

It was a time after all the trees had withered. After all the grass in the lawns, soccer fields, and children's parks had shrivelled, their brittle blades leached of colour, curling back down into the dry grey earth. After the last of the flowerpots had vanished from the balconies, and the great swathes of wheat, corn, and potatoes that had once patchworked the country had been relocated and reinvented as genetically perfect specimens in laboratory jars.

It was then—in this time—that I, in an improbable turn of good fortune, happened upon a ticket to visit THE LAST GREAT CRAB APPLE TREE. Even among the skilled class, such an experience would have been a luxury. As it was, for someone like me, a third-generation member of the unskilled masses, it was practically unheard of. An aberration. A blip. If I'd had anyone to tell, they would have been dumbstruck.

The ticket was from a lottery—the type corporations sometimes ran in an undisguised ploy to harvest what still remained private of our personal data. Although, the way I saw it, what difference did one more survey make? They already owned me. About six months prior, I had gone through a phase where I'd entered every lottery I came across and had thus long forgotten about the particulars of any one event when I got the good news about my winning entry. But there it was, one Monday afternoon when I peeled off my latex gloves and flicked on my phone during my lunch break.

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU ARE A WINNER! ONE ADULT PASS TO VISIT THE LAST GREAT CRAB APPLE TREE.

In those years, I was renting a single's flat in the suburbs of the suburbs of city, so I was closer to the recovery land than most people but even then, it was still thirty-five minutes out on the speed train. From the station where I disembarked, you couldn't see the tree right away, like I'd imagined. To the west, there was a view of the factories and to the east, there was a big naked hill with—as seen from my vantage point on the platform—a thumbnail-sized glass structure atop it. Even with the veil of smog draped low in the sky, it appeared to us like a beacon of molten silver.

To get up the hill, a wooden sign directed visitors to a winding path of rough hewn stones sunk into the dirt. Rustic. It wasn't until I had to stop and wait for the couple in front of me snapping a selfie that I realized I was the only one in the crowd of visitors who'd come alone. Not that it bothered me. There was only one person I would have considered bringing here in the first place, and she had been dead for almost fifteen years. Besides that, on second thought, I wouldn't have wanted her with me. Not to see this. It was funny how I got to thinking of her protectively like that sometimes—like a sort of a parent in reverse. I just knew it would have broken my mother's heart.

But I didn't mean to be a downer. I felt my lips crack dryly as I forced a smile and took another step. It really was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I had seen the videos online of men crumpling to their knees in reverence at the sight of the small, gnarled tree, of women weeping with joy as they bit into one of the rarified green and red fruits, juice, like tears, running down their chins. People said we didn't get authentic taste like that anymore. They swore it changed their lives. That was, in fact, the official slogan of THE LAST GREAT CRAB APPLE TREE. *It will change your life.*

Everyone was red-faced and sweaty by the time we reached the top of the hill. Coming from the city as we had, none of us were accustomed to the raw rays of the sun and unfiltered air, and, judging by the soft pale look of my companions, most spent little time away from the glow of computer screens. At least I knew what it meant to be on my feet all day.

We then came to a low stone wall, the rocks artfully weathered and mottled with fake moss. At the gate, we were greeted by a woman in old-timey navy-blue overalls. She informed us that any videos or photographs taken within the premises would be subject to an approval process and could be revoked by THE LAST GREAT CRAB APPLE TREE Co. at any time, without notice. She collected our fingerprints on a slim tablet as we passed through.

Having crossed the wall, we were at last close enough to glimpse our own bedraggled silhouettes in the walls of the glass building. Without being told, we took our place at the back of the long line snaking to the front door, the childish excitement that had been palpable at the base of the hill now having given way to a stoic resignation. The guards admitted only one visitor into the building at a time, and so the rest of us had nothing to do but squint in the sun as the foremost guest approached the entrance and was swallowed by the sliding double doors in a single flawless *whoosh*.

After ninety minutes, I was at the front of the line. A guard beckoned me forward with a crooked finger. Behind the glass doors, I found there was a smaller wooden door. As this door thudded shut behind me, a cool earthy breeze tickled my nose. My eyes struggled to adjust to the dim interior.

Except that it didn't feel like an interior. Although I could see from the edges of the dirt floor that the room was a perfect square, only about twelve feet in width and length, it felt much bigger. From inside, the walls did not look like glass at all, but rather the edge of a green forest at sunset. I did not pause long to investigate this, however, as a shaft of golden sun coming from above refocused my attention to the middle of the room.

