, and Growth Squad, comprised of twelve individuals: Seven members, and five paid workers, who do not have status as members, to discuss what is going on, and how they should proceed. Fiona Farrinelli, as usual, takes notes on leaves of leopard plant, with modified punctuation to help her write faster.

The purpose of this meeting is to get your thoughts and feelings off your chest, said Berta Isabel Esperanza, a journalist from Honduras, so we can address potential, you know, conflicts, or contradictions, or diverging opinions, that might make some of us unhappy.

Well said, Berta, I will go first, said Marichka Kobrynska, an electrical engineer from Ukraine, I am unhappy because *they*, she pointed a finger at the seven Growth Squad members, they created a competition between us, and I don't think we need competition, we need to work together.

How does this make you feel?

How does this make me feel?

Yeah, it is better if you express your emotions vis-à-vis the situation.

So you don't want me to rationalize, said Marichka Kobrynska. Okay, no problem. It makes me feel anxious and stressed,

like not only do I have to compete to survive in nature, with predators, now I have to worry that others I don't know may put us in danger, and they have sugar, salt, and we have to work to get it, what is this, a business?

Excuse me, excuse me, jumped in Gunther Glassfarb, we established it is fair, and folks voluntarily accepted to do the work for payment in salt and sugar.

Yeah, yeah, we did, said the five workers.

Mallarika, you want to say something? said Berta.

Yes. Hi everyone. I am Mallarika Patekar. I didn't speak much until now. I was very tired from the shrinkage. I am glad I am with you all. You are good people. I agree with Marichka. We cannot continue like this. I propose that all the sugar and salt be brought here to the collective.

Unacceptable, said Brutus.

Sorry, I am speaking, said Mallarika. I work as a social justice lawyer. This system you made is not just. You pay the workers as a pretense to keep exclusive access to your resources and isolate yourselves from the rest of us. I thought we were all in this together.

Amen, sister, said Holly-Kate Glassfarb.

I want to speak too, said Marie-Louise Lubala, a painter from Congo.

Wait, I need to answer that first, said Lynton Friedman, a member of the Growth Squad.

No, Lynton, she was speaking, said Berta. Wait your turn.

Look at them, six men, one woman, continued Marie-Louise, looks like patriarchy to me, no offence, Mrs. Fletcher, I don't know what you all do in real life, but this is not like real life, this is a new life, new circumstance, and you do not seem to understand, forgive me, you said get things off my chest, so I will say exactly how I feel, I talk straight, so you all try to create your real life here, but it's not possible, look at us, we are as tall as a mushroom, we live in a tree like chipmunks, we drink a

thimble worth of water a day, squirrels are our biggest enemy, a drop of rain on our head can give us a bruise, this is our life now, some of you say it is not real, maybe it is not, but it surely feels real to me, because I can feel pain, and I can remember what I dreamt last night, the night before, I can feel the time flowing at a constant pace. This is enough evidence for me that this is real, as much as we can define real. I know we have scientists among us, and artists, we all have our perceptions and definitions of what is real, but surely we see each other, we talk to each other, that is something. We all have desires, for freedom, for satisfaction, as we discussed about our needs recently, surely that is something to consider, not being all selfish and ignoring the collective. Wait until you need us, then what? You will give us the salt and sugar for free as payment for our help? Is that what we want to become?

Thank you, Marie-Louise, said Berta. Anybody else?

Last to speak was Florencia Gallardo, a doctor.

It is hard to reconcile different worldviews that have a lot of history and baggage, said Florencia. I understand your position, Marie-Louise, and I understand the Squad's position. Of course, I am on your side, Marie-Louise. It pains me to even say that I am taking sides, but I do feel this, I don't know what it is. Sadness? Regret? I did not want this to happen, but they have their freedom too to make a life as they wish. Does it affect us? Yes. But it is their freedom. Do you know what I am getting at? Our worldviews have collided, in spite of the shrinkage that happened to all of us. This is what makes us human, I suppose. Look, I am a doctor. I know science, biology, anatomy, evolution. From my perspective, one of these worldviews is bound to whither and fail, because it cannot last much longer, according to the laws of nature.

Care to explain please? said Billy Nordhaus, the oil rig foreman.

Sorry, some other time, said Florencia. It is getting late. The meeting ended there without other substantial contributions.

## 33

Holly-Kate Glassfarb and Peggy chat under a fern, alone.

Can we be honest with each other, Peggy? I think so. I'll go first. I knew about your affair with Gunther for some time, you know, a smart woman knows, not necessarily when the husband's behaviour changes, because his did not change, but when he changes priorities away from his wife, towards his business, in the company of his personal assistant, in this case you, Peggy, no offense. Ah, no worries. So I wanted to see for myself, to understand better, I followed you to the club, then the shrinkage happened, Strange, right? I cannot help but see some weird purpose in this. Gunther hasn't changed at all. He behaves the same. He is less interested in you, though, Yeah, true, Gigi is with him now, Gigi your dog? Yeah, That's interesting, He is still obsessed with growing back to his normal life, Some men won't accept reality even if it hits them in the face, said Holly-Kate and sighed, Do you still love him? said Peggy, I suppose. But it's different. I'm changing. This new life is changing me, I know, right. Me too, How about you Peggy? Do you love Gunther? Yes, I mean, I don't know, I haven't reflected on it when I was with him. I can see myself letting him go. It was not about his power, his money, as people may think, I just liked his intelligence and humour, not the business intelligence, I don't care about investment and all, but his relational intelligence, how he talked to people, how he knew what buttons to push, what not to say, that kind of thing. I know exactly what you mean, said Holly-Kate, visualizing the day she met Gunther at a highbrow social

function. Does this matter now? said Peggy. What do you mean? These feelings, do they matter now? What you feel about him? What I feel about him? Why do you say that? I get a sense of deep shifting, said Peggy. Shifting, like how? Emotionally? It is more than that. Maybe existential. Spiritual. As if my previous life, as a normal human, is becoming a story, a fairytale, while this life here, with you around, with everybody doing whatever, is my normal, is my identity. As if time is becoming like these ferns that give us shelter now. Time is becoming material. I feel I can touch time, Holly-Kate. I can smell seconds. I can taste minutes. I can touch hours. I can see days. Not as in a metaphor, not as poetry. Time as a physicality, You know Peggy, we have scientists with us, they might have something to say about that. I know, I know, Menelao is a physicist, Celeste a chemist, the others, I don't mind being told off, I am used it, but they cannot deny me the experience. Did you try those mushrooms from Sly and Yolanda? said Holly-Kate, joking. Don't be silly, I don't do that. I was thinking about it. I am serious, as much as I can be when I say these things. Maybe being this small rewires our brains and connects us more with the life around us. Perception of the world is in a continuous feedback loop with the world itself, I didn't know you were that philosophical, Peggy, said Holly-Kate realizing it may sound condescending, I know you mean well. I am doing a Master's in Political Science with a focus on ethics. Ironic, right? Holly-Kate laughed, Sorry, I didn't mean to laugh, she said. It's all right.

Gigi came running, alone.

Gigi baby, where is Gunther, did you run away from Gunther? said Peggy. Gigi seemed to say yes, he did, and he wanted his mother to go check out where he was coming from.

They followed Gigi onto a path, deep into the forest, they walked a while, then stopped by a wad of vegetation that was camouflaging a large object, they partially removed the vegetation

and discovered Gunther's picnic basket, climbed inside, found the salt, the sugar, and other non-perishable goodies that were opened and had small chunks removed from them, clearly for the personal consumption of a small number of beings.

Do you know what this means, Peggy? Yes, I think so. Gunther just lost all his power.

## 34

The core source of power is the monopolistic possession of information, much more than the legal, moral, or customary entitlements to holding a position of power in society. This is something Menelao Melanolioiu would probably say after having eaten a sliver of hallucinogenic mushroom, to Paula Lipman, the professor, after she would have imbibed fermented blueberry juice, since they liked to talk nerdy in an altered state of mind, and laugh themselves to the ground.

After the collective found out about the whereabouts of the sugar, the salt, and the other goodies, they all went there to claim the provisions, pushing Brutus to the side when he tried to block their way. Be serious, Brutus, you cannot stop all twenty-one of us, said Berta Isabel Esperanza, the journalist. Yeah, Brutus, what you need all that sugar for? said Sly Stone, the musician. Brutus had no choice but to run back to the squad's compound, which was only half finished, and report the takeover. By the time the squad came, the Oak Collective was already carrying the goods to their compound, all merry and joking around. Come, join us, they said to the Growth Squad, we are happy to share, drop all that nonsense.

Gunther was furious, his face was red. Is that your party face, Gunther? said Mallarika Patekar, the lawyer. Gunther, don't

be mad, come, let's have some fun, said Yolanda Francescone, the model.

An hour later, all little humans were at the Oak Collective compound, frolicking, murmuring, the squad minority protesting, but nobody was listening to them, the five workers of the squad, having joined the celebration, simply quietly quit their so-called jobs, because now they could have as much sugar and salt as they needed, without having to work for the benefit of a partisan elite. Screw them, said one of the workers, who can now be revealed as Missy D. Point, a hairdresser by profession. Yeah, I'm done working for others, said another former worker by the name of Cléa, just Cléa, no declared last name, a medical nurse by profession. The other unnamed former workers had already mingled with the collective and had mentally moved on from their recent employment, putting all their energy into having fun with everybody else, and some even spilling their wages onto the ground, ten crystals of sugar to show utter emancipation. Honey, don't waste the sugar, it's still valuable, said Debra Literolis, the high school teacher. Oh, I'm sorry, I just got carried away, said the unnamed worker, and picked up the crystal. It's okay, honey, said Debra.

By sudden acclamation, the Growth Squad was thereby officially dissolved, when Cecil Millington, to everyone's surprise, climbed a pebble and announced, I hereby declare the Growth Squad dissolved, to immediate cheers and applause from all humans present, minus the seven founding members of the squad, who were still standing embarrassed to the side of the party, having lost their leverage, their workers, partly their hope for growth, and now even some of their pride.

Darlings, you look so gloomy, said Jasmine Flier, the hippie, why don't you really join us, you can still eat salt and sugar, there's even jam and biscuits, but you know that already, at least

it will not go bad, and will make everyone happy. Including you!

Marcus, honey, come home, said Debra Literolis, who had found out that her husband Marcus had joined the Growth Squad before Gigi revealed the location of the picnic basket. Really, honey, it's okay, I forgive you. You forgive me? said Marcus Literolis. Sure honey? Okay. Marcus left the group of seven and joined the party after having waited for this sign of forgiveness, because he was too much of a proud man to ask forgiveness first even when he was truly sorry, which Debra knew quite well, but waited for the right moment to teach Marcus a lesson and make an impression on the other six remaining growthers.

The next to leave the squad was Blythe "Brutus" Zapp, who said, Can I have some reassurances there will be no retribution for my attempt at doing my duties to my group, there will be no surprise attacks against my integrity, or deprivations of any sort, and my belonging to the collective is restored, while I also offer, of course, my apologies for any offense that I may have caused? Sure, honey, we forgive you, get your ass over here, said Debra Literolis, and Brutus joined the party.

Then the others followed, with similar statements but shorter, making their best efforts to show remorse. Babe, do you think we should trust them? said Sly to Yolanda, out loud so the six and everyone around can hear, they said it jokingly. We are joking, of course, guys, we believe in forgiveness.

Be like a goldfish, with a five second memory span, forgive and forget, easy, move on, repeat, said Florencia Gallardo, the doctor. Well said, doctor, said Peggy, sitting next to Holly-Kate Glassfarb, who were both waiting for Gunther's turn to walk past them and utter his feelings of regret. Which he did, in due time, because of irrefutable peer pressure and high temptations of joyous festivity radiating outwards from the Oak Collective's tiny forest party.

## 35

The body length of the tarantula, depending on the species, ranges from about five to eleven centimetres, with legspans of eight to thirty centimetres. Compared to the average height of a member of the Oak Collective, which is somewhere between five and ten centimetres, a tarantula can appear as a monster, a beast from hellfire, a huge predator that can easily overcome the frailty of a miniscule human.

Harding C. was the unfortunate human who fell into a tarantula's nest, a hole in the ground, getting stuck in the sticky web, while he was on one of his strolls with Sheep. His companion was lucky and missed the hole, so Harding C. found himself stuck face down in the net, screaming, Hello, hello, please help, I am stuck here, hello, anybody. There was nobody around, Sheep did not possess the intellect of a dog to take her parent's message to the other humans and ask for help. She remained still, near the edge of the hole, not doing anything, waiting for the parent to return, not understanding the gravity of the situation. By chance, it was Bubble, Fiona Farinelli's Yorkie, who caught scent of the danger, and started barking incessantly. What is it, Bubble? asked Fiona. Bubble pointed the barking at a particular point outside the compound, which was good enough for Fiona to want to check out what was there, taking her friend Debra with her, as Debra seemed to be free at the time, and in search of some entertainment.

Bubble the Yorkie ran ahead of them and stopped at Sheep, kept barking at Sheep and at the ground, leaving the task of

finding the problem up to his mother. Oh my goodness, Harding, said Fiona, looking into the hole. I fell, said Harding C. Are you all right? asked Debra. I think so, said Harding C., but I want to get out of here as soon as possible, this seems to be a spider's nest, which means there are spiders around. I know what you mean, said Fiona, we are going to get some help. Stay here, I'm going, said Debra, and ran back to the compound to get more help, while Fiona remained with Harding C. to comfort him.

As the members ran back towards Harding C. in the hole, the tarantula also made its apparition nearby from the opposite direction, setting the humans into a race and raising their blood levels. Brutus immediately took it upon himself to hurl pebbles at the tarantula, to distract the beast, then pulled out an arrow from his quiver, placed it in his bow, and shot it fast at the tarantula hitting its body. The arrow got stuck into the beast but did not alter its trajectory. Brutus shot again and again, hitting the target every time but failing to distract the beast from the other humans, or from its nest, where the prey had been captured. Brutus had no choice but to charge at the beast in close combat, at first with a spear aimed directly at one of its eight legs, which made an impression and forced a reaction from the beast, who hit back at Brutus with the wounded leg, changed direction towards the little annoying human. Brutus readied himself for the tarantula's charge, signaling to the humans to keep running and extract Harding C. while he kept the beast busy.

The tarantula attempted to grab Brutus with its claws, hit the air, Brutus jumped away from its path, rolled on the ground efficiently, according to strict military training and experience, to find himself in a superior position vis-à-vis the enemy, from where he could deploy with full force his weapon, in this case a makeshift combat knife he had carefully shaped from the lid of that tomato can, to which Brutus added a solid handle carved from wood. He plunged the knife into the body of the beast with

no trace of regrets, spiced the move with a warriors' cry, repeated the move three more times with such haste that the beast did not get the chance to reposition itself away from the attacker.

Meanwhile, the collective had reached the nest and saved Harding C. by pulling him out with a rope, fast, with few words exchanged, as there was no need for them, while everyone had quickly taken a role in this rescue operation, from operating the rope, to providing support to Brutus by shouting and hurling objects at the beast, in a circular formation moving in unison, as to provide defence from all directions, while Harding C. was being escorted away, under cover.

Brutus won his battle when the beast collapsed to the ground, and expired. He then knelt in front of the deceased beast and offered his honourable salutations as a sign of respect, which was an incredible sight for the others to see, as no one expected this to come from Brutus. He saw them and said, That was a fair fight, the beast fought for its right to live, I respect that.

There were many lessons to be drawn from this happening, but the collective decided to talk about them the next day, to allow time for much deserved rest and healing.

## 36

The following week the watermill began its operations. It has been designed to process seeds of buckwheat into flour, as buckwheat was found to be plentiful around. The entire collective, all 33 of its members, participated in its design and construction. Branches were carved into timber and beams, sprockets were equipped with teeth of metal, toothed gearings were carefully measured for balance and quality. It was turned on by Menelao by a simple switch of a lever that opened the flow of water from the stream into the spinning wheel. The stone wheels

started spinning in tandem, seeds were poured through a funnel, dust soared out the windows. Everyone cheered and applauded.

Let's also make a malt mill, said Sly. Why? said somebody from the group. To make beer of course. Or how about a fulling mill to make better clothes, said Jasmine Flier. Or a tanning mill, said Billy Nordhaus, the oil rig foreman. Why, isn't that to make leather? said somebody. Why do you want leather? I like leather, said Billy Nordhaus. Where do we get the leather? From sheep of course, said Billy. I don't know man. Oh, wait, how about a finery forge mill, said Brutus, to forge metals. Or a tool-sharpening mill, said somebody else. Ooh, I'd like that, said Marcus Literolis. Or a hemp mill, said Yolanda Francescone. Or a paper mill, said Berta Isabel Esperanza. Or a sawmill, said Lynton Friedman, the political advisor. Anybody else? said Peggy laughing. Ore-crushing mill, said Brutus. A blast furnace, said Lynton. That was said already. Oh, sorry. How about a cutting and slitting mill, said Gunther Glassfarb. For what? Asked Jayden Flier. For cutting thicker branches and stuff, Oh, okay.

A dozen barrels of wheat were produced over the next three days under careful scrutiny. The process went smoothly, from provisioning the seeds to cleaning them, separating the wheat from the chaff, feeding them into the mill, collecting and packing the flour. No other mills had been built for other purposes, as the work required for their creation was demanding, intense, prolonged, and the collective decided the amount of effort in comparison to the desired outcome was not palatable to the members, as needs had been met already by the existing watermill. Even Sly, who talked about a malt mill, reconsidered this idea over time. He had the epiphany that beer was not a need onto itself, perhaps a desire yes, a desire that was not shared by the majority of members. Brutus who wanted a finery forge mill also walked back his suggestion, not because he did not consider it a need, but because he could not find enough

members to work with him on the construction. When asked, Brutus still thought forging metal was a need for the community, and was able to provide extensive explanations, while still knowing quite well what Menelao said sometime ago that needs are things that we require to survive and stay healthy, while wants are things that we desire but can live without.

With the smooth functioning of the watermill, and plenty of buckwheat provisions, recipes had multiplied. Flour offered so many options for culinary creativity. Folks were happy, satisfied. Not long after they habituated themselves to the constant flow of flour, some humans felt the urge to do something new, to expand their horizons further.

## 37

Rajesh Biswas was a mechanical engineer with a keen passion for poetry. Gao Jianxing was a translator and a playwright, with a deep love for all things engineered, the more complicated, the better. They found themselves chatting on the way home from a shift at the watermill.

Say Rajesh, do you see poetry in how watermills work? asked Gao.

I suppose I can imagine other realities where I watch the watermill operating, such as the flow of blood between organs, or the flow of ideas from professors to students, or the transformation of energy from the sun into life, then into fossil fuels via the decay of life, then into energy to sustain new life. Does this count as poetry, Gao?

I think so. In my view, poetry is language loaded with meaning and emotion that stretches words beyond their dictionary definitions into other realities and hyperrealities. Poetry condenses many worlds into few words, packs emotions into figures of speech, attempts to describe the indescribable and

speaking the unspeakable. If you see a watermill as a living organism it is because they have similarities in their operations at some abstract level, where causes flow into consequences.

Let me then ask you this, what is more important in life, engineering or poetry?

Tough question Rajesh. I often feel that engineering is also meant to deliver poetry. Think about how we enjoy entertainment on our devices. Even a theatre requires construction engineering. Vehicles are designed not just to move humans, but also to entertain them. Music, stories, films are what we seek. Even the most hyper materialistic individual that collects luxury cars, has an ultimate purpose that has to do with stories that they tell themselves about those luxury cars. It can be about status, about the aesthetic of the objects he is possessing, about the methods of their creation. There is no engineering without poetry, or poetry without engineering, they cannot be separated from each other.

If humans made more efforts to seek this connection, they would enrich their lives, said Rajesh. Engineering with little attention to the poetry that is clothing it, seems lifeless. Poetry that has no engineering to carry it into the world, may remain a dream of one soul. It may benefit that soul, but it will not be heard by the world. Then I wonder, is all poetry supposed to serve the world? Or is it enough if it serves just one soul? Is engineering supposed only to serve the world without listening to the world's poetry?

Look, we're home Rajesh. Time flies. Let's grab some drinks and talk more.

Yes, please!

Zuri Owuor had been writing novels in her native Swahili and in English for more than ten years. During the same time, Donatello Zuniga, had been working as a consultant for Recursos Minerales Avanzados para Soluciones Energéticas Inc., RMASE Inc. What Zuri and Donatello had in common was that they were born in places at one degree latitude South of the equator on different continents, just a few days apart. Zuri in Kenya. Donatello in Ecuador. They learned all of this about each other on a sunny day, when they happened to be next to each other, rolling blackberries on the ground towards the storage place.

So, tell me more about your work, Donatello, at that company, said Zuri. It is nothing much, said Donatello, I helped companies from Europe and North America negotiate with authorities in South America access to natural resources. What kind of resources? said Zuri. Lithium, copper, rare Earth metals, things like that. What are those good for? The cool things we all enjoy, the gadgets, the cars, the batteries. And you help them how? I translate for them and I tell them where to go to ask for permits, like which Ministry, which institution, how much it costs, how long it takes, how to get it faster. I see, I see, so they extract resources, to send to factories across the oceans, then products get made, cross oceans again back to your country, my country, everyone. Pretty much, that is how it works, said Donatello, it is called globalisation. You know, this is causing a lot of suffering for many people, those who live where the extraction happens, those who work in tough

conditions, those who work in factories, those who breathe the smoke from those factories, those who live near mountains of garbage where the expired products are thrown. I know, I know, what you are saying, intervened Donatello, believe me I did not make this system, I wish it was not like this. I am sorry to say, but you helped the system with your work, said Zuri. I had no choice, believe me, I had to have a job, and it so happened that I came to do this, not by choice, but by circumstance, I was good at it from the beginning, I thought it was a good thing, I still believe there was some good in it, look at how many useful things we made with all those resources, sure there is waste, but I hope humans will learn to waste less or nothing. That is not possible, said Zuri, I think you know that, looks at us, we are so little after the shrinkage and we still have waste. But we learned to be very careful with it, said Donatello, and it is all biodegradable. Exactly, said Zuri, why can't normal-sized humans do the same, why is there this insane rush to extract, extract, extract to produce, produce, produce so we can consume, consume, consume, then to waste, waste, waste and again, as fast as possible, as much as possible. Don't ask me Zuri, I don't know the answer to that, like I said I did not make the system, I just had to make living, if you asked me I would do it differently, so I can stop feeling guilty. A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadence civilization, said Zuri. Yeah, I guess, that is true.

They stopped rolling their blackberries to catch their breaths.

I write books about what this system is doing to the soul of the people, said Zuri. I have travelled on my continent and talked to many people in many countries, of many tribes and languages. They say the same story. It is an old story. There is an imbalance within human civilization. Rising, severe imbalance. A few have grown so much, that they forgot their origin. While bathing in luxuries, they forgot their bodies and their minds come from

nature, belong to nature, are nature. The many, the poor were left behind to work for the few to keep them growing. They were sold dreams, with trickery and deceit, that they would be able to grow too if they worked hard for the few. Maybe this shrinkage that happened to us is a lesson that we should slow down and find our origins because we have become lost.

Donatello Zuniga sat in silence. He left beads of sweat to roll down on his cheeks, feeling like every one of them was a heavy weight pulling him down, making him even smaller and smaller.

## 39

According to superdeterminism, all the events past, present, and future, have been predetermined at the beginning of the universe. There is absolutely no free will, no coincidence, no spooky action in the distance, no mystery about the future. If you know all the events of the past, you can tell the future with complete certainty.

Do you believe all that, Menelao? asked Marichka Kobrynska, the electrical engineer. Superdeterminism is one way to discuss the predictions of quantum mechanics, said Menelao. I cannot say I fully subscribe. That means we have no choice in what we do, said Marichka, we are simple automatons with the illusion that we make free decisions. Well, even if it's true, which I doubt, said Menelao, it does not change how we live our lives. We still have to eat and sleep. We still use our brains. We do things, regardless whether they are by choice or illusion, doesn't matter, but we still do them. What about the shrinkage? said Marichka. Well, that may be well an illusion itself but it is happening, so we might as well deal with it.

They had been walking for hours, scouting a larger perimeter around the compound, because the collective had agreed it was

necessary for security reasons, at the advice of Brutus Zapp. They were talking about how a deterministic worldview affects moral principles and behaviour, when they heard voices coming from not far away, loud voices, of several humans engaged in passionate conversation, real humans of normal size, coming their way.

They are coming! said Marichka, what do we do? I don't know what we do, I don't know, said Menelao, panicking, Let's not raise our voices, we don't want them to see us. The voices were getting louder and closer.

This is the place man, said one full-size human, this patch of forest here is the perfect place, we buy it, we raze the trees, do some terraforming, landscaping, build the welcome centre right there near that hill, change the course of the river to make it straight, then there is plenty of space for eighteen holes, a beautiful spa, indoor exclusive dining club. Right, right, said another voice, we just need to get these trees out of the way, the bushes, the vegetations, whatever is living here.

Three men in hiking gear, carrying maps, and devices stopped next to the bush where Menelao and Marichka were hiding.

How long is it going to take? said the second man. Twelve, twenty months, after closing of the purchase, said the first man. Ahem, said the second man. Licenses, approvals, incentives? asked the third man. All in the same timeframe, said the first man. Ecological concerns, neighbours, activists, noise, nuisances? said the first man. None that we can project now, in fact we can grease the local community with a generous donation to their whatever local library or community centre, which we also budgeted for. Good, good, said the first man.

Menelao and Marichka were so close they could touch the boot of one of the men. They were biting their fists to keep silent when, from behind, with no forewarning, Brutus Zapp, Sly Stone, Ignacio Salar, and Jayden Flier bumped into them

in a rush. Shhhhh, gestured Menelao. Oh, I see, said Brutus. What are you doing here? whispered Marichka. We heard voices, whispered Ignacio Salar. We had to check it out, whispered Brutus Zapp. What are they doing, who are they? whispered Jayden Flier. I think they want to build a golf course with an exclusive club over our forest, whispered Menelao. Over my dead body, whispered Brutus Zapp and clenched his hand on the knife. What, are you going to tickle them with the knife, Brutus? whispered Ignacio Salar. Watch me, said Brutus.

Brutus broke the ranks and moved into position closer to the three men, measuring each step so he did not draw attention, aiming to align himself with his back against the side of the first man's boot, where he was covered by the shade of the man's pants. He kept the knife in his teeth until he moved slowly toward the front of the boot where he obtained visuals of the shoelaces, then he immediately proceeded at cutting the laces at the point where they inserted into a hole to form the loop. He succeeded at the first attempt, and moved to cut again, in another spot to guarantee the detachment of the lace from the boot. He returned to the first position, showed the okay sign to the others watching him in awe from the bush, while the three fullsize men were still talking business, not thinking in the slightest to look down and check their boots. Brutus continued the operation, moving to the other boots, repeated another dozen cuts without losing composure. All laces had been liberated from the boots, being now only a matter of time and a few steps of walking until all boots came loose.

He had just finished the last cut and was returning to the hiding place, when the men started moving and blocked his return path. Hey, I am walking here, screamed Brutus. The men could not care less, did not hear tiny Brutus and continued moving, one of them coming from behind, hitting Brutus with the side of his boot and projecting the tiny human into the air

like a mini cannonball. Ayeee, screamed Brutus while flying into the bush, which sounded just like any other chirping forest bird to the three normal-sized humans.

Brutus landed on a patch of moss, while the businessmen walked away. The group quickly ran to him, Are you okay Brutus? asked Marichka. I guess, said Brutus with an aching voice, holding his ribs, looking for his knife. Did you break anything? asked Sly Stone. Only my pride, said Brutus and gestured that he was really thirsty.

## 40

Later that evening, urgent meeting of the Oak Collective, Fiona Farrinelli taking notes, everyone present.

What can we learn from what happened? asked Ignacio Salar almost rhetorically as if he already knew the answer. Isn't it obvious, said Brutus Zapp, we are on the verge of being invaded and destroyed. Are you suggesting that we need to build our defences? asked Cecil Millington. I think he is saying more than that, said Gunther Glassfarb, I think he saying we have to consider all options available, including pre-emptive strikes or even a counter-offensive. You are not serious Gunther, said Mallarika Patekar, how can we defend ourselves against such an overwhelming force? We know from history that the weak have always been conquered against their will. We have an advantage, said Brutus, in that we know of their intentions, and we possess the same knowledge, our only shortcoming is our size. In our case, size matters, said Peggy and many agreed.

An owl hooted to the rising moon.

Marie-Louise Lubala spoke. Even with the knowledge of superior power, the weak are still often defeated, regardless of their size and number. In my country millions have perished

under bullets, bombs and swords coming from the North. Many are still toiling the earth today, digging it up, to send resources to the powerful. There is no escape. If the powerful want your land, they will get it. If the powerful want your body, they will have it.

If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stomping on a human face, forever, said Berta Esperanza. Geez, that's bleak, said Donatello Zuniga. It's from a book, said Berta.

A starry night, beautiful and serene, was unfolding.

I don't like this at all, said Lynton Friedman, the senior political advisor. We were here first. They cannot just come, take our land, and build a goddamn golf course. If I were in my normal-sized life, I would look at it differently, I suppose. But this is our life now. This is our community. We have a right to live. You are on to something Lynton, said Billy Nordhaus, the oil rig foreman and Lynton's best friend. I agree with you. We are here. We have to live. Fred Hayektom stepped up to speak. Unless it is part of the simulation, he said. What do you mean? said somebody from the group. I mean that those three men are not real, they are simulated, and just came to test us. You cannot prove that, said Menelao. You cannot prove the contrary, said Fred. Guys, nobody has the burden of proof, said Paula Lipman, as we do not have a baseline for this reality except for our senses, and the perception we have of each other. This is good enough to consider that what we have here is real, for all intents and purposes. There is hard to get a grasp on reality if we cannot trust our sense.

Nightlife was waking up. Crickets, birds, soft wind, the usual.

Okay, okay, we act as if it is real, said Brutus. I don't care if it is a game or not. Our lives are at stake. I feel it in my blood, in my gut, in my thoughts. That's good enough for me. Hear, hear, said a number of folks. What do we do? asked Aiko Kochiyama who had been listening carefully, we cannot really fight back bulldozers. We can set them on fire, said Marcus Literolis. I

like that, said Sly Stone, I like that very much, that will send a message. I don't know if it will be effective, said Zuri Owuor, it will draw attention to us, they will come back with stronger forces, they can always come back with more bulldozers. Maybe we can change their hearts, said Marichka Kobrynska. Hmm, that is a good feeling, said Cléa, the nurse, I like that, I like to hope we can change people's hearts and minds.

The humans went quiet for a while, in unison, trying to hide behind their own thoughts, drawing conclusions, then dropping them, riding waves of emotion, feeling real, all too real, converging in the end on a deep, raw, unadulterated desire to live.

## 41

**H**istory teaches that humans resort to action when there is enough motivation to overcome fear, biases, apathy, and other mundane priorities. When your house is on fire, you may be tempted to leave fast before you are engulfed in flames. When a house one hundred kilometers away is on fire, and you see the smoke rising high, you might be tempted to sit and watch for a while. When a forest is on fire a thousand kilometers away or on another continent, you will not do anything because the flames and the smoke will not inconvenience you. And if a fire grows as big as a country, while still far away from you, you may feel smoke blocking your sun, you may taste the ashes in your mouth. Will you do something then? It is hard to say, because even if you want to do something, there will be nothing available for you to do, unless you are a trained firefighter, or a medical professional. You may want to shout at somebody in power to do something about it, and it will be just that, shouting at power. When the vast fires will finally arrive at your house, then you will leave, likely still screaming in all directions, at the neighbours, at

the powerful. That is the life of humans on Earth.

Or is it? said Berta Esperanza.

It is nobody's fault in particular, said Margaret Fletcher, the real estate expert.

It's the system, said Donatello Zuniga.

The system was made by humans and can be unmade by humans, said Ignacio Salar.

The collective had decided to do something about their potential invaders. They listened to the history of colonization, as told by several members one evening at a campfire. They listened to the military expertise of Brutus Zapp. They weighed strategies. They wrote down assignments for action. What if we made this land undesirable? said somebody from the group. What if we hide its potential? said somebody else. We have to show it is unprofitable, said Jasmine Flier, that is very costly to develop, and with little prospect to make money from it.

Nothing stops bulldozers in their search for profit, said Cléa the nurse. We are the invisibles. We are disposable. They will use everything in their power to get to their objective. Nothing else matters.

Sometimes they pretend to listen, said Debra Literolis. Yeah, I know that talk, it's all hogwash, said Brutus.

What if we poisoned the land, targeted, said Celeste Millington, to give the impression it's inhospitable for development. Like what? said Fred Hayektom. We make a hundred holes around the perimeter and we fill them with a stinky gas. When they come, we release the gas. They will think the land has a vast deposit of stinky gas, which is not very palatable to the noses of potential club members. I like that, said Brutus, where do we get the gas? We make it through fermentation. Sounds like a good idea, said several members from the group.

They decided to start work on the next day, but could not.

There was something in the air already that smelled of charred wood, soot, boiled ferns. The horizon turned from clear blue to a washed bluish grey. It was getting thicker. Then they saw orange far away, flames that were towering above the land on a line that stretched for many kilometres. The forest was on fire.

By the end of day, helicopters were whirling around the fires dropping loads of water. The wind had picked up, pushing the fires farther into the landscape, fortunately away from the Oak Collective's compound. Under the literal light of fire, it had become self-evident that there would be no need to make the land undesirable for venture capitalists, as nature had manifested itself to send a clear message that bulldozers must stay away, indefinitely.

