

# The Tree Donor

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## Synopsis

It is in the mid-21st century, and heatwaves in the past decades have devastated all vegetation in the local regions. Fortunately, Mr. Ren, a generous businessman, donated a forest to our community. We are more than grateful for his generous donation. May the Great Forest Spirit bless us with happiness and prosperity...

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## April 4th

It's the seventh time Mr. Ren has donated trees to our community. The tree count is 252, and all of them, again, are young and healthy banyan trees. This is the biggest donation he's ever made to us. I, Ah Xian, as the community liaison for Mr. Ren, am closely documenting his donations to us under the name of our community and our kind Forest God.

Our members are more than grateful for Mr. Ren's generous and regular donation to us this year, for we haven't had any green vegetation growing for a decade. Trees are delicate, they say, and they died off after waves of heat felled them in the past few summers, just like ships in the ocean that tip over with the billowing waves. Actually, I can only imagine what the scene is like — I haven't seen the ocean anyway, though I've been wanting to see it since I heard stories of it. Everyone wishes to see the ocean one day.

Ma always tells me that I should not keep my personal thoughts in this communal journal entry, but I can't hold them back. These banyan trees — just by gazing at them from a distance — give me a weird sort of comfort. They look like green flags against the hazel sky, among the dead bodies of their own kind. As told by historical documents, these trees, with their adventitious roots expanding, will cover miles and miles within their lifetime. One banyan tree, in a single millennium, will become a huge forest. Then, our community will embrace a green world again.

Some side notes — I've heard of recent news about child trafficking incidents in neighboring communities. Because the United Government has recently passed a law to strictly regulate the working population, children could be smuggled to the working districts to boost regional productivity. Or, according to what I heard more from adults around me, young children could also be taken to wealthy districts to entertain those nasty moneybags... How terrible!

May Mr. Ren and his children stay safe and happy.

May the Great Forest Spirit bless us with her grace and generosity.

May She bless my unhappy sister, Ah Luo, so that smiles will come back to her face.

May She bless my parents to not quarrel anymore and to laugh together just like they did when I was young.

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## May 25th

It's the eighth time Mr. Ren has donated trees to our community. The tree count is 170. They are, as always, young and healthy banyan trees, well-protected in the truck, waiting to put down roots in this soft yellow sand. I, as the community liaison for Mr. Ren, am closely documenting his donations to us. Today is a rare sunny day, and I can see the sand clearing to reveal the turquoise sky when the wind is strong.

The workers that brought the trees to us have just exited their cars and walked straight past me, carrying with them a huge scroll which I think is the map of the forest. They walk straight into the forest and disappeared among the trunks, only their red jackets distinguishing them occasionally from the green trees and orange sands.

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## July 12th

The heat waves are extremely brutal these days, and our whole community lies slumbering in the sand. With the heat comes the sloppiness — it is as if my head has been stuffed with glue, and I can't make my thoughts clear. I just sleep and eat and sleep, an endless and boring cycle.

Muddleheaded, I don't even want to write anything down in this journal. But since my duty is to also record any significant events happening in our community, including extreme weathers, I have to at least make some effort.

The sun set just now, and I see people carrying our communal water tank onto a truck — they're probably heading to the forest to water the trees. Our water has been running out much quicker than last year as the trees put down roots in our community, but we all think it's worth the price — the Forest Spirit will always be with us, granting us prosperity and hope.

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## August 2nd

It's the ninth time Mr. Ren has donated banyan trees to our forest. We now have a total of 1,778 trees in the forest — and perhaps more, if they have already begun to expand with their adventitious roots. After the workers planted the trees and left, I took a short walk into the forest.

I haven't been in the forest very often, for my parents think it disrespectful for me to intrude into the forest without praying to the Forest Spirit. I am sure, though, that the Forest Spirit will forgive me.

I walked into the columns of green and brown. For the first time, I felt the coolness of the dark green shadows cast down by the canopy above. Sunshine filtered through the almond-shaped leaves, leaving golden spots on the dark yellow sand.

As I walked deeper into the forest, I was surprised to see so many shrines, red and tiny, standing beside trees. Next to these shrines there were all sorts of religious tokens, especially pieces of colorful plastic — mostly blue and red ones, but some were also white or yellow. There were also personal items hanging from the tree branches with plastic strings, which reminded me of wind chimes I saw when I was young. Beneath the chimes were sticks of partially burned incense, faint stands of smoke escaping from the tip of their tips. Mimicking my memory of Ma, I took out the three incense sticks I had snuck out from her drawer. Kneeling on the forest ground, I lit them and planted them into the soft sand.