I was not expecting to feel much of anything. I considered myself more jaded, or perhaps, just less ignorant about the state of the world than those waiting outside. But at the sight of those young, tenderly green leaves, the thin branches bent down heavy with fruit, a hundred dazzling orbs of speckled red and green, my throat caught. The tree was shorter than I had imagined, and yet, bigger. It seemed, in fact, to exist beyond the primitive parameters of space and time. A shiver ran down my spine, and I had to blink to stop the tears hot in the corners of my eyes.

In my thirty-one years of life, I had never seen such beauty.

I stepped closer, coming to stand as close as I could get without crossing the small wire fence encircling the trunk. My right arm reached forward almost involuntarily.

A strong pair of hands clamped around my shoulders. Out from the shadows, a guard had materialized. He yanked me back from the tree roughly.

"No touching. No picking—"

"I'm sorry—"

"No tasting. No licking," he said, looking altogether unfazed. I hadn't been the first to try that. "Your time is almost up. Would you like a photo?"

I nodded, wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, and shrugged off my dusty backpack to retrieve my phone. The guard's expression changed as he accepted the device I was handing him.

His eyes widened, and the weight of his heavy brow seemed to lift. "A generation 5X?" He looked at me and laughed, a surprisingly lighthearted sound. "You can't even get these on the black market."

I grinned. "It's a dinosaur. I know."

The guard was silent for a moment. "You're one of the lottery winners."

I just smiled, and he took the photo. I returned my phone to my backpack, and as I turned to leave, he stopped me to close the zipper I'd left.

"Thanks. Not that I have much of value to steal," I said jokingly, but he wasn't smiling anymore.

"My brother had the same phone. It's impossible for people like us to afford new ones," he said, and then he pointed to the exit with a thick, calloused finger, and I walked out.

Somehow it had got around at work that I had been to THE LAST GREAT CRAB APPLE TREE. At lunch break, everyone wanted to see the photo, so I passed my phone around. There were oohs and ahhs as they peered at the screen. The plants we spent our waking hours tending were Frankenstein creations, engineered to maximize produce and minimize expenditures on leaves, branches, and roots. We only knew trees from paintings and public sculptures in the nice neighbourhoods we didn't live in.

"So. Did it change your life?" Dee asked, tossing me back my phone.

I glanced down at the photo on the screen, which was dark except for where the flash had lit up the room in the middle, washing out my face and the top half of the tree. It was a rubbish photo. You couldn't even see green on the leaves.

I looked up and saw no one had resumed their eating yet. They were waiting.

"No. Of course not."

They looked relieved. We all laughed.

It was in the bottom of my backpack.

I didn't take it out until I had returned from my life-changing excursion that day, and was back, standing in the quiet of my own claustrophobically tiny apartment with the door locked, though, even before I saw it, I knew it was there.

A bruised crab apple no bigger than the size of a child's fist, with a long, lopsided stem. Feeling a detached sense of awe, I set it on the counter, and then went to my bedroom to fetch a small plastic box. I put the apple inside and shoved it to the back of my kitchen cupboard, behind some bowls, and closed the door.

I knew he meant for me to sell it—and to do it as quickly as possible. I knew I could get a lot for it on the black market, and I spent a week browsing the web, researching potential buyers. I even made an anonymous account on Old World Goods and contacted an artist who said he'd pay twenty times my annual salary for the apple, but then I didn't reply to his message about a pick-up location. I deleted my account.

Instead, every day, at work, I found myself counting down the hours until I could return to my kitchen and take the small, homely fruit out from its hiding place. I stroked its smooth skin. I held it up to my nose and inhaled its scent. I licked it. I touched it to my lips but did not bite it.

I wondered what my mother would have said. I figured she'd tell me to sell it, too. She was a practical woman—I wouldn't have made it past childhood if she hadn't been.

But I couldn't. I knew I'd rather keep the apple until it turned soft and dimpled, until it rotted from the inside out than sell it to someone in the skilled class.

For a month, I delayed, and then, one particularly hot evening, I was sitting on my kitchen stool pressing a chilled unopened can of soda to my sweaty neck, when I decided, rather abruptly, that it was time.

I got up, opened the cupboard, and calmly took down the box. Removed the apple. A green face blushing a furious, patchy red. As stunningly imperfect as the day I'd found it.

I put the apple to my lips and champed down hard with my teeth.

I knew. I knew. But I had to prove it myself.

I spit out a mouthful of foamy plastic as tears, like sweet apple juice, dribbled down my chin.