## 42

Weeks passed without noteworthy events. Except for when two sheep gave birth to two lambs stirring unanimous joy in the collective who decided to throw a party to mark the event. The lambs were named Joy and Hope, appropriately, without objection. Only two days later, after the excitement had petered out, much to the surprise of humans, two more sheep gave birth to two more lambs, named Curiosity and Perseverance, each one weighing less than a dozen grams, slightly heavier than Joy and Hope. Someone from the collective shouted, Miracle.

When the next pair of lambs were born, another two days later, there was certainly some surprise, but no human came forward to propose another celebration. This is becoming a pattern, said Aiko Kochiyama, the video game designer. Patterns usually have predictability and an underlying theory, said Fred Hayektom. What do you think is happening, said Lynton Friedman. I am not a veterinarian Lynton. I know that Fred, I am just asking.

Jasmine Flier came forward. Folks, we need to assess all the sheep. I may be able to tell if others are pregnant.

Five more sheep were found pregnant, likely in advanced stages. A few weeks later the herd of sheep had doubled in size. Jasmine Flier had to commit herself full-time to the role of shepherd. After some initial hesitation, Holly-Kate Glassfarb and Harding C. decided to join Jasmine full-time. Holly-Kate's reservations had to do with the fact that she didn't like to get her hands dirty, but loved dairy products very much and began to feel a deep spiritual connection to the animals that produced the milk and cheese for her benefit. I feel exhilarated when I touch the wool of the sheep, I feel their soul. Harding C.'s reasons to join had to do with his deep bonding with Sheep, and he also wanted to pass his obligations at the mill to somebody else if he came to shepherding full time.

After roles had been assumed, with the knowledge and consent of the collective, one evening at the nightly hangout, Gunther Glassfarb stood up suddenly to say, Folks, now that we have so many new sheep, we can start thinking about expanding our production of clothing and dairy to grow our reserves. I'm thinking specifically of cheese, we can never have enough cheese, so let's just make as much as we can. I love cheese, said somebody from the group. I think we can all agree to that, said Gunther Glassfarb. I don't think we need that much, said Paula Lipman, we already produce more than we consume. There is never enough cheese, said Gunther Glassfarb. Haha, amen brother, said Lynton Friedman. Plus, how do we know when we have enough? said Gunther Glassfarb. It is a question of comparing needs to resources, said Menelao. We are now in a situation where resources outpace our needs, but that should not mean that we should exploit all our resources just because they exist.

Gunther Glassfarb stopped to read the group. The majority of

folks seemed to agree with Menelao. Fanatic cheese-lovers seemed to agree with him, but not all of them.

I propose a vote, he said.

The vote was twenty to thirteen to not increase in the production of dairy. Donatello Zuniga after having voted for more production said, How do we know when we produce enough? Do we not have to account for unforeseen events in the future where our needs might increase? Do we not risk losing resources in the future? Why not take advantage of them now, while we have them?

I thought about that too, said Missy D. Point, the hairdresser, but I think we might add to the risk if we exploit the sheep too much now.

I agree with Missy, said Holly-Kate. Let us produce to match our needs now, protect the sheep, watch their health, so we can maintain this equilibrium for as long as we can. This is the most reasonable path to keep risks low, and cover our needs for a longer time period.

I agree, said several folks from the crowd.

Ok, then. Since we had the vote already, it remains settled, said Menelao. Gunther, everyone, are you good with this? What Missy and Holly-Kate said makes sense.

Yeah, I'm okay with that, said Gunther.

We're okay too, said the other twelve who voted with Gunther.

## 43

Roman poet Juvenal described in the poem *Satire VI* the potential qualities of a woman worthy of marriage. His words were *rara avis in terris, nigroque simillima cygno*. It translates to *a rare bird in the world, very similar to the black swan*.

During his time, first century Common Era, black swans were presumed not to exist. A black swan event is an unexpected high-impact event that is difficult to predict and prepare for under normal circumstances but that in hindsight appears to have been inevitable.

What do you mean by that, Margaret? Can you give us an example? said Cléa, the nurse.

Well, take for example cheese production, said Margaret Fletcher. We voted not to extend the production based on our assessment of our needs. However, there can be an unforeseen event, called a black swan, that could catch us completely off-guard, could disrupt the flow of our collective, and even jeopardize our safety.

Like what? said Missy D. Point.

I don't know, said Margaret. That's why it's called a black swan. It's impossible to predict.

Like the evolution of the climate? said Missy D. Point.

Umm... yes, in a sense, but not like climate itself, more like specific weather events that affect local communities.

Can a heavy storm be a black swan for us? said Cléa.

Yes, if it is strong enough it can destroy our entire establishment, said Margaret Fletcher.

Some members of the collective were not present to this ad-hoc lecture Margaret offered to hold for those who were curious about her very successful career in business, how she made it to the top as a woman, raised without a father figure, then made it through a tough business school to become a top executive in the real estate industry. When Margaret asked the women present to lean in, come closer, because she wanted to share some personal stuff in confidence, something that women would only share with other women, after they built a deep connection based on trust, in that very moment, the foliage of nearby trees started to move in an

unnatural pattern, with clear indication of intent. Then screams and noises were heard, many of them, uncountable.

Heelp, cried many voices of humans.

Brutus sounded the horn he made himself from hard wood, the members came rushing to the compound dropping everything they were doing, according to the security protocol written by Brutus and agreed upon collectively.

Billy, Lynton, you're with me, said Brutus. Marcus, take Sly and Jayden with you. Donatello, Ignacio, Rajesh, you three secure the perimeter. Everybody else, take defensive positions.

Forgive me Brutus, said Berta Esperanza, but I heard cry for help, not a cry for attack.

I heard it too, said Brutus. Trust me, this is for the best.

The teams dispersed per Brutus's instructions, took their gear up into the tree where the cries were coming from, and kept close to each other. Soon they discovered the first sources of noise. There were many small humans stuck in leaves, in various nooks of bark, in uncomfortable positions. Dozens, maybe more. Who are you? Brutus asked the first human, dressed in priestly garbs. The priest was in shock and kept repeating God have mercy God have mercy. Brutus freed the man from the entrapment and instructed his team to help the man climb down to the ground where he could be processed by the others. Help, here, over here, cried many other tiny humans stuck in the tree. Brutus in turn shouted at the ground, We need two more teams here on the double. No danger. We're safe.

It took hours for five teams to help the stranded tiny humans climb down from the tree. By the end of day, the total count was in the high hundreds, all in shock, very few able to speak.

Emergency meeting of the Oak Collective. Notetaker and secretary, Fiona Farrinelli, who brought Bubble the Yorkie with her because Bubble would not have it any other way.

I know it's late, but I had no other choice but to call this meeting, said Cecil Millington. All members had the right to call urgent meetings at any hour. We have obviously experienced a black swan event, Cecil continued, an unexpected, unpredictable surge in the size of our population. What do we do about it?

What do we know so far? asked Billy Nordhaus, the oil rig foreman.

That they experienced shrinkage, just like us, said Paula Lipman, that they are all unharmed, some still recovering from shock, they come from various locations around the world, not everyone speaks our language, they are many, do we have a number, Florencia?

Nine hundred sixty-seven, said Florencia Gallardo, the doctor.

And with the thirty-three of us, that makes the entire population, a total of one thousand, said Paula Lipman. Surreally interesting I would say. Okay. We also know that our food reserves can cover the needs of the entire population for two weeks, Gunther?

Yes, fifteen days at current rate of consumption, said Gunther Glassfarb, who had taken the role of shift supervisor at the mill.

Sorry, you wanted to add something?

Yes, Paula, I did, said Gunther. I don't mean to sound snarky, but I did talk about increasing production.

A black swan event cannot be a factor in planning production, said Menelao Melanoliou. There is a vast number of potential black swans. We cannot account for all of them. We cannot put pressure on our resources just in case there will be a black swan. If we have such an event, we reassess then. So yes, I think we need to increase our production immediately for the needs of our entire population.

You're okay with that? Said Gunther.

Of course I am okay with that, Gunther, replied Menelao without skipping a beat.

We can then all agree we need to organise for more production, said Gunther.

We need more manpower, intervened Brutus Zapp who was holding the roster of names and duties. I will approach the newcomers, the healthiest first, to recruit them, sorry, engage them in production. I do not expect any resistance, sorry, recalcitrance, no, wrong word, reluctance, yeah, that's right, reluctance. I will make it clear it is about their survival.

Do we need to worry about our current reserves? Asked Fred Hayektom. Like, you know, security concerns?

Security is tight around the storage pit, said Brutus. I got my men on it. But we must increase supply immediately. We don't want riots and theft.

We don't, said somebody from the group.

There is also the matter of sleeping accommodations, said Paula Lipman. We got that covered for now, outdoors, which is not ideal. I expect we can start carving new apartments tomorrow.

How about healthcare? asked Marie-Louise Lubala.

I am working on a plan, replied Florencia Gallardo the doctor. There are some mild conditions that are under observations.

I can help with translation, said Gao Jianxing.

I can help with counselling, said Mallarika Patekar.

I can help with communication, said Ignacio Salar.

Harding C. kept quiet during the meeting, nodded frequently, patted Sheep on her head, thought about his family, played with several explanations and scenarios in his mind, discarded them one by one, methodically, remembered what Marie-Louise said some time ago *This is enough evidence for me to believe that this is real*. Harding C. felt the expansion of humanity around him deeply in his soul.

## 45

One thousand tiny humans with the average weight of thirty grams each consume one full normal-size Roma tomato, eighty grams of bread, and on average one thousand kilocalories per month, roughly speaking, on wide spectrum of needs. There are other issues I have identified, said Harding C. to the Oak Collective meeting of members, after he had been appointed as organizer of the inventory. Our stock of seeds is enough to feed one thousand tiny humans, henceforth I will just say humans if you don't mind, for simplicity, so the stock is enough to last three months assuming we plant immediately under controlled conditions, which means building more greenhouses. Logic dictates, rationing of food distribution will become inevitable, rationing of water will not be as stringent because we can build containers for water much faster, and there is enough supply of wood for this purpose. Next, waste.

One moment, Harding, said Cecil Millington, you speak about rationing, who will decide how much is enough per person.

I have made calculations, said Harding C., here they are. Please review.

Can I see? Said Gunther Glassfarb.

The members took turns at reviewing the rationing numbers and gave their approval by nodding.

May I continue? said Harding C. Please, somebody from the group said. Next, waste. I know we are in a good position to generate only organic waste, which is great, but it is still waste, and coming from one thousand humans we're talking higher volume. We will need to dig more waste pits with proper insulation.

Agree, said somebody from the group.

Shelter is the third concern, said Harding C. We are fortunate that we are not in the midst of winter, so sleeping outdoors under makeshift shelters within the compound is reasonable at least for a week until we build more living quarters.

We will need to expand the compound and the defences, said Brutus Zapp, the former colonel. I assume responsibility. Will recruit the team.

Thank you. While we are in the privileged position of being first here and having established a provisioning system, it does not mean we are the sole sovereigns of this land. There are more of us know.

Right, said Zuri Owuor, the writer, I am glad you said that.

Which means, continued Harding C., we will need to engage the many new humans in the process, gently, carefully, so they understand and accept that cooperation is essential for survival.

How do you suggest we do that? asked Fred Hayektom, the retired tech bro.

I will write something and present it as soon as possible, said Harding C. and sat down. The meeting was adjourned.

## 46

A good number of humans from the new batch recovered from shock within days and were able to have thoughtful conversations with the members of the Oak Collective. There was no dissent to the existing plans, no new suggestions, except

for a friendly one coming from a young male in his twenties, a geography student working part-time as a barista: Would it be better if we created more collectives like yours, let's say one collective per tree? They can handle the affairs for those living in that tree, and collaborate with the other trees, as equal groups in the entire compound? To which Harding C. replied, That is great idea, and it aligns perfectly with what we have been discussing, if you don't mind dear sir, I will present a sort of governance manual later this afternoon to the entire gathering of humans and solicit opinions.

I talked to many folks, said Florencia Gallardo, the doctor. The general feeling is that of immense gratitude for having been rescued. I expect they will be quite open to collaboration and agreement.

Survival can be a great motivator for cooperation, said the geography student.

I quite agree, said Harding C.

Later that afternoon, after lunch had been served for the entire population, a stew of potatoes and vegetables, quite delicious, a recipe of Debra Literolis', the Oak Collective invited everyone to listen to a public presentation of a governance system that could help with the survival of everyone there, with equal and fair access to all resources, with fair participation to serving the needs of the collective, observing principles such as *all for one, and one for all* or *the golden rule* or *declared expectations and assumed responsibilities* and many others, well written by Harding C. with some additional help from others who had some free time.

Dear fellow humans, Harding C. began his presentation, speaking from a raised lectern atop of a flat pebble, trying to project his voice all the way to the other end of the compound. There are so many of us now, one thousand souls in this shrinkage predicament, which some of us have already gotten accustomed to. Whether we will escape this situation or not, we certainly have no choice but to make the best of it, as it feels as

real as any human experience, certainly with some exceptions. We are facing tough questions. How to survive? How do we defend ourselves against predators? How should we organize ourselves? How can we stay united?

Yeah, shouted somebody from the crowd and received immediate applause.

Glad you are with me, friends. Soon, everyone is going to move into the living quarters we carved out together, thank you all for contributing. Next, our gardens must expand. The capacity of the mill. Defences. Increased collective vigilance because now we are more likely to draw attention. Once an eagle attacked us, probably thought we were chipmunks. We had a hard time pushing it back. Had we not been prepared, we might have lost some of our members. This could happen again. Also, full size humans may cross into our territory, as has happened recently. We definitely do not want to draw their attention. We might end up on international news. Or in some laboratory. We don't want that, do we?

Nooo, said the crowd.

We wrote some recommendations based on the experience of the Oak Collective. Fiona Farrinelli will distribute some copies now. Please read and we will meet again Friday at six o'clock to discuss.

Can we try to organize ourselves into a society with a structure? asked a human from the crowd.

Yes, we can discuss on Friday, said Harding C.

Like how we decide what is important, how we divide work, how we maintain fairness, said the same person.

Yes, we'll talk about all that on Friday. Folks, think about all these. Bring your thoughts. All ideas matter. Don't be late. Friday six o'clock.

Stanley “Sly” Stone, the musician, and Yolanda Francescone, his girlfriend the Swedish model, were working in their makeshift workshop, when Jayden and Jasmine came in without knocking as there was no door, Anybody home, we come in, we have food, then entered without waiting for a reply as they were on friendly terms with Sly and Yolanda.

What are you working on? asked Jayden. This is a percussion instrument, this is a windpipe, this is some sort of harp, Yoly, hand me that chisel. That’s awesome man, said Jayden. We brought a fruit basket, said Jasmine. You’re too kind, said Yolanda.

Man, I’ve been thinking, said Jayden, we should organize a big concert for everyone. Folks are still stressed about the whole situation. They need some relaxation.

That’s exactly what we were thinking, said Yolanda. We need more musicians and artists.

I can help with that, said Jasmine. Doesn’t have to be a string quartet. We can have a beat n’drum party.

Soon, when I’m finished with these instruments, we can start rehearsals, said Sly.

Yolanda and I can recruit artists, said Jasmine.

What do I do? said Jayden joking that he appeared to be left out of the plan.

You can help me here, said Sly.

Eternal sunshine for the soulful kind, said Jayden. What do you mean? said Sly while chiseling. It’s what we do here, we

make sunshine for the soul, while sailing on an ocean of doubt and mystery. You are a poet today Jayden, said Sly. Yeah man, don't you feel like something great is happening to us since the shrinkage? There is something yeah, but what are you thinking? Something like all this was supposed to happen, not in the sense that we were chosen, but that it was inevitable that this would happen to us. Interesting. And it's more than that, said Jayden, it's that all of this has already happened and we are just going through it again just so we understand what is happening to us. Now, that's interesting, I hadn't thought of that. When the new cohort appeared it all clicked, said Jayden, it feels even more inevitable, so to speak. Inevitable? said Yolanda. Yeah, like this party must happen, like we should have fun and live with acceptance. Are you saying we should remain small? asked Sly. No, no, think more about what is, how it is, and less about why it is. Feels philosophical to me. Jayden was pacing back and forth in the workshop. I feel nature around us as quite limited. Imposes on us careful planning and rationing for survival. At the same time, our imagination feels unchained, limitless. We can build whatever world we want. Feels limitless, but it is bounded by this forest and I'm okay with all this. Pretty reasonable to me, said Sly, let's make some drums now. We can use those walnuts, and these sheets I made from skeleton flowers, *diphylleia grayi*. They have petals that become transparent when in contact with water. I thought they grow only in Japan, said Jasmine. I thought so too, said Sly. Maybe we are in Japan, said Jasmine. Who knows.

## 48

**T**hieves, freeloaders, slackers, don't like them, they're just a pest in society, said Brutus Zapp. Couldn't agree more, said Fred Hayektom, the retired billionaire who was chewing

roasted strawberry seeds, do you think we have a problem with our group. I have reasons for concern, said Brutus. One thing is for sure, said Billy Nordhaus, the oil rig foreman, I've seen how hard some of the new folks were working on building the new accommodations, there was this obese dude who gave up after twenty minutes, said he cannot work anymore, it was just annoying, but he did want a place to live. Tell me about it, said Margaret Fletcher, the real estate expert, I know the person, asked for half of my salad when he saw I didn't finish it. Did you give it to him? asked Brutus. I did, actually, he was just there, I couldn't toss it to the sheep. I knew it! said Brutus, goddam freeloaders. Maybe there are some extenuating circumstances, said Lynton Friedman, the senior political advisor. What circumstances? said Gunther Glassfarb, also present and suffering from a mild stomachache with an unknown cause which rendered him less conversational. Maybe his bodily constitution predisposes him to certain behaviours, said Lynton. Yeah, yeah, I keep hearing liberals give that argument, said Brutus, look, I respect the constitution with my entire being, but that doesn't give me the right to freeload on somebody else's back. It's not about that Brutus, said Lynton. I know man, I know, I'm just making the point, and I know the difference between biology and rule of law, in case you were wondering. You also said something about thieves, said Donatello Zuniga who arrived a bit late. Right, thieves, I think it's inevitable, it's just human nature, said Brutus, we gotta protect our assets or we risk chaos. I'm new here, said a man in a white shirt whose name was not known to everyone else present, looks like you guys have done a pretty good job at surviving before our cohort arrived, and I agree with you sir that not everyone is a saint, I have seen some fellow humans in my cohort trying to grab extra rations from storage, nothing scandalous, probably they didn't know you have a system with rules, let's give them some benefit of the

doubt, however what if they did know about the rules, which were clearly announced repeatedly over several days, what if they knew and they proceeded with stealing, nevertheless, don't ask me why, there are reasons for all behaviours, can we always know the reasons, can we always understand them, unlikely, but this does not excuse them or allow society to fall into disarray so the gentlemen here is correct with his concern about thieves, freeloaders, and slackers, all societies are tainted with specimens like these, which leaves us no choice, and I will finish with this thought, that us fine honourable men, and women certainly, have an obligation to ourselves and to society to preserve the order you sir were talking about, because there is little else that distinguishes us from the wild beasts I often hear at night, a frightening thought if you ask me. Good point, said Marcus Literolis, the general contractor, but how do we get to enforce these rules, after everyone agreed on them. Enforcement is my specialty, said Brutus, but I do require some legitimacy for my techniques and this can only be acquired from proper dissemination of said rules of enforcement so that the population is very aware of them, including the consequences of non-compliance, but not limited to them, so to get to that point, some passive acknowledgment, preferably active, but passive also works, is required, we can do it with a plebiscite, or with an announcement posted on the bulletin board to say something like, if you have an objection by this date, post it here or say it out loud at the meeting, and if no objection, the legitimation is obtained, so we are good to proceed. What kind of consequences do you have in mind, sir? asked the man in the white shirt. There is a wide range of possibilities, with different degrees of pressure on adverse behaviour, we can start with private admonition, then we move to public admonition, then removal of a small allowance of food, then a larger allowance, all according to the rules of engagement, agreed upon in advance of course. Of

course. Then, we can up the ante, continued Brutus, to some sort of psychological restraint, for example, they will not be allowed to participate in fun events, then next level, they will be subjected to physical restraint, such as house arrest. Do you think it can go that far? said the man in the white shirt. In my experience dear sir, said Brutus, I became familiar with the entire spectrum of human behaviour, anything is possible, you can also ask the several scientists we have in our community, they will confirm that in such a large group as ours, the likelihood of having individuals with anti-social behaviour is above average. Thank you for your clarifications, said the nameless man. Does anybody else have other concerns?

## 49

The Women's Club had organised a group hike for a Thursday afternoon, going south of the compound, at the initiative of Zuri Owuor the writer who said, Let us go on a hike just us women to reflect on our situation, exchange some jokes, talk about some issues, away from the distraction of the compound. I very much like this idea, said Missy D. Point, the hairdresser, while the other women all professed their enthusiastic participation.

About an hour into their walk Marichka Kobrynska, the electrical engineer, tripped and fell to the ground face down in such a weird position and so unexpected that some of her companions thought she was enacting a physical comedy bit, while others realised that it had been an accident and rushed to help. I'm fine, I'm fine, said Marichka. They quickly found the cause of her tripping, an inconspicuous protuberance into the ground, rather hard and dark-coloured, not a rock, not roots, or other natural elements, but a metallic object, or at least a small part of

a larger object, evidently man-made, with geometrical patterns. The women grabbed sticks and began digging around the object, the more soil they removed, the more object they unearthed, as it seemed it was much bigger than at first impression.

It took them at least another thirty minutes to remove enough soil to form an idea of what the object was, and they realised when they uncovered a part of the object that resembled a curved lever, inside a rectangle with two edges attached to be body of the object, and two edges detached, Oh my goodness, said Mallarika Patekar, the activist, this is a trigger, the object is a pistol. Holy moly, said Aiko, Marie-Louise, Florencia and Cléa at the same time. What do we do? said Mallarika. Let's dig it up, then we'll decide what to do with it, said Paula G. Lipman.

The pistol was unearthed within the hour. They cleaned the soil around it, Jasmine Flier climbed on it and made sure the safety lock was in the locked position, Yolanda used the sunlight on a mirror to look inside the barrel for a bullet, there was no bullet, Debra managed to open the chamber to find that it was full of bullets, Oops, she said, what do I do? Close it back, I suppose, said Fiona Farrinelli, we'll see later if that means anything. Should we tell the men? said Peggy. I don't see a reason not to tell everyone, said Celeste Millington. You're right, you're right, we are a collective, men, women, we live together, we discover together, we learn together, we decide together.

How do we carry the pistol back? asked Holly-Kate. We can build a raft and pull it with ropes. Do we have ropes? I packed a bit of rope, said Jasmine, and we can make more from natural fibers. Good idea. Perhaps I can run to the compound and ask for help, said Zuri, what do you think. I think it's a good idea, said Jasmine, unless anyone else thinks differently. No, no, it's okay, said some women from the group. Any objections? There were no objections.

While Zuri ran back to the compound, the raft was constructed quickly, ropes aligned in such a way that the load was equally distributed in two lines of towing, and they began pulling, removing slowly the pistol from the hole in the ground where it was laying, barrel facing down, as if the pistol fell from someone's holster into the wet ground, and weather piled more material over it until it was almost completely covered.

Half-way back, they met a group of men running with Zuri, well-prepared with more ropes, a bunch of wooden wheels, tools, refreshments, the sorts, and immediately took over from the women, after exchanging gentle courtesies, Are you all okay? Are you hurt? Everyone was fine, everyone partook in a sentiment of excitement and trepidation at the discovery, and thank goodness, nothing bad happened. Marichka Kobrynska had recovered from the shock, was walking normally, and felt no pain.

Tea was made for everyone that evening. The entire community was present to witness the arrival of the salvaged pistol carried with a makeshift wooden cart. The Oak Collective summoned an emergency meeting to collect suggestions for what to do with the pistol. Suggestions were collected in pieces of leaves, dropped in a basket, read out loud so everyone could hear. Fiona Farrinelli kept the tally, read the results close to midnight. After another couple of rounds of selecting the top suggestions, the finalists were, in no particular order the following: melt the pistol and use the metal to forge tools, use the pistol for self-defence, disassemble the pistol and use the parts as tools but no melting because in this scenario the pistol can be reassembled and repurposed for self-defence. It was sometime after three a.m., when the winning suggestion by absolute majority was to melt the pistol down and forge tools. Let it be so, said Fiona Farrinelli and adjourned the meeting.

## 50

Zuri Owuor began the storytelling class speaking passionately. She said, Authors are not supposed to break the wall of imagination, or the world of fantasy with its peculiar rules, regardless of whether it is filled with anthropomorphized talking animals, or supernatural powers, or phenomena that would make reasonable scientists cringe, yet, what if the breaking of this wall is an act of imagination onto itself, which spills over the makeshift fantastic contraptions, and creates a meta-reality beyond questions of plausibility. Dragons, dinosaurs, elves, hobbits require a reality with laws, require fabrications. I say, friends, let us ignore fabrications and just live this life, as it is, respect it, mock it, explore it, make the best of it, then we'll see what happens. But, please let us not destroy it, because fabrication or not, it is what we have, and we cannot afford anything else, at least for the time being until we understand more what is going on.

If I understand this correctly, said Ignacio Monserrate Ernesto Salar, the fact that we became little is part of our life story, we should take it as it is, make the best of it, actually enjoy it, because just like our entire life it is much beyond our control. Yes, said Berta Isabel Esperanza, we do not know why this happened to us, do we want to return to full size, perhaps, I don't know, I am not suffering now, I actually like it, I have time to think and reflect, life seems simpler and more interesting, at the same time, look we even have time to sit down with each other in this storytelling class, I remember when I was a full

size human, I barely had time to read a book for pleasure. For me stories are very important, said Gao Jianxing the translator, I made a living from quickly grasping meaning from words and reconstructing them in another language, what good is life if we are not able to tell it in stories. Even as full-sized humans we lived for stories, said Yolanda Francescone, the Swede, whether it was films, music, fashion, interior decoration, we did all that to consume a narrative made by others or create our own story about who we are, what we want. Do we think anything has changed now? Jayden Flier asked the group.

It's almost the same to me, said Fred Hayektom, the tech bro, except that it's smaller, but what I mean by that is that the sense of self I have hasn't changed at all, I kept my memories, my philosophy of life, however it is because of this size that I have a different rapport with the world, so I'm starting to develop new thoughts, which contradict some of my earlier convictions, maybe yes, what can I do, I cannot change anything, even if I wanted to because now my story has all of you in it, that's just the truth, I cannot ignore that, and I'm feeling how that transforms me. I think that's beautiful, said Missy D. Point, the hairdresser.

Does anybody else want to share? said Zuri.

Sure, I'll go, said Gunther Glassfarb, it's hard for me to find words. You can do it, said Holly-Kate Glassfarb with a mix of friendliness and pedagogy in her voice, while Peggy, his former lover, also present, was eagerly waiting to hear what Gunther had to say, Gigi the Pomeranian was snoring on her lap, Peggy was hoping to hear some words of atonement, or an evolution in the character of Gunther, instead she was genuinely surprised at Gunther's words. Friends, everything that was said here is also true to me, and I realise the lack of choice we have in who we are, or what happens to us, yet my mind keeps delivering to me thoughts of escape, I still feel I need to fight back, but I don't know who my enemy is, if there is one. And I make steps

towards acceptance, but is that a good thing I wonder, I think it is, I see you all here, the entire village, we do look like a village now, don't we, something unites us, you Zuri call this forging a living story, I like that, I call them living through events together, we surely do want to survive, that's number one, we surely need each other, that's number two, we have something to look forward to, whether to go back, or to make our life here better, yeah, I suppose, I feel better now.

All humans present clapped to show support and encouragement. Gunther was visibly touched. Gigi woke up and Peggy whispered to him, it's okay to go back to sleep, it's all good. Many others took turns to share stories about how they felt, how they described the situation, what they hoped they can do with their lives. It was a good night for everyone.

## 51

Melting the pistol produced a sizable amount of metal so much so that Cecil Millington who was in charge of the smelting had to stop the smelting suddenly and prepare a rush report for the evening meeting of the entire community in which he said excitedly, Folks, we have so much metal, we could make gardening tools for each of you. That cannot be true, said Gunther Glassfarb who used to be the CEO of Solid Carbon Capital, Inc., which specialized in the optimal allocation of resources. But it is true, said Cecil, there are a thousand people here, the metal required to produce a rake, or a trowel, or a shovel, or pruning shears is minuscule, it's a matter of milligrams per tool while we have at least three hundred thousand milligrams, not counting the bullets, which may add a few thousand milligrams, so there you go, of course not every person requires a full set of gardening tools, we could certainly share,

perhaps we can establish a sharing system for each tree collective, with a gardening shed at the bottom of the tree, a sign-up sheet to check out tools, duration of use and so on. I suppose that makes sense, said Gunther Glassfarb.

Which brings me back to the issue, what to do with so much metal, considering that our team has melted barely half of the pistol, the furnace is still up and running, the team is forging gardening tools all day long.

Marcus Literolis here, if I may say a word. Go ahead Marcus, said Fiona Farrinelli who was taking minutes per usual. I would like to add a proposal for consideration, to use the metal for the construction of a larger aeroplane, maybe that is not the right word, a glider, a flying glider, you know the one that does not require an engine to run and uses aerodynamics and air currents to fly. What would be the purpose of this glider? asked Sly Stone, the musician. Well, to survey the surroundings, get a clearer picture of where we are and how far away the next human settlement is. Ahem, said Sly Stone. To be frank, said Marcus, it would also be an attempt to find an escape, or just to explore. It is human nature to explore, said Paula Lipman. Right, said Marcus Literolis, what do you all think?

If we have so much metal at our disposal, Billy Nordhaus said, why not attempt to build some sort of motor, we have specialists among us, we can make wires and coils, axles, freewheels and ball bearings. To what end? said Missy D. Point. Whatever end, said Billy Nordhaus, improve the quality of life.

We can build a crane and use it to build a giant dome over our village, said Lynton Friedman, the senior political advisor. There you go, said Billy Nordhaus. Wait, a dome? Why would we need a dome? said Cléa, the nurse. Well, it is rather self-evident, said Lynton Friedman, for self-defence against predatory birds, for weather control. Ah, said Cléa.

Or some better guns, said Blythe “Brutus” Zapp. You and your

guns, said Cléa. Forgive me if I am overcautious, said Brutus. I forgive you, said Cléa and smiled.

Let us all just say our ideas out loud, then we can discuss and vote, interrupted Fiona Farrinelli quickly in a louder voice to keep the meeting on point. Musical instruments, said Jayden Flier. A radio antenna and a radio, said Jasmine Flier. I like that, said several folks from the crowd. Cookie shape cutters, said Margaret Fletcher. Springs for mattresses, said Rajesh Biswas. A lightening rod, said Zuri Owuor. A lorry, said Donatello Zuniga. Are you serious Donatello? said Ignacio Salar. Yeah, for transportation. How about some ploughs, said Ignacio. Pipes and water tanks, said Gao Jianxing. Pans and pots, said Berta Isabel Esperanza. Needles for clothing, said Marichka Kobrynska. A printing press, said Mallarika Patekar. A silo and a bunker, said Aiko Kochiyama. Telescopes and microscopes, said Marie-Louise Lubala. Surgical tools, said Florencia Gallardo the doctor.

People spoke well into the night, Fiona wrote down all ideas, a break was called for dinner and stretching, then the villagers returned and used simple majority to vote on each idea. All passed.

## 52

About a dozen tree collectives of thirty members each or so, have come to the general consensus that they do not want to hold elections for any government body that would be in charge of making decisions for the entire community, because, we all suffer from democracy fatigue syndrome, said one person, an accomplished master electrician by trade, we know what happens when we elect so-called leaders, give them power to decide for us, they completely stop listening and will do what they please while in office, fearing only about losing the next election. A phenomenon known as passive consent.

Thusly and henceforth, I propose we should elect groups of representatives by drawing lots, said the master electrician, similar to selecting juries. I see no problem with that, said a fellow neighbour. Yeah, I like that, said more people from the group. More precisely, I think, continued the electrician, we should have a Rules Council comprised of twelve members, all selected by lottery, and a Peers Council comprised of another twelve members. The Rules Council will write rules that affect the entire community, but will not be authorized to enact them. That will be the job of the Peers Council, to vote on the rules put forward by the Rules Council. Both councils will have their members replaced every other month or so, to ensure maximum representation of all humans here, since everyone will be eligible to sit on both councils, not in both at the same time, certainly.

Will sitting on council be mandatory, just like jury duty? asked someone from the group.

I would argue that in the spirit of conviviality, said the electrician, in order to avoid this public service, folks would need to provide reasonable excuses. We should not go as far as to compel anyone, of course, we are not that big of a society, we don't circulate money, we don't have a labour market and so compulsory participation would create complications. But, I do see how such consideration would be needed if we were a group of ten thousand or a million humans, small or regular size, doesn't matter.

Would others agree to this plan? asked the same person.

I believe so, said the electrician. Many people are talking about this.

We can present it tonight at the general assembly, said the person.

Right, said the electrician. And one more thing. The Oak Collective should be disbanded, in my opinion, since they were an organisation of the first thirty-three humans who arrived here, and now we are a thousand, so we need a governance for

all. Surely each tree community can have its own mini collective with authority over the administration of the respective tree where they live plus the surrounding land where they grow their food, under whatever name they so desire, however when it comes to issues concerning the entire compound, we do need the most inclusive administration possible.

