

RHETT DAVIS

ECONOMY OF MOVEMENT

UNLIKE HIS GRANDPARENTS, who had planted themselves in his mother's backyard when he was a boy, Rourke had never wanted to be a tree. He'd left home as soon as he was old enough and travelled to any city but the leafy, waterlogged one in which he'd grown up. The act of movement was what thrilled him, the speed of it and the blurring of places. The idea that one had to settle for a single patch of dirt made him feel sick.

His grandfather had explained, as he and his grandmother took root, that they wanted peace. They wanted to dig deep, to nestle in their warm, moist patch of earth for years, perhaps centuries, and to feel the sun in the same place each morning. They were tired of cars, planes, electricity and television. They were tired of listening, and they were tired of movement.

"We want to watch the world pass," his grandfather had said, his eyes distant and his skin already rough, "and not be concerned with its passing."

Rourke had watched them change with horror. Their eyes had gradually closed over and their humanity was slowly lost, until one day his pale mother announced that they were gone, and in their place were two oaks, still except for the sway of their branches.

From his basement window Rourke looked up at the maple that had, many years ago, planted itself in the middle of the street, forcing the city to redirect the road around it. The tree was gnarled and bent, a stubborn and cantankerous old thing. It had knots the size of his head. The asphalt was cracking where the roots were breaking free. It occurred to him that though the tree might not want to move, neither did it want to be contained.

He drank coffee from a cup he'd stolen from a cafe in Rome. The beans were Mexican, the roaster Nova Scotian, the sugar refined in Quebec from Queensland sugar cane. It tasted like nothing. Perhaps, he thought, smoking had finally ruined his taste buds. He finished, rinsed the cup and drove to work.

Rourke managed a branch of a small travel company that organised tours for adventurous young people who were not adventurous enough to

travel by themselves. Their slogan, “Why bother?” was placed in advertisements over a high-contrast monochrome photograph of young people arguing with a train conductor, frantically looking at maps or being stalked by shadowy assailants. Juxtaposed was a vibrant colour image of better-looking young people having a better time in the same place. This photograph was supplemented with the phrase, “Go Travelerex!” It was a dated campaign.

Traffic was slow that morning. A car had slammed into an old alder. The car was a write-off and the tree was in a bad way. Dark blood poured down its bark from a deep splintered wound. He could see the tree’s writhing innards. Tree surgeons were frantically patching it up. Paramedics were talking to a woman who was laid out on a stretcher. He rubbernecked. He wondered how old the tree was. Whom it had known, or who had known it. The cars behind him honked, and a policeman waved him through.

The glass elevator passed from the parking garage through to the sunlit atrium. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust. The atrium was huge and usually deserted, aside from a few fountains and some greenery. The ride from the garage to the office was the most pleasant part of his day. He could no longer hear the beating of the city’s heart, its insistent screech. He ascended quietly and smoothly. Below, a security guard argued with a man who had chosen a bright spot in the middle of the atrium to plant himself. Another one, he thought. Couldn’t they find somewhere else? But he rose, and they grew smaller, and smaller still.

Ding, went the elevator.

He’d been back home for two years. His father had been sick and his mother unable to take care of him alone. He’d spent a year living with them—helping, cooking, arguing. His father improved, although Rourke wondered if he had somehow faked it in order to extricate his son from the house.

He moved into a basement apartment. He didn’t intend to spend much time there, but soon found himself exhausted by the idea of leaving it. All of the places he’d been and the people he’d met were distant, untouchable memories. Unreal photographs, taken by a different person. He couldn’t imagine what had driven him to want to move so far and so quickly, as if movement was the purpose to life. What had caused him, for instance, to end up in an Italian’s bedroom one morning and a Hungarian hostel the next? Why had he not stayed in that bedroom?

He pinned a map to his living-room wall and spent an evening marking all of the places he'd been. When he finished, his bottle of wine was empty and the map filled with red pins. He'd explored mountains, caves, grottoes, beaches, deserts, ravines and forests. He'd crossed paths with so many people, sharing a tiny segment of their lives and then losing them. He'd been convinced that his was the righteous path. That those who never left their home province, like his parents, his grandparents, were dull and simple. That with every new destination he was adding a new aspect to his soul. With every new sight he felt himself a step closer to a secret understanding of the world. But when he looked at the map the pins seemed random, as if they tracked the movement of a drugged spider.

At mid-morning there was a knock on his office door. Mae, one of his travel consultants, peered in. "Hey, I'm going down to the coffee shop for a few hours to work. Okay?"

"Sure. Can I get that itinerary by close of business though?"

"I'll get it to you by two. Thanks."