“Please wish us good luck, Great Forest Spirit.” I whispered to myself.

As I stood up, I hit myself on a chime — it was Ma's prayers, written on Luo's worn baby shoes. Her handwriting was too messy to be read, but she mentioned the name of Da.

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## August 10th

It's an extremely important day for our community! Mr. Ren, for the first time, came to visit us. Every community member came out to welcome his arrival. My little sister Luo and I came early. My parents initially opposed me in bringing Luo, for she was still emotionally unstable from the farming accident that took away her left arm. However, I insisted that seeing our long-respected tree donor would definitely cheer her up — if it weren't for him bringing us the Great Forest Spirit that blessed Luo to recover, she wouldn't have survived the accident. Protecting Luo in my arms, I managed to make my way to the front side of the crowd, so we could have a clear view of Mr. Ren's arrival.

I had imagined a huge fleet of shiny high-tech vehicles, but Mr. Ren arrived in a simple desert rover. When he stepped out from his vehicle, I happened to be right in front of him. He looked taller than me, but he seemed to be a little bit hunchbacked, which made him my height. My gaze collided with his brown eyes. I had previously held a strong prejudice against people like him who have high social status — people who come from the Metropolis, from places beyond our community — that they were all arrogant and grumpy. But when my eyes met his, I could only see warmth.

Mr. Ren then turned to other people and greeted them, nodding his head as he delivered his gladness with his smiling eyes. His shoulders were broad. Attached to his shoulders were two strong and healthy arms, concealed by his long-sleeved shirt. I began to recall how the media praised him: a man previously unknown to the public until last year, he had suddenly risen from the grassroots to become a successful businessmen who cared deeply about the environment. His environmental awareness earned him more business opportunities. With his considerable fortune, Mr. Ren hoped to start a great tree-planting project to restore our scarred ecosystem.

As I was lost in thoughts, Mr. Ren approached the crowd with a big smile.

“I’ve been recently reading into how trees have the restorative power to heal both the ecosystem and the people,” he told us. “And I know that you, as a community living in the Sichuan Basin for hundreds of generations, were very reluctant to be forced to say goodbye to the forests that were destroyed because of these goddamn heatwaves. Now, I’m more than glad to see my brothers and sisters regard this forest as a newly emerged deity that protects your community — nature protects us and heals us. Please respect her and give her good care, because you know she’ll reciprocate your actions. Also, please don’t worship me in any way — I’m just a human being using my humble means to perhaps make the world a better place.”

“And you, kid,” he turned to Luo and me, holding out his hands. I hesitantly put my hands in his and he shook them. “I know that you have been keeping a record of my donation to your community. Thank you for documenting the trees for me. It’s a tedious job, and I fully appreciate your effort.”

Flattered, as I was standing in awkward silence not knowing how to return his kind words, Luo stepped out from behind me and said in a crisp voice, “Thank you, Uncle Ren.”

Mr. Ren smiled again and shook her small hand. Then, he patted my shoulders and left with the rest of the community members to visit the forest.

How fortunate we are to have Mr. Ren as our tree donor! Had Mr. Ren not planted those trees, our faith would have gone with the thousand sandstorms. It is those trees that reassured our faith at the brink of collapse. It is the Great Forest Spirit that re-empowered us with the willingness to live.

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September 3rd

Ma found out that I stole her incense to visit the forest. She almost beat me. But in the end she didn't.

As another strong heatwave is roaring across the districts, more and more news outlets are reporting child trafficking now. It's indeed a chaotic time — the world has never rested since the 2030s — but it is hard to identify precisely when the world turned into chaos. I guess that the world never feels fallen, because we all grow accustomed to the fall. I guess that's also why people didn't take action when they began to experience climate change — 30 °C in January, not a big deal; snowing in June, not a big deal either. So we got used to extreme weather. We still call it "extreme weather," but it doesn't really feel extreme anymore, because heatwaves are so common. Now forest fires break the night in winter, and hail kills the crops in summer.

Later in the afternoon, Ma and Da began quarreling again about unessential details of their lives — Da drinking too much water or Ma wasting a piece of paper. The hot weather seems to heat up their rage. They could rip each other's face off with their words, and I knew that Luo couldn't bear with it any longer, so I took her out into the forest.