## 53

The Rules Council and the Peers Council were created that very evening. Names were drawn from a basket, and except from an elderly man who was suffering from severe soreness of the throat, everyone accepted the assignment. Harding C. was drawn to be on the Rules Council, while Peggy was drawn for the Peers Council, raising some eyebrows from certain individuals in her original group, as if they meant to say, Is she qualified? They didn't dare say it out loud, because Peggy saw them and prepared a strong rebuke along the lines of, How qualified were any of the politicians you have ever voted for? If the eyebrows had remained raised, Peggy would have added, the Rules Council will not work alone, we will hear suggestions and recommendations every day, just like politicians from the normal-sized human society have staff advising them.

The advantages of drawing lots were clear to everyone. There was no need to run elections, set up debates, hear charismatic individuals plead for themselves over others, brew unnecessary conflicts and division, print leaflets and campaign posters, strategize for marketing, play influence games, play favouritism, trade secrets in shadowy places, all of that was removed. Now, all villagers had equal chances of being drawn to serve on either council.

Suggestions and ideas for rules and activities started to come in the very next day. The shortest deliberations were on an idea to send out a scouting party of ten people in the surrounding areas for general reconnaissance. The Peers Council approved the idea right away. A call for volunteers was posted on the billboard, twenty volunteers came forward, from which ten were selected, also by drawing lot, after their general health was assessed by Florencia Gallardo, the community doctor. A day for preparations and instructions from Brutus Zapp, who had volunteered but was not drawn, a night of good sleep, and after an early rise the following day the group would head north, in the opposite direction of where the pistol was found, according to the plan.

## 54

Four hours into their mission, the group of ten discovered a secluded unshrunk cabin, not too big, not too small, no road leading to it, covered in moss and mystery, well-maintained, not broken, not sad, rather dainty and curious. We must check it out, said Sly Stone, the musician. What if there is somebody inside? asked Rajesh Biswas. See the dust on the ledge and on the door handle, said Sly Stone, it hasn't been cleaned in a while. We must think like mice, that is how we will get in.

They found a crack in the bottom of the door, pried it open, cleaned the splinters, and got in, one by one, without having to eat through wood, as rodents would do. The cabin had no occupants, as expected, only a fine layer of dust everywhere, on the empty table in the middle of the room, on shelves, on chairs, and on a black box in the corner of the room that showed the picture of a specialty drone, with a small cargo space, a remote

with two antennas, and a solar charging unit. Are you thinking of what I am thinking, said Aiko Kochiyama to Marichka Kobrynska. If you think we should take the drone then yes. We should take the drone, said Aiko Kochiyama. How are we going to do that? asked Rajesh Biswas to the entire group. We carry it out, box and all, said Sly Stone. What about the door? said Rajesh Biswas. We open the door. How. With that key in that bowl on that table, said Sly Stone.

Climbing on the table, tossing the key on the floor, carrying it to the door, pulling it up to the key hole, turning it so the door became unlocked, pulling down on the handle to open the door, was a tremendous team effort that required lots of talking, correcting, synchronizing, keeping calm, taking breaks, and mutual encouragement. They checked the contents of box, there was nothing missing, they pushed buttons, the remote and the drone responded, despite a battery level of one percent. With ropes around the box, they pulled it outside through the open door onto the soft grass, where they stopped to rest again, not for long as time was passing and the night was approaching. By the time they were ready to keep moving, two dozen villagers came to help, as it was agreed upon in advance, help must be asked when groups on a mission discover large objects that present an interest to the entire community, and especially if said objects need to be transported to the compound for further analysis and decisions.

## 55

The mandate of the Rules Council was to write rules for the community without voting on them, while the mandate of the Peers Council was to vote the rules into effect without having to worry about writing. Two complementary bodies that worked really well. Anybody could make suggestions to the Rules

Council, and the council had to discuss all suggestions. Once they wrote the applicable rule, they sent it to the Peers Council, which had meetings late afternoon when all members finished their respective chores with the local community for the day. Sometimes the voting happened over a cup of tea, some laughter and fun, raised hands for yes, and it was done.

Separating deliberation from decision was a healthy habit. It helped the community maintain a good balance between their personal lives, and the needs of the entire village. When the Rules Council put forward a proposal for some action and the Peers Council approved, there was no issue with finding volunteers to do the work. Everyone was happy to be randomly chosen to be on either council or to do whatever was needed from them. Surely, refusing to do this kind of work was tolerated as long as it was backed by reasonable excuses. It happened rarely because much pride and joy came with the work of serving and very few chose to refuse it.

One of the suggestions received after the formation of the councils was to use the drone in a mission to survey the surroundings from a high altitude. The suggestion was quite precise. It read: a team of five fit individuals would ride the drone inside its container accompanied with supplies to last them a few days, to be on the safe side. Meanwhile, a team of another five villagers would operate the drone remotely from the middle of the village to have a clear signal by using its remote. Instructions found inside the box state that the drone has a range of ten kilometers and the batteries lasts for an uninterrupted operation of eight hours. I propose the exploration of the surroundings on a radius of ten, maybe twenty kilometers, which can easily be achieved, considering the maximum speed of the drone of one hundred kilometers an hour.

There was nothing to add to this proposal, so the Rules Council forwarded it to the Peers Council unchanged, and the

peers voted in favour on the very same day. Ten volunteers were called for. Twelve people came forward, two were left out by random draw, and the teams were ready to go at once.

They headed north by northwest, as decided by group leader Jayden Flier, who had put his name forward along with Blythe “Brutus” Zapp, and Jayden was drawn by lot, while Brutus said he would then take the role of ground operations, which was everything that had to be done once they landed at the destination. I hope we will not end up like in the Hitchcock film, said Stanley “Sly” Stone referring to the heading chosen by Jayden. As the drone, carrying the group, rose above the canopy of the highest tree in the village, Aiko Kochiyama said, I like suspense, maybe we get a good thrill from this expedition. I’d rather have it be uneventful, said Cléa.

They were in touch with ground control via the on-board microphone of the drone, which was also equipped with speakers, an odd feature that made them suspect it was a special-purpose drone likely used by a forest ranger to communicate with hikers.

Objective, ten o’clock, said Jasmine Flier from her seat on the left side.

Yeah, it looks like a building, said Brutus.

Ground control, copy, we see an objective ten o’clock, said Jayden, take us there.

Copy drone crew, we see it, replied ground control, looks like a resort of some sort. We see cars parked.

Oh, yeah, we see them, replied Brutus. Keep us high.

Copy that, keeping you high.

The drone approached the resort, revealing more detail on the remote screen and to the crew on board, a dozen luxury sport utility vehicles in dark colours, expensive and shiny, having each an attendant, full size humans dressed well, clearly the chauffeurs.

Ground control, it must be an important meeting, said Jayden.

Copy that, drone crew.

Awaiting orders.

Stand by.

The drone maintained a high altitude above the complex, high enough that anyone with the naked eye would think it was just a bird.

Drone crew, copy.

Drone crew here.

We will land you on the roof of the compound. We decided you should try to find out what is happening inside. If you agree, of course.

Copy that, ground control. Give us a minute to talk about it.

Copy.

Ok team. Do we want to this?

Hell yeah, said Aiko Kochiyama.

Objections? said Jayden.

None, said Brutus.

Ground control, copy. We are a go. Repeat we are a go.

What's that drone crew?

We agree.

Okay.

Ground control landed the drone on the roof of the building, stealthily, barely making a noise, and not coming straight down from the sky, but taking a detour through the canopy of the surrounding forest, then quickly from the tree nearest to the building straight up, on the opposing side of the chauffeurs. Once landed, Brutus quickly issued the order for the team to, Go, go, go, keep low, move fast, stop near that chimney. Precisely so it was executed by the team, with perfection, while they entered radio silence, leaving the drone behind. We are on our own team, said Brutus, we have each other's backs. If anything happens, we rendezvous at the drone. We leave nobody behind. Relax, we'll be fine, said Aiko. I'm just saying Aiko, I'm

responsible now. They found a hole near the chimney, in the roof, likely made by a squirrel. They entered inside through the hole, one by one, in no particular order, Brutus last.

The attic was shallow, clean, rustic and empty, rays of light and human voices pierced from the room below through the wooden beams. The crew climbed down the chimney carefully, using the equipment they had, not taking any risk. Once on flat ground, they used military sign language taught by Brutus to advance to a source of light so they could peek at the happenings below them.

They lay flat-faced around the tiny opening and looked down. It was a room with a dozen men sitting at an expensive oval table, talking, pushing papers, having drinks. Their words were clear. These industry-leading results reflect a strong endorsement by our clients of the choices we offer, said the First Man, the advice we provide, the long-term investment performance we have delivered, and the fiduciary standard we uphold. We don't know yet whether the consequences of easy money and regulatory changes will cascade throughout the regional banking sector with more seizures and shutdowns coming, said the Second Man in response, then looked at the man next to him. The Third Man said, Leaders in public and private sectors are essentially trading efficiency and lower costs for resilience and national security. This trade-off between price and security is one of the reasons I believe inflation will persist and be more difficult for central bankers to tame over the long term. The Fourth Man immediately jumped in while not looking up from his paper. He said, Investing for a financial goal like retirement is an act of hope and optimism, demonstrating a long-term perspective, trust in financial institutions, and belief in the integrity of the market. Then he looked to the Fifth Man, who jumped in, on cue, to say, For the past three decades, all of us at this table have led by listening to our clients. Our growth reflects this deep commitment to understanding their needs, building our strategy to address them

in the context of market opportunities, and then executing with discipline. Agree, said the Sixth Man, since our founding, we have always been unwavering in our commitment to serving our clients, and by doing so, we have delivered outsized returns for our shareholders.

What's the bottom line here? said the Seventh Man while pouring himself more bourbon. The Eight Man replied, We seek the best risk-adjusted returns within the mandate they give us, and we underpin our work with research, data, and analytics. The Ninth Man added, This trade-off between price and security is one of the reasons I believe inflation will persist and be more difficult for central bankers to tame over the long term. As a result, I believe inflation is more likely to stay closer to four percent in the next few years. The Tenth Man spoke next, We are proud to be the highest-performing financial services stock in the S&P 500 since our IPO in 1999, delivering a total return of 7700 percent.

The hell, said Aiko Kochiyama, the video game designer.

Shush, whispered Brutus.

The Eleventh Man said, Today, streaming allows me to listen with ease to the whole album of an artist, or just that artist's greatest hits, or a playlist of my own compilations, or those of other listeners. We have so much choice at our fingertips. Indeed, said the Twelfth Man, Technology has also made financial markets much more affordable and accessible. Forty years ago, buying a stock or bond was a laborious process that required calling a stockbroker.

The First Man's turn came again. Shall we do this, gentlemen? Are we in agreement?

Aye, said the other men and raised their hands.

Very well, we will start at a base per-gallon price of fresh high-quality air, with daily sustainable rationing, and premium options depending on location across the country. We will buy clean air franchises municipality by municipality. Since humans

need to breathe, clean air subscriptions will be the easiest product to sell in the history of all civilizations.

What the hell, said Aiko Kochiyama. I've heard enough.

Let's go then, signaled Brutus. Full retreat. We are done here.

## 56

Back at the village, when the crew descended from the drone, they were surrounded by villagers curious to know what happened, why the crew appeared to be flustered and in shock.

Who were those people? asked a villager.

We think some top executives at a secret meeting, said Aiko Kochiyama.

From what you say, it appears they want to sell fresh air to people, said the villager.

I suspect there is more, said Jayden Flier. We saw maps with lakes, rivers, and forests with the logos of their corporation. They want to own and sell everything.

That's insane! said the villager. Are they going to do something to this forest, to our forest?

Anything is possible, said Jasmine Flier.

Over my carcass, said Brutus Zapp.

I like your spirit Brutus, said Aiko Kochiyama.

I would spill my sweat and blood for this village and this forest, said Brutus.

With you brother, said Gunther Glassfarb from behind Brutus, and tried to fist bump him. They awkwardly missed each other slightly.

I understand we are now even more vulnerable, said Menelao Melanoliou.

We survived shrinking, we can survive this, said Holly-Kate Glassfarb.

It's not the same, though, said Peggy. These rich folks will send bulldozers again, or they will enclose the forest and charge tickets for entry.

I wouldn't mind that, keeps the tourist traffic low, said Margaret Fletcher.

It can also have an adverse effect, said Menelao Melanoliou. People will think there is something special about the forest, they'll be curious and pay the ticket, just because the ticket exists. It's like buying into an exclusive service.

Makes me cringe, said Cléa.

I get it now, said Billy Nordhaus, the oil rig foreman. I had never seen it that way.

How do we prevent this? said Donatello Zuniga.

Like people have always prevented unwanted incursions, said Ignacio Monserrate Ernesto Salar. We fight back. We defend the land. We keep it open for all humans. No tickets. Free and alive.

Easier said than done, said Donatello Zuniga.

Look, I didn't say it was easy, said Ignacio. It was never easy. It is what must be done. There is no other way.

No other way? said Donatello Zuniga.

No other way, said Zuri Owuor, who was standing right next to Ignacio.

But we are so small, said Donatello Zuniga. They are huge and powerful.

A swarm of ants, if it gets big enough, can inconvenience and stop an elephant, said Zuri Owuor. And if the swarm is huge, it can chase the elephant away.

Makes sense, said Donatello Zuniga. But still, there are a thousand of us. They can hire armies.

We die shrugging or we live fighting, said Berta Isabel Esperanza.

Yeah, said everybody else present.

The village night wardens, after midnight, heard voices not too far from the village. Two full-sized humans, dressed in camouflage, were making their way through the forest, carefully, carrying some small devices with screens and antennas.

Around here is where we lost the signal, said the first voice.

They must have realized the drone can be tracked from afar by GPS, said the second voice.

The night wardens ran back to report this conversation to the Emergency Council, created just the day before, the members of which had to be woken up, each member from a different tree, gathered at the meeting point designated for emergency decisions, and briefed in full.

They also had some rifles with them, said the first night warden.

Like how big? asked Brutus Zapp.

This big. With telescopic sights, said the night warden.

Hunting rifles, said Brutus. Probably illegal poachers.

What now? said the night warden.

We must stay still, very still, let camouflage work for us. Alert everyone, said Brutus.

The rules for this occasion, as established by the Emergency Council, required perfect cooperation from all villagers to refrain from making noises and fires, to stay inside and cover their windows. If a human walked just near the village, they would not notice any miniature gardens and housing units, as they were covered with leaves and moss. One had to investigate closely enough to discover the village.

The drone had also been completely turned off, battery unplugged, and covered with soil.

The two alleged poachers came closer to the village, stepped on some branches purposefully left on the ground as perimeter alarms.

Be quiet, said the first voice.

Okay, I'm sorry, said the second voice.

There is nothing here. Let's go that way.

They walked away from the village. The villagers remained quiet, in emergency mode for the rest of the night.

## 58

Open council of all villagers, Fiona Farrinelli moderating and taking the names of speakers and what was said.

Marichka Kobrynska: I need to get something off my chest. I had recently adjusted to the idea of living here, living small, then we found the drone, we heard those rich people selling Earth back to humans, and all my comfort vanished, I cannot sleep now, I imagine us being discovered and taken to some laboratory for study, put into prisons made of plexiglass, next to mice and hamsters, just tell me, am I crazy, I need to hear it from you.

Mallarika Patekar: I feel you Marichka, I share your feelings, in my words I would say I feel uneasy and discombobulated by what the drone crew discovered, I am less certain about my future, about our future, I don't think about being a small or full-size human, I like it here, I just don't want our little heaven to be disturbed.

Florencia Gallardo: You said it well Mallarika, you too Marichka. I do feel we made a little heaven here in the village.

Gao Jianxing: How dare someone sell that which was

not made by humans, or anything that has evolved on its own, we must fight back, we must speak and resist, the equilibrium has been tampered with, this leads to disaster, do we want disaster?

Many voices: No, no, of course not!

Gao Jianxing: Nothing is forever, this life is not forever, this shrinkage is not forever, this will end, things will transform, beings evolve, but while we are still in the midst of this experience, let us not accelerate its destruction, let us make an effort to keep the balance.

Someone from the back: You mean the village?

Gao Jianxing: Yes, the village, and our lives here. We worked hard for this life, which was not our choice, but we made it good, and I like it.

Fred Hayektom: So, you are suggesting we camouflage ourselves better?

Gao Jianxing: Pardon me Fred, I was not making suggestions.

Fred Hayektom: No worries then.

Missy D. Point: Can I say something?

Fiona Farrinelli: Of course.

Missy D. Point: Why do people accept the social order?

Margaret Fletcher: What do you mean, Missy?

Missy D. Point: The people in general. They say, it's just the way it has always been, social order is normal, we accept our fate.

Margaret Fletcher: What social order?

Missy D. Point: Like those men at the cabin wanting to sell the air and water of Earth to the rest of us. And people will just accept that. Not us here, but people out there.

Paula G. Lipman: It's a combination of many reasons.

Power structures. How a culture accepts hierarchies. How people understand personal freedom. How people believe in fate versus self-determination.

Missy D. Point: So, can we change the social order?

Celeste Millington: By simply asking the question, we have already begun the change.

Several voices from the back: Yes!

Marcus Literolis: What's next then?

Jasmine Flier: We think hard about opinions, we discuss, we decide, we act. Together.

## 59

Just in case I lose this diary, when it is found, whether in this small form, which would appear to a full-size human as being as big as a grain of rice, or to a shrunk human, to which it would appear as a normal-sized diary, I write my name, Harding C., my wife's name is Lorelei, a climate scientist, my son's name is Mikael, he is a teenager and plays video games. I am assuming the role of documentarian of this small forest village, which, by the way, needs a name, because for some reason nobody has proposed a name for our new community, not since thirty-three of us were known as the Oak Collective.

I would like to begin with how we live, specifically the housing arrangement. When we built our housing units, we considered three principles, that the materials used can be fully recycled or fully biodegradable, that we do not build by harming our ecosystem, and that we do not use more than we need. There are one thousand tiny humans in the village, which I will call Village, the simplest name possible. We borrowed twelve trees

from nature to build the apartments. That is roughly eighty-three humans per tree. There are eighteen apartments per tree, so the average occupancy is four point six humans per apartment, which is quite comfortable given the size of the living spaces. Everyone has their own “room,” and I put “room” in quotes, because we use grass-knitted dividers to create private spaces. We did not carve rooms into the insides of the trees. We wanted to keep the trees unharmed, much like squirrels build their nests. We built helicoidal stairs on the outsides of the trees, from the top apartment to the ground, camouflaged with vegetation, so it is impossible to see what is hidden inside the tree. Apartments did not need a kitchen. We all eat at the communal bistro. Each tree has one for its residents. There is also the Village Kitchen on the ground that will eventually fit us all. We are working on it.

We do our bio-business, so to speak, in a designated space in the apartment in special containers for this purpose, which we then empty every three days and use the contents as fertilizers. We lower the contents with pulleys to the ground. Before we had the pulleys, they were being carried down the stairs. Once somebody tripped on the stairs and the container fell out of control on the ground. Nobody was hurt, but a good lesson was learned. I hope literary critics reading these words would not be that curious to know if the container broke open.

About the insulation of the apartments. It's fairly good. We use moss and clay, thick leaves, and dry grass knitted tightly into a sheet that covers the walls. At night when it's colder, we close the shutters, and leave just enough opening for ventilation. On hot days, the shade from the tree is enough to keep the inside cool. We do not spend that much time indoors. We don't need artificial light, and even though we manufacture candles for occasional purposes, we rarely use them. Most of our activities happen outside, in various communal locations.

The meetings of the councils rotate among various apartments in Village. We decided there was no need to build a communal place for that. When the Village Kitchen is finished, we will have a place for all sorts of festivities, meetings, games, or just social eating and drinking. Until then, we are just fine meeting in each other's homes. Even the shiest, most solitary humans have found benefits in having meetings at their places. We depend on each other for subsistence, for our emotional wellbeing. Those who wish to spend time alone can certainly do that. There is plenty of time for being who you are in Village, regardless of how many humans live with you in your part of the tree.

## 60

Okay, when we reverse the shrinkage, do we want to continue this lifestyle in full-sized form? asked Cecil Millington matter-of-factly, after having been silent for a long time during public gatherings.

One can say, it is not us who shrank in size, but humanity as a whole that overgrew its habitats, said Menelao Melanoliou. The physical reality is ripe with physical relativism.

Yeah, until you bump into energy conservation laws, said Paula G. Lipman.

Is it possible that all this is just a collective experience, said Jayden Flier, while we are all on hallucinogenic mushrooms at some retreat, and our brains have created this metaphorical world for us.

It is impossible to disprove, said Sly Stone.

Or to prove, said Jasmine Flier.

My question still stands, said Cecil Millington. Just as we became smaller and retained our memories, we could rebecome

full-sized humans, and retain the memories of this experience. It is worth asking the question.

From my perspective, said Rajesh Biswas, the mechanical engineer, I have learned valuable lessons from my life here in Village. I have become a complete being. I feel I am connected with my entire self, my entire body, I have not left corners of my soul unexplored, I have found a peace that is deeply rooted in meaning.

What meaning is that? asked Brutus Zapp.

That equilibrium of being and its existence in nature is the beginning of freedom.

The casual morning chat was interrupted by Marcus Literolis, who came in running, agitated, carrying some breaking news.

We hit a gopher tunnel!

A what? said Brutus Zapp.

A bloody gopher tunnel, said Marcus. We were digging the hole for the safety bunker and we hit a tunnel.

Is anybody hurt? said Florencia Gallardo, the doctor.

No.

Where is it? said Brutus Zapp. Let's go.

They went out to the place where the hole was being dug, not far from the middle tree in Village. The miners were standing in a semicircle with their shovels raised towards the entrance into the mine from where a gopher had just made its appearance, overwhelming the miners with its size, appearing threatening and scared at the same time. Nobody was making a move, not the miners, not the animal. It was a perfect standstill.

Nobody move, said Brutus Zapp.

We were just doing that, said one of the miners. What now?

Let me think, said Brutus. Clearly, we disturbed the animal's habitat.

Evidently, said one of the miners.

Let's just all back off slowly and quietly, said Brutus. Lower your shovels.

What if it attacks? said the miner.

It will not attack, said Ignacio Salar. They are herbivores.

The miners lowered their shovels and moved away from the gopher. The onlookers were signaled to get back inside and not show their curious faces in the window. Everybody else had to go back inside, keep quiet, and give the gopher space to leave. Minutes later, the gopher went back inside the tunnel. The Peers Council decided to seal the hole to the tunnel. The safety bunker would be constructed in a different location, more carefully next time, to avoid any other disturbances to the families of gophers residing in the soil beneath Village.

## 61

**H**arding C.'s notebook. We are in the sixth month of our life in Village since the shrinkage. I want to write about how we procure our food and how we take care of our health. Each tree has its own garden, which is managed by the collective living in that tree. Some herbs are grown locally for each tree. Vegetables are grown collectively for the entire village by a food committee. One tree grows only potatoes, in addition to herbs for its own use, another tree grows tomatoes, another grows cucumbers and so on for all twelve trees. We also have the communal garden near the river, not far from Village, where we grow more vegetables. That location is safe from gophers and from potential discovery. Readers may wonder about the size of our crops. They are, as expected, normal size from the perspective of an unshrunk human. A tree may grow one, maybe two tomato plants, another two or three potato plants, and so on. As you imagine, dear reader, all this production taken together is sufficient for all humans living in Village. It does require significant work and care. Every day, each tree community

assesses the status of its garden, communicates the results to the food committee, which tracks progress in a ledger, and deals with problems at their meetings. The knowledge of all villagers is so rich and wide, we rarely find ourselves without a solution. There are farmers, engineers, doctors of various specialties, builders, former miners, teachers from kindergarten through university, musicians, poets, lawyers, mathematicians, writers, and many more. Back to food. We even grow plants for spices, not too many, only what grows in this climate, but enough to have a good variety of flavours. In case you wonder about protein. There are ongoing debates about that. A group led by Brutus Zapp once caught a fish and many of us ate from it for a week. We could not keep it for longer. We preserved it in salt. There is a limit to preserving meat. We gave up on eating fish. Some voices kept bringing up the question of hunting. They remain a very small minority. We will not hunt any game for many reasons. First of all, we are small. It would be extremely difficult to catch even a squirrel. Anything bigger is out of the question. Assuming some of us would be interested in consuming squirrel meat, it would not be the same as chicken or fish, despite our cooks' best abilities. Then there is the issue of storage. Just like the fish, we cannot store perishable goods. We do not have a refrigerator. We got accustomed to being vegetarians. It actually works quite well. Not vegans, but vegetarians. The sheep provide dairy products. There are three hundred villagers engaged in dairy production. I am one of them. We take good care of our sheep population. The animals are happy. We are part of their ecosystem. They are part of ours. Would you have done any different, dear reader? When we found shrunken sheep, matching our size, we could not have left them alone to fend for themselves. Sheep have evolved together with humans. They are family.

Healthcare. Florencia Gallardo, the doctor, has opened a clinic on the ground level of one of the trees, with the help of seven

other doctors of different specialties. We even have a dentist. We built her a chair and some tools, to the best of our abilities. We don't have an X-ray machine, or an MRI, or a microscope. So far, we haven't had the need, but many villagers have expressed concern that their health might deteriorate and our doctors may not be able to help them without the advanced technology that unshrunk humans possess. Indeed, that is a valid concern. Perhaps we should develop miniature technologies to compensate for that. The physicists among us, and some engineers, raised some points coming from quantum mechanics that I am not able to reproduce here, which say, in essence, that there are some physical limits to the miniaturization of technologies. This did not help to alleviate the worries of those of us not trained in quantum mechanics. But I digress. Our team of doctors is doing a great job at keeping everyone healthy. They deal with many issues, from infections to headaches, indigestion, food allergies, bruises, and even mental health concerns. Yes, some of us need therapy to be able to cope with life in Village. Luckily, there are two trained psychotherapists living with us. There is one sensitive issue I must mention here for the record. It's about sex. Of course, it happens. We do it. No issue there. It works. There have been couples that shrank together, and others have developed relationships after the shrinkage. The issue is birth control. We have decided we cannot reproduce. There are too many uncertainties about our life here. The doctors have told us that, while everything seems normal about our bodies, they cannot guarantee how pregnancies would evolve, if the foetus would inherit shrunken genes, what if they didn't, then it might jeopardize the mother's life, and so on. Therefore, all sex must be super protected. Rest assured, we are using effective birth control.

## 62

The eagle circled Village two, three times in broad daylight, high enough that it did not draw anyone's attention until it lowered its altitude in an attack position, slowly at first, still not having decided where to strike. Villagers that were out and about, doing work, chatting, had barely five seconds of notice to find cover or begin running when Brutus, with his attention quickly aroused from years of close combat, yelled Eagle! Take cover! A command that he swiftly obeyed himself by diving headfirst into shrubbery. The eagle had picked Rajesh Biswas as its target, likely because Rajesh was the farthest from anyone else, working on fixing gardening tools. Rajesh saw the eagle's shadow getting bigger on the ground, heard Brutus, and jumped in a flash into the tool shed next to him, a second before the eagle thrust its claws downward to grab the entire shed in a tight grasp, and lift it off the ground like it was a mouse made of air.

Heeelp! yelled Rajesh from inside the shed, while the door had closed by itself. The eagle's miscalculation. Now Rajesh had been flung against the wall, floundering to get a grip, while tools tumbled all over, hitting him, missing him.

As the eagle was gaining height, villagers were popping their heads out of their hideouts. Gao Jianxing was Rajesh's best friend. He was the first to say loudly, We have to rescue him! Now! Brutus, do something.

I'm on it, said Brutus, who had quickly assessed the options. Take out the drone.

The Emergency Council was activated within two minutes,

as some members were taking a nap and another one had taken an involuntary biological break caused by the eagle's apparition. They took the drone from its hangar, put together a rescue team, and launched the drone by the end of the fifth minute, while the eagle had landed on a high branch of an oak tree, far from Village, but still within sight.

Jayden Flier and Billy Nordhaus were designated as drone operators. Brutus led the away team that consisted of seven villagers. The plan was simple, as Brutus proposed, We approach the eagle from below and harass it with pebbles that we discharge with our slingshots. Operators will keep moving us, left to right, below the bird, so it cannot see us and attack us. We aim for its claws until it drops the shed with Rajesh in it. While the shed will be falling, the drone will match its fall and we will it anchor it with this grappling hook at the end of this rope.

Do you think the drone can hold the shed? asked Aiko Kochiyama, who was also on the away team.

Yeah, it can.

They launched the drone according to plan, approached the eagle that remained still on the branch, carefully observing the peculiar object as it approached, maintaining the right grasp on its prey. The away team launched the attack with pebbles, getting only high-pitched whistling notes from the bird in response and an open menacing mouth. The drone operators did a great job of maintaining altitude and enough wobble so the eagle could not attempt an attack while maintaining possession of the shed with the human inside. The relentlessness of the away team paid off when the eagle decided to forgo the prey and drop it, then take off from that position.

The shed fell into the oak tree like a matchbox half empty. This slowed the fall but created a washing machine-like experience for Rajesh. The away team followed the shed from a short distance, not being able to enter the tree's canopy. Hang it there Rajesh!

Brutus said from the drone. There were no words coming from inside the shed, only onomatopoeias ayeee ayeee, signs that Rajesh was surviving the fall but in distress. When the shed finally hit the mossy ground, the onomatopoeias stopped. The away team landed nearby and rushed to the shed, opened the door, and found Rajesh bruised, shaken, and alive.

You good? asked Brutus.

I think so, said Rajesh, happy to see you.

Needless to say, there are many lessons to learn from the encounter with the eagle. Was the eagle a manifestation of *force majeure*, against which one can never fully prepare? If one asked Brutus Zapp, he would say that the security and defences of Village are top-notch, yet there are *unknown unknowables*, there will always be *unknown unknowables*, this is just a consequence of the complexity of society and its intersections with itself and with nature.

## 63

**H**arding C.'s notebook. I will write now about governance and rules, meaning how we organise ourselves, how we make decisions. Village has been a life-changing experience for me and for all humans living here, even though some have not said much about it, likely because they are introverts and do not enjoy talking about their emotions in public. It is not a secret that the mental health studio we created remains in high demand. Some choose to go there, some choose to share at our daily evening storytelling hangouts, each according to their temperament. Social life is flourishing, and everyone has adopted a collective mindset as part of their personal mental universe. We each managed to develop this feeling of participation in a common experience, while maintaining our unique identities. Truth be told, this adjustment was a tad more difficult for folks

who used to be engaged in competitive endeavours in their pre-shrunken life. Executives, businesspeople, and performance athletes are in this category. Gunther Glassfarb, the investment banker, who belonged to the first cohort, appears to be fully integrated now. He stopped talking about his pre-shrunken life, doesn't care to lecture anyone on the merits of the market economy, or on the importance of a well-balanced portfolio of investments. If he has private thoughts about this, it is hard to tell. He might have. We don't know. His behaviour is now most exemplary. Takes all his duties seriously. Participates in governance, just like anybody else. Cares about the wellbeing of his fellow villagers. Offers solutions to our problems. Does voluntary work to improve Village. He is a good citizen.

Was Gunther Glassfarb transformed by the rules we created, against his will? Was he already persuaded before we created all the councils and the rules? I digress. I cannot speak for each villager. I haven't talked in depth with everyone. Back to rules and governance.

We realized fairly early on that we could not conduct ourselves according to the rules of society where we came from before the shrinkage. Many principles just didn't work for us. If we elected a president and a top-down bureaucracy to make the rules for us, and coordinate their enforcement, it would have created a lot of resentment. For us, this new life was and is a question of survival and also a question of making a new meaning for our lives. No bureaucracy can know all the details needed to make the best decisions. We are not pressured by the urgency of so-called efficiency, which means we have to make decisions fast, hence the need for a top boss and a group of sub-bosses, who hold the power. We realized efficiency is just an excuse used by full-sized societies to have bosses and hierarchies. That just doesn't work for us. We quickly discovered that it is hugely important to maintain a proper balance with our forest, to treat our trees, surrounding

flora and fauna with utmost respect, or we would face a very hard life and even extinction. This idea of balance had to be mirrored in how we organise ourselves.

Another aspect we had to consider is about the variety of characters, temperaments, and personalities living in Village. Some come from cultures of hyper-individualism, some from cultures of collectivism, some take charge of their own lives and do expect society to help them, some achieve meaning in life only through engagement in society. How to forge rules for Village, knowing all this?

We opted for the creation of the Rules Council and Peers Council, where participation is both voluntary and socially required. Volunteers put their names in for the Rules Council. All villagers are considered for the Peers Council. The Rules Council makes rules through deliberation and consultations with those interested in providing advice. The Peers Council votes on which rules become effective. Secretaries keep a record of everything. Both councils have a constant flow of members, in and out, at least on a weekly basis or when someone leaves for personal reasons before their term. Works just fine.

The Emergency Council was created for when we need to react fast to an event. It has its own rules and its own members. They can intervene in special occasions, such as when a rescue operation is needed, or someone gets lost in the forest and a search party needs to be created. This is for decisions that require action on the same day. It's all in the rules.

Rules are changed all the time. Everyone can read them on the bulletin board. There are not many. You can memorize them while sitting for a cup of tea.