His phone buzzed with a text message from Caroline. *Will need a drink tonight. You in?*

He looked at the status of the tours they were currently operating. All were going smoothly, aside from a complication with taxi cabs in Genoa. Each of the fourteen tours had a green light against it on his executive dashboard. Nothing was amber or red. In Tours, right now, a group was "spontaneously" being seated at a pre-selected restaurant in one of the town squares. In Oslo, it was a free evening. In Reykjavik, a bus was about to deliver a group to its hotel after a day looking at black sand, black rock, waterfalls, volcanoes, green fields and glaciers. The travellers would compare photos over dinner at a local restaurant. Someone would excitedly mention Björk, if they were old enough. They probably weren't old enough.

He texted back, *I'm in*, and went outside for a smoke.

The rooftop courtyard had a sprawling view of the city's glittering skyline, the snow-capped mountains and the sea surrounding it. Over the water a Chinese container ship unloaded its cargo. Queued behind were others, each bearing its gifts from across the globe. In the sky sea planes circled. Lines upon lines intersecting.

Rourke finished his cigarette and noticed a man on the other side of the courtyard. His clothes were stained and worn, his beard untended, and

his skin red. The man was simply standing, arms at his side, eyes closed, facing the weak sun. Rourke felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. It was strange that he'd been able to elude security.

"Hey," Rourke said. "You can't do that up here."

"Do what?" the man answered, without opening his eyes.

"Plant yourself."

"I'm just enjoying the sun." His voice was so deep it was difficult for Rourke to hear.

"Yeah, I'm sure, but you can't do it here."

"Why not?"

Rourke frowned. He could just call security. "Aside from the problem that there's no earth to root into, security won't allow it."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm enjoying the sun, like I said."

Rourke put his hands up. "Whatever." He walked to the door, stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "I'm going to call security."

The man didn't respond. His face beamed in the sunlight.

Rourke went back to his desk, picked up the telephone receiver and put it back down. He looked at the computer screen. Nothing to worry about. He told the receptionist he was going home for the day and left, into the glass elevator, down through the atrium into the basement and the parking garage.

Ding, went the elevator.

His parents lived in the east. He didn't like driving east. The east was full of trees that had planted themselves wherever they had felt like. There were always new ones too, people who had decided simply to stop, stand still, and never move again. The city did its best to maintain order, but it was difficult. The roads were crooked and the pavements filled with cracks. It resembled a forest in some places. Branches reached out from broken windows. Trees tore through brick, ripped down walls—slowly and relentlessly. Down alleyways hundreds of skinny, addled birch trees could be seen clambering for a single slant of light. They grew behind garbage cans, twisted between telephone poles and electrical cables, their spindly branches obscuring the street art from view.

The car rattled as Rourke drove along the winding road. People gathered beneath the trees, protecting themselves from the rain that had started. The lights changed red unexpectedly and Rourke slammed on the

brakes. The car slid along the mossy slime that covered the asphalt, coming to a stop just before hitting the trunk of a tree growing in the middle of the intersection. His heart thumped.

Why, he thought, couldn't they find somewhere else to go? Across the water were mountains, forests and valleys. Why not go there? What right did any of them have to demand a patch of earth wherever they wanted? What right did they have to give up and make the rest of the world carry on, yet be constantly reminded of them?

He found his mother lying at the base of one of the oaks in their backyard. She was curled up and nestled between two exposed roots. She sat up when she saw him and wiped away tears. He looked up at the oak and patted it with one hand. A bright, multicoloured tube of yarn had been knitted around its trunk. He gave his mother his other hand, helped her up and hugged her. She was warm and smelled of moisturising cream.

"Winter sweaters again?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It's getting cold out."

"They both getting one?"

"Of course. Drink?"

"Yup." They started to walk inside. He stopped at the door. "You alright, Mum?"

"I just miss them, Rourke." She smiled through bloodshot eyes. "Come on. Tell your father to make coffee. He's been sitting in that chair for the past three days, posting angry messages to websites. He'll be sprouting roots from his ass if he's not careful."

They sat at the kitchen table looking out at the trees. It had always seemed to Rourke that his grandparents had planted themselves too close together. He'd had several arguments with his mother, claiming that they would eventually fight for sunlight, nutrients and water, and she countering that they'd wither and die before one tried to kill the other.

He sipped his coffee. His mother put her hand on his. "So. How're you settling in over there?"

"I've been there a year, Mum."

"I know. You found anything, anyone special?"

His father rolled his eyes. "What your mother really wants to know, Rourke, is whether you're about to leave her. Again."

He thought about Caroline, then shook his head. "No one special. And I've already been everywhere."

“Siberia. You been to Siberia yet?” his father asked.

“Yeah. I sent you a postcard from Lake Baikal, remember? The deepest freshwater lake in the world? The water is supposed to add years to your life, and I went for a swim and it was so cold it felt like I lost ten.”