"You don't have to do this," Luo told me. "I'm getting used to this right now. I'm growing up, and you should let me handle these things on my own." She spoke with such conviction, but the tears in her eyes gave away her true feelings. I wrapped my arms around her tiny body and held her tight, my eyes staring at the green leaves of the banyan trees.

"Let go of me." Tears began to drop from her cheeks. "I'm not a child anymore. I don't need your comfort."

"Luo, listen." I tried to make my voice sound soft. "I know you're a big girl now, but sometimes you need to try to rely on me a little bit more — I'm always by your side."

"I know, but please, just let me go." She struggled to push me away from her, her right hand pressing hard on my chest, sending a shot of powerlessness burning through my ribcage right into my lungs. Since the farming accident a year ago, the once jolly Luo suddenly became overly composed for a child of her age. She forced herself to stay strong in front of other people, but she cried beneath her blankets almost every night. She changed so quickly from her previous self that I don't know when I should offer her help, and when I will hurt her self-esteem. Since then, I've been blaming myself for being an irresponsible sibling — but what else can I do? I released her from my arms.

“Okay, okay, I’ll let you go. Just remember, I love you, okay? And the Great Forest Spirit will protect you from evil things.”

“Okay.” She moved away from me, leaf shadows dancing on her small figure.

“I love you too, Xian,” she said before leaving me.

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## September 12th

We’ve been having good weather these days. This morning, I was overjoyed to see some birds resting in the forest when I was sitting with Luo eating dried earthworms — it used to be an important component of Chinese medicine, so we’re kind of living in luxury, I guess. When I asked Luo what those birds were, she just shrugged and said, “just some kind of chicken-like animals. If we catch them, maybe Ma will make them a good stew, and perhaps that’ll cheer Da up.” We both stared at those birds as they disappeared from our horizon.

Speaking of food — I read a book last week that talked about 20th century people eating chickens and cows. I have no memory of chickens or cows, but I feel like I miss them. Sometimes I jokingly tell myself that this is probably because I inherited those memories from my ancestors — it’s just amazing that memories can be passed down over generations of people. I want to inherit the memory of forests from my ancestors.

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## September 18th

Very urgent news — the United Government recently alleged that several prestigious businessmen, including Mr. Ren, are earning money from illegal processes. The Government is undertaking investigation into this case.

I am stunned to hear such news. Why do people think Mr. Ren would commit such crimes? He is the greatest eco-warrior of our time, proven by both the mainstream media and numerous witnesses. He is the intermediate person between the Great Forest Spirit and our community. He earned his fortune by his assiduous spirit. The Forest Spirit will bless him and find the real villain. Our community has unanimously signed a letter, which has been sent to the United Government to prove Mr. Ren’s innocence in this crime.

Ma and Da began quarreling again. Now they have quiet quarrels, careful enough not to break any furniture in the household, but when they’re not quarreling they trap themselves in different rooms of the house. Ma still talks to Luo and me, but now Da stays completely silent. When he

occasionally comes out from his room, I see his puffy eyes red with tears and congested veins, making his already small eyes even smaller. Because of this, Luo has been feeling ill these days. She's just extremely upset about everything around her, about hunger, heat, and herself. I don't know how to cheer her up. The only thing I could suggest is a daily walk in the forest, where her spirit could be healed.

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## October 6th

Our widowed neighbor, Weng, has been talking to Luo these days, and I think she treats Luo as her own daughter. She tries to tell jokes to Luo to make her laugh, and surprisingly, she succeeds almost every time. Sometimes she has even invited me into their conversation. Apparently Luo likes her — Weng offers her the care Ma and Da can't provide her. I am grateful to Weng for comforting Luo. However, two days ago Weng has gone to the Water Station to replace our empty water tanks, and Luo became quiet and upset once again.

Out of distress, I stole more incense from Ma and went into the forest. The forest feels burning hot, heat seeping out from the yellow soil, coating the skin of my feet. I lit up the incense and prayed sincerely to the Great Forest Spirit.

“Great Forest Spirit, do you feel my frustration? I can't help Luo feel better. Please send Weng back. I know I shouldn't be asking for more after you saved her life, but would you please, please let her be happy again?”

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## October 7th

Weng did come back, but Luo disappeared.

All we know is that she went out for her daily forest walk early in the morning. Today is another day of extreme heatwave, so we all stayed indoors. No one noticed that she was missing until later in the evening when the cooler air allowed us to go out.

When other members of the community told me that they hadn't seen Luo all day, the blood in my body ran cold. Even though my body was coated by a thin layer of burning sand, I felt as if I had been thrown into a refrigerator, every organ inside my body congealing under the paralyzing shock.