This is what applies to the entire Village. Each of the twelve trees also has its own specific guidelines, not too different from one another, which have to do with the specifics of that tree, such as its garden, its architecture. For example, one tree has a

rule that there should be only five people using the stairs at the same time because they have noticed some structural problems. Another tree requires the presence of a resident to check the tree's garden early in the morning, to make sure it hasn't been trampled on by wildlife during the night. Some herbs are rather fragile.

Inside each council, the decisions are made by consent. Not consensus, but consent. That means, if there is no reasoned objection to a proposed rule, the rule is adopted. The members rotate their roles based on a random allocation. Members are selected for each council also based on a random selection, either from a list of volunteers for the Rules Council and Emergency Council, or from a list of all villagers. Fiona Farrinelli, our general secretary, keeps track of these lists and selections. She also suggested that when someone else wants to try the general secretary role, she will let that person take over, so that she does not raise suspicions that she might be biased somehow. But a random selection is fair and equitable because it is... random. The draw is public, with names in a hat. Super easy.

One more thing. If someone makes a mistake while serving on either council and creates displeasure in Village, anyone can call for the replacement of that public servant, no offense, and none is taken. Someone once said, Please don't take this personally, here the name of the servant was said, we would like to allow someone else to continue your role, for the benefit of the entire community. And that public servant gladly accepted to let someone else continue. Nobody clings to a public role because the stakes are not social status, not accumulation of wealth or power. It's simply to serve the community. There is no merit either in being elected, because... there are no elections. Everyone can serve if they so wish, and when called to the Peers Council they gladly come to vote. It's just one evening per week, at its most frequent. There is also a fun hangout after the vote, with cookies, tea, music and dancing. It's quite a pleasure to serve.

That is all I have to write about how we organise ourselves. Readers from the future, if they are interested, can consult the rules books, once they are copied and magnified. They are an easy read.

## 64

The Peers Council voted unanimously that an evening of mindful recreation with music and dance should take place the next weekend at the summer garden. Unlock our minds, disinhibit our souls, and connect fully with the forest around us, was written on the bulletin board that announced the event.

Sly and Yolanda made several instruments at their workshop, tambourines, drums of various sizes, bongos, flutes, panflutes, ocarinas, banjos, taikos, a marimba, cymbals. Cléa, Zuri, Paula, and Menelao made costumes from grass and flowers in their workshop. Other teams worked on decorations. Other teams prepared food and fresh drinks. It began at sunset under a clear starry sky.

Drummers launched the first rhythms, they had practiced for weeks, under Sly's supervision. Then the flutes joined with simple uplifting melodies to colour the beats. The banjos joined with pointed verses phasing in and phasing out, as dancers joined the circle of movements, pirouettes, and freeform frolicking. A small group of villagers joined in tasting microdoses of hallucinogenic mushroom from the Fliers' garden, watching the spectacle while seated, un-mushroomed friends kept close to supervise them, just in case, Florencia Gallardo the doctor being one of them because she was quite familiar with the benefits of *psilocybe semilanceata*, while the others danced around them appearing like passing comets in flashes of light to the mushroomed group, all laughing with each other, sometimes also at each other in

good spirits certainly, referring to an unusual dance move, or to a piece of grass stuck in the hair, or mud on the face, or tripping on the ground from spinning on heels way too fast, Slow down, you'll make a hole in the ground, Ha ha, that's not possible, Wanna be, and so the conversation continued to other party-like jokes and innuendoes until the song changed rhythm or melody without ever stopping. Many villagers came forward to be trained as musicians, starting with small drumming techniques, which built up the physique and also the musical ear, then building to taking up banjos and flutes, more complicated instruments that required more practice, not made for everyone, but enough became proficient enough in weeks to keep up a melody and even improvise a bit, thanks to great teaching, and fun lessons, all culminating to this evening of amusement, the first all-hands-on-deck party Village had ever had. The music cannot stop at any time, said Sly, the musical director, so we'll take turns at instruments, we won't all play at the same time. When the sun went down fully, the starry night and the moon provided sufficient illumination, some torches here and there added additional ground visibility, and when the fireflies made their appearance sometime after midnight, the celebration was showered with a light spectacle that appeared to match the musical vibration, Oh my goodness, look, the fireflies are dancing to the music, said one of the mushroomed humans, Yeah, you're right, said one of the un-mushroomed humans, equally excited by what they saw, while dancers found the new apparition of light as a sign of spiritual grace, the forest speaking to them and being with them, approving their manifestations with sound and movement, utterly matching the vibrations of life all around. Precautions had been taken in advance for safety and balance, movements were encouraged to be soft and careful, designated places for breaks were marked with carefully-placed torches, food had its own spot for consumption, and so

on. Night wardens took turns dancing and going on duty. And the drumming, the music did not stop, varying beats from the softest to the most kinetic, with Sly orchestrating the players from his heart and using hand gestures that were rehearsed and memorized well by everyone. Moonlight also increased in strength after midnight and became liquid somehow, As if it's raining moonlight over us, said one of mushroomed humans, and stripped naked to shower in moonlight stirring amusement from those in vicinity, while others joined the shower without premeditation, and with pure feeling of elation in participation, and as there were no rules against social nudity as long as it did not inconvenience others in their activity, it was quite all right to express oneself in the most natural state, especially for reasons of soulful celebration where judgement of others had dissolved utterly, leaving time and space for joyous immersion into the incomprehensible finitude of human experience. I love you man, said a villager in a heightened state of beatitude to another villager, In a nonsexual way, the first villager added, Oh wow, thank you, replied the second, I love you too, I love this song, the first said, What, the second said, the song being rather loud, The song is great, the first said thumbing up, Yes, I love the song, the second said, both understanding that the superposition of love for each other and love for song created a new state of being that needed words to be described, at a later time, in peace and quiet, not right now with music and energy, meaning much was being accumulated in the souls of humans partying, a sort of life-energy made not to be enjoyed later, a construction of a mind-body to be experienced later as a version of the mind-body being live right now in the present. There were drum solos too, alternated gracefully, when folks needed a break, moving in and out from the large centre group to the sides to drink and catch their breath, those remaining in the centre took turns at climbing

the stone in the middle, to perform a dance for everyone around, a sort of personal kinetic poem from oneself to the community.

## 65

**H**arding C.'s notebook. We had an awesome party last night, all night, I had a blast, I never felt better since the shrinkage. Slept five hours, had a cup of tea, now I need to write this because I am behind. Someone needs to keep a record of what is happening with us. The more we live here, the more special it feels. Someday the world will need to find out about this, I hope, I think there are lessons to be learned, or at least some good stories to tell. The topic of this notebook entry is the most exciting for me, cannot wait to write about it. The economy of Village! I know, right? What can be more fun!

No citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself, wrote Rousseau. There were some frictions about how much work someone was supposed to give for the benefit of the community, how much reward should be given for unequal work, what kind of reward, what is considered work, is working the mills work, is working in the gardens work, how about making musical instruments, how about walking in the forest to find herbs, or how about daydreaming until an idea comes to mind that might benefit all villagers, or it might not benefit everyone, perhaps only the roommates, perhaps only the neighbours in the tree, we talked about all these matters. Those were difficult conversations, folks pulled in all directions, I remember specifically Billy Nordhaus, who used to work on oil rigs and was good at industrial design, he designed all the mills, he said, What is my reward for all this, I busted my ass, we need some sort of differentiators between our contributions.

To which Cléa, the nurse, said, Differentiators for what exactly. You know what I mean, said Billy Nordhaus.

No, Cléa did not know what he meant, neither did we. So I asked Billy myself, Do you think those differentiators matter here, whatever they are. Billy Nordhaus took a few moments to think about it, then he said, No, I suppose they don't matter.

Right after that, Fred Hayektom, who had worked in information technology where he made many billions, said, We all know what is at stake here, Brutus mentioned it in a meeting some time ago, some will work more, some will work less, for different reasons that is true, but the benefits of said work will be distributed equally to all villagers, so how is this fair.

From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs, said Paula Lipman the professor.

Come on Paula, don't go Karl Marx on us, said Fred.

Look around you Fred, said Paula, this is a new, real world, we know our abilities, we know our needs, we know the forest. What is there to add to this. This is it. What we call *fair*, we might as well call *balance* and *wellbeing*, at the same time. For each. From each. Respecting our differences. What we can do is an egalitarian distribution of minimal necessary work, wait wait, let me explain, we discuss as a village what needs to be done, and we distribute according to ability, interest, and necessity. We all take turns in all jobs, from those that are undesirable to those that are pleasant and so on. It does not have to be a competition or a buildup of frustrations.

Economics is very simple, said Lynton Friedman. The science, allegedly, that deals with the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services, or the material welfare of humankind. Everything else, money, value, reward, property, if you will, it's just trifling matters.

Trifling matters you say, said Margaret Fletcher, trifling matters? After you have benefited from these so-called trifling

matters, I mean no disrespect, but those trifling matters mean everything to the unshrunk humans out there, they cannot function without them.

But we can, said Missy D. Point.

True, yes, said Margaret Fletcher.

Folks, if I may, what do we want here, said Donatello Zuniga, we do want a good life, shrunken as we are, and we have managed to make a good life so far, I think we have achieved good economics, if I can use the term, no, yes? When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. One Corinthians thirteen with eleven.

Rajesh Biswas raised his hand then spoke, A highly learned man has two sources of happiness: either he abandons all earthly interests, or else he possesses much which could be abandoned. It's from Nagarjuna.

I like that, said Zuri Owuor. Do you know another?

Sure, said Rajesh, it's a bit longer. No suffering is self-caused. Nothing causes itself. If another is not self-made, how could suffering be caused by another? If suffering were caused by each, suffering could be caused by both. Not caused by self or by other, how could suffering be uncaused? From Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.

I see how this relates to the question of economics, said Cecil Millington. I mean it earnestly. We manage nicely without money. We have plenty of food. Our health is generally in good condition. Our spirits are lively. There is plenty to do, plenty to think about.

Well, said Billy Nordhaus.

Wait Billy, let him speak, said Fiona Farrinelli.

In other words, continued Cecil Millington, our economics is a stable system, very much alive, doing what it's supposed to do, with everyone engaged, all needs covered, yes indeed, after some of us adjusted mentally to the new conditions, which I

may say was an uplifting journey, at least for me it was, I have rediscovered, reinvented myself, I am at peace with myself, I feel unshackled so to speak because I am connected fully to the space where I exist, both physically and also mentally, dare I say also spiritually. I wonder, and my dear wife Celeste here can attest, if we actually want to go back to the unshrunk life, which now seems like it would be so uprooted, ruffled, precarious and feeble. Yes, unshrunk life is feeble and fragile because it is oversized and unfit to the inner human universe, while our shrunken life is fully embedded with our complete inner life.

Thank you, Cecil, for these well-chosen words, said Peggy holding Gigi the Pomeranian in her lap.

That being said and more contributions along the same lines speak for the economy of Village. Often when there were issues of allocation of effort for work that needed to be done, the evening hangouts settled the issues with thoughtful conversation. On rare occasions there were proposals to change some rules that went to the Rules Council then the Peers Council. We all knew the common denominator was a life with balance and wellbeing for everybody which left plenty of room for personal growth, exploration and curiosity.

## 66

**T**he mills have produced so much flour and forged so many metal objects that the Peers Council has voted to slow down production to a quarter of what it was before, at least for a couple of weeks until stocks reduced their overflows to align with what was actually needed in Village.

It's a fine balance, said Menelao Melanoliou, to keep stocks and flows aligned with human needs. They need to be constantly reviewed. We are fortunate to know what our real needs are

so we can plan much better, as opposed to unshrunk human societies out there that are critically, almost catastrophically out of balance.

Do you think that's why the world is in crisis? asked Celeste Millington.

I think so, yes, said Menelao. Unshrunk societies have not internalized notions of limits, the organic interdependence between stocks and flows. They assume there is some infinite potential to the human experience on Earth. There is also the hubris, ah the humongous hubris that they are in control, which they are not, nature is collapsing in front of their eyes, and they still think they will survive and thrive. This reckless expansion of civilization without regard to limits is causing the collapse of the civilization of the unshrunk humans.

I think the shrinkage has taught us the liberating effect of limits, said Marie-Louise Lubala.

Marx famously wrote that the realm of freedom begins only where labour determined by necessity ends, said Debra Literolis.

Is this related to what Menelao was saying? said Gunther Glassfarb.

Yes, I think so, said Debra. To complement Menelao, I would venture to guess that perhaps unshrunk humans are the way they are not by choice, but by accidents and incidents of history. I do not believe humans have free will, they do not have the ability to decide what to will, or to control their intentions, or to change their thinking independently from all the prior causes that were fed into the human brain. If individuals do not have free will, can we say that societies have free will? Or do societies function like a superorganism made of singular units that, taken together, create a flow of history? We became shrunken not by choice, meaning we were not asked if we wanted it, but imagine that we were asked, how many of us would have accepted this life? I would have probably said yes.

Me too, said somebody from the back of the room.

Still, that would not have been a real choice, continued Debra. It would have been determined by my severe distaste of what we call unshrunk lifestyle, of the absurdities in the unshrunk society, the injustices, the inequalities in quality of life, inequalities in power. I was actually craving something else, something different, because my entire body and soul were not integrated in the world. For a long time, I had the feeling I did not belong in the world, and now I realized, living here in Village, the reason I was feeling that way. The unshrunk society was severely out of balance with nature, and with the construction of the human soul. I knew I was not the only one. Then the shrinkage happened. I see it as an unexpected gift.

What you said, Debra, is very valuable, said Gunther Glassfarb. It makes me think. So, if individuals do not have free will, if societies are also ginormous machines, indeed very complex and impossible to predict, it means that we accept resignation or go with the flow. In either case, can we change anything?

Yes, of course, I think so, said Debra.

How so?

Well, continued Debra. Change still happens, regardless of our lack of choice. Look at us here. We changed. Influenced by the shrinkage. We adapted to a very different lifestyle. We build a society where no society existed before. We took clues from nature, we responded to threats, we informed ourselves from unexpected events. I know, it is hard to shake off this illusion of choice. It doesn't matter, in the end, if we have the power to decide or not. It matters that change happens.

That's great to hear! said Donatello Zuniga. Sorry for my outburst, I was sad all day, and hearing this makes me feel good.

I find it hard to wrap my head around this, said Marichka Kobrynska. I agree with you Debra, but there is something in me that pushes hard against this idea. Changes happen without

our will. But it appears that our will is conditioned. So, can we change the world? Can we influence others to change the world?

Can I try to answer this, said Gao Jianxing. I am struggling as well. Let's say we go back to the unshrunk world, and want to make people there adopt our vision of balance. Can we do it? The answer is yes, we can, because I know I can do it, I see myself as a changed man from having lived with you in Village. Can we influence unshrunk humans? The most honest answer my brain is giving me is this. It's the wrong question. Influence assumes free will. We don't even need to talk in those terms. We just do, then our actions will cause effects or not. It may change unshrunk humans or not. We tell them, we show them, we talk to them as much as we can, within the limits of our capabilities and energy, and that's it. It's actually very simple, now that I think about it.

You hit the nail on its head, said Gunther. There is no actual influence. When I had a position of power, I confused influence with power. But it was all devoid of freedom. People had to obey me. Actual change is the result of doing.

Ayyy, this has become so philosophical, said Billy Nordhaus. I'm not used to thinking like that.

That's all right Billy, said Paula Lipman.

I am coming to some understanding of what we are talking about here, said Billy. If we just reframe freedom in terms of balance, and got rid of free will, you know, theoretically, we can see the flows and stocks of life close to what they truly are, a giant web of dependencies. Where we are a piece, like many others, by we I mean both shrunken and unshrunk humans. If this is the case, I can live with that, I can actually live with that quite well, because I get to keep my sense of freedom, right, I know it's fake, sorry didn't mean fake, it's an illusion, but a real illusion, right, doesn't matter anyways, I'm good with that. I can still do what I enjoy, as an upgraded human, so to speak. Gee,

wow, thank you for that. That was very interesting!

Didn't know you were a poet Billy, said Zuri Owuor.

Well-

Folks, this was very interesting, said Menelao Melanoliou. Do we still want to do this? A mission into the unshrunk world?

## 67

Harding C.'s notebook. Entry by Fiona Farrinelli.

Harding asked me to write in his notebook because he had to go out with Sheep to give her some attention. He had been busy with work and had neglected Sheep. He felt bad about it and needed time to reconnect. I gladly accepted.

The topic for this entry is education.

When most of us accepted that this is going to be our new life, we also assumed that we were not going to be unshrunk again. We established a system to build knowledge from our current experience and from the expertise of everyone in Village. When the drone was discovered along with its solar battery pack, we immediately made the connection with our existing possession, namely the few smartphones that were also shrunk along with their owners who happened to have them on their person. Not many. Thirty-three. In a population of a thousand. Now that the smartphones could be charged, we decided to create a library for knowledge where the smartphones will be kept and accessed by all villagers on a fair rotation basis. We refrained from using them to communicate to the outside world. We use them strictly to access knowledge, such as books and articles about living and surviving, and occasionally we read news. We do not use the smartphones for entertainment or digital socializing. We have all that in Village with the community and it is much more pleasant and soulful than any digital interaction.

This is the context for how education happens. In the entire population, a third are children. They require schooling. Fortunately, there are several teachers and professors among us, all quite happy to design a curriculum for all ages. We produced papers at the mill to make notebooks, such as this one. There are plenty of notebooks for everyone. Some use them to write poetry, thoughts, essays, and even continue their theoretical research from their professional unshrunk life. Within a few months, a sizable library began to take shape.

Classes took place every day in different formats. Indoors, and outdoors, with many recreational breaks, some held as lectures, some as conversations with questions and answers. Most importantly, our instructors adopted a method of understanding and bringing out the best in each student without grades and hierarchies. It works very well for students who are naturally inclined towards abstract and mathematical thinking, it works for those inclined towards arts and physical expression of their thinking, and everything in between. It took some time for everyone to get used to the system. We did not have much else to do. There were no jobs, no universities, no careers, no competition to prepare the students for, so why pressure them to conform to standardized hierarchies? This was the biggest hurdle to overcome.

There are classes for adults too, organized as lecture series, by experts in their domain. People sign up for those classes, and they are held frequently, based on demand. We all learn about how to grow our food, how to understand all life around us, how our presence affects nature around us, even considering our small size. We learn together that every resource matters. We learn about the fragility of life, and the resilience of life, because we were living it day in and day out.

Beyond our life, we also wanted to learn more about what unshrunk humans were doing. We still wanted to learn about new scientific discoveries, about politics, about the universe, about

life in the oceans and in other ecosystems, about history and geography, history of art, of civilizations and so on. We used the library to read, write essays and stories, then present them to the village at our regular series of public talks where we got together to learn as a collective. We love those nights. Everyone comes together to hear those talks. And anyone can talk about anything.

Guarding the library has become as important as the quality of our gardens. There is almost always somebody there to check humidity and make sure volumes are in the right place, that the phones are charged and well maintained, schedules respected and updated. Until one day, the first phone lost its internet connection. Likely the subscription had been left unpaid and it expired. Over the next weeks, we went down to a dozen phones that maintained their internet connection, because they were on family plans and someone unshrunk kept paying the bills. Of course, we wondered if we could be located through the phones. It appeared not. The GPS chip in each phone has been rendered inoperable after it went through shrinking. I am not a physicist or an electrical engineer. I cannot explain how that is possible. But it is possible as shrinking was possible, so if there is doubt about that, please seek a specialist and ask them.

An important idea raised by a psychologist among us was about the sense of accomplishment. Students and adults alike still felt the need for some sort of validation through reaching personal accomplishments. They were content with their social engagement and felt validated by the collective but they needed to satisfy the internal urge to mark their own lives with progress. For those who felt this need, we offered support collectively. If someone wanted to mark the completion of a course, they received a diploma. Some wanted to be tested. So they got tested by the teachers. No grades, just an evaluation of their progress that was stimulative for the student. It is wonderful to know that your performance in education has no bearing on the

quality of life and status in society you can achieve. Education in Village is only about self-improvement with the purpose of contributing to the community and achieving a sense of personal accomplishment, for those interested.

Then we have the natural competitors. We still have some of those. They want to test their abilities against the abilities of others. What we did was to gamify the need for competition. Public games. Fun games. Often with parties after. There were chess games, judo games, even swimming in the river or large puddles. With time, competitors turned out to be playful humans who just needed partners. I never liked competitions and exams, so for me it was fun to watch the evolution of those who wanted to validate themselves through challenges with others.

I am not sure if I am supposed to write in more detail about education, for example how classes take place, the names of all instructors, what books we have at the library. I will leave all that for a future entry.

## 68

**M**eeting of the Rules Council to create a proposal to launch an expedition into the unshrunk world to seek information about our condition and acquire medication that is lacking in Village. Peggy acts as secretary, calling the meeting to order.

The room is now open for discussion and formulations, Peggy said. Please proceed. Florencia Gallardo.

Thank you, Peggy, said Florencia Gallardo. With regard to the medication aspect. Some of our fellow villagers suffer from conditions that require special attention. We manufactured some powders to mitigate symptoms, so far so good, conditions are stable. The team of doctors cannot guarantee that these so-called treatments can last. We require certain medications. I prepared

a list here. The away team will seek the nearest pharmacy and attempt to obtain these medications, we don't need much, five to ten capsules for each item on the list from which we will scale down appropriate dosages according to our current body mass.

Is there consent from the medical team? asked somebody on the Council.

Yes, we have it, said Florencia.

Proposals to modify the rule? said Peggy. No? Okay. To the other item. Find information about our condition. What kind of information?

I suggested that, said Brutus Zapp. I will explain. We found out zilch, nada, nix at the library about our situation. Not that I want to escape or anything. I just want to know. Maybe there are some answers out there. In the press. At some research facilities. The away team will infiltrate the computer network of certain research facilities and will attempt to obtain relevant intelligence. I made a list of said facilities here. Some of our computer experts will need to be on the away team. I can join them to coordinate infiltration and extraction from a security perspective.

Thank you, Brutus, said Peggy. Proposals to modify the rule? No? Okay. We will send these rules to the Peers Council for voting this evening before dinner. If they approve, we can start preparations tomorrow.

Wait, one more thing, said Brutus.

Sure.

We obviously cannot use the drone for this away mission, said Brutus. I mean, there are limitations. Range of transmission from remote to drone. And battery autonomy for both the remote and the drone itself. I would like to add a separate proposal, namely, let me read from my notes, to break the away mission into two parts, the first part is flying to the extent of the range, preferably with the purpose of locating a pharmacy, then the second part is securing a mode of transportation from there to the secondary

location which would be the nearest research facility from the list. There are several options for the modes of transportation I mentioned: piggybacking on unshrunk vehicles, constructing an autonomous flying vehicle, namely a glider, I have the schematics here, which does not require a motor, but does require some training, which I can provide, and number three, least desirable, riding a dog, preferably from a shelter, I have the specifics, which can be guided to carry the away team to the research facility. The team will feed the dog, talk nicely to it, and so on, to establish rapport and compliance.

All right, said Peggy. Proposals to modify the rule? No? Okay. So we will send three separate rules to the Peers then. Any other discussions? No? Okay. Let's end here and go eat because I smell something tasty that they made in the kitchen.

## 69

**H**arding C.'s notebook. On rituals. Even from the early days of the Oak Collective, we felt the importance of rituals, understood as established forms for ceremonies, patterns in our daily life, construction of meaning in life through collective dedication to being present in a certain place at the same time, by following the metabolism of the community in the same fashion. It was the best way to stay close, watch each other's backs, keep us resilient. When the later cohort arrived, with religious professionals among them, there was a priest, an imam, a rabbi, a swami, a monk, and there was a discussion about establishing a place of reflection, which we didn't want to call church or temple or anything else, so we called the Place. That is where some of our rituals happened, followed by nights of stand-up comedy and improvisation shows, theatre plays, musical concerts, dances, so on.

Rituals are discussions about the life of our gardens, of our fellow villagers, followed by a group walk around the village, when the designated poet of the day recites verse about life in nature, moral lessons from history and on occasion the religious professionals say sermons from their respective holy literature, in such a way that does not proselytize, such as come to my religion don't go to this other religion because of such and such reasons, their sermons are crafted so that they speak to the needs and dreams of shrunken humans living in Village, a very diverse bunch having to live under the same conditions, leaving no room for creating sects with competing interests. Perhaps this was the purpose of the shrinking, whether it came about by design or accident, to create a condition for humans to live together, to walk by the same rituals, to discover a path together.

Then there are the jokes. One day when the priest, the rabbi, and the imam entered the Cafeteria, which is called like that even though no coffee is served there, the swami and the monk were already there enjoying herbal tea, they saw the other three entering, the swami said, Look, a joke is happening, to which the priest thought he was the subject of a prank yet again, just like the week before when someone replaced his wooden cross with a cross made from celery and took a bite from it, the imam and the rabbi were already chuckling, but the imam himself was the subject of the prank this time, there was a fine thread tied to his garment which had at the other end a bunch of dandelion pappi that he was pulling after him, to the amusement of the children that were responsible for this. The rabbi hadn't noticed any of this because he had just stepped on a sticky patch of ground, of course made by the same children to have a great laugh, the rabbi lost a sandal in the sticky patch, just outside the Cafeteria, was not upset at all by it, and carried on walking. That's the spirit in Village. Getting upset was phased out from our emotional repertoire. Even jokes and humour are part of our rituals.

## 70

Controlling the drone with the remote proved to be impractical. The technical minds in Village got together and reconfigured the drone to have autonomous navigation on board without the need for a ground team to move it about. They installed a two-way communication antenna so the away team could maintain permanent contact with ground control at an even longer range. For this exploratory expedition into the unshrunk world, Brutus Zapp was not selected.

The away team consisted of Harding C., Menelao Melanoliou, Marichka Kobrynska, Aiko Kochiyama, and Florencia Gallardo. Objective: find the research facility on Brutus's map, plug into their internet and find out what was going on in the world.

They waited for a clear sky afternoon to lift off from Village towards the open fields they had noticed on previous missions. They were supposed to cross the fields and ascertain their whereabouts, which, according to Brutus's calculations based on star charts and other means, should not be too far away. If that proved to be right, the shrinkage would not have happened too far away from the research facility with which Brutus was familiar. The next question to answer was whether the facility had anything to do with the shrinkage.

Shortly before sunset, the away team came to a very large corn field, so large that it stretched into the horizon blended into the peachy colours of the sun. There was no activity in the field except for a lone combine doing its job in parallel lines, back and forth towards a complex of buildings that were likely

purposefully built for this kind of agriculture.

It appears we have arrived at the field, said Harding C., who was the navigator of this mission. If the map is right, we cross the field here, towards those buildings, we continue north for ten kilometers, and we arrive at the research centre.

Let's ride the combine, said Aiko. We can land on top of it. Why not, we'll draw less attention. We look like a bird from far away.

There were no objections. The leader of the away team, Marichka Kobrynska, said to Menelao who was the pilot, Make it so, after which Menelao changed the course of the drone to intercept the combine in a bird-like flight pattern, to land on its roof.

There is nobody inside, said Florencia Gallardo.

Must be one of those remote-controlled combines, said Marichka.

Look at this field, it's huge, said Aiko. As far as eyes can see, it's all corn. So much corn. Why do people need so much industrial corn?

What Aiko was thinking but did not express in words, was the monotony and lack of diversity of the crop. She did not know much about industrial agriculture but was aware that monocultures were thinning out biodiversity for the sake of efficiency, or better said, for the sake of profit.

I suppose people need to eat, said Harding C.

And not just people, said Florencia Gallardo.

They rode the combine until it came close to the main building. There was an array of silos behind it, several cars parked, a few unshrunk humans out and about in overalls, an office with the lights turned on, and an empty two-lane street parting the building from another large field of a different colour and purpose. So far, so good, said Harding C., we are on track, let's stay undetected and maintain this course, Which way that is? said Menelao, That way, said Harding C. They increased altitude to a safe point where they would be indistinguishable from a

bird, to the naked eye of humans on the ground.

Night had fallen fully when they arrived at the destination, as planned. The building in sight was not attached to an agricultural field, but rather to a forest of thick, dark green pine trees. Big letters on the side of the building read RAGEONX, and in small font, right below, Research for Advanced Genetics, Enhanced Organisms and Nanotechnology X.

What does X stand for? said Aiko. I don't know, Brutus didn't say, said Harding C. You think he actually worked here, said Aiko. I think so, he is very foggy about this, said Harding C., how else would he know so much about the place? Maybe he has secrets he is bound to keep, said Florencia. He might, but I trust him, said Marichka, he risked his life for us. That's true, said Aiko, what do you think we'll find here?

Nobody answered that question. They remained silent as there was no time for speculation. Menelao, land the drone over there, said Marichka. Menelao put the drone down near an antenna on the roof of the building, which was pointed at a high angle, probably linked to a satellite. They used Brutus's shrunk work phone, his ID and password, to connect to the building's WIFI. The assumption was that his phone would be detected at work and be dismissed as a fluke of the network, so humans would not search for Brutus anymore, in case they started to search in the first place when discovering Brutus's disappearance. This line of thinking had its own set of questions that the away team was very aware of. They had ten minutes to browse the network and the internet for information, before the connection would be cut by the system administrator manually as it certainly matched the pattern of an outside intrusion.

Five minutes into browsing, a light turned on the roof, illuminating its entirety. They were discovered. Seconds later, two security guards burst through the door with handguns drawn,

yelling at nobody, Freeze, freeze, don't move. They were receiving instructions in their earbuds, which were to scan the roof to locate the intruders.

Damn! whispered Aiko, not again. We must go, said Florencia. Give me just a second to download this file, said Harding. No, no time, said Marichka, we must go now. I got it, said Harding and severed the connection to the network. Go, go Menelao, said Marichka, at the same time when one of the guards aimed and shot at them. The bullet missed the drone, but not completely. It grazed one of the blades. We can't fly, we can't fly, said Menelao. Yes, you can, make it so, said Marichka with such a determined voice that it forced Menelao into action without him thinking about the movement of his hand on the controls. He pulled up the drone, while the guards kept shooting at them, missing every time, but shooting incessantly as the drone gained altitude, fast but uncontrollably in a zig zag pattern that made it even more of a difficult target. Aim for the forest, said Marichka, I'm trying I'm trying, replied Menelao, mustering all the concentration he possessed, while the others kept to their stations, heads down.

They made it to the forest and kept flying erratically at maximum speed, continuing for a while until no shots were heard, no lights were seen, except the emerging moonlight from behind a blanket of cement-colored clouds.

## 71

The diary of Harding C. on art and creative expression in general.

I do not know much about art. The most I know is from that time when my family and I visited the Louvre Museum in Paris to see Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. I had less than ten seconds to look at the painting that was three meters away from my

vantage point, before a museum employee rushed us to leave that space so other tourists from the thick crowd could have their ten seconds. What can I say. It's a painting. You get a much better look in a printed version, where you can see all the details. Just outside the room that contained the Mona Lisa, in a long hallway, I saw a painting called *Il Condottiere*, a portrait of a man by Antonello da Messina, painted in 1475, as far as I can remember. I stared at the portrait for at least five minutes, nobody bothered me. I think it's a much finer painting than Mona Lisa, and it was created decades earlier.

I don't know about beauty in the eye of the beholder either, however I feel that beauty is to a large extent a social construction, an unspoken subliminal agreement between people who want to give a physical representation to a bouquet of emotions. What I mean to say is that beauty does not exist unto itself but only through the emotions of a human that can hold them. In Village we create all sorts of art that expresses our emotions. Not all art is about beauty or feeling good. Some art elicits rage, other art elicits repulsion, or annoyance, or raises abstract questions, or has no point at all, except to let out streams of consciousness, something that I would never do myself, it's too personal and presumptuous of me to expect others to be impressed or to want to know my unfiltered imagination. I only dared to write about myself in this diary entry, to have a record of my own perspective. Others are doing the same in their diaries, which I will collect eventually, with permission, into a single volume.

Why do we do it? Look, I will be honest. I am not a poet. I do not have much literary talent. Rhetorical questions such as, why do we love, why do we cry, why do we hold faith and so on, are not very mysterious to me because I have answers to them, in varying degrees of confidence. Why do we make all that art in Village? Because we do not have a choice. We have arrived

at a peaceful balance with the forest. We have time to explore creativity unencumbered by material constraints. We produce sufficient foodstuffs, we have sufficient tools and equipment to live comfortably. We satisfy our yearning for knowledge, thinking, liberty, and progress through creative expression.

There is the theatre group, the comedy group, the visual arts, the musical studio, the social games, the constructors club. The constructors are building and rebuilding modular mazes, domes, and houses made of wood for entertainment. They assemble and reassemble in various shapes, add new challenges, experiment with new architectures under the constraint that no wood go to waste. It's fascinating and quite ingenious.

A few words about boredom. The shrinkage made us realize that the huge demands on our attention that the unshrunk world used to put on us have also instilled what I call the anxiety of boredom. When we left the attention-grabbing world even for a few moments, our brains learned to reject those moments as undesirable, and labeled them as boredom. Then this manufactured boredom seeped into the attention-grabbing time as well, and we were anxious to avoid boredom and sought even more stimuli, something new, something to make us feel alive. We have escaped that self-enforcing spiral since the shrinkage. We are not bored in Village. Our moments of quiet, reflection, meditation blend naturally with collective life. Attention requires consent, solitude is respected, social engagement is voluntary, liberty is a river, if I am allowed to attempt a metaphor, that flows within the boundaries of what the forest can offer us and what we do to keep the forest healthy.

