

Name: _____ Class: _____

Autumntime

By Anthony Lentini
1999

This story is set in a future where technology meets almost all human needs. As you read, take notes on how the narrator compares natural and artificial objects.

[1] I saw my first tree today. Dad finally broke down and took us to East Boston Urban Center after Mom had been harping¹ on it for the past two weeks. I think he was glad we went after all, because he was smiling quietly all during the trip back.

Dad used to tell me stories about the trees that still existed when he was a boy. There weren't very many even then, with the urbanization² program in full swing, but most people had seen at least one tree by the time they started school. It wasn't like nowadays, at any rate. Oh, I've seen the plastic trees; practically every street has a few of them. But you can tell the plastic ones are artificial just from looking at pictures in the microdot library.



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This morning when we got up, the house was all excited. Mom dialed a light breakfast of toast and synthetic³ milk so that we wouldn't waste time eating. And when finished, the three of us took an elevator-bus up to the fourth level, where we caught the air track to Brooklyn. From there we took another elevator-bus down to main level, rode the monorail to Intercity Subway Station 27, and caught the second sublevel AA train to Boston. Our expectations were so high that Dad and I didn't mind it when Mom told us again how the tree was discovered.

The O'Brien home was one of the few examples of old-style wooden structures that hadn't been demolished in Boston's urban-renewal campaign at the turn of the century. The family had been able to avoid this because of its wealth and political influence, and the house was passed on through several generations to the present. Old man O'Brien had no heirs, so when he died the family home went up for auction, and the Urban Center bought it. When local officials arrived for an appraisal,⁴ they discovered that the house had a back yard, which is forbidden by zoning restrictions.

1. **Harp (verb):** to talk persistently about a particular topic
2. **Urbanization (noun):** the process by which cities are formed and become larger as more and more people begin living and working in central areas
3. produced artificially
4. an estimate of what a home is worth

- [5] In the yard was a live tree — an oke was what Mom called it. When the news of the tree’s discovery leaked out, quite a few sightseers stopped by to have a look at it, and the local government, realizing the money-making potential, began charging admission and advertising the place. By now it had become a favorite spot for school field trips and family excursions such as ours.

When we arrived in main Boston we rode the elevator-bus up to ground level and caught a monorail out to East Boston Urban Center 3. An air-cush taxi took us the rest of the way to the residence.

The home itself was unimpressive. It had none of the marble gloss or steely sheen of modern buildings, but was rather a dull white color, with the paint peeling in places. Dad paid the admission fee, and we spent the next 15 minutes on a dull guided tour of the house. The rooms were roped off to keep people from touching anything, but there were no windows facing the illegal back yard anyway, so it really didn’t matter that I couldn’t enter the rooms on that side.

My mind was on the tree, and I thought the inside tour would never end, but soon we were walking through a doorway hidden in one of the bookshelves and into the back yard. The yard was big — at least 10 by 20 feet — and I was surprised to find real grass growing on the sides of the concrete walkway built for tourists. The grass didn’t distract me for long, however, because I just couldn’t help noticing the tree!

It was located at one end of the yard, and there was a mesh fence around it for protection. It was similar in form to the plastic trees I’d seen, but there was much more to it than that. You could see details more intricate⁵ than in any artificial plant. And it was alive. Long ago someone had carved their initials in the bark, and you could see where the wound had healed. But best of all was the smell. It was a fresh, living odor, alien to the antiseptic⁶ world outside with all its metal, plastic, and glass. I wanted to touch the bark, but the fence prevented me from doing so. Mom and Dad just breathed deeply and stared up with smiles on their faces. The three of us stood there for a moment, and then the tour guide told us to make room for the next group. I didn’t want to go — in fact, I felt almost like crying.

- [10] On the way back home, Mom and Dad were silent, and I read through one of the brochures the guide had passed out. When I came to the part that said the O’Brien home would be open only for the rest of this year, I was sad. They intend to tear down the place to make room for some kind of insurance building, and the tree will have to go, too.

For the rest of the trip, I just sat still, fingering the object in my pocket which I had picked off the grass in the O’Brien’s back yard. I think it’s called an acorn.

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5. **Intricate (adjective):** detailed

6. **Antiseptic (adjective):** extremely neat, sterile, and clean, occasionally to the point of harshness

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies a theme of this story?
 - A. Technological progress and urbanization come at a cost.
 - B. Nature is resilient and humans should not worry about damaging the environment.
 - C. Humans value preserving nature over technological progress.
 - D. The benefits of human progress outweigh its negative consequences.

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Mom dialed a light breakfast of toast and synthetic milk so that we wouldn't waste time eating." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "When the news of the tree's discovery leaked out, quite a few sightseers stopped by to have a look at it, and the local government, realizing the money-making potential, began charging admission and advertising the place." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "It had none of the marble gloss or steely sheen of modern buildings, but was rather a dull white color, with the paint peeling in places." (Paragraph 7)
 - D. "They intend to tear down the place to make room for some kind of insurance building, and the tree will have to go, too." (Paragraph 10)

3. Re-read the following excerpt from Paragraph 9: "But best of all was the smell. It was a fresh, living odor, alien to the antiseptic world outside with all its metal, plastic, and glass. I wanted to touch the bark, but the fence prevented me from doing so." What does this quote reveal about the narrator's attitude towards nature?
 - A. The narrator is excited by nature, but not deeply affected by it.
 - B. The narrator is captivated by the beauty of nature.
 - C. The narrator prefers the world of steel and glass to the world of nature.
 - D. The narrator is fearful of nature and tries to keep their distance.

4. How does visiting the tree affect the narrator?
 - A. They feel excited by the chance to see the tree again in the future.
 - B. They are moved by the tree, and upset when they learn it will be cut down.
 - C. They are angry that there are not more real trees in their city.
 - D. They ignore their parents when they see that they do not care about the tree.

5. How is the narrator's point of view towards the tree different from their parents' point of view?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Imagine you were in narrator's situation. What would you do with the acorn? Why?
2. In your opinion, what are the costs and benefits of preserving nature for future generations?
3. In your opinion, how close are we to living in a world that resembles the setting of this story? Explain your reasoning.
4. In the context of the text, what should the future look like? Would you prefer to live in a futuristic world of steel and glass like the narrator, or a more natural world where we have fewer cities and more green spaces? Explain your thinking.