When my brain could finally process information, I immediately biked to the neighboring community to look for Luo. They told me that they had all been indoors, too, but a woman told

me that she saw from the window a couple go across their community in a tricycle, two girls and one boy lying asleep in the back trunk. One girl had short hair, a red dress, and only one arm — that must be Luo!

“The police — Bring me to the police, I need to talk to them!” I yelled desperately, even though sand had coated my throat and nostrils.

“Qin’s the only one on duty today. And he already said he can’t help,” A worker told me. He turned aside, and behind him cowered a slim man dressed in a worn police uniform.

“Three children — missing — including my sister — and the police can’t help?” I gloomily approached the cringing policeman.

“No, man. The heatwave was devastating. No one was outside,” squeaked Qin. “Not even us. The tricycle had no tracking chip installed in it, so we can’t track it either. If it’s still in the community, then sure, we can find its location in the security camera, but once it’s out of the gate of our community, it’s just — *Whoosh* — gone. Security cameras would probably be the best bet to locate them.”

“Fuck — then check the security camera!”

The security camera showed that the tricycle drove out the community gate and went into the thick sandstorm in early afternoon. There is no way for us to know where they were heading, because there are no official roads built in the vast desert.

“They could have gone to the Metropolis,” Qin suggested. “That’s the place abducted children are most likely to be brought to in recent months.”

The Metropolis! How on Earth would I find Luo in the Metropolis? How would I even get there?!

Oh, Great Forest Spirit, why did such fate befall me?

Why?

Why?

Why?



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## October 8th

When I stumbled back to my house it was already daybreak. The blazing sun rays pierced through my vision. The sky was rarely clear, but I felt like I had never hated the sun so intensely, as intensely as I used to love it.

The whole community had been up all night, looking for ways to contact neighboring communities asking for Luo's whereabouts. No luck.

Ma was sitting with Weng when I approached her in the living room. It was the first time in many years I had seen Ma cry. Her tears ran down her cheeks as if this clear liquid had become so abundant in her body, her cheeks red from emotions and heat. I heard Da weeping in his study. As if I have been infected by some sort of crying disease, I threw myself into Ma's arms and burst into tears.

I realized that crying is a catharsis. We had been holding back our tears for so long. Too long. We didn't cry when our community was hit by gigantic heatwaves; we didn't cry when sandstorms raided past our community; we didn't cry when we were parched from thirst because we gave our water to the forest. But stress builds up like tiny droplets of water into a shallow bowl, and when Luo disappeared, the bowl was too full to hold anything back. The water inside poured out as a flood, ripping apart our bodies and souls. Oh, Great Forest Spirit, as I look in your direction, your leaves are tarnished by the yellow sand. No wind nor heat could make you dance. You look tortured just like I am. Please, please help me find my sister.

Other community members are at our door now. I need to meet them.

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## October 9th

Some updates — I haven't slept for 2 nights, but I have calmed down.

Thankfully, with the blessings of the Great Forest Spirit, Weng has brought me a little hope. She contacted two friends from the neighboring community, and one of them told her they're willing to sneak me into the Metropolis with their empty water tanks. After entering the Metropolis, I'll try to look for Luo.

I shall set off tomorrow morning.

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October 10th

Ma dragged me out of bed when it was still dark outside. She had put on her finest outfit, her hands holding her precious incense sticks. Behind her, I saw everyone holding incense like her.

“We’re here to greet you farewell. We’ll pray for you — all of us — in front of the Great Forest Spirit. I know you’re young, and going to places beyond our community is a huge challenge.” Ma murmured as she knelt down before me, placing three incense sticks in my palm, “I just want to let you know how much I respect you and how proud I am to be your mother. I’m sorry that I can’t go with you — it’s better for your young body to sprint across the Metropolis than dragging with you my old and worn limbs.”

They took me to the forest, and together we performed the ritual. We rested our knees on the soft sand and placed the incense on the forest ground. Everything was done in silence. Then, Weng and two other men drove me to the neighboring community, where Weng’s friends awaited me.

Before I boarded the truck, Qin approached me, looking slightly concerned.

“Hey, is it that important to save those three... children?” Qin asked me carefully.

“Why ask?” Words squeezed out between my teeth. “They are three lives, and among them is my sister.”

“Well, you know, resources have been running scarce, and these little ones would, you know, grow up and become big ones. And the big ones, well, they consume even more resources and produce more little ones. How are you going to feed so many mouths with limited resources? I already heard that you guys have been watering Ren’s donation with your own precious water supply — how long is that ever going to last?”