Base, come in base, is this working? said Menelao into the walkie-talkie that was delivering only static noise in spite of Menelao's several attempts to reset the frequency.

Maybe it's out of range, said Aiko.

Shouldn't be, given the duration of the flight and the terrain around us, replied Menelao.

So why is it not working?

Really Aiko? said Menelao.

Seconds later, the walkie-talkie delivered the following words, Drone team, do you copy, drone team, do you copy, this is base, repeat, do you copy?

Yes, we copy base, how about you, do you copy? said Menelao.

Yes, we copy drone team, finally.

That's a relief, said Marichka to her friends on the drone team.

The conversation that ensued covered a brief report of what had happened since the drone team departed from Village, the encounter with the security personnel at Rageonx, the team's health, and the status of the drone. Both the base and away team concluded that the damage was repairable. Before repairs could begin, the away team had to secure their location, given that they had landed in a tree in an uncomfortable position, tangled in a web of twigs, they had to get the drone unstuck, lower it to the ground carefully as to avoid further damage, and detection. Once on the ground they established a secure perimeter, camouflaged their presence to the best of their abilities, Menelao, Marichka, and Aiko began the repairs with help from base, until they were completed.

## 73

**N**otebooks of Harding C. I have been asked to document how we deal with conflict. For the record, I need to mention we are blessed to have several villagers among us with experience in conflict resolution, some professional psychologists, some who have worked in the military, some who are teachers familiar with various pedagogical approaches. We even have professional politicians and trade unionists with us, quite knowledgeable about Robert's Rules of Order. They explained why rules of order are important in dealing with complex collective issues and maintaining a high quality of democracy. Then, there are several religious professionals with us, of various faiths, whose presence alleviates matters of conflict of conscience, of which I am personally not privy to, not that I should be, I only mention that we do have those internal conflicts.

What I can tell you about the known conflicts is that they tend to be determined by the environment we live in and are mostly related to our shrunken size. We do not quibble about the right level of taxation that could stimulate or inhibit economic activity, which is a matter of contention for the unshrunken world. Our conflicts are about what kind of seeds to plant, for example, someone said they would really like to have bread made from wheat grains, but growing wheat in a forest is not very practical, remember everything we grow is unshrunken, grows full size, so a crop of wheat would be a tad impractical. That's how that conversation went. It was an important, passionate discussion

that almost degenerated into a physical brawl. Thankfully, some calm heads intervened, and used the proper words to de-escalate the conflict. For an unshrunk human this may seem like a trivial problem. I assure you, for us it was not.

I suppose that, upon reflection, conflicts between humans, regardless of their size and provenance, are inevitable. Not all of them are solvable, but all of them are describable at least, meaning there are stories that can be told about them. We decided in Village to allow the stories to be told, with the willingness of the parties involved in whatever conflict. Once those stories were shared either in a public forum, or a private session, depending on the situation, parties were engaged by the mediator to express their levels of satisfaction during the entire process of conflict resolution. It is true, some conflicts did not result in immediate acceptance from both parties, so it took longer for those people to develop a mindset of coping. When accommodations were required, and were available, we provided them. When they were not available, the community offered alternatives. Example: Villager X required a private water closet for their exclusive use because they suffered from a severe phobia when they had to share a water closet. Would you consider that unreasonable? Some villagers did consider this request unreasonable, and one of them pursued the path of conflict with Villager X. No mutual acceptance was found. The community did indeed find accommodation, which certainly cannot be denied, if it can be offered when requested. There are other examples, not too many, because conflicts take up a very small chunk of our time. We just don't have many. Given more time, I am quite confident that we can phase out interpersonal conflicts completely in Village. Matters of personal conscience remain an open book, perhaps for as long as humans continue to exist.

As soon as they landed, Marichka handed over the device with the data collected from Rageonx. The briefing was scheduled for later in the evening, when the entire Village was invited to listen. Until then, the councils would collect questions from everyone, but only questions that pertain to the away mission itself, not the content of the data collected. Fiona Farrinelli was elected to ask those questions to the drone team. Meanwhile, the first person selected at random to read the files on the device and provide a brief report to the entire collective was Jayden Flier. It took him more than four hours just to view all the files, and read a small portion of them. When he arrived at the meeting, he was visibly flustered.

You all right Jayden? Fiona asked when he sat down near her.

I don't know yet, but go ahead, it's going to be a tough night, Jayden replied.

While the crowd was taking their seats and coming to order, Fiona stood up and said plainly, as it was within her prerogatives, Folks, thank you for coming, I am going to change the rules here a bit, I will invite Jayden to speak first, give us his findings, then we'll see where this takes us. Take it away, Jayden.

Thank you, Fiona. I will begin with a big conclusion about my readings of the data from Rageonx, said Jayden slowly while walking his eyes over the crowd. The soft way to express this conclusion is that some of our fellow villagers present here have connections with Rageonx.

No way, really, said someone from the crowd.

Please, everyone, said Fiona.

I will get to the names in just a bit, said Jayden. Per our rules, we all agreed to full transparency, truth etc., regardless of what we find, because we are all in this together. No secrets. Here we go. I found lists of contracts and payments for services rendered, so it read in the documents, for the following, apologies, I am just going to list them in the order I found them, Cecil Harold Lysander Millington. Gunther Glassfarb, Marcus Literolis, Blythe Zapp, Lynton Friedman, Billy Nordhaus, Margaret Fletcher, Fred Hayektom, Donatello Zuniga, Aiko Kochiyama.

Wait, no way, said Aiko Kochiyama.

We'll get to discussion in a moment, said Fiona. Please continue.

And a number of corporations with unfamiliar names, said Jayden.

Look, I have nothing to hide, said Brutus Zapp. If I may.

Go ahead. Two minutes, please, said Fiona.

Yeah, I worked as a security consultant for Rageonx, said Brutus. I help them build the security teams, both for their buildings and cyber-defence. They paid me and that's it. Did I know what they were working on? Only to some extent. I did not have full clearance. Anything above my pay grade was inaccessible.

But you knew they were working on miniaturization technologies? asked someone from the crowd.

Not miniaturization, said Brutus. Nanotechnology.

But it could be used for miniaturization?

Look, folks, my name is also on this list, said Fred Hayektom. Nothing to hide. My company worked on some of the tech at Rageonx. Then I sold my shares and dropped out of the project. I know we are all thinking this. Rageonx is somehow responsible for the shrinking, they put us in some sort of mad experiment for whatever purpose. I cannot confirm nor deny this. I just don't know. Is it likely? Possibly maybe. With about a thirty percent degree of confidence.

Whoa, that's a lot, said somebody from the crowd.

How did you calculate that? said somebody else.

I do not know of a tech that can just shrink people, said Fred. We are not in a film, that's certain. Whatever is happening with us checks out as real, as far as our senses can tell us. I don't think we are in a virtual simulation either. A company like Rageonx does not have the kind of computing power necessary to generate all this "reality" for us, nor does any other company and it can never happen for reasons I will not go into here. I do suspect, however, that it is not a coincidence that some of us here have connections to Rageonx, of which I was not aware until now.

Same for me, said the others whose names were read out loud.

I still operate on honesty, said Fred. I committed to honesty since we arrived here, because we are not in a game theory setup. We depend on each other's honesty for survival and wellbeing. I want to get to the bottom of this much like anywhere else here.

Agreed, said the others whose names were read.

We can jump to conclusions, continued Fred, suspicions and accusations, or continue with finding out the truth. Why did we shrink? Why us? Why nobody else? How much of this is real?

Applause and agreement from the crowd present.

## 75

Several weeks later, after the data was perused by many villagers taking turns at reading from the device itself, or from copies made on other devices, while being mindful of the limited supply of energy to power those devices, study groups were formed naturally, one per tree, to discuss the data, interrogate folks whose names were linked to Rageonx, in the friendliest way possible. Except for Gunther Glassfarb, who caught a severe cold and had

to confine himself to bed for several days, all former Rageonx contractors offered full cooperation.

No ulterior link was found.

It appeared it was a simple coincidence that Cecil, Gunther, Marcus, Blythe, Lynton, Billy, Margaret, Fred, Donatello, and Aiko worked with Rageonx in some capacity. Cecil was a steel provider, Gunther moved capital, some techniques he used included overleveraging against financial derivatives, taking advantage of fiscal loopholes, borrowing against unrealized income, Marcus worked on building some of the labs, Blythe aka Brutus worked on security, Lynton was a political liaison whatever that meant nobody was really interested in knowing more even though Lynton offered to share details, We all know how lobbying works, said many of the villagers, it's about obtaining permits, tax cuts, Lynton said Yes, then they moved on. Billy worked on energy systems, with his experience in fossil fuels, Margaret helped with the acquisition of land, Donatello was a government liaison for raw materials in South America, and Aiko worked on software development, but not in critical systems. Small pieces in a large puzzle.

One evening, during a fireside chat, Gao Jianxing spoke, What if Rageonx is not materially responsible for causing the shrinkage, but they are responsible in a metaphorical sense?

Whoa, said Jayden taking a puff from a self-rolled joint, that's deep man, but I know what you mean.

I don't, said Cléa who was completely sober.

What I mean, said Gao, is that someone looked at the work done by Rageonx and did the shrinkage to us but not in the sense we perceived it, that we are much smaller than the surrounding environment, but our senses themselves have been altered that it only appears we are smaller, while in reality we are the same size as unshrunk humans.

It can be true, said Florencia Gallardo, the brain can be manipulated to perceive a different scale of reality.

Are you saying we are not actually in a forest? said Berta Esperanza.

No, no, we are, said Gao, and it is real for us. For the unshrunk humans we may appear in their size. Only we see ourselves differently.

How do we test this hypothesis? said Paula Lipman.

We continue to live our lives, said Gao. We continue to learn and explore. The time for understanding will come.

## 76

Life as a metaphor is a cute thing to think about, but when you have to put food on the table, you don't have much time to think about the meaning of life, said Missy D. Point while passing the breadbasket to the next person at the dinner table.

Life has different meanings depending on the size of your wealth, said Zuri Owuor.

Not always true, said Fred Hayektom, spreading a slice of bread with cream cheese and herbs.

Easy for you to say, you are a billionaire, said Cléa.

I am not the only rich person at this table, said Fred, or I should say formerly rich.

The combined wealth between some of us here, said Margaret Fletcher, is over ten billion if I am not mistaken. This cream cheese is very good, Mallarika, thank you for making it.

My pleasure, said Mallarika.

How is life not different for you, said Zuri?

It comes back to limits and imagination, said Fred. And status. Not always, but sometimes. At least for me. When I cashed in

those billions, I realized I could do anything I imagined, but what I imagined was so pathetic, it left me empty. Yeah, I could buy this and that to prove a point about me, but so did the other wealthy humans. It was such a silly race for nothing. You cannot even validate your status as a mega-wealthy person. It's in your head. The recognition you may receive, it is purchased. It's conditioned by the wealthy. Not by the alleged merit I had, but by the wealth itself. We all know there are so many humans more intelligent and more hardworking than we, the super wealthy, yet they do not have that much. It's an undeniable fact of life. Merit is a medieval delusion, a fabrication, it's not real.

If only all super-wealthy thought like you, said Marie-Louise Lubala.

Some of them do, said Fred.

I do, said Gunther Glassfarb.

Me too, said Margaret Fletcher.

So do I, said Cecil Harold Lysander Millington.

This cream cheese is so good, said Donatello Zuniga.

Is there more? asked Ignacio Monserrate Ernesto Salar.

Enough for everyone, said Mallarika.

How much cream cheese can a human eat, really? said Fred.

Exactly, said Cecil Millington, spreading a second slice.

So then, if humans do not need infinite cream cheese, why do they appear to need even more wealth? said Berta Isabel Esperanza.

I suppose the system allows it, said Fred. No other reason, really.

I suppose, said Berta.

It's not that we had much choice, said Fred. I am a determinist. I do not think we have free will. The entire history of my brain caused my entire behaviour, and the system facilitated my actions. Literally, I am not at fault, but don't get me wrong, can you pass me the salt, please?

Sure, said Berta.

Don't get me wrong, continued Fred. I can be changed by circumstances. Perfect example: the shrinkage. I am a changed person.

Can people change if not for an exterior event that forces them? said Marichka Kobrynska.

Nobody changes solely based on internal causes, said Fred, like this bundle of neurons or that bundle deciding on their own to change the behaviour of the entire organism. External input is always present and required.

We can thank Rageonx, or whoever did the shrinkage, for your transformation, said Marichka.

We can thank them, said Fred. I wish I knew who they are.

Choice, no choice, said Brutus Zapp, I am not a very wealthy person, I don't need to be, I don't want to be, I love it here, wasn't always the case. So, I changed too. Damn, this jam is amazing too. What is it?

Raspberry, said Mallarika.

Y'all have to try it with cream cheese, said Brutus. De-licious! What was I saying? So yeah, this whole experience changed me, too. I still want to know how it happened, who did it, the whole shebang, but I don't care that much anymore. I'm glad it happened. I learned to take it in. And it's much better than my life before. I may want to remain like this.

Half of the table froze in silence.

With his mouth half full, Brutus continued, What, I mean it, it's not that bad, we have everything we need to live, it's fun, not much stress because we contained the dangers, protection is good, land is plentiful, we can explore, we can learn, and we don't damage the forest. We could last a really long time here, and enjoy it!

Gunther Glassfarb burst into uncontrollable laughter. He went on and on, folks raising eyebrows and joining with smiles, You ok Gunther? said Jasmine Flier, Gunther could not stop, was just signaling he was okay but needed more time to get over it, He also

likes being small, said Jayden Flier, which made Gunther laugh even harder, I know what he's thinking, said Missy D. Point, he realized that he may not actually be that wealthy anymore because he cannot access his wealth now, That's it that's it, said Gunther laughing and breathing like an excited puppy, she gets me!

What is wealth without power, said Billy Nordhaus calmly, spreading raspberry jam on a full slice of bread.

They're the same, said Marie-Louise Lubala.

Two crabs are eating a billionaire on the bottom of the ocean, said Sly Stone. One looks at the other and says, This taste a little rich to you?

The table burst into laughter.

Wait, we're not at the main course yet, said Mallarika half-missing the joke, we have salad, potatoes, quiche, cakes.

And mushrooms, said Sly Stone.

Fermented grapes, said Menelao Melanoliou.

Crackers, said Debra Literolis.

Cauliflower ice-cream, said Zuri Owuor.

Get out, said Lynton Friedman. How did you do it?

In the cool room, said Zuri Owuor.

Folks, folks, I am happy this happened to me, said Fred. I don't miss my former unshrunk wealthy life, but if we ever return to that size, I will remain forever a man of Village.

## 77

Cléa was humming a dance song to herself when the blueberry she was pushing gained speed, moved away from her quickly, rolling into a large irregular indentation in the ground, definitely not a natural phenomenon, such as a hole sculpted by rain after having lost all rainwater due to evaporation or absorption into the ground. Oh my goodness, it's a footprint, Cléa exclaimed to

herself, then looked around to check for other witnesses or for potential sources of danger. There were none, so she decided to run back to Village to report her findings, and leave the blueberry behind as it would have been too difficult to pull the fruit out of the footprint, clean it, and roll it back home according to her current daily assignment.

She was running back to the village when, out of nowhere, she was lifted off the ground by a giant hand, or so it appeared to her, it was an unshrunk human male who said to Cléa, when they were face to face, Cléa in the palm of the man's hand, What do we have here, said the man, Please don't kill me, said Cléa utterly scared for her life, I would never do that to such a lovely creature, said the man, how come you are so small? How come you are so big, said Cléa in return, still scared, Fair point, the man said, I understand we are talking from different perspectives, apologies, I am Luke, I am an Earth wanderer, I'm Cléa, I'm a nurse, For squirrels? said Luke smiling, No, for shrunken humans like me, said Cléa, Ah, there are more of you? asked Luke, Maybe, said Cléa, losing fear gradually as Luke seemed to be a decent unshrunk human.

What is an Earth wanderer? asked Cléa. Also, if you could put me down, that would be great, thanks.

Sure thing, said Luke, I'm going to put you on this rock and sit next to you if I may. There you go.

Appreciate it.

Where were we? Ah, an Earth wanderer is a person what just walks the Earth.

Why?

To check out places, meet humans, learn about life. I know, you can do all that from your computer these days, without moving your body much. That's okay too but not the same. I need to expose my life to the reality, unmediated by screens.

Makes sense.

Which brings me to this place. I did not expect to see a tiny human. Tell me more about yourself. You said there are others?

A few others, said Cléa, now completely relaxed. We went through a shrinking event. We don't know how or why. We made a life here in this forest. Village is not far from here.

Shrinking, you say? said Luke. I went through some shrinking myself. Moved into a van. Sold almost all my things. Looks like it's been more than that for you guys. Awesome.

It's different, said Cléa. But you're right, not very different. Except we didn't have a choice.

Nobody really has choices in life, said Luke. We are just riding the flow.

Somebody from Village said the same thing recently.

I'd like to meet them, said Luke.

Let me talk to them first, said Cléa. Some villagers are more anxious, so we need to be mindful of that.

For sure, said Luke. Know what, I'm just going to wait right here, have some blueberries, and you go tell the others.

I'll be right back.

Don't be late, said Luke. I know where you live.

Ha, you're funny.

I'm joking, sure, I'm a good person, I promise.

Ok, I believe you, said Cléa. I'll be back soon.

## 78

The villagers came in three separate teams, Brutus leading the forward team carrying spears with pieces of white cloth at one end to signal peaceful intention, the back team was at a distance behind, charged with alerting the community in case things went awry, and a third team hiding in the left flank in a bush, as backup support, also just in case.

You guys are funny, said Luke, when he saw the forward team with Brutus in tiny military gear, I mean no harm, I promise.

Greetings, said Brutus. That's what Cléa told us. What brings you here?

I am an Earth wanderer, said Luke. I have this backpack, please take a look inside, I'm going to just put it on the side so you don't have to climb on it, my minivan is parked down the road in that direction, this is my identification, I'll put it here, feel free to inspect.

Luke Wanderlust? That's your name? said Jayden Flier, who was also on the forward team.

Yeah man, I changed my name, said Luke.

I like it, said Jayden.

Me too, said Ignacio Salar, who walked onto Luke's ID to get a better read.

So, Mr. Wanderlust, said Brutus.

Call me Luke.

Luke, continued Brutus, you are not disturbed to see a bunch of tiny humans?

I'm not, man, said Luke. I'm very chill. I live and let live, man. I don't judge.

We are not like other people, said Menelao.

Believe me man, I've seen weird stuff, said Luke. You are cool. Normal.

Both teams heard that. Villagers were discombobulated by Luke's words. They looked at each other, some signaled softly that Luke may be cuckoo, others did not think so, others wanted to hear more.

I assure you I'm not cuckoo, man, said Luke. I've seen a lot in my life. Unshrunk humans, that's what you call us, right, behaving as if they were elephants, rhinoceroses, whales, great sharks, way above their size, so when I look at you lovely people, I see nothing weird, I see normal and proper, man.

Thank you, shouted Marcus Literolis with great satisfaction

from the back of the back team, Finally some recognition.

You're funny man, said Luke.

Marcus shush, said Debra Literolis, from next to him.

Luke, if I may, said Brutus, maybe you can help us with this, situation of ours, it's not that we have a problem, no, we're good, we make a good living here, but we still want to know what happened, just to have peace, you know.

Yeah, man, sure, I'll help, said Luke, it would be an honour. I'll do whatever I can.

We cannot offer accommodation or much compensation, said Brutus.

Don't worry about that man, said Luke, I'm good, I have everything I need, food, tools, some survival skills, I know it doesn't show, ha ha, I made it so far, after many years.

Good to hear, said Menelao. We truly appreciate it.

Awesome man.

Let's party! said Yolanda from the back team.

Far out, man, said Luke.

## 79

The party began just outside Village, in the next clearing, where there was enough space to accommodate everyone, including Luke Wanderlust with his backpack, tent, and portable cooking pot. They built a modest fire pit where Luke made a scrumptious vegetable mix soup, enough for everyone, large and small, to last them three days or for as long as the party carried on, whichever came first. Music was crafted by Sly Stone and the Band, dance inspired by Yolanda's dance group, where she was the lead choreographer, catering was provided by the team on rotation in the Cafeteria, safety precautions were provided by the safety team, where Brutus Zapp had nothing to do, because they

had become that good and professional. Villagers came in party outfits, made in all-natural fibres, colourful and delightful, eager to spend time with the first unshrunk humans they had seen or met in a very long time.

Unlike Lemuel Gulliver in the island country of Lilliput, Luke Wanderlust found much chemistry with the villagers, not approaching even the slightest impression of discord, and being extra careful with his movements to avoid any damage to the surroundings or to cause the slightest harm to anyone, human or non-human, while dancing, eating, moving around, or simply walking. Many villagers talked to him with awe, as if he was of a different realm, so much so that Luke, as uber-chill as he seemed, had to remind them that he was as human as they once were, Not a biggie man, he said, you're shrunken, I'm not, we live the same, man, I know Luke, said Marie-Louise, but you still remind me of my other life and how many unshrunk humans behave, It's all right man, said Luke, even though Marie-Louise was a female, he knew that of course, his manner of speaking only reflected coolness, which is not genderized, Marie-Louise knew that as well, and while the music and dance was playing loud around them, she had to raise her voice so Luke could hear her, I cannot hear you, said Luke, I'm going to lie down, come to my ear and talk in there, which is exactly what he did after finding the right spot some distance away from the dancing crowd, then Marie-Louise spoke into his ear as loud as she could, I miss my family, Whoa, said Luke, you're too loud, Sorry Luke, That's all right, he said, I think I got it, I wish I could help you man, I don't have a phone, No worries, said Marie-Louise, it's just how I feel, maybe I'm a bit drunk, I'm drunk too, said Luke, You have family? said Marie-Louise, Yeah, I have parents, they're good, and some others, they're all good, How do you talk to them, I send them postcards, letters, from around the world, That's nice, Yeah man I like postcards, No photos? I don't have a camera, man,

said Luke, I don't miss technology, You're a Luddite? said Marie-Louise, I don't know what that is, Never mind, I'm not against technology, just don't have time for it from too much wandering, That's funny and deep, Yeah they keep telling me that, I think you should stay with us, said Marie-Louise, I'd like that man, I'll stay, for a while I'll stay.

The party carried on until the next evening, by which time Luke's soup was finished, villagers were exhausted from all the dancing, the talking and the playing.

## 80

So, Luke, this minivan runs on petrol? said Menelao Melanoliou looking at the vehicle from the top of a rock.

No man, it's electric, said Luke.

Ah good, said Menelao.

Yeah man, I know what you mean, petrol is bad, electric ain't much better overall, but to make it better, I gave up my house, I did my part.

Yeah, sure Luke, that's great, I don't mean to judge, you do what you gotta do, we all try that, right? To the best of our abilities.

I know man, that's why I wander the Earth, I don't know what else to do.

Have you thought about not travelling alone? said Menelao.

I did for a while, said Luke, and had company, we travelled to many places. When that company got tired, they went back to whence they came. Not everyone can be a fulltime nomad.

We are all nomads to some extent, except for different distances and durations.

You're right man, that's so true, said Luke.

If you don't mind me asking, what made you choose wandering?

I don't mind at all, man, it's my body, I was itching, in my eyes, in my heads, legs, arms, everything. I worked in a steel mill and it got very tedious man, day in day out, melting, forging, melting, shaping metal sheets and pipes, too many pipes and sheets man, I asked myself who needs all those pipes and sheets, told my union, we need to organize man, find out who needs all those pipes and sheets, slow down a bit, they said they knew who the sheets, nuts, and bolts were for, for some oceanic shipping ships, what are the ships shipping, I asked them, they are shipping steel and containers from place to place, so we make steel to move around more steel, I said, yeah, pretty much, said the union leader, sounds redundant, I said, tell me about it he said, let's do something about this, I told him, what do you have in mind, he probed me, ask management that we work like three days a week, make less sheets and pipes, yeah but they're gonna pay us less, the union leader replied with noticeable frustration in his voice, I'm good with that, I said, if we make less steel there's less containers with stuff being shipped around, so we won't have to buy that stuff, so we don't need that money anyways, the union leader looked at me as if I was high, and I was not high in that moment, listen man, I told the union leader, we asked to work four days a week, and three months vacation, for the same pay, now you're talking, he retorted with a sigh of relief, so we organized to do that, but I'm not good at organizing, I get tired easily man, in long meetings I fall asleep, they had long meetings to organize, not for me man, so what ended up happening, they got a few days off per year, bit more money, by the time that happened I was out man, I left the steel mill, sold my house and hit the roads, this was an easy choice for me, man, you either get more money to work the same, or work less for same money, to feel progress, am I right, yes I know these choices have different motivations, they kick in at different times, bottom line there's too much steel being shipped around in shipping ships, we don't

need that much, I mean why, for what exactly man, there is Earth that can be wandered, we should wander it more, right, they said the steel shipping is to advance progress so we can enjoy Earth better, but it's not better, it's just too complicated for no real reason, many start to get it, too much agitation man, wander more, that's my story man.

Thanks for sharing, man, said Menelao, Now you gotta tell the others too.

Yeah, I'll say it again, no problem, man.

## 81

That is a great story Luke, said Florencia Gallardo the doctor, I wonder if I can ask you a favour, though.

Sure, man, any time, said Luke.

Can you take me to the city when you get the chance, I'd like to procure some supplies for Village, mostly medication.

Absolutely, do you want to go now?

If it is not too much of an inconvenience, said Florencia.

Can I also ask you a favour, said Gunther Glassfarb, not waiting for an answer, I just need to get to a bank terminal to check some of my financials. I manage other people's money. It's important I honour my duties.

I hope it's not too much if I also ask you a favour, said Holly-Kate Glassfarb, I'd like to go with my husband too.

Since we're on this topic, said Lynton Friedman, can I come too? I need to make some calls.

I'd like to join too, said Rajesh Biswas, I was working on the construction of a nuclear plant before. I'm curious if it made progress.

Sure, man, I'll take you all, said Luke. I can use a shoe box I used to keep fresh eggs in to carry you.

They made the first stop at a pharmacy, one of those big chains, where aisles were labeled with numbers and categories, where you could buy cosmetics, eggs, milk, withdraw cash, peruse gossip magazines, and check yourself out if you were in a hurry or did not want to interact with a human cashier. Luke took Florencia in a hip pocket, from where she could hear the conversation.

That's quite a list you have there, said the pharmacist.

Yeah man, you know, for conditions.

This Gallardo, said the pharmacist, is your doctor?

Not for long, man, I travel a lot.

She writes very tiny.

She is quite small, yeah.

Ask her next time to write bigger.

Pssst, whispered Florencia.

Your pocket is moving, said the pharmacist.

Yeah, the phone is vibrating.

Luke pulled a tiny note from the pocket. It read amoxicillin.

I also need some amoxicillin.

You got an SMS by paper? joked the pharmacist.

That's funny, man.

The next stop was the bank. The agreement was that the group would wait in the shoe box on the front passenger seat, while Luke took Gunther and Holly-Kate to the bank, reserved a terminal, logged in and sat there while Gunther went over the data.

You have to put me in your breast pocket, said Gunther when they sat down, so I can see the monitor, I'll dictate the password.

They'll see you, man, said Luke, they have cameras.

Don't worry, I look like a Pez dispenser.

Luke logged in, clicked where he was told, began to read aloud some numbers.

Shush, no need, I can see from here, just stand still, please, said Gunther.

Don't patronize him, said Holly-Kate from inside the pocket, keeping low.

No worries, man, I'm good.

There were pages upon pages of numbers, graphs, forecasts, and statements.

Hurry up, we'll get in trouble, said Holly-Kate. They'll catch us.

There was a knock on the door. An associate entered. Are you all good, sir?

Yeah man, just talking on the phone with my broker.

Let us know if you need anything.

Don't turn, don't turn, Luke, said Gunther, just carry on.

They stayed there for an hour until Gunther was satisfied, and thanked Luke profusely. In the shoe box, there was significant unrest when they came back.

What took so long? said Lynton Friedman.

Apologies, said Gunther, the market is spiralling out of control, periods of volatility, the government is discussing freezing capital in offshore accounts, clients pulling out assets under management, it's a storm.

Whoa, said Lynton, what are the spreads on blue chips?

Not looking good, said Gunther.

What are you talking about? asked Rajesh Biswas.

The others in the shoe box were just as flustered, except for Florencia, who was preoccupied with the medicine she now had under her responsibility.

Can we go now? asked Rajesh, we can be at the nuclear plant and back before the end of the day.

What are the volatilities? continued Lynton.

Huge liquidity pressures from steel manufacturers, clogging in international shipping, governments cracking down on windfall profits, long-term yields are really low, around zero, and going into negative territory.

Where do we go now? said Luke.

Can we wait just a bit, if you don't mind? This is important, said Lynton.

Or you can drive, Luke, said Holly-Kate, they can talk on the road.

By the time they arrived at the nuclear plant, Gunther had finished his report to the group, they drew conclusions, were exhausted, and at peace at the same time, which normally would not have been the case had the conversation happened in their unshrunk state.

The nuclear plant was still under construction. Luke stopped the car for a minute, put Rajesh in his breast pocket so he could see. From the look of the reactor buildings, the administration building, the construction seemed to be on schedule. We cannot stay here long, said Rajesh, it'll be suspicious.

You want me to drive? said Luke.

Yes please, you'd better drive.

A minute later, a police patrol car pulled them over.

Hello officer, said Luke.

Good afternoon, sir, said the officer. Your taillight is out.

I gotta replace that soon, said Luke. Tomorrow, I promise.

Do that please, said the officer. What do you have there, in that box?

It used to be for fresh eggs.

Mind if you open it?

Luke opened the shoe box. It was empty.

Thank you, sir, that is all. Have a good day.

Good day, officer.

Luke drove off slowly, amused by the encounter. You can all come out now, he said to the villagers hidden under the seat. This was a lot of fun, man!

General meeting of Village. Fiona Farinelli taking notes. Folks, the purpose of this meeting, she said, is to welcome Luke Wanderlust to Village as a full member of our community, as we are all happy to have met Luke, and as he has also been quite happy to settle here, I think I speak for everyone when I say this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, Luke, you want to say something? Sure, thanks man, quite happy to stay with you folks, I find you all very beautiful and happy, I think I can learn much from you, so I would like to stay a while, maybe one day I'll get shrunk like you, who knows, and live in one of those cute tiny apartments. Tiny for you, my friend, said Ignacio Salar, for us they're quite spacious, just the amount of space we need. Ha ha, you're right man. Ignacio is thinking about downsizing, said Donatello Zuniga, while everybody laughed copiously, to which Ignacio replied, Donatello, you want to move in with me, I don't need the extra room, we can split the house chores. Ha ha, no thanks man, I'm good. Where are you going to live, Luke? asked Marie-Louise Lubala. I don't know, said Luke, maybe I'll pitch my tent just over there, behind those trees, so I don't disturb your space, and you can visit me anytime, or I can visit you, I can help you with work. That would be great, said Billy Nordhaus, we're building an extension to deliver more water to the paper mill. Whoa, you have a paper mill, man? Sure do, said Billy Nordhaus, there is always a demand for paper. We also have a modest print shop, said Marichka Kobrynska, we might need your help to carry the presses, they're heavy for us. Sure, man. In ten years,

we'll have our own nuclear plant and particle accelerators, joked Sly Stone, while everyone laughed, not that there's anything wrong with that. I like progress too, man. See, there's a lot to do in Village, said Yolanda Francescone. I wonder what we can do for you, Luke? said Peggy, with Gigi the Pomeranian near her, we don't want to appear like we're only asking for things from you and not offering anything in return. I'm good, I'm good, very kind of you to ask, said Luke. Just tell us whenever. You already did much for me, said Luke, you opened my horizons, made me think big, really big. Surely you're joking Mr. Wanderlust, said Celeste Millington, how could we, being so small, make you think big? Some folks laughed. You have a great perspective on the world, said Luke, you are small to us unshrunk people, but you are big to yourselves and to the forest, you are freer, you have much more time and space to wander, I like that. You sure it's not because of our size, said Paula Lipman, maybe if we were big, we would behave just like unshrunk humans. Size doesn't matter, said Luke, it's what you do with it, if you allow all nature to live, you will be happier, no need to temper your imagination, your freedoms, shift your wandering towards wondering away from plundering. Mic drop, man, said Jayden Flier, while everybody laughed and applauded the general sentiment of what was said and intended this evening under a clear starry sky.

## 83

**B**efore sunrise, the population in two different trees woke up to Missy D. Point screaming from the top of her lungs, They're attacking, Heelp, they're attacking, without other details as to who was attacking whom, and from what direction, or to what purpose. In under a minute, Brutus Zapp arrived at Missy's

to assess the situation, which he did successfully. Three ants were traipsing through the garden adjacent to Missy's tree, causing significant damage to the tool shed, the crops, the foodstuff stored in crates, the pile of mulch, the pile of fertilizer. In their pen, the sheep kept at their business, not sensing real danger. Enemy incoming, shouted Brutus and blew the whistle in an alarm pattern to summon all hands to the defence of Village. Security teams arrived in under a minute, carrying basic defensive weaponry. They formed a basic enclosure pattern around the three ants to prevent them from advancing further, which was utterly ineffective since those specific insects did not perceive this kinetic blockade as threatening, not even when Brutus ordered the teams to start sticking the ants with their pointy spears. The maneuver forced the ants toward the fence surrounding Village, but it was not enough to make them leave, since the pull of the smell of food was much stronger than the humans' determination. As the teams continued sticking the ants with spears and hitting them with slingshots, more screams erupted from behind the defence lines, from all trees concurrently, voices uttering the same words, They're attacking, Ants incoming, et cetera, which described well what was happening, swarms of ants coming from all sides of Village into its perimeter aiming for the gardens, food provisions, the Cafeteria, chipping away at everything in their paths. Brutus ordered, Retreat, everyone stay inside, lock your doors, close your windows, prepare torches, commands that received full compliance as they made total sense as soon as they were uttered. The ants did not bother with the humans themselves, either going around them, or nudging them to the ground without malice, the fault being entirely on the side of panicking humans that ran amok, tripping, bumping into each other and into the incoming population of insects. There were minor injuries sustained, including Brutus, who fell on top of an ant that bit his leg in self-

defence. The enclosure of Village was quickly clear of all humans by the time it was overrun by ants in their quest for food. The sheep remained calm in their pen, untouched by the tumult.

We have to counterattack fast, said Brutus to the team that found shelter with him in the nearest tree, Before they destroy everything, How do we do that, said Billy Nordhaus, With torches and stones, said Brutus, but we require perfect coordination at all times, signal the others to get ready, Yessir, said Billy right away. They cracked open the window on the top floor to signal the other trees where folks were ready to exchange messages at their respective top floors, per the defence guidelines that had been rehearsed and agreed upon in advance. The global message was that in one minute, seven torches would emerge from each tree, in a clockwise pattern, starting with tree number one, then delayed by ten seconds, to force the swarm of ants to move away from the fires into a single direction, leading them outside the compound. The first set of torches came out on signal. The operation seemed to work until the fourth set of torches, when some ants did not follow the direction intended by the villagers, but instead started to climb trees, away from the fires, a move that baffled Brutus for a second, Close the gaps between the trees, he ordered, Get closer, leave no gaps. As more torches emerged on schedule from subsequent trees, the operation was back on track, the swarm of ants was being pushed out of the compound, while the ants that managed to climb some of the trees, they continued climbing well into the depth of the tree, until a point when they were either carried away from the wind, consumed by birds, or fell to the ground farther away from Village.

P hew, that was close, said Gao Jianxing who was covered in mud from an encounter with insects, How did it happen? said Marcus Literolis, did someone leave food uncovered, That was not the case, said Debra Literolis, I personally review all inventory daily, It was a black swan event, unknowable unknowns, said Brutus, I agree, said Rajesh Biswas, Uh-oh, said Marie-Louise Lubala, What now, said Gao Jianxing, Look at the clouds, rain is coming, said Marie-Louise, We have to clear the damage, salvage what we can before the rain comes, said Cléa, Sorry guys, just arrived, said Luke Wanderlust, just went to the minivan to get my stuff, y'all alright, We're fine Luke, said Florencia Gallardo, the rain is coming, Yeah man, it's not looking great, better get settled fast, y'all need help with cleaning that? No, we're good, it's too small for you to pick up anyway, you'd get in the way, said Debra Literolis, I'm going to set up the tent, then.

Minutes into cleaning, the rain started. Fine small harmless mist droplets at first. Everyone, take cover, ordered Jayden Flier who was in charge of the operation, Don't delay please, go now, leave everything outside, we'll get it when the rain stops. Back inside the trees, no rush, said Jayden, everyone, to their residence. Trees, signal your numbers, said Brutus to the security captains of each tree. When the numbers came back, there was a shortage of twenty-five people. Where are they? said Brutus, agitated. Neighbours say they left with Luke to go to his tent. Ah, okay, said Brutus. Yo, yelled Luke from his pop-up waterproof tent, which had a line of sight to Village, I got some

folks here with me. We're good. Thanks for confirming, yelled Brutus back. All right man.

The sheep, yelled Harding C, they are getting agitated, they need help. There was no answer.

The rain picked up in volume and intensity very fast. Drops were heavier, tighter, breaking into smaller droplets when they hit the ground, splashing back into doors and windows, harder and louder, What is happening, oh my god, said Peggy holding Gigi tight, It's just rain, don't worry, said Yolanda Francescone, with her back against the door to keep it shut in case water broke through, Guys you okay there, somebody from the next tree said loudly, Yeah, we're fine, answered somebody else from another tree, It's never poured like this, continued the voices, Yeah, I cannot remember a time either, Hey everybody, you there, this was Luke's voice from quite close, It's me, Luke, you should see the skies man, this is going to be bad, you want to come to my tent, it's waterproof, very solid, I built a shelter over it. I'll come, said Fred Hayektom. Me too, said somebody else from the back of the room. Me too, me too, said several other voices from the room. Can we come too, said other villagers from the next tree. All right man, said Luke, I can take everyone, I emptied my toolbox, I can carry you in it. What about the sheep? said Harding C. Sheep, too, said Luke.

Luke filled the box with villagers, packed tight, each carrying a small bag with personal items, about a hundred people in total, about the capacity of a streetcar. The ride took about a minute. Luke unpacked them one by one, placed them down, I gotta go back for the others, make yourselves at home, I started a pot of soup there, we'll distribute it soon. He went back through the hard rain to Village, filled the box again, delivered the humans and sheep to the tent, and repeated the walk until all villagers and all sheep had been transferred to the tent, safe and sound. When he put the last batch down, the sky cracked a solid

deafening thunder that felt very close to them, the lightening struck across Village smack into the tree by the paper mill, branches fell into the river, over the paper mill, crushing it to a pulp, Luke being the only who caught a glimpse of the spectacle, What happened, ask the villagers from inside the tent, Ah, nothing man, it's just lightening, Just lightening? said Gunther Glassfarb, you realize a strike would fry us all, We're safe here, man, said Luke, So says you, said Gunther.

Over the next little while, the rain intensified so much, the sounds it made, the cracking of branches, the sloshing of puddles turned the tent into a resonance chamber where it was impossible to talk to the fourth person away from oneself, not helping much with the relief of anxiety. I know it sounds bad, said Luke, I've seen worse, it's going to be fine, man. The next second, someone at the back screamed, Water, while someone else overhearing that said, Yeah, that's how rain works, There is water inside the tent, then the message spread through the crowd, all thousand humans, plus Luke, not fast enough to overcome the speed by which the water was entering the tent, apparently from somewhere down below.

## 85

Whoa man, the tent is ripped. Yeah, no joke, said Gunther. Gotta leave the tent man, this is not good. And where do we go now, if you don't mind my asking, Gunther. My van, man, it's solid, we have to move now. Folks, prepare to evacuate, Brutus issued the order, Spread the message please, Perhaps Brutus, said Paula Lipman to his ear, we should not use military terms like evacuate, it adds to the stress, you know what I mean, I'm aware of the psychology Paula, replied Brutus kindly, trust me, we're in a flight or fight situation which requires terse and

precise verbal commands for the purpose of survival, Gotcha, said Paula, No worries, replied Brutus, and to everybody else he said, Let's move people, into Luke's box, tighter this time, They can also get into the backpack, said Luke, You heard the man, get into his backpack, You can make holes to breathe, said Luke, it won't take long.

Water was filling the tent quickly from an unseen source. While Luke was gathering his things, wet and dry, he uncovered the rip, which has been made by a fallen branch, a big one with pointy ends that went through the fabric like butter. He plucked the sheep by the handful and tossed them into a waterproof pouch he had hooked to his hip. Folks were panicking, seeing the water level rise fast, some tripped facedown into the puddle, pushing and shoving ensued, Luke tried to maintain order by keeping them in line with his huge hands, Be nice guys, he said, Help, yelled an old man who could not walk anymore and was pushed down by incoming waves. Luke plucking him out of trouble and placed the old man in the care of villagers at the top of the queue. The toolbox filled with about two hundred villagers packed tight like sardines, or other creatures that are crammed into a small container for the purpose of saving space for transportation. Luke made two holes quickly with his pocketknife into the toolbox so air could circulate and closed the lid, turned to the queue that was advancing into the backpack, which was placed at a slightly raised angle to keep water out and allow humans to enter.

Faster, people, faster, ordered Brutus from the side, as he was watching the entire scene and saw how the water level was rising, now reaching hip level of an average adult. There were about a hundred people left to embark when the water reached waist-deep, still rising. We won't make it, screamed somebody from the queue, Yeah, we will man, said Luke, folks make a bundle, form a chain with your arms, I'll grab you, Do what he says, said Brutus

from the handle of Luke's pot that was floating around. Folks pushed against each other to form a bundle of sorts, while Luke unrolled his towel, submerged into water, collected the bundle of people like a wad of sticky figs, lifted them out of the water just in time, pulled up the backpack right after, plucked Brutus from the pan, put him in his breast pocket, hooked the pan to the carabiner attached to the backpack, Hold on folks, we're going now.

The rainstorm was blowing from all sides, the wind was so strong, that the moment Luke stepped out of the tent, the wind tossed the tent into the thickets that were also under severe kinetic pressure from the elements, Luke, the tent, yelled Brutus, Too late for that, We're not going to make it, yelled Brutus, We'll make it man, the weight of people helps, What, screamed Brutus, Stay inside, said Luke.

## 86

On a clear day, Luke needed a good seven to ten minutes to walk from Village to the minivan. After leaving the camp site behind, in ten minutes he had barely made it a hundred steps, having to balance his feet against the current that was running as high as his knees, folks making unintelligible noise from the back, the sheep bleating in the pouch, Brutus saying something inside the pocket, impossible to tell what it was, rain hitting his face from all directions, accompanied by occasional forest debris carried by the strong wind. He took a detour towards a hillock that put him above the current. Where are we going, yelled Brutus. Hold on, I need to reassess.

From atop the hillock, he contemplated the scale of the deluge. It was grand, stretching as far as the eye can see. The river had flooded large parts of the forest, the plain all the way to the roads, there were no lights anywhere, no cars, no lamp posts, nothing,

the darkness of the storm had incapacitated the movement of everything. He saw his minivan, being pounded by the storm, still standing where he left it. It's not looking good, he said to no one in particular, What is, said Brutus, Village is gone, What do you mean, It's flooded badly, man.

The sheep never stopped bleating in the pouch, Luke checked on them, they were fine, only agitated, trampling each other, but alive. He made a mental path towards the minivan, knew it wouldn't be easy, but had no choice, and soon he would be left with no options. He left the hillock, venturing straight into the current, which was deep enough to just cover his knees. The weight he was carrying helped him remain on his feet, but advancing was difficult. He used sticks to anchor himself into the ground with every step, made it halfway into the plain. The water level had risen to the middle of his thighs, We can do it, man, he said as loud as he could to lift the spirits of humans and sheep.

He picked up the pace while some waves splashed into the backpack, causing screams from the humans inside, the pouch with the sheep was floating on and off on the current. The minivan was standing on the road, which was not yet flooded, given its elevation. Luke made the last steps with great difficulty, pushing hard against the current that had reached his crotch area. He crawled the slope up to the road, grabbing onto whatever he could, until he felt gravel with his hands, then finally, asphalt. The van was being nudged by the wind, but it was still standing. There were no side doors. He pried open the back door, climbed inside, struggled to close the doors behind him against the pull of the storm. We made it man, he said, exhausted.

Let us out, let us out, screamed the humans inside. Okay man, sure, hold on, replied Luke still catching his breath. He let everybody out, humans and sheep, onto the floor of the van. They scattered throughout the vehicle, except for the seats that were difficult to climb. We have to get out of here, said Luke, taking a seat behind the wheel, Where are we going, asked somebody who had made it into the cup holder, I know a place, What kind of place, A not-here kind of place, said Luke, Okay, fair enough, Everybody hold onto something, we're leaving, said Luke, who gave them ten seconds to comply, turned on the van, and departed.

He drove with the wind, which pushed the van forward on the road, with the occasional exceptions when the wind changed to a sideways vector, pushing the vehicle into the other lane, close to the gravel. Whoa, exclaimed several villagers who were watching the ride from the dashboard, after having climbed by themselves, driven by burning curiosity. Behind them, the current had spilled over the road and was following them with an increasing acceleration, not enough to catch up with them, but fast enough to remain visible and cause panic for everyone who was watching in the mirrors, and for the others who watched second-hand by reading the body language of the first observers. Harding C. and a few others were tending to the sheep, trying to keep them in a makeshift enclosure they had crafted with shoelaces they'd found on the floor, while others were holding tight to whatever was around. Luke's hands at the wheel were steady, he did his best

to maintain an even speed on the road until the road made some sharp ascending turns at an angle of more than fifteen degrees, towards a higher elevation. The turns shook the crowd, some humans and some sheep became loose from the others and slid on the floor of the van in all directions bumping into walls, boxes, blankets, Ayeeee, many screamed, Baah, baah, bleated the sliding sheep whose thick wool helped with softening the impact. Luke slowed down at each turn as much as he could, still not being able to cancel out the inertia or the incline. At least the current was far behind. Only strong winds and heavy rain slowed them down, and under all reasonable estimates, they were out of life-threatening danger.

When they reached the top of the hill, the road took them meandering through a forest so tall that the only visible horizon was a dot of sky at the end of the road, rarely however, when the road had a straight stretch, even so, the dot of sky was dark blackish blue on account of the storm so that one could easily confuse it with other landscape features.

Luke continued driving for quite some time, finally outrunning the storm, and the wind. The skies remained heavily darkened by clouds. The road was empty in all directions. Many signs had been knocked to the ground, giving an indication that the storm had already passed through those places. Close to sunset, judging by the time on Luke's watch, they left the main road and turned into a forest road, narrow and bumpy, well hidden. Again, everyone had to hold on tight. Folks, I'll go as slow as I can, we are out of danger now, said Luke, we're soon going to be there, Where is that, asked the people from the cup holder, It's a friend's cabin, said Luke, we'll be safe there.

They arrived at the log cabin under complete darkness. Still raining, the surroundings felt very much like the clearing where Village was situated, trees forming a large circle, space in the middle for activities and development. In that space, the modest,

cozy log cabin had been erected at an equal distance from all trees. There was room to park a car, maybe two or three, depending on their size. There was an outdoor oven, covered. The windows had shutters that were locked in position from inside. Luke found the key where he expected, in a matchbox, buried under a stone, by the door. Y'all wait in the car, until I check inside, he said, shouldn't be long. We'll be here said Menelao Melanoliou standing on the dashboard together with many others who were curious to see where they had ended up.

Is he going to get help? asked Cléa from the cup holder. I don't think that is wise, said Debra Literolis from the front passenger seat, what if help actually arrives, they'll find us, and we cannot control how they will react. Not everyone is friendly like Luke, said Missy D. Point from the dashboard. Imagine an unshrunk rescue comes and they see a thousand shrunken humans and sheep in a minivan, said Zuri Owuor. Do you think they'll arrest Luke? said Cléa. On what grounds? said Berta Esperanza. I don't know, maybe kidnapping, said Cléa. He did not kidnap us, said Marichka Kobrynska, he rescued us. Can we trust the authorities to view it the same way, even if we give the same statements to Luke's defence? asked Cléa. We're all discussing hypotheticals here, said Mallarika Patekar. Nobody is concerned that authorities would react irrationally at seeing tiny humans and sheep? said Aiko Kochiyama. That is my top concern, said Marie-Louise Lubala. Don't you find it strange that we have not seen any other unshrunk humans since we left Village? asked Florencia Gallardo. I don't see a problem with that, said Celeste Millington, I blame the storm. Surely, other humans in the area must have been surprised by the storm, said Holly-Kate Glassfarb. Or we're just in a remote area, said Peggy. In any case, said Fiona Farrinelli, our predicament has changed, we can no longer rely on ourselves for survival, we have been uprooted, we are refugees. Perhaps we should make an arrangement with Luke, he is very friendly to

us, Yolanda Francescone. What are you suggesting? said Paula G. Lipman. After the storm passes, maybe he finds another place for a New Village, said Yolanda. I like that, said Jasmine Flier, I'm sure he'll agree. We'll have to start from scratch, said Margaret Fletcher. We have experience now, said Cléa, we'll make it even better this time. He's coming, said somebody from the dashboard, Who's coming, said somebody from the floor, Luke, said the first person, Great, because I am very hungry, said the second person.

## 88

All good inside, said Luke loudly through the window to everyone inside while he was still taking on heavy rain. I'm not going back into that backpack, said Lynton Friedman. Dude, we don't have a choice, said Billy Nordhaus, it's only for a minute. Do y'all want to go with the box or the backpack? asked Luke through the window, not hearing the conversation inside. I'll take the box, said Donatello Zuniga. Me too, said Ignacio Salar. Guys, you realize we're making him do several trips in this rain, said Rajesh Biswas. Well, he offered, he said Gao Jianxing. Rain is not that bad, said Harding C. from down below near the sheep pen. It may actually be faster if we all went with the tool box, said Cecil Millington. Agreed, way more efficient, we'll fill the box in a minute, two hundred per box, five trips, said Gunther Glassfarb. Should we tell him? said Menelao Melanoliou, he's waiting for an answer, in the rain. Just one second Luke, said Marcus Literolis. Yeah, I'll wait man, take your time, said Luke. Who is for the box, raise your hand, okay, get in the box, said Sly Stone, while he climbed into the toolbox himself. Many others followed. Brutus signaled Luke to open the door so he could communicate the decision of the collective. We're taking the box, he said. All right man, said Luke, I see the

first batch is ready, I'm just going to take it inside, if that's all right with y'all. Sure, we're ready, go ahead man, said Jayden Flier loudly from inside the box.

Luke picked up the toolbox through the back door, left it open, the villagers were queuing up for the next round, Harding C. was herding the sheep in anticipation of transportation. He went inside, waited for the villagers to exit the box, Make yourselves at home, he said, went back to get the next batch, saving many seconds on time, went back for the next batch, tripped and fell on the slippery grass, Whoa man, he said, sending shocks of concern through the waiting crowds that witnessed the fall, I'm all right man, said Luke, and continued to the van.

The last batches consisted of only sheep. Harding C. said he wanted to be picked up last since in his capacity as assigned shepherd, he felt responsible for the wellbeing of the flock. Luke brought Harding C. to the cabin in his pocket with the last group of a hundred sheep, including Harding's very own Sheep.

Luke made the fire in the cabin, laid out blankets on the floor everywhere so villagers could dry themselves, prepared a pot and ingredients for a big soup. Harding C. organized a new pen for the sheep, in a corner, at a safe distance from any potential harmful objects, distributed fresh grass for them that Luke had brought from outside, an unshrunk handful, which was plenty for the entire flock of shrunken sheep for a week. Luke put fresh water on saucers, in several places, enough for everyone. The villagers prepared their own plates and utensils that had been packed for travelling. Some villagers had a change of clothes, some did not, and for those who did not, Luke made a wad of pieces of fabric cut from a shirt that was clean and dry, so folks could wrap themselves until their own clothing was wearable anew.

The soup was ready in ten minutes. All right folks, I am going to put the plates on the floor, you can help yourselves from there. I'll make some bread too, but that's going to take some time. You

are a doll Luke, said Debra Literolis. Aww, thanks Debra, said Luke. The villagers had queued up for the soup, seven queues for four plates, all the plates that Luke found in the cupboards.

Is your friend coming here? said Menelao. No man, not any time soon, said Luke. May I ask where he is? He's an Earth wanderer, like me, except that he doesn't do it in a van and he kept this house. How does he travel? On foot, takes buses, trains, ships, that's it, said Luke. Never cars? asked Menelao. Occasionally taxis, I think, but that's it. That's cool, said Menelao and continued eating his soup, while Luke continued eating his. After some pause, Menelao spoke again, And he lets you stay at his house? Sure man, we're friends, there are many like us. Earth wanderers? Yeah, man, we know each other and help each other with whatever. How do you help? I give people rides in my van, sleepovers, I help with housework, I helped you in Village. Right, that was a big help, said Menelao with his mouth full, he was that hungry, and saved our lives for that matter. It's a pay-it-forward kind of thing man, said Luke, can't put a price on that. How did you realize that? We cannot control life circumstances, said Luke, I have a van, my friend has a house, need for need, not price for price, know what I mean? Yeah, I think I do, said Menelao, this soup is great, by the way. I'll bake a bread for tomorrow, said Luke, it'll be much better with some bread, and cheese. Cheese, from where? There is a cold room below the cabin, said Luke.

The cold room had not only cheese, but also various assortments of jams, pickled veggies, pickled fruit, syrups, canned beans, dry spices of all kinds, flour, wine, vinegar, and many other items catalogued carefully on a spreadsheet by someone who had been there not long ago. When he came back upstairs with a basket full of stuff, Luke explained the arrangement to everyone, When someone from the network of wanderers drops by, they can use whatever, then replenish in

kind before they leave, mark the date on the spreadsheet for the next person. What if somebody cheats? asked Fred Hayektom. Nobody ever cheats, said Luke, ever. So it's only trust that gets you into the network? said Fred. Yeah man, just that, nobody is even tempted to cheat, the word would spread in the network, you don't want bad word to spread, you'll not get back in. Fair enough, said Fred. Why would anyone cheat, Fred? said Menelao, the reward to be in the network is much higher than the result of cheating. Yes, yes, I got that, said Fred enjoying the soup as much as his friends.

They played social games after dinner, danced to instrumental music on instruments saved from Village, drank drops of wine to celebrate their new life, some debated whether to apply to enter Luke's network of Earth wanderers, I don't know what that means, said a villager, we don't travel much, considering our size. Yeah, I know said another villager, what if we met another wanderer, maybe they can take us with them, or we could take the drone to another wanderer's cabin, Forget the drone, it's lost in the storm, Yeah, that's right, I forgot about that, Maybe you had too much wine, said the villager laughing, Ha ha, that's right, I think I did, No worries, Yeah, no, I'm good, I'm good. They laughed and sipped more wine from a spoon that was reserved for their group, as each group received an allotment in various containers that were available around the cabin.

## 89

When they woke the next morning to the bleating of an early-rising sheep, they saw the rain had stopped and the sky was beginning to clear. That was great, said Sly. What was, honey? asked Yolanda. The food and the party last night. Something smells great, said Jayden. I think it's bread, said

Jasmine. Morning folks, said Luke from the kitchen, I put the bread in the oven. It's going to be fresh by breakfast, needs an hour. No rush, I'm not a morning person, said Sly, stretching. Where is Harding? said Yolanda. Did he not sleep in the pen, with the sheep? said Sly. Yeah, he did, but he's not there, said Yolanda. Maybe he went to the bathroom. He's not there, I just came from there said Yolanda. Has anyone seen Harding? asked Sly around, Luke, did you see Harding? He was in the pen when I woke up, said Luke, now he's not. Did he go out? asked Yolanda. I don't know, did he, can he? said Sly. Maybe, through the pet door, said Yolanda. What pet door? That one. That's a pet door? I thought it was just the design of the door. It's a pet door, said Luke. Is it working? said Sly. Obviously, said Yolanda, who went to the door to prove just that by pushing into the flap. Okay, so he could be outside, said Sly. Luke, do you mind checking, it might be easier for you? said Yolanda. Of course, said Luke.

He opened the door, and left it open for fresh air to waft in, and for the villagers to observe from the threshold as he looked for Harding C.. I don't see him, said Luke. The grass is still wet. Check the van, said Yolanda. Luke went to the van, which had all its doors closed, and one window half open, or half closed, depending on the perspective, peered inside, He's here, Luke said. Thank god, said Yolanda. Hey man, you okay? said Luke to Harding C., then back to the group, He says he's okay, he came to look for his satchel, he left his satchel inside the van. Ask him how he got into the van. How did you get inside, man, with the door closed? said Luke, then to the group, He said he climbed through the open window just for fun. I didn't know Harding could climb perpendicular walls, said Yolanda to Sly next to her. I saw him training in Village, climbing trees, boulders, he got pretty good at it, I'm not surprised. Good for Harding, said Yolanda, he scared us, but I'm glad he's okay. He's okay, said

Luke, he's still looking, I'm just going to open the back door for him, it'll be much easier. Yeah, please do that, said Sly.

Luke did just that, and then came inside to finish his work on the bread that was due to be taken out of the oven any time soon. It was an old wood-fire oven that required the presence of a human at all times. The bread was ready by all measures of size, colour, and aroma. Step back folks, said Luke, for safety. He took the bread out, holding it with two mitts, which had been hanging on the wall for this very purpose, put the bread on the counter, closed the oven back up, and cut the air supply to the fire. That looks awesome, said Sly and many others who were watching from the floor. We need to give it a bit of time to cool down.

That very moment, a powerful cracking sound hit somewhere outside very near to the cabin, sending a deafening wave of air inside, knocking a few humans and sheep to the floor. It was a lightning strike that hit the van smack in the middle of the roof, leaving a large burn mark. Whoa man, said Luke, and ran to the door to check out what happened. Harding, you okay, man? said Luke. There was no response. Smoke was rising up from the burnt paint. Harding, you okay? yelled others from the threshold. Go, check on him, said Sly. Wait is it safe? asked Yolanda, what if the electric charge has not yet dissipated into the ground? I think it has, said Sly. I'm going, said Luke. Keep the mitts on, just in case, for insulation, said Sly.

Luke walked carefully to the van towards the back door. Smoke was coming out from inside. Harding, you okay, man? said Luke. Yeah, I'm okay, replied Harding in a full, clear voice, much louder than Luke expected. When the smoke cleared, he saw Harding alive and well. Harding was a full-sized, unshrunk human.

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Whoa, man, you're big, said Luke, what happened? I don't know, said Harding C., it just happened. Folks, Harding's unshrunk, said Luke, come out and see. Wait, what, said the crowd, let's go. Harding C. came out of the van too slowly, still shaken from the experience and met his fellow villagers in front of the cabin, staring at each other in awe, Wait, what, said Gunther, what did you do Harding. I didn't do anything, lightning caught me inside. That must be it, said Gunther, I want to try too. I'm not sure if it will work again, looks like it was an one-off, said Harding C. Nevertheless, said Gunther, can you help me get inside, please? Sure man, said Luke, I'll help. Tell us everything, said some of the villagers coming closer to Harding C., touching his shoes, also regrown to their unshrunk size, same as his clothes, which many villagers found rather convenient. Well, there isn't much to tell, I was looking for my satchel when lightning struck. Did you find it? asked somebody from the crowd. I did not. How did you get shrunken in the first place? asked somebody else. I was near a lightning strike with Sheep. Maybe that's how it works, in reverse. How did you get shrunken? Villagers started to talk amongst themselves. I found myself in a tree. Me too. Me too. I was on a tour bus, we entered a tunnel, then we woke up in the forest, where Village was. Perhaps we should try the same, get to the forest, and wait. And you get on a bus and go through a tunnel. Shouldn't that have happened already? We spent so much time in the forest already. Yes, but there was no lightning strike until now. Perhaps it will work now. Folks, this is not very

scientific at all. Do you think it was scientific in the first place? I guess not. We still have not ruled out the simulation hypothesis. Hey man, said Luke, chuckling, I'm real, I'm not simulated. So says you, said somebody from the crowd, even that is hard to prove objectively. There is nothing objective in the universe, said a teacher. Let's not get lost in semantics here, said another teacher, objective is something existing independently of or external to the mind, actual or real, as in objective reality, or something based on observable phenomena, empirical, such as in objective facts. Our experience can be tested for this definition. Okay, fine, we'll talk about this later.

So, what do we do then? said Menelao Melanoliou.

Let's attempt this reversal experiment, said Florencia Gallardo, unless somebody would really like to keep the shrunken size. No? Nobody? Very well, in that case, we can take positions in the forest at least for the next night, see what happens, take necessary precautions for safety. Do we need to climb the trees? said Aiko Kochiyama. Honestly, I don't think that will make a difference, said Florencia. We'll sleep on the grass, Luke, do you mind keeping an eye on us until tomorrow morning? For sure, man. I'll help too, said Harding C. Great, everyone, gather the necessary belongings, let's spend today as if it's our last day in this shrunken state.

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By nightfall they were ready. They ate well, hydrated, cleansed their minds and bodies. Luke and Harding C. established a perimeter in the forest near the cabin that could contain one thousand unshrunken humans. Another large perimeter was reserved for sheep. A clear sky offered an impeccable view of various constellations, the breeze moved the leaves of grass in the

forest gently. Nightlife carried on as per usual without disturbing the arrangement of humans and sheep. After midnight, the entire community was fast asleep.

The first to wake up was Cecil Harold Lysander Millington, around five in the morning, which was according to his normal schedule. He found himself in the nude, in a crouching position, unshrunk. Whoa, he shouted when he came to his senses in full, it worked! Celeste Amelda Persephone Millington woke up immediately, also nude and unshrunk. It worked, Cecil! she said. It sure did. Where are our clothes? Celeste asked. I was expecting that, said Cecil, they remained shrunk, look, pieces of fabric, as we grew our bodies ripped right through them. That's inconvenient. What about the others? Hello, Hello, they called around them, trying their best to cover their nudity. Yeah, I'm here, said Luke, just waking up, fully clothed, naturally. What happened, said Harding C., also freshly awake. It worked for us! said Cecil. There are others too, said Harding C., some are asleep, some are waking up, everybody is nude. The least of our problems now, said Cecil. We didn't think about that, said Peggy, coming from behind them, in the nude, of course, but carrying Gigi unshrunk as well, over her breasts. I don't mind, we're unshrunk again, said Holly-Kate Glassfarb, waking up from behind a tree, not visible yet. Do you mind? said Fiona Farrinelli, from somewhere in the vicinity. Apologies, replied Menelao Melanoliou, I am as surprised as you. Debra, you're naked honey, said Marcus Literolis, giggling. Look, the hippo is talking, replied Debra Literolis to her husband in jest. More and more villagers were waking up to the realization of their refreshed size and newly acquired nudity, all taking the change with humour and minor embarrassment wrapped in overwhelming relief. You look good in any size, said Stanley Stone. So do you, said Yolanda Francescone. Brrr, it's chilly, said Paula G. Lipman, as she was working to clothe herself with moss that would not

stay on her. Brutus Zapp was fully awake and doing his morning calisthenics, starting with one hundred push-ups in the nude, counting to himself but loud enough to be overheard. That you, man? said Jayden Flier jokingly, trying to keep warm? Thirty-two, thirty-three, said Brutus minding his business. It is a bit chilly, said Jasmine Flier, keeping a fetal position, knees under chin. Lynton Friedman was eating an apple, Hey man, he said to Billy Nordhaus, who was making a stick from fallen branches. Where did you find that? I went to the cabin. Margaret Fletcher was trying to cover her embarrassment by adopting a lotus position. Fred Hayektom came to her and asked politely if he could join. Sure, please, she said. Missy D. Point was chatting with Cléa about a recipe that they wanted to try together, made using the flour in the cabin. Can I help? asked Zuri Owuor, approaching them, I think we can make pies for everyone. I like pies, I can help too, said Donatello Zuniga approaching carefully, forcing himself to look the women in their eyes, a courtesy which they returned. Ignacio Monserrate Ernesto Salar came running with the news that everybody was waking up, all villagers, wherever they were, all in the nude. By the way, the sheep are unshrunk too, said Harding C., and they are all healthy. That is so good to hear, said Rajesh Biswas, I was very worried for them. I worried too, said Gao Jianxing, coming to the conversation with his private parts already covered with an improvised floral arrangement. How did you make that, Gao? asked Berta Isabel Esperanza, coming to Gao and checking out his garment, really making Gao blush because she was still exposed but not exhibiting any embarrassment whatsoever. I foraged and knitted some fibers. Show me, said Berta, and they went to the source. Marichka Kobrynska, after overhearing, joined them as well, Save some for me, a few more, and she laughed. Mallarika Patekar was knitting her own garments with leaves and moss, sitting down, with a few others learning from them. Aiko Kochiyama

was covering her body, top to bottom, with mud. Why do you do that? asked Marie-Louise Lubala. Mosquitos, replied Aiko. Gotcha, said Marie-Louise, I'm going to do just the same, let's do each other's backs. Florencia Gallardo came running to Luke and Harding C. still in the nude, not minding the situation, she said, Guys, is there a first aid kit in the cabin, someone cut their feet while walking. Sure, I'll get it, said Luke. I'll come with you, I may need some alcohol too. And off they went.

Hello, hello, somebody, yelled a voice from the minivan. Oh, it's Gunther, said Harding C., he got stuck inside. We gotta help him. Doors are not locked, said Harding C. A few villagers went to the van, opened the back door, found Gunther inside, on the floor, still clothed, tired, and shrunken. What? Gunther said, it worked for you? Looks like it, said Menelao. What about me? said Gunther. I don't know man, said Lynton, maybe it's the van, you should have been in the forest, everybody is restored now. Gee, thanks, said Gunther, what do I do now. Maybe try it tonight, said Lynton. You may want to lose your clothes now, said Billy. Everybody laughed, except Gunther, who said, Humorous.

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The next morning, after having spent the night in the forest, guarded by friends, Gunther Glassfarb became unshrunken. He was so excited when he woke up, he forgot about his nudity and came running out of the forest toward the cabin, yelling, Yes, yes, and only after some time did he realize that there were other unshrunken humans out and about. You okay, man? said a villager who was carrying water in a bucket for the making of a communal meal that was being prepared outside. Gunther's excitement quickly petered out as the needs of the community outweighed the emotional needs of the one, in that moment.

You're awake man, said Luke, great, need your help, we are carrying stuff out of the pantry, we'll use everything, there are a thousand souls to feed, man. So y'all just walk around naked? said Gunther. No choice man, people are hungry, but Harding took the van to the city to buy clothes for everyone. How? said Gunther. Gave him my credit card, man, said Luke. You're a good man, said Gunther. No problem, said Luke and showed him the way to the pantry.