“That’s none of your business. We have our faith in the Great Forest Spirit, and I don’t care if you believe in Her or not. If it weren’t because of Her, my sister wouldn’t have survived.”

“Ah, your sister — I heard — is she the girl with only one arm?”

“...Yes.”

“Then there’s even less reason to save her — a handicapped girl? Excuse me if I sound direct and offensive, but she’s not going to contribute much to the workforce in your community even when she grows up. Be rational! It’s a rough time for everyone. But think about yourself — you’re physically able and healthy, and you’ll continue to contribute to your community’s workforce until you retire. If you were arrested for stealing into the Metropolis — worst-case scenario — you’ll probably be shot, and your community will lose a whole able person!” His waved his hands violently. “Think about yourself, you know. Think about your community.”

I was silence for a moment. Indeed, he was right. Luo's disability has haunted our family since the accident. We are well-informed of the newly implemented regulation for working districts. We know that, sooner or later, unless Luo can find a way to contribute to our community's production chain, then by law, she will have to be eliminated from our community's food and water supply list, no matter how much our community cares about her. But she's my sister. I've been an incompetent sibling for so long, but I'm willing to do anything for her to prove my love.

"If that couple — I mean, those kidnappers — really brought your sister to the Metropolis," Qin continued, "she may be better off there. At least they've got plenty of *jobs* for your one-armed sister to keep her alive..."

Before Qin could finish his words, Weng slapped him in the face.

"Go find your sister," she told me, "and be safe. We will be here waiting for your return."

I curled up in the water tank and the truck drove off. It will probably be a while before I could write in the journal again. Oh Great Forest Spirit, please send me forth to Luo.

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October 30th

I'm back.

I don't even know how I got back home — I only know I snuck into a dark rocking vehicle. My brain has been too preoccupied with my experience at the Metropolis, and I just want to go home, to see Ma and Da —

— And bring them the despairing news.

Mr. Ren has been convicted of earning money from illegal origins: his fortune comes from trafficking children. He is responsible for the thousands of the child abduction cases that have occurred in the past year — including the abduction of Luo. That's why he suddenly became so affluent. That's why he donated trees to our community — to cover up his sins and to buy more business opportunities for his disgusting deeds.

Ma was waiting for me in the living room, wrinkles crumpling her withered face. Behind her, the furniture had been damaged. Broken table legs and shattered bowls were scattered on the floor. When she saw me, she raced up and held me tightly in her arms. We both cried until we were about to faint.

“I couldn’t find Luo, I’m sorry.” I finally opened my mouth, words sliding out from my dry tongue like the noise of scratching sandpaper. “I know what Mr. Ren has done. The Great Forest Spirit has been a lie since the beginning. I don’t know if Luo survived or...”

“She didn’t.” Ma whispered.

My body froze.

“She didn’t.” Ma repeated, her whole body trembling. “I just saw the news tonight. You were lucky to be on the way back home so you didn’t see her last face on TV. Our community burned paper money for her earlier this evening at the Forest shrines. My dear, dear daughter Ah Luo... I shouldn’t have spent so little time with her — and with you, Ah Xian. I’m such an irresponsible mother. Oh, Ah Luo, may you rest in peace.”

The last five words from her mouth were like a small yet deadly spark that ignited the dried wooden logs inside my head. My world became white. Then yellow, then purple, then pitch black. In the darkness I saw a cluster of green, as if I was standing in front of the Great Forest Spirit, as insignificant and helpless as a grain of sand. Then all of a sudden, Luo’s words popped into my head — “I love you, Xian.” Her words became a fold of fire ascending from the dark sky, lighting up the whole world with its powerful heat. My vision was on fire.

The forest was on fire.

My faith was on fire.

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## October 31th

The forest is on fire. Because of the extreme heatwave, and possibly the burnt paper money. Our whole community watch in despair as the banyan trees are gradually devoured by the blazing flame, the trees’ skeletons standing hopelessly against the twilight before dawn. It is as if the true Forest Spirit finally revealed herself, rebirthing in the purifying fire that destroyed the product of humanity’s greed, stupidity, and blindness.

Goodbye, the forest composed of trees that are biologically unable to survive this landscape and weather.

Goodbye, the forest that drained our water resource.

Goodbye, the forest that mocked us with fake faith and gave us false hope.

Goodbye, the forest built upon the torment of thousands of children victims.

Goodbye.