Very few villagers were clothed, but some needed thermal protection, so whatever fabric was available in the cabin was converted into garments, with a doctor's prescription to follow preliminary triage. There were no protests. The task at hand was so precise, the feeding of the collective with the limited resources at hand, there was no mental space left for giggling, embarrassment, sexual tension, or other normative trains of thought elicited by the sight of a nude human body. In the end, the collective put enough food together for everyone, depleting almost all supplies from the pantry, which were generally planned to last a month for a maximum of six people, which was also the capacity of the cabin.

When Harding C. came back from the city with the van full of basic t-shirts, pants, underpants, socks, and shoes for everyone, in a format that could fit the van, meaning no boots and bulky items, the food was also ready, consisting of bagels, croissants, salads, soups, mashed potatoes, stew, all ready to be laid out. Getting dressed took priority, per collective agreement. Villagers formed a queue leading to the back of the van where Harding C. and Luke handed out clothing according to size until the stock was depleted and just a few items were left over as backup. It was good we made a list of sizes in advance, said Harding at the end. Yep, said Luke.

The entire space around the cabin was filled with people eating on the ground. The serving station was near the entrance

of the cabin where three villagers were distributing portions to those present. There was a widespread sentiment of peace, joyful contentment, profound comradeship amongst everyone. They talked and joked between them to whomever happened to sit nearby, they took turns serving, bringing out more food from inside, more water, more bread.

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Clearly, we have to go back to the city, said Menelao before dusk, it's a matter of food, shelter, healthcare, social reintegration. I miss my family, said Marichka. Me too, me too, said many others. I find it difficult for society to accept our story as is, so we may have to describe our experience by means of metaphors, said Menelao. So you are saying, said Fred, we cannot tell anyone we got shrunk? You can tell them, said Menelao, certainly we cannot stop each other from speaking to the world, in my opinion however we cannot even provide any evidence for our experience, Village was destroyed in the storm, there are no photographs or any recordings, and we might as well have had a mass experience on hallucinogenic mushrooms. I agree with that, said Jayden. We are dropping the simulation hypothesis? said Fred. Occam's razor, my friend, said Menelao, the principle that recommends searching for explanations constructed with the smallest possible set of elements, also known as the principle of parsimony, which means, what is more plausible that an elaborate experiment with virtual simulation conducted by Rageonx that required an enormous amount of computing power and flawless rendering, or that we simply spent a few months in a retreat, enveloped in beautiful dreams, sure even this has some loose threads, but still.

We can say we lived together in a small forest collective, said Mallarika Patekar, it is true. I like that, said Marichka, that's what I will tell everyone. Me too, me too, said the others.

As for our plans going forward, said Menelao, I am a changed human, fundamentally, and I'd like to let that reflect in everything I do, going forward. If everyone is interested in joining me to create a social mission from this, let us continue our collective in real life, in whatever form we desire, after we talk at length about it, certainly. I don't need much convincing, said Fred Hayektom, and that includes self-convincing, I think we do need to help society learn the great lessons we learned in Village, how we can live a better life in balance with Earth. All right man, said Luke. That being said, continued Fred, I will put up my entire wealth, which is substantial as you know, towards this new social cause, let us call it Wellbeing for Everyone, or some other name that you all like better. I like that, Fred, thank you, said Menelao. I'd like to join too, said Margaret Fletcher, I'll put up my wealth too. Me too, said Marcus, Gunther, Cecil all at the same time, perhaps only delayed by a few milliseconds. Gunther, you too? said Menelao. I know it may appear as a surprise, but yes, I am sure, said Gunther, if we combine our wealth here, and develop a plan for the unshrunk world, to promote wellbeing for everyone, I am very excited to participate, just hearing myself talk, saying the word unshrunk, I realize how pointless my quest for growth was before the shrinkage, and how much meaning I discovered with you all during our stay in Village.

Well, I am speechless, honey, said Holly-Kate. I will be with you for the rest of our time.

Love you guys, said Peggy.

Well, look at us, dreaming big, said Menelao, if you'll pardon the pun. You are allowed, said Fiona jokingly. So folks, I'm thinking, continued Menelao, since we have come upon these

substantial resources I think, in my opinion, correct me if I am wrong, that we could aim to form a political project of some sort that would be most conducive to changing unshrunk society for the better. I do think you are correct, said Fred, if we just gave our wealth away, which we will, I am committed to that, and did not attempt to reform the rules of a society that is still obsessed with infinite material growth, we may still find ourselves in the same predicament, so then a political project is what we need at this time, we can aim high to degrow, if I can use this word, with the goal of creating wellbeing for everyone, as I mentioned before.

Whoa, we are moving fast, said Celeste Millington, I enjoy and agree with everything that is being said here, so I would like to dare to make the next small step in thinking and suggest that we actually create a political organization with the name Wellbeing for Everyone, with the purpose of forming government, after having crowd-sourced a plan to roll out meaningful, equitable wellbeing for all citizens and living beings of this country, and of all countries on Earth. We will need to be careful about how wellbeing is defined, said Paula Lipman, because some super-wealthy humans will have no choice but to forgo luxury, and dare I say it, debauchery, which they currently enjoy at the expense of billions of poorer humans. Absolutely, that goes without saying, said Fred, and if I can do it, so can the other super-wealthy, we will all be much better off without distasteful games of buying luxury goods, properties, chasing status, et cetera.

It appears then we are converging towards a political program, said Menelao. This is a very important conversation, but I'm getting hungry, and I think I'm not the only one, so let's continue this in the city at dinner or something. I'll stay here man, said Luke. Great, whoever wants to join the Wellbeing for Everyone party, said Fred, meet us at eight at The Oak and the Owl. I own it. I'll make the calls. I'll have the taxis pick us up on the main road.

Thirty-three former villagers showed up at The Oak and the Owl, while many others left their names on a spreadsheet to be contacted later because they did want to get involved with Wellbeing for Everyone, but first wanted to spend some time with their families. Folks, we are going to make it easier for everyone here to get involved, said Fred, I will use my wealth, and so will my other fellow wealthy humans, to give everyone helping the campaign a monthly guaranteed income, to cover all living expenses, and a tad more. To be fully open, I envision this as a collective effort, similar to how we built Village, nobody will work for me, we will all work for each other, I will not be the one to decide what happens with my former wealth, it will be up to all of us, collectively, having equal voice, as it should be in a democracy.

That being settled from the beginning, the group started working on writing a full political manifesto, a program of policies and regulations, the governance of the newly established organization, quickly settled that they will have no bosses, no board of elite cadres, there will be functions, titles, and roles distributed randomly to those who expressed interest, after having passed a threshold of skills necessary for the position, also collectively decided and assessed, and when all was set and done, over many evenings in the first few weeks, expenses covered by the trust funded from the former wealth of all formerly wealthy humans from Village, it was decided after many rounds of talking and voting, that the collective should present itself as a political party at the upcoming elections in two years' time, with

the high aim of taking high office in government, to implement the agenda of Wellbeing for Everyone.

The major constraint they faced were the hurdles of electoral politics, with which no one had experience, except for Lynton Friedman, who used to work as a senior political consultant, which proved to be good enough to compensate for everyone else, We are sitting on a very fresh and uplifting political project here, said Lynton one evening, and we have to play by traditional rules at least until we get into government, meaning we will have to have a list of candidates in each territorial unit, plus a candidate for the position of prime minister, the top executive position in government, who does not have to be the leader of our party, since we do not have a leader according to our internal constitution. So, what are you suggesting? said Harding C. Well, we have no choice but to select those candidates, including, like I said, for prime minister. How do we do that? said Celeste. Well, we start by asking who is interested, those interested raise your hands, okay, I see three hands, then we deliberate what skills we wish those candidates to have, then we vote only if those interested meet those requirements, and if they do, we select a candidate at random, because let us be honest, a random qualified selection is as good as a traditional candidate that operates on charisma or as a puppet for the wealthy class, in no way will our candidate be less competent than any politician already in the system.

The skills were drafted after a few additional sets of conversations, during which four more candidates came forward, all characterized by some degree of reluctance, all compelled to serve the country in such a position of great responsibility, none interested in the reputation of the position of prime minister, in fact they couldn't care less, all they wanted was to bring about wellbeing for everyone, forever, to expand good, decent life as they had in Village to all humans.

The collective voted that all seven candidates met the requirements on the list of skills and relevant experience with working with others, as it is often, if not always, needed in politics. From those seven, unceremoniously, by drawing a piece of paper from a hat, Menelao Melanoliou was selected to represent Wellbeing for Everyone as their candidate for the position of prime minister, while the others were happy to serve in whatever capacity was required of them in government, if the party wins the elections, as absurd as that may seem, but never say never, as the saying goes.

We trust we had a good life in Village, said Menelao, we trust all humans can live well, in harmony with their environment, without harming other beings, including their fellow humans, without taking away the chances of survival from future generations. This is enough to give us confidence that we can change this country for the better, we can change the foundations of politics, we can inspire all citizens, regardless of ideology and identity, to grant us this temporary permit to launch the reforms. Folks, in the core of our message will be also how politics itself works, how we will phase out political parties themselves, so we don't have to play the games of convincing, the marketing of elections, the promises, the empty campaign talk anymore. We will be crystal clear about this during the campaign. This is the beginning of something beautiful.

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Luke Wanderlust and a few others formed a Small Forest Collective to use the land adjacent to the cabin to raise the herd of sheep whose former owners could not be identified, and cultivate some land using permaculture techniques, deciding to settle in the area and live simply, maintain their comradery

and strong connections from Village, and why not, spread the word through camps and seminars held at the cabin for anyone interested to visit, at a very low cost, or no cost if possible.

We will focus our attention, however, for the remainder of this small chapter, on the Wellbeing for Everyone party, with a small p, not majuscule P, as they decided to forgo that description. Similar to the Small Forest Collective, the Wellbeing for Everyone party realized the importance of education and inspiration woven into relatable stories, which is precisely what they did by organizing a permanent tour of public lectures and conversations in all corners of the country, blending political message with storytelling of a future where wellbeing could work for all citizens of the country, and even more so, for all humans on Earth.

What do you mean by wellbeing? asked a young she-citizen at the very first seminar where Menelao Melanoliou spoke, presenting himself as a candidate for the position of prime minister.

It is what describes and facilitates a good life for everyone without encroaching on the wellbeing of others, it is recognizing uniqueness and finitude as attributes of all humans, specifically, all humans are recognized as individuals deserving life and dignity in equal measure, and living a span of limited life on a limited planet, among many other species that play a role in each other's existence and continued evolution.

This sounds like some sort of egalitarianism, said the she-citizen in a quick follow-up, while the other citizens leaned in to see where this was going.

It is indeed a form of egalitarianism, said Menelao. I am glad you recognized it as such.

All humans deserve the same wellbeing, said the she-citizen.

I would not say deserve, said Menelao. I would rather say all humans are entitled to the same wellbeing.

I think I know what you mean, said the she-citizen. Nobody deserves more or less wellbeing than others, simply because nobody

has chosen their status in life, nobody has control over where to be born, over having an inheritance or not, over how their bodies are constructed, over their skills and abilities, and so on.

Precisely, said Menelao.

So, your party reframes politics around the notion of wellbeing? asked the she-citizen.

Yes, said Menelao, hence the name.

I'd like to ask a question, said another citizen from the back of the room.

Fiona, dear, can you take a microphone to the gentleman in the blue shirt? said Menelao.

Thank you, said the gentleman in blue, this sounds great, it's very inspiring as a matter of fact. My question is, actually two questions, how do you put this in practice if you win the elections, and number two, how do you convince people about this major reform in politics?

Those are the most common questions we hear on this campaign, said Menelao. The first is about policies, our agenda for what rules and laws we need. That will take a longer answer. Please follow our campaign over the next months for that longer answer. Basically, some rules will be phased out, some rules will be phased in. The second question is tricky because it assumes people are persuadable. I do not think they are, certainly not over a short time. You can inspire people with storytelling, then in time they can be persuaded if the story remains true to them. We are on a campaign of inspiration, if you will, which we will continue. That's how we hope to persuade. By telling the story over a longer period of time. We'll see if it translates into votes.

Fair enough, thanks, said the citizen in blue.

As Paula Lipman stepped on stage and walked towards the lectern, the crowd erupted in cheers, waving Wellbeing signs, giant snails made from moss, and other creative political paraphernalia made from natural biodegradable fibers, overpowering Paula's voice until she got access to the microphone to reply, Wow, you are amazing, what an incredible turnout, thank you all, let me get right into it, today I would like to talk to you, on behalf of Wellbeing for Everyone, of all our candidates, about some of our financial policies.

Number one, let's talk about wealth, shall we? We live in an era when very few humans possess stupendous wealth so large that it is incomprehensible to all of us here. We are talking about wealth as big as the economies of entire countries. Our position is that wealth over a ceiling of five million is immoral, indecent, and grossly incompatible with the need of all humans to live in harmony with each other on this planet. We contend that no person deserves or needs or should be allowed to have wealth over the limit of five million because no such wealth, or any wealth for that matter, is earned without inheriting the vast social foundations constructed by our forefathers. All arguments for limitless wealth are defeated: it's not about hard work, it's not about being smarter, it's not about perseverance, it's not about decisions. All wealth comes from inheritance or luck or the rules of society that allow such accumulation with impunity.

The crowd erupted in cheers of support.

Number two, intellectual property. Can we really say that innovation is purely a product of a person's mind? The product of a corporation, without any connection to the social infrastructure that facilitated that innovation? Intellectual property, and all property for that matter, cannot exist outside of society, it is embedded within society, it is a creation of society. This is why intellectual property would need to become public property seven years after it was created. This will encourage creativity even more so, we argue, because creativity will no longer be linked to wealth in perpetuity. We need to progress faster as a society, and having longer term protections for intellectual property slows down this progress. Artists, musicians, inventors, will have their livelihood secured by phasing out rapacious intermediaries, and increasing their revenue in the first seven years. This is how wellbeing will be shared for everyone, allowing everyone to continue innovation.

Enthusiastic applause.

Number three, the stock market, continued Paula Lipman. Oh, don't get me started on the stock market. That circus must be phased out. The stock market is entirely disconnected from reality. It is a casino of the ruling class to play games of wealth at the expense of the rest of us. The lie that the stock market is a means to help companies produce useful stuff for the economy, by investing in them, is one of the greatest lies ever told. Investors buy and sell imaginary stock against margin accounts that they never pay back. They play games with borrowed money, many times over the so-called value of the stock. How is it possible that the value of shares on the market fluctuates based on rumours, gossip and public relations? How sick is that? Or that the market goes up in historical records when the majority have stagnating incomes? Or when the cost of living is exorbitant and somehow companies have record profits? What do we do about this madness? We phase out the power of the stock

market and give it back to the people. What does it mean? We reconnect economic value with the real life. Speculation will end. The core of the issue here is democracy. The stock market is a democracy disruptor, because power is linked to property, not to the uniqueness of the individual. Companies must be run on the principle that each human has one vote, not that each share has one vote. It is as simple as that. Over the following weeks, we will roll out the details.

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Whoa, such a big turnout, how are you all doing? said Menelao Melanolioiu, yelling from the top of his lungs to the big crowd that had gathered in the arena to hear him speak about Repairing Earth for Life, as was the title of the rally.

It is no secret that we live in a climate crisis, Menelao continued. The age of fossil fuels is finished. We have burned fossilised life for energy for far too long and far too much. We became addicted to it. The cure for this addiction is to switch to energy that does not need life to die out and become fuel for later generations. You know the solutions. You know the alternatives. We want a future where we don't have to heat our air, poison our rivers, dig out soil for a kind of energy that destroys life through creation, use, and dissipation. It is no longer acceptable to produce energy through death and destruction. The energy needed for life must be as elevated as life itself, it must come from outside life, or else it will consume life from within.

For life for life for life! cheered the crowd.

We must also fundamentally rethink how we make our food, how we waste what we do not consume, how we merge our food systems with nature and our economies. Industrial agriculture has ruined biodiversity, reduced soil fertility, decreased the quality

of our food. The industry of food production, while feeding increasing populations, had also generated tremendous amounts of waste, and left the downtrodden undernourished. We will phase out all privileges for the industrial agriculture apparatus, and phase in support for local food production on ecological principles. Food must be of high-quality and affordable, produced locally for local consumption, not wasted by being reintegrated into the ecosystem. Everything related to food must be biodegradable, including packaging. We will not allow products of questionable quality in questionable packaging on the market.

Good food good food good food! cheered the crowd.

Now, on the question of waste. We know it's ugly. We know nobody wants it in their backyard. We know it's inevitable. But the answer is not to ship it to poorer nations, or toss it into the ocean or into rivers. A fully responsible society assumes responsibility for all of its inputs and outputs. Circular responsibility. We will no longer allow our nation to dump its responsibility onto other nations. Exports of waste, of any kind, will be stopped immediately. The will of communities must be respected. No waste will be dumped anywhere without consent. This is the very least we must do, to repair Earth for Life.

You make it you own it! You make it you own it! the crowd chanted, alluding to another radical policy put forward by the Wellbeing for Everyone party, a policy under heated debates in the media, which will be addressed very soon, in another speech.

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Friends, great to see you all, cheered Mallarika Patekar, I hope you're having a lovely day!

Loud cheers from the crowd.

Here we go, friends. Let's talk about difficult stuff. Because that's what we like to talk about here, don't we?

Laughter and cheers from the crowd.

Number one. Our military budget. Just a simple question. Why? Just why. Why does it have to be that big? Why do we need these huge armies? Why do we need to sell military equipment to other nations, except for self-defence? There is always the argument that if we do not spend on our military, the enemy will. While the enemy thinks exactly the same. If they do it, we must do it too. Then one psychopathic dictator decides to invade some other country, because he can, it's always a man, isn't it, did you notice, they invade this other country, so we must take sides. Or not. What if we deescalated in the first place? Will that not inspire other countries to do the same? And if we advanced wellbeing for everyone, will the desire to invade others not be phased out as well? If we can lead by example, maybe, just maybe, other countries will follow. We need to start from somewhere. Yeah sure, crazy dictators can still pop up, so to protect against that, we need to keep some military forces. Again, what if, our restraint, our focus on wellbeing, will deflate even crazy dictators? What if?

Hell yeah, shouted the crowd. Peace, peace, peace!

Glad you agree! continued Mallarika. An even harder subject is colonialism. A huge, hard subject. If one nation takes resources, cheap labour, cheap energy, and cheap land from another nation and leaves nothing in return, that's colonialism. If one corporation, with permission from its nation of origin, plunders the ecosystems of another nation, displaces populations for the sake of extraction of resources, that's colonialism. It does not matter which agent does the plundering. Even when it's with uninformed consent, or informed consent, or apparent freedoms granted by the market, or privileges granted by governments, even if it's still legal, it is still colonialism. By no means of common sense, or survival instinct, or sense of belonging to a place, can a person or community willingly consent to its own

enslavement, in whatever form that takes, from being paid poverty wages, to having to work from dusk until dawn, to not having proper shelter, or education, or health. Colonialism is alive and well today, and it must end. On the part of our nation, we will end all forms of colonialism perpetrated by any agent associated with our nation, directly and indirectly, and we will recognize the responsibility of our nation for the harm done by its agents around the world. Yes, it is the moral thing to do. Yes, we can afford it.

Ecstatic applause and cheers of support from the crowd.

The next topic came up recently in our debates, continued Mallarika. Many of you asked me to talk about it. It's about commercial advertising. Why does it matter? Why is it such a taboo subject to talk about? We believe, as many of you do, and those of you who do not believe yet, may come to realize this fact, that commercial advertising is the top illness of our society. Yeah, but you may ask, how do I find out about a product or service I may need? The answer stares us in the eye. You search for it. Duh.

General laughter.

I don't mean to be snarky. Hear me out. We should go to the information we need, the information should not come to us, unsolicited, unconsented. We can have public catalogues of products, services, events, whatever, that we can consult or customize for our interests, have them available when we need them, without them impinging on our attention. We allowed the advertising industry to ravage our attention with unsolicited, manipulative blasts of ads coming in all sorts of shapes at us, inducing us with fake needs and wants just to create an enormous economy of sales for what purpose other than the accumulation of capital. We are not against innovation of goods and services that truly serve the public, but let the public go to whatever is created, let us not be suffocated with lies about

what we are supposed to need and want. Information in the advertising industry does not flow freely. The most powerful agents always have more power to push their ads. Information should be decoupled from power to achieve true liberation. Commercial catalogues will not have artificial algorithms and hierarchies. No information will be pushed above another. Not even popularity can elevate a commercial product above another. Like a dictionary, all information will have equal standing.

Standing ovation and loud cheers from the crowd.

Let us be very clear, continued Mallarika. The same will apply to political commercial advertising. Until we upgrade our electoral democracy, we must also phase out political commercial advertising. We must unlink access to power from wealth. It is an abomination that only rich politicians continue to be elected because they receive the most in financial contributions. This practice will also be phased out immediately. Liberation of all people and wellbeing for everyone will never happen, as we have learned from history, as long as the wealthy are the only ones to have access to power. There will be a day, when the power to govern will be truly by the people, for the people, and of the people. We will not accept *carte blanche* from anyone, if we form a government, we will not take passive consent from you, the people to do whatever we want. We pledge to create a large, virtual citizens' platform, secure, transparent, where citizens can vote and react in real time to our proposed new rules and laws, and we pledge never to pass a law without popular consent, and to never bypass popular objections. We will put out a detailed plan for the citizens' platform soon.

The arena erupted in applause, cheers, and song that brought Mallarika to tears until she found herself singing with the people.

## 99

Friends, comrades, fellow humans, said Berta Isabel Esperanza to those gathered in the plaza. Great to see you all!

Cheers and applause. Banners and signs waved to welcome Berta and her entourage.

Wellbeing for Everyone is not just about phasing out bad stuff from our economy, from our society, Berta said with a bullhorn. Wellbeing for Everyone is also about phasing in just rules for all citizens to recognize the uniqueness of all, and not the privilege of the few. We are all born with one body, one mind, one soul. Everything else is bestowed upon us by society, including privilege. You feel that, you know that. We can only construct ourselves in relation to others. That being said, the first item of our economic agenda that we would like to introduce is a universal basic income for all. An income that is guaranteed every month, it does not come with any strings attached, and continues for the entire life. An income that any human can live on, not with excesses, but with dignity.

For liberation! cheered the crowd.

Yes, friends we are moving toward liberation, continued Berta. Next, we will talk about global pay equity. It's not enough to limit excess wealth in our country, as my colleagues have mentioned in other speeches, it's not enough to raise the bar for our own citizens, but we must also be fair to our sisters and brothers around the world. If we borrow resources from them, or labour, or energy, we must pay them as much as we pay ourselves. This is part of our decolonization process. Pay

differentials between countries carry with them injustice. We can only achieve peace establishing equity in pay globally, in the context of trade and resource sharing. There should be no taking without giving in return.

United we live, united we live! cheered the crowd.

Berta continued. When all children become adults, they will receive a social allowance on which they can start in life. For too long, we have burdened our youth with debt and financial obligations instead of allowing them to build on existing social wealth. This social allowance will be distributed to all children, unconditionally. Oh, it always begs the question from the ruling class, but how are you going to pay for it.

Laughter from the crowd.

I'm going to tell them how we are paying for a social allowance. With a wealth tax!

Loud cheers from the crowd.

Yes, and they know it's coming, and it will come, and it will happen! They tried to hide their wealth for decades and centuries. Tell them to mark our words! Hiding is over. We have a particular set of skills. We will find you in the deepest fiscal paradise, in the most obscure bank, behind the shadiest foundation, and we will tax your wealth, and we will have a social inheritance for all our children. Enough was enough! The future must belong to everyone.

## 100

Please welcome my dear friend and colleague, Florencia Gallardo, said Berta before she passed the bullhorn.

Hello everyone! Florencia Gallardo raised her hand to salute that crowd. What a great day! What we just heard from my friend Berta Esperanza is just the tip of the iceberg. There are

many details packed into our proposals. We thought them out well, we spoke to you, you wrote to us over the past several months. What we say here is actually made of your words. This is how a revolution begins.

Half of the crowd was cheering Berta, Berta, Berta, the other half was cheering Florenciaaa, Florenciaaa.

You folks are funny, continued Florencia. I will talk about more phase-ins, more about what we need to start doing. First, phase in full ecological production. You produce a thing, you provide a service, you are fully responsible for the entire lifecycle of the product, from where the materials come from, to how your products or services generate waste. Every step in the life cycle of your product and service must be certified ecologically by independent review panels. If a product or service is not fully certified for ecological production, it cannot enter the market. Do you think single use plastics will pass this bar?

Nooo, shouted the crowd.

Do you think private jets, luxury cars pass this bar?

Nooo, shouted the crowd.

Do you think products with palm oil pass this bar?

Nooo, shouted the crowd.

You get the point. Yes, many corporations will scream. Our voices are louder. The voice of Earth is louder.

Florenciaaa, Florenciaaa! shouted the crowd.

You know it's not about me, continued Florencia. Second, phase in ecocide law. It's about unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts. Ecocide law will govern those tempted to dodge ecological production. Let's face it, there is always temptation to cut corners. Well, ecocide law makes those corners round and transparent so we can see through them. There will be nothing left to cut.

Clean Earth, clean Earth, clean Earth! cheered the crowd.

Third, global restoration of ecosystems, continued Florencia. This is about repairing the damage already done. It has been done. It can be done. It must be done. There are so many inspiring stories I can tell you about this. Berta and I, we lived together in an ecovillage, deep in the forest within a larger community. We learned how to have a good life with deep belonging to the community and to the living nature around us. We restored ourselves by learning respect and, most importantly, the limits of our needs and desires, the limits of what nature can provide to us. Once we learned all that, we discovered a much richer life, something many of us had never experienced before. This is how we came to believe that wellbeing for everyone is possible.

## 101

Whoa, everyone, we did not expect to fill this town hall on such short notice, said Jasmine Flier to the hundred folks gathered in the village's only space that was bigger than a bar. We have been doing these teach-learn-listen events for many months. I am so humbled by this experience. We are a political party, by virtue of history, but we do want to phase ourselves out until parties are no longer necessary, this is why we always intended to be on the learning and listening side since we launched these boots-on-the-ground missions, which brings me here, to share with you what we learned from other folks like yourselves, to learn from you, collect all the knowledge so all those who are not here physically, but want to hear your lessons, could also hear or read them. There are four ideas we organized for today, as you know from the poster.

Let me start with economic democracy, continued Jasmine. Intuitively, many folks know what it is. When we talk specifics,

as we learned from our conversations with folks around the country, we find out that economic democracy is truly a radical concept. We ask the question: why does democracy stop at the edges of politics? Why is the economy not governed by democratic principles as well? This is what we mean by economic democracy, wherever there is economic activity, democracy ought to characterize the governance of all economic agents, from large corporations to small firms, cooperatives to associations. No more unelected bosses, executives, leaders of any kind. In fact, we argue, on behalf of many folks like you, that above a threshold of skills and competence, also determined by collective deliberation, all positions of power must derive their legitimacy from the will of the people, precisely what it is known as democracy, whether that takes the form of elections, or attribution of roles by drawing lots from pools of qualified candidates.

Next, to respond to the will of the people, the government will facilitate the creation of community work agencies, also administered democratically, which will assess what work is needed to maintain a flourishing community, as well as agencies that will be responsible for maintaining synergy between communities, in cases where the needs of a community cannot be satisfied from within. These work agencies will administer a job guarantee, meaning those interested in doing well-paid work for their communities will have an opportunity, this being anything from habitat conservation, to caring for neighbours, to building provisioning for food, to redesign the architecture of housing, to organize and host entertainment and art, scientific experiments, cultural festivities, games and recreation, communities will know best what they need and can do.

I have a question, said a member from the community, drawing the attention of everyone. Does it mean we can get our local theatre back? We had community theatres for decades until somebody in government decided they weren't worth the money.

Indeed, of course, yes, said Jasmine. That's precisely what a work agency could mediate.

Awesome, thanks.

Next, we would like to share the concept of universal basic services with you. We learned from you that what holds society together is a solid foundation of services provided by society, for society, that folks can access equally, without difference in quality or quantity, based on social status or wealth. These services are a way of *being together*. This is not just a metaphor. It is something real that has existed since humans evolved. For example, having equal access to free education, free healthcare, free public transportation, free public libraries, free places for gathering, and so much more, with no prior qualification needed, without any discrimination, is *being together*. This is what creates society. This is what society actually is, this *being together*. The stronger the togetherness, the stronger the community.

The audience erupted in applause in unison.

Thank you friends, I feel you, said Jasmine. Just so you know, these are not my words, they were not written for me by some political consultant we hired, these are words we heard from you in other boots-on-the-ground events, which you can watch or read about on our websites. All these ideas tie together, and there are many more that are constantly evolving. I will end today with another concept that we learned during our travels. Democracy by lot. Yes, it is exactly what you think it is. Phase out elections. Phase out political parties. Select politicians at random from the pool of adult citizens. This is what the Ancient Greeks did, although they did not include all adults. Really, electoral democracy, the way it has evolved today, is easily corruptible. The major issue is passive consent. Elected representatives assume they receive a blank check after they win elections to do whatever they want until the next election. In a refreshed democracy, representatives must represent the will of the people at all times.

Passive consent must be phased out. We spent too much energy on too much division in party politics, in competing ideologies. Political campaigns. Public relations. Huge amounts of money wasted on manipulative marketing. Private interest lobbying. Corruption. Laws made to favour the ruling class, because politicians were financed by the ruling class, and were members of the ruling class. No surprise that trust in governments and political parties is low. No wonder voter turnout is so low. Phasing in government by lot will refresh democracy. It is time for democracy to evolve.

The crowd rose again in a standing ovation and cheering, while Jasmine came down from the microphone to hug people, shake hands. Microphones were being prepared for the meeting to hear from everyone present, record passions, lessons, reactions, suggestions. It carried on well into the evening.

## 102

It's election day people, gosh what a couple of months it has been, with the Wellbeing for Everyone party rising in polls from nothing to now being a serious contender, some pundits even say they can form an outright majority! What do you make of this, Paul?

Mary, it has been an incredible run for our station, as the first independent media outlet to bring you the incredible and revolutionary work being done by Wellbeing for Everyone. Just look at these numbers, if we can put them on the screen, in all territories, Wellbeing for Everyone candidates occupy first or second slots in the polls, this is amazing.

Indeed, Paul, it is. We followed their boots-on-the-ground missions closely, by the way, love the name, I actually bought boots for reporting.

Love your boots, by the way.

You should get some, Paul.

I will, Mary, for sure, I will.

We don't know what to expect. I am tempted to call the results right now, that's how excited I am to see what the future brings. Most people I interviewed predicted that Menelao Melanoliou has the best chance to become the new prime minister. Worked as teacher. Worked in agroecology. Was involved in several organizations before he entered politics.

He does not even consider himself a politician, Mary.

Right. He did play the outsider card for sure. It seems to have worked. You know, I've said for some time that we live in times where only outside politics is possible. Coming from all sides. Both bad and good. This time, the message of Wellbeing for Everyone seemed to have resonated with the people differently than other outsider messages from parties in the past, which were usually focused on blame-the-other, keep-the-other-out-so-we-can-have-a-good-life, that kind of politics.

Politics of fear.

Right. Can we have a politics of hope? A politics of wellbeing for everyone? We shall see very soon, Paul. Very soon. Polls close in one hour.

If I can jump in, Mary, I would say that even if they don't win these elections outright, they will form a very strong opposition. They will not go away. Judging by the great work they have done in just a few months, their position can only strengthen. People are desperate for change. People want a stress-free life. People want to live in a relaxed society. People do want the privileges of the few to be phased out. It only took a few months of teach-learn-listen to start a cultural shift.

Perhaps it is too early to say, if it is indeed a cultural shift, Paul. It does have the symptoms, I give you that. The momentum is on the side of wellbeing for everyone, and I do not mean just

the party, but in general, it seems the soul of humanity is being reborn somehow.

It did not take another war, or another major economic depression to get to that.

That disproves some theories we've read in books. The past is hardly a predictor of the future.

We were on the verge of fascism, we were on the verge of major wars, for most of my life. It didn't happen. It felt like it was happening numerous times, but it never truly broke humanity. Can we say that a Quiet Revolution was brewing all this time in the background, and just needed a better moment to come out in the open? Perhaps, we will see in five, ten years, if all this brings about material transformation. There is a lot of good stuff on the Wellbeing for Everyone agenda. Really good. Working time reduction? Whoa, give me that. I need some time off, Paul. My back really hurts.

Or free trains, Mary. Myself, I love trains. Cannot get enough of them. I am going to sell my car if we get free trains. I mean it, Mary.

We have a countdown to the closing of the vote. We can see the first exit polls soon. In about an hour, we can show the first results.

Folks, we are not going to break for commercials as mainstream media does. We do not take money from advertising, as you are all aware. We are one hundred percent supported by you folks. While other stations now play advertising for back pain medication, which should be free if you're asking me, we are just going to go live with the Wellbeing for Everyone HQ to feel the heat there. Jane, you are live.

Thanks, Paul. As you can see, the energy here is through the roof. There is a lot of well-tempered excitement, some sort of collective spirit has risen, they are very well-prepared for all results. They told me the plan will go ahead as announced. They mean every word of it. I did not see backdoor conversations. All

members have stayed here in the room the whole day, I can see Menelao Melanolioi talking to the catering staff, making jokes. It is very different than what we were used to seeing during traditional campaigns.

Back to the studio, folks. Voting has officially closed. We can now release the first exit polls, and I must say, folks, I am floored. Overwhelming majority for Wellbeing for Everyone, they took almost all territories they could. They will have no issue with forming a government. Folks, this is a historical moment! We are living through a political revolution. This is history, folks. We have changed the future, forever.

## 103

The first measure announced by the Melanolioi government was the creation of several concurrent nationwide citizens' assemblies to carry out the task of writing policies that would roll out the vision of a wellbeing-for-everyone society. The wave of excitement was without precedent in history. Critics remained stuck in childish soundbites that fewer and fewer citizens took seriously. The general feeling was *I cannot believe this is happening, is it too good to be true? I don't know yet, but I want to be a part of it, I have nothing to lose.* There was one Citizens' Assembly created for climate-related policies, another for the reform of democracy, another one for the reform of finances, another one for the military, another one for the process of decolonisation, another one for social justice and legal reforms, another one for the reform of education, another one for science and innovation, and one assembly to shadow the work of the other assemblies by acting as an independent shadow experimental government. All these began their work in the first three months of the Melanolioi government.

Public sentiment evolved quickly from excitement to a hopeful *if all of this happens in real life, my hope in humanity will be fully restored*, and when Menelao Melanoliou declared in a live speech that, All proposals and laws written by the Citizens' Assemblies will become obligatory for our government to enshrine into the law of the land effective immediately, people went berserk, Is he serious, is this what real democracy looks like, it has never happened in history, But it will never work, What do you mean it will never work, the man just said what the government is going to do, I know, I heard that, I want to see if they are keeping their word.

It took all Citizens' Assemblies two full years to consult with experts, with citizens themselves, to read studies, conduct their own research, and come up with a voluminous set of new laws that would become new rules of the land, which were nothing less than the most radical transformation of a nation in the history of humans on Earth, even more magnificent than that it was accomplished by democratic means, surely at the initiative of the government, however an enlightened government as some pundits started to comment. Many experts struggled to make forecasts and prophecies about what would happen to the nation after all these laws become effective, and as time passed, Will it truly change the soul of the nation, will it ensure our survival for generations to come, will it speak to the greatness of our nation? While other pundits were less preoccupied with the greatness-of-our-nation notion and talked more about the quality of daily life of citizens less preoccupied with philosophical questions about nationhood, the *Zeitgeist*, what is dialectical materialism in this time and age, the role of the state, the role of class identity, and many other less tangible ideas that sometimes focus on talking about life and society, more than *being into life*, and *being into society*, so to speak.

Year three of the Wellbeing for Everyone government started with another shocker. One of the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly for the Military was that the defence budget must be scaled down significantly over the following five years, to such an amount that it does not exceed the average per capita of all other nations, other rules talked about military involvement in the selection of government in foreign countries, and so on. The shocker was the announcement from Menelao Melanolioiu himself that, Our nation will close down all its military bases outside our territory over the next two years. We will bring home all our troops stationed outside our borders, and soon transition our military into strictly a defence force, and a peacekeeping force, that will intervene only at the solicitation of the United Nations assembly. The military will be known going forward by the name of Peace Corps, with its subsequent divisions into land, air, and naval units, which will all be downscaled significantly.

But, but, but, he cannot do that, said a prominent commentator on national television, his jaw frozen in shock at the end of the announcement. It's, it's impossible, he continued, while his producer insisted in his earbud that the commentator keep talking for the love of god because dead air or incoherent phrases did not sit well with the television audience that was already in sharp decline. So, basically, the commentator spoke again, Our nation will not contribute anymore to the advancement of democracy and peace in the world, I wonder if this is not the gravest mistake in our nation's history. While he was uttering these

words, the commentator knew quite well he was utterly wrong because next to his face viewers saw on the screen in big font, the military will become Peace Corps, so how can anyone say, that the nation will no longer help with increasing the peace in the world, when the very new name of the army will be Peace Corps, and the Defence Ministry will become the Ministry for Peace. The commentator had no choice but to resign the next day when he saw on his internet accounts that the population did not take well his mischaracterization of the government's announcement, and more importantly, the fact that it was a Citizens' Assembly in the first place that recommended this course of action, an assembly formed by regular citizens such as himself, the commentator.

The closing down of military bases worldwide did not prove to be a logistical fracas, to use the words of a late-night talk show host who attempted to squeeze out some humour from this massive endeavour. So, our nation made all these playgrounds around the world, the comedian read from a teleprompter what the team wrote for him, and now we are taking all the toys and coming back home for dinner [audience laughter] Is mom home to check if we washed our hands? [audience laughter] Oops he is [audience laughter]. Oops, *she* is [more laughter]. [Speaking in mom's voice] Did you clean your playground? Did you put your toys back? [audience laughter].

Both allies and traditional enemies came out with statements immediately to applaud this massive military operation, and much to the surprise of comedians, experts, journalists, some internet commentariat, no other nations took over those abandoned playgrounds, some were reverted back to the ownership of the nation where they were located, some converted into actual playgrounds, some into beautiful ecovillages and so on. It was the most orderly, civilized, friendly movement of military personnel and equipment in history. A beautiful story for books and cinematic films.

**O**n the day when the last soldier set foot on home turf, the Minister for Energy held a press conference. The following is the minister's statement in full.

Thank you all for coming. Our government continues to follow the will of the people as outlined in the rules and laws put forward by Citizens' Assemblies not long ago. Today we announce the nationalization of all fossil fuel companies that reside or operate in our country. Effective at midnight, their boards of directors will be replaced by citizen councils that have been selected by lot. The councils will supervise the phasing out of all fossil fuel extraction, production, and delivery with the deadline that such operations must cease completely by the end of the fifth calendar year. The ownership of these companies will be gradually transitioned to the public, while the governance will be transferred to the citizens' councils, which will be independent from the government. Meanwhile, the Ministry for Energy will continue to phase in alternative forms of energy. The Citizens' Assembly for Climate and the one for Science and Innovation have already put forward the plans and rules for the development of alternative energies. Those plans will continue as scheduled. I will continue to ensure the citizens that there will be no disruption in the delivery of energy. Transportation powered by fossil fuels will also be phased out within five years. Certainly, this will mean an economic diet for some industries and some privileged individuals. Rest assured, everyone will still be able to get to their destination in accordance with society's will.

We will consider all forms of energy that do not require a flame, from nuclear, to solar, to wind, geothermal, and others, specific to geography. The production of energy must always consider the environmental cost, and the footprint of this production cannot cause irreparable damage to ecosystems. This does not mean that less damage is acceptable. It means that environmental assessment must always include the consent of the local communities.

Fellow citizens. Our future can be, should be, and must be a future of clean energy, one that is mindful of the laws of thermodynamics, the conditions of life, and complete democracy within our nation and beyond.

## 106

**P**rime Minister, thank you for joining us today. We hear you have yet another major announcement.

Thank you for inviting me, Mary, Paul, said Menelao Melanoliou. It is great to be here!

Why did you choose our show for this major announcement? said Paul.

I was looking for a conversation, not a speech, followed by Q&A, said Menelao, I like your show, as I love other shows in democratic media, but your show has the right format for this announcement.

Feel free to lead the way, said Mary.

Here we go, said Menelao. We are launching a People's Trust to phase out the stock market. This may not be such a surprise for you because we have been talking for a while about how insidious the stock market is, how anti-democratic, a value-hoarding institution that has lost any connection to the needs of humans. The Citizens' Assemblies have also made this proposal.

We are now implementing those proposals and giving it a name and proper structure.

How will it work? said Paul.

In the first phase, continued Menelao, we will set up the institution. It requires some legislation to create a novel legal framework. Next, we will mandate the Central Bank to open digital accounts for all citizens, at no cost to the population.

Are these accounts connected to the People's Trust? said Mary.

They are, said Menelao. I will get to that in a moment. As you know, companies listed on the stock market have certain corporate charters, follow corporate law, have certain fiduciary guidelines in place, have certain governance structures. All of that will be phased out during the transition of ownership. As you know, corporations follow the trinity model, as we call it, defined by three elements: property, which is made up of the shares of the company, power, represented by the ability to decide based on the volume of shares, and capital itself, which some experts call the means of production. Follow so far?

I'm with you, said Paul.

We need to peel back the onions, said Menelao. Companies that are owned by other companies, by hedge funds, by pension funds, and so on. One way to peel away the onion is to move the shares to the People's Trust outright, in one sweeping move. Another way is to peel away the onion, layer by layer. In the second approach, economic agents will gradually transfer their shares to the People's Trust, starting with ten percent in the first year, twenty percent in the second, then thirty percent in the third year, forty percent in the fourth year, then the remaining ten percent in the fifth year. The People's Trust will become a legal owner, so to speak, of all stock-based companies.

This is revolutionary, said Mary.

Yet comprehensible, said Paul.

Revolutions don't need to be complicated, Paul, said Mary.

Ha ha, no, I suppose not, said Paul. Please continue, Prime Minister.

Like you said, it does not have to be rocket science, and incredibly convoluted, continued Menelao. Here's the big caveat to this scheme. This transfer of property will not also transfer power. This is very important. The People's Trust will not command those companies. They will hold the shares in trust, but the power will revert to the workers of those companies. They will make all the decisions, what to produce, how to produce, how to distribute profits, and so on. One worker equals one vote. What happens to the pension funds, you may wonder.

We do wonder indeed, said Paul.

The current value of each person's pension will be credited to their account at the Central Bank, before the onions are peeled away. Up until the limit of five million, of course. So nobody loses their pensions. Nobody's savings will be lost. Pensions will become guaranteed by the Central Bank and will be entirely discounted from the stock market even before the stock market is phased out.

Phew, I was worried there for a second, said Mary.

Absolutely no need to worry, Mary, said Menelao. What you have saved, you will continue to have. You will own that account, it is yours. With direct access. No brokers. No money managers. The value of your pension savings will never go down because there will be no financial market to affect that value.

Tell us more about the power aspect of the trinity, said Paul.

So, we transfer shares to the People's Trust, continued Menelao. Remember, shares also represent fractional, proportional power in those companies. Power is actually the real thing here. Power remains inside companies, with the workers. The proportionality between power and property vanishes. There will be no such thing.

What if a university has, let's say ten percent stock in a utility company listed at the stock market? said Mary.

Perfect, let's take that example, said Menelao. When those ten percent are transferred to the People's Trust, the university will receive the market value of that stock in cash from the Central Bank up to what we call functional limits.

Whoa, wait, said Mary, that's a lot of money required for the Central Bank to buy out all that stock. What are functional limits?

Remember, Mary, said Menelao, this goes together with the entire package of proposals from the Citizens Assemblies. There is also a wealth limit of five million for personal wealth. That's one functional limit. For institutional investors, the functional limit should be the number of humans employed or affiliated with that institution, multiplied by one million. Say there are ten thousand people linked to University X, that's ten thousand times one million, which is ten billion. At the very core of all onions are people, we must remember that. We peel back the onion's layers, we count the people, that's how compensation will be paid.

Okay, another example, a hedge fund, said Mary, how much they will get.

Same rule applies, said Menelao. They provide the list of people associated with them, we multiply that by one million, that's the functional limit, so they get that much. Or if the limit is not reached, they get the full value of their stock. Property ownership will become fully transparent.

That's true, said Paul. I suppose there will be backlash, such as claims of value theft, of property.

Certainly, said Menelao. However, property does not exist alone, it always comes with power. We actually don't take anything. It's just being moved from one bad system to more a democratic system. Citizens will not lose wealth, guaranteed. Companies will be run democratically, by the people who actually do the work of production. Actually, everybody wins. Sure, much like slave owners lost, and I use air quotes here, 'value' of their property, was that really property? Was that

really ownership? The great evil we are undoing here is the proportional link between property and power, with some very fair compensation, which of course cannot be proportional itself because we cannot undo a bad rule by applying the same bad rule, hence the functional limits.

Gotcha, said Paul. Now I have a full picture.

Prime Minister, this is essentially phasing out capitalism, and the entire predatory private banking industry.

Precisely, said Menelao. I'm sure you have nothing against that, ha ha.

Ha ha, no sir, no. I'm good with that. Let us take a short break, then we'll cover the rest.

## 107

The beginning of year four of the Wellbeing for Everyone government began with major festivities all around the country in what was decreed to be Democracy Day, a public holiday when people could get together and celebrate the very idea of democracy, refreshed as it came to be under the new era that was emerging. Citizens' Assemblies had already made proposals a few years before about a major reform to the entire election system. The government passed the necessary laws for reform, including changes to the constitution, which would take effect at the end of the term.

Elections were abolished. Parliament and government were to be replaced by six new bodies, with members selected in a participatory system, largely based on sortition. Members would be selected by lottery.

Can you break it down for us, Minister? asked Mary.

Sure can. The six bodies will be: the Agenda Council, Interest Panels, a Review Panel, a Policy Jury, a Rules Council, and an

Oversight Council. First, the Agenda Council chooses a topic for legislation. It will be made up of 150-400 people, chosen by lottery from among volunteers, using algorithms to ensure a fair representation. These citizens will work full-time in the Agenda Council for three years each. A third of the members will be replaced each year. They will be paid a salary. Second, various Interest Panels come into play. There can be a hundred or fewer. Interest Panels are groups of twelve citizens who can each propose a law, or part of a law. Members are neither elected nor chosen by lot, they simply volunteer to help think about a particular subject. They can discuss traffic safety, food provisioning, energy sovereignty, job guarantees, education. Third, all these proposals for laws are put before a Review Panel, of which there is one for each policy area. Proposals concerning traffic safety, for example, come before the Review Panel that concerns itself with mobility. These panels can be compared to parliamentary committees as they do not have the right to initiate legislation nor to vote on its adoption. They just do the work in between. They use the input from Interest Panels, organise hearings, invite experts, and work on developing legislation. Fourth, legislation is put before a Policy Jury. This is to avoid power concentration in the Review Panels. The Policy Jury does not have permanent members. Every time a vote on a piece of legislation is needed, four hundred citizens are chosen by lottery to come together for one day or, in certain cases, for several days. These lotteries are drawn from the entire adult population. Participation in this random draw is quasi-mandatory. It instills an egalitarian principle of equal chance of being picked, regardless of personal identity. This Policy Jury will hold a secret vote without further discussion. There are no political parties. No party discipline. No ideological labeling or identities. No behind-the-scenes haggling. No back scratching. It is a secret vote based on personal conscience and thinking. Fifth,

the Rules Council, also chosen by lottery, develops procedures for the actual drawing of lots, for hearings with experts, and for voting, when it's required by the Policy Jury. Sixth, the Oversight Council, chosen by lottery, ensures that citizens selected by lottery follow the procedures. They also deal with complaints. This is it, in brief form.

Thank you, Minister, said Mary. As many of our viewers know, there have been heated debates and objections to abolishing elections. A columnist wrote, and I quote: what if incompetent, corrupt, reckless, self-interested people, without expertise, were to find themselves in powerful roles?

There is tremendous energy in this participative model for self-regulation, said the Minister. This is why there are six bodies, including Rules and Oversight. This is why we have algorithms, which, of course, are fully transparent. The number of people involved in government will be roughly the same. They will still have access to experts.

What happens to party politics? asked Mary.

The Wellbeing for Everyone party will be dismantled at the end of our term, said the Minister. We cannot legislate to force the other political parties to follow suit, but given the fact that parliament and government will be abolished as institutions, I see no reason for political parties to exist anymore, unless they want to turn themselves into non-profits for people to hang out, talk ideologies, have debates, throw parties, certainly at their expense, if they so wish, as any group of folks can do, we remain a free country, however parties will have no power in running our country. All power now rests with the people, directly, through participation and selection by lottery, without any intermediaries. Historically, party politics, democracy by party rule, has done more damage than good. It has polarized society too much. It's promoted corruption, bribery, lobbying, waste of money and time with marketing, self-promotion at the expense of truth,

governing by charisma, governing by sound-bites and media clips, huge rallies simply for the purpose of collecting votes, time wasted on metaphors and epithets and not on facts and material issues that really make a difference in people's lives, all of that has made political parties a kind of politics by cabal, politics by clique, politics by closed doors to rooms where we never learn what happened in them. There are better ways to do democracy. The people have spoken.

## 108

When the Work Agencies opened, on the first day of August in year four, over half of the top-paid CEOs in the country resigned, quoting incredible pressure from the Work Agencies making it difficult for us to maintain high profitability because labour has gained very high bargaining positions, to which citizens replied on internet forums, Bro, what the bleep, you are saying you cannot underpay workers now because Work Agencies are creating good quality, high paying jobs, and you cannot compete with them to keep your high profit margins and high executive pay, what the bleep bro, your class is OVER, and many other similar comments and celebratory marches and parties on the streets with huge banners read, THE AGE OF UNELECTED CEOs IS OVER, BUH BYE, accompanied by amusing drawings and memes that reminded departing executives that lo and behold, society now also has a MAXIMUM WEALTH of five million and decreasing soon, so what are the execs going to do with all those so-called exit packages that they decided to take voluntarily, huh, what politicians are they going to fundraise for because now elections are abolished and political parties have turned into book clubs, huh CEOs, and all other lords and barons in the unelected

professional managerial class that is also phased out because lo and behold economic democracy was phased in.

The demand and the need for Life Protector jobs administered by Work Agencies was so high, the feeling of caring for community and living nature so strong, there were entire office buildings simply left empty, leaving pointless insurance companies, investment banks, mortgage companies, all sorts of parasitic brokerages and fee-sucking advisors without any employees, scrambling to find answers about what the hell was going on, thus filing for bankruptcy within months. Life Protectors began work immediately to restore local, regional, and national ecosystems. Since protectors were members of communities, they were vested in the consent of the community that was consulted at every step in the processes of protecting the quality of human and non-human life in all habitats, while ensuring everyone had access to basic services, including, but not limited to, quality housing as a human right, access to quality food, while industrial production was being phased out, access to health care on the rule that a family physician must be available within a maximum of fifteen minutes, and for remote locations, mobile family physicians to meet those needs.

Work Agencies evolved to become a hub of communities to organize their needs for work, distribute work that was in high demand but with low supply, such as cleaning services, waste collection, or work that was in low demand but with a high supply of labour, such as catering services, all those questions about demand versus supply, skill versus experience and so on were discussed at work agencies. Some socially necessary work was assigned by lottery, on rotation, to phase out stigma, and phase in the dignity of performing a well-paid service for the community.

The traditional labour market phased itself out over the following months, at an accelerated pace after elections were abolished. Given that economic democracy was replacing

corporatocracy, and workers had gained the power to hire and fire their managers based on rules of competence they themselves had established democratically, there was no need for a labour market. Citizens had the option to choose from Work Agencies or joining independent cooperatives, as equal partners, much like all citizens became equal members in the refreshed democracy that no longer pitted one group against another in the name of efficacy, efficiency, or eminence.

## 109

The world has been following progress in the nation with awe, disbelief, hope, impatience, enthusiasm and many other strong feelings, but one was missing from the list: apathy. One way or another, the world wanted to see how this nation would change. When the Melanoliou government ended their term and the new six-body administration was put in place, that is when the world really accepted that the revolution was real.

The closing of tax havens came as a storm. Following a series of resolutions adopted by the United Nations and agreed upon by all countries, enormous amounts of wealth came to the surface, spurring outrage and cheers from humans around the world who now realized how rigged the economic game had been, how greedy for power and wealth the super wealthy humans had been, with utter disregard for justice and democracy. Trillions upon trillions of dollars were now being counted and accounted for. Tax them out of existence, was the global demand, regardless of language and nations. Humans took to the streets in spontaneous marches and celebration, encircling parliaments, royal palaces, flooding the most famous squares and plazas of the greatest cities shouting, Super Rich Are No More, by which they meant everyone with wealth over five million, Earth is Ours,

committing to not leaving the public spaces until that hidden wealth had been confiscated and redistributed to all nations fairly.

There weren't any places left for the super wealthy to hide. No country, no bank accepted assets of any kind any longer, particularly anything without a disclosed owner, by the full name of a person, not foundations, not trust funds, not any firm of any kind, but names of real humans. Once those ledgers were filled and assets accounted for, the massive global redistribution began. People's Trusts began to be established in one nation after another. Authoritarian regimes began to crumble when the assets of the rich were exposed. Massive outrage toppled dozens of governments over several months.

Many countries did not have much experience with real, participatory democracy. The United Nations took the initiative to establish the International Agency for Democracy to help countries learn from the success of the Wellbeing for Everyone government, and adapt the six-body model. Some countries decided to adopt the six-body model as-is, others added a few more bodies to account for the size of those nations, and cultural differences. This word *democracy* was no longer associated with European history. The world had given birth to new meanings, from *being in one*, or *the being of many*, or *the rule by chance to avoid the tyranny by choice*, in any case, the dissolution of caste in whatever shape or form it had existed in, to allow equal chance for everyone to become a selected administrator of a nation. Deeply ingrained in the cultures of the world, the uniqueness of each human, the experience of finitude of each human, surfaced in a public outpouring of hope, renewed trust in fellow neighbours, and much joy to be alive in this moment of history.

Within the following three years, the entire nuclear arsenal of all nations had been dismantled completely, by mutual trust and transparency. The few remaining local conflicts fizzled

out, when the original points of contention came to be seen as ridiculous and childish. With tyrants out of power, and new administrations, made by the people, of the people, and for the people replacing the tyrants, there were immediate decisions to cease conflicts, They are our sisters and brothers, people in administration said, how can we wage war against them, it is absurd. Within days, wars stopped. Then there was a first day of silence on Earth, of many more to come, with no bombs, and no shots being fired.

## 110

Climate crises, biodiversity breakdown, were not issues that could be solved in five years. The inertia of the tremendous damage that had been done by the growth-driven industry-intensive consumption-based economy since the dawn of the Great Acceleration of energy production and resource extraction, this inertia of damage had generated compound effects that were causing suffering, harm, destruction affecting hundreds of millions of people. These people needed healthy food, clear water, clean air, a roof over their heads, air conditioning, healthcare.

When the minority world of rich nations began the great distribution of wealth from the former super wealthy to everybody else, they had so much wealth to work with that the global poverty line immediately jumped into the realm of two digits, bringing out of poverty, in real terms, over three billion people. This was just about money, but money is not the same as calories, money is a facilitator, at best, when properly deployed, or an instrument of oppression when improperly hoarded, not that there is a proper way to hoard money, there isn't. The rollout of economic democracy, People's Trusts, full reserve banking, personal accounts at central banks for all citizens

had the expected effect to lower the pressure of financial debts between nations on the actual economic activity of those nations, while the international financial institutions lost the ability to influence national policy of indebted nations. Not only did the cancellation of debt of the majority world infuse energy into the growth of wellbeing for the majority world, the debt also taught the minority world the valuable lesson in temporality. There were limits on the duration of debts, not more than seven years, on almost everything, because in addition to full reserve banking and the phasing-out of predatory investment private banks, the economy was learning to serve people's needs without the need for perpetual growth, which had many financial causes, such as the very concept of interest rates. User Poodle4President wrote in a decentralized digital social forum, I wonder how many Nobel Prizes in Economics would have to be rescinded for faulty thinking based on the faulty assumption that growth must be inherent to all economic systems.

Phasing out interest rates on the public generation of money via central banks, or via local alternative currencies simply made the profit motive wither away at a time when humans focused their attention seamlessly on fulfilling their needs on the principle, My Wellbeing Does not Diminish the Wellbeing of Another, a simple golden rule, conceptually organic to all cultures and natures, so that when people thought about what wellbeing meant for them, they were thinking about their food, where it was produced, by whom, how far away, they were thinking how they were getting around, by burning energy or by simply moving their bodies on mechanical vehicles, they were thinking about each object they were touching to bring into their homes, how it was made, by whom, at what expense to the environment, what will happen to the object in the future, can it be returned to the environment, or transformed into perpetuity into other useful object, they were thinking about

their use of technology if it was made at a loss of connections to other humans, as exciting as technology might have been, it remained just that, technology, and not another human, even though other humans could be reached with the help of technology. Surely, many humans loved the experience of virtual environments, yet they understood that all environments have natural physical limits, including those made from bits or qubits. Energy was such a limit. Materials were such a limit. Once fully democratized, technology became a true friend to humans.

The experience of limits is an experience of freedom. Knowledge of boundaries anchors the mind in what can be realisable in a person's life. The notion of uniqueness within each human is bundled into this knowledge of boundaries. The reality that each human is one organism that is the result of evolution, among many other organisms that have evolved on the same planet, with its particular features, its soft or hard sensibilities to changes from within or from without, as bestowed by the Universe itself, this reality has become graspable by the human mind, and when humans became aware of it, they unlocked a very long path of existence into a deep future.

## 111

Whoa man, that's deep, said Luke, say it again.  
They unlocked a very long path of existence into a deep future, said Harding C. His wife Lorelei and his son Mikael were sitting next to him, at the long table next to the house of the Small Forest Collective.

I just read it somewhere, said Harding C.

I know I feel great now, man, said Luke, not sure about that deep future.

Tooks us a few years to get here, said Cecil Millington.

Hard and beautiful years, I would say, said Celeste Millington.

I don't regret any of it, man, said Luke. They were tough.

I wonder if all this would have happened without our experience with, you know, the shrinkage, said Gunther Glassfarb.

Yeah, who knows, man, said Luke. I don't even know what that was. Our time during the shrinkage in Village was awesome man, I still don't know what actually happened, maybe it was a real beautiful dream, doesn't matter what, doesn't matter how, it matters that it changed us, it matters that it did not cause any damage to anybody in the process, right?

Well put, Luke, said Peggy. We were a bunch of very different people in Village but the predicament we shared made us unite and live mindfully of each other.

If you think about it, said Holly-Kate Glassfarb, the world itself was in a predicament, in many predicaments actually, they just needed a spark to realise they were in it together.

What was the a-ha moment for each of you? asked Fiona Farrinelli.

For me, it was the hard truth, said Menelao Melanoliou, that whatever I wanted, whatever I needed from society, for myself, depended on others. This tension, between my needs and the needs of others, was pointless. That was the a-ha. I stopped seeing the other as a contender. I saw the other as a fellow human.

In addition to what Menelao said, for me, a-ha was when I finally figured out what that higher-than-us thing was, said Marcus Literolis.

What was it, man? said Luke.

Life itself, said Marcus. Life is higher than all its components, human and non-human. Life continues for its components and often in spite of its components, sounds bizarre I know, but life is such a strong idea, fragile and nimble at the same time. This taught me humility.

And it taught me how I can be free, said Debra Literolis.

Marcus and I reviewed our lifestyle, needs, wants, desires, all of it after we returned from Village. We downsized our material life and upscaled our spiritual life. It made us better people. To each other first. To our family. To our community.

I made my best music after Village, said Stanley Stone. I created so many new instruments and sounds in Village, I was overwhelmed with ideas of what music to write. Man, the concerts, the festivals we had since then, they were just the best thing that can happen to an artist. We discovered infinity.

Whoa man, said Luke, let's do another one this summer. We have capacity for five thousand people now in the Small Forest Collective.

That's awesome, man, said Stanley. Let's do it!

I can help with networking, said Yolanda Francescone. We have a beautiful community on our socials. We can easily plan for a month or maybe two.

We can do two months, said Luke. We're good on food. All of it.

Awesome, said Yolanda, we'll start prepping next week.

Can I come too? said Paula Lipman.

Of course, man, said Luke.

Ha ha, I'm joking, said Paula. Of course I'm coming. My students have created this Musical Anthropology of the Future group, they have some fantastic ideas, this would be a great occasion for them. They want to study whether spontaneous culture can form in an intense musical space. How originality emerges from a collective experience of emotion.

Whoa, said Luke.

I am coming too, said Blythe "Brutus" Zapp. Music is great physical exercise. Music teaches discipline.

Ha ha, Brutus, you're funny, said Jayden Flier.

Discipline of the soul, my friend, said Brutus, laughing. Who says a military man cannot change?

Obviously, said Jayden, I'm glad you're coming. We are coming too. I haven't seen the stars far from the city in a long time.

That's going to be the perfect place man, said Luke. We don't have light pollution here.

I love what you've done with this place, Luke, said Jayden. I'm going to bring my telescope.

To a music festival? said Jasmine Flier.

Oh, it's going to be much more than a festival, said Stanley Stone. Sure, bring your telescope. You can make beats from the pulsing of stars.

See, Stan knows, said Jayden.

I will bring my loom, then, said Jasmine. We'll make some ponchos from natural fibers.

Guys, you know since Rageonx became a worker cooperative, said Lynton Friedman, I realized that information security works best when it serves the public good. That was my a-ha moment. And count me in for the summer music fiesta.

Yeah, I almost forgot about Rageonx, said Billy Nordhaus. What is it doing now?

Helping the community nodes protect their data, said Lynton. Securing micro transactions. Keeping media in the public commons.

We use it here too, man, said Luke. For our internet connection. Works great. You, Billy? What are you up to? How's your left eye?

Since I got the implant, said Billy Nordhaus, I had about a dozen upgrades. I can now see up to radio wavelength.

Whoa man, said Luke. You can see radio?

It's an app, I can turn it on and off, said Billy.

Get out, said Luke. I'm gonna get a cyber eye too, man, ha ha.

You lose some, you get some, said Billy.

I can barely tell it's not a real eye, said Margaret Fletcher looking straight into Billy's eye. Question is whether I would want that voluntarily? Probably not. Any side effects?

It itches sometimes, said Billy.

Ah, that's not that bad, said Margaret. Are you going to turn radio vision on when you come to the musical experience here?

I gotta try it, said Billy.

This is my second a-ha for this year, said Margaret.

What was the first? asked Fred Hayektom.

That I really love microscopic fungi, said Margaret. I really, really love them! I'm out and about for days and weeks looking for fungi and mycelia networks in nature. I carry a microscope with me.

I'm actually working on a portable atomic microscope, said Fred.

No way, said Margaret, we have to get together.

For sure, said Fred. Next week? My lab?

Done, said Margaret.

Can you bring the microscope to the musical experience? said Missy D. Point. I'm interested too. We can set up a tent.

Absolutely, said Fred. I have a working prototype.

I am going to finish my Master's in neuronal regeneration, said Missy D. Point.

Way to go, Missy, said Luke.

You know, from hair stylist to neuroscientist is not a big step, it's about the same location on the human body, said Missy.

I know somebody who became a hairstylist in addition to being a neuroscientist, said Cléa. You know why? For artistic expression.

And you, Cléa, what have you been up to? said Luke.

I took a ship to Africa and spent the past five years there, said Cléa, setting up hospitals, training people to use MRIs. I am going to go back soon.

By the way, has anyone taken an airplane in the last five years? said Zuri Owuor. Wow, really, nobody? So interesting how fast humans can adapt. I had an a-ha moment on the day I realized that more people took ships between continents than ever before. That free time really opened up the possibility to travel.

My buddy Ignacio and I, said Donatello Zuniga, have been

travelling for the past five years, hauling technology to the majority world, installing, instructing, helping people build sustainable infrastructure. All via ships converted to run on no-emissions tech.

Remember when we had to restart our nuclear reactor in the middle of the Pacific, said Ignacio Salar, in the middle of the storm.

Wait, what? said Rajesh Biswas.

The ship ran on a nuclear reactor, said Ignacio. There was some malfunction.

That's dangerous, said Rajesh.

No, it was fun, said Ignacio. It was fun!

I still don't understand how they work, said Rajesh.

It's easy, my friend, said Gao Jianxing. Just like nuclear submarines.

Almost, said Ignacio. Decommissioning nuclear submarines helped us develop this fleet of clean ships.

How far can I travel on a clean ship? said Berta Esperanza.

You can go around the world, said Donatello.

And they have no emissions? said Berta.

Very little nuclear waste, said Donatello. And super safe.

I had an a-ha moment too, said Marichka Kobrynska. I was just looking at a beautiful lone tree on top of a hill and I just thought, humans can travel anywhere with clean ships, electric trains, and a few electric cars, anywhere on the planet. I forgot why we were rushing to get to places.

I'm with you, sister, said Mallarika Patekar. I love slow travel. My family and I go places for months. It's so comfortable not to worry about traffic, check-ins, queues. Looove it.

Slow life is the best life, said Aiko Kochiyama. My a-ha moment. I know more, I feel more, I live more, since I slowed down.

Are you making new video games now Aiko? said Marie-Louise Lubala.

Yes, but different, said Aiko. Games with the lowest energy

footprint possible. In which players contribute the energy they produce.

Niceee, said Florencia Gallardo. What it's called.

Degrowth of Humans and Sheep, said Aiko. Players reconstruct their lives in a virtual space, algorithms give them challenges to solve problems. Players work together to share energy and resources. The game runs on player-generated energy from physical exercise and certified, locally-produced solar or wind.

Awesome, man, said Luke. Loveee it! Who's hungry? Who wants to help us make dinner?

THE END



"Rituals are discussions about the life of our gardens, of our fellow villagers, followed by a group walk around the village, when the designated poet of the day recites verse about life in nature, moral lessons from history and on occasion the religious professionals say sermons from their respective holy literature, in such a way that does not proselytize, such as come to my religion don't go to this other religion because of such and such reasons, their sermons are crafted so that they speak to the needs and dreams of shrunken humans living in Village, a very diverse bunch having to live under the same conditions, leaving no room for creating sects with competing interests. Perhaps this was the purpose of the shrinking, whether it came about by design or accident, to create a condition for humans to live together, to walk by the same rituals, to discover a path together."

may fly

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