His father shrugged and coughed.

“It’s over there on the fridge, Dad.”

“Oh, right, right. That place.” He coughed again, harder than before.

Rourke and his mother exchanged a look.

“I can see you two looking at each other. It’s nothing, just the spores from the mold on all these friggin’ trees.” He hastily added, “Not those trees, of course,” nodding to his wife’s parents.

Twelve months ago, when his father had felt certain of death, Rourke had taken his hand and said, “Have you thought about the other way, Dad?”

His father had glared at him and croaked, “No way in hell am I going to become one of those freaks. You’ll bury me in the ground and I’ll rot there like a goddamn human is supposed to.”

“But you’d live, Dad.”

“For what? For you? You want me sitting in the ground living so that you and your brother don’t feel so bad about it? Listen, buddy, when I’m dead, I’m dead. Gone. And you’re all going to have to deal with it. Like every goddamn normal human being. I’m not going to do what your grandparents did to your mother, keeping her in some never-ending state of grief. Got it?”

Rourke had nodded.

“You know that your shithead brother is going to do another PhD?” His father’s clothes were too big for him now, and gathered around his frame like a blanket.

“Really?”

“Yep. I said to him, ‘What do you want to do another one for, Brent?’ and he says, ‘I’ve found an area of research I’m passionate about and you don’t understand and also can I have another loan?’ Asshole.”

His mother tutted. “Harvey. I don’t know, Rourke. It’s like the two of you just can’t sit still.”

“Why would we want to? Look at what we have to look forward to,” Rourke retorted, nodding to the trees in the backyard. His father chuckled and his mother turned away.

“Is it death? Or is it an attempt at another life?” Caroline asked him.

“That’s a question.” He slid his beer glass around in the pool of condensation that had settled on the table.

“I’m serious. We always talk about how it’s people giving up, dying. Trying to escape the world, you know? I see it all the time at work. People just standing there. Waiting for the change. And the manual says you’ve got to try to snap them out of it. Get them back in the game, back into reality. But their faces, Rourke. They look serene. They radiate life.”

“It can’t be much of a life, standing there, unable to move or sense anything.” He emptied the glass.

She frowned and shook her head. “It’s just a different kind of life.”

“We have legs and arms and muscles and lungs and a heart for a reason.”

She sipped her beer. “What reason, other than to be alive?”

“You thinking of joining them?”

“No. I just don’t think it’s as crazy an idea as some people think. I think maybe it’s beautiful. That your grandparents chose to do a beautiful thing.”

“Tell that to my mother who has to stare out her backyard at their arboreal graves every morning.” He downed the rest of his beer and asked the waitress for another. “It was awful watching it take over. It was grotesque.”

“It’s not something that can just take over, Rourke. You have to give yourself to it.”

“I know that.” The waitress handed him another beer. He stared blankly at the hockey game on the television over the bar. “The change wasn’t the thing that really freaked me out.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was the fact that one day I might want to do the same thing.”

She studied him for a few seconds longer than he would have liked. He pretended to watch the hockey.

He was hungover the next morning and went out early for a cigarette. He was surprised to see the man from the previous day standing in exactly the same position, the beatific smile still beaming from his face.

Rourke lit up. “Hey.” He heard the whisper, barely audible. He turned. The man was looking at him. “Hey.”

“Still here, then?”

“Can I have a drag?”

Rourke hesitated. "Uh. Sure." He went over to the man and handed him the cigarette. "You can have it."

The man grabbed it eagerly. "Thanks, man."

He looked down at the man's feet. Tendrils of roots had started to form, fixing him in place. The man could probably break free, if he wanted to. But not for much longer. "You sure you're supposed to be smoking? In your condition?"

The man laughed. "Probably not, man. One last cigarette though. A dying man's last wish."

"You're not really dying though, are you?"

The man's eyes opened slowly and he regarded Rourke for the first time. He blew out and coughed. "This tastes like shit." He threw the cigarette down, a little too close to one of his roots. The wind started to blow the cigarette back. "Oh fuck, hey, could you just stomp that thing out for me?" Rourke did as he was asked. "Thanks."

Rourke lit another cigarette and turned back to the railing, to the city sprung from the earth and the mountains and the forests beyond it. The city seemed like a castle under siege. The trees in the roads, the cracks in the pavement and the weeds in the lawns. The mold in the air conditioning, the pollen in the nostrils and the spores in the lungs. The city was temporary. An extraordinary, dizzying moment.

He stubbed out his cigarette and stood away from the railing, facing the water and mountains. He gave himself plenty of room. He lay his arms at his side and closed his eyes. He heard the traffic below, the rushing wind and the honking of horns. The murmuring of a city. The grumbling of the earth. His mind raced. His mother, his brother, his father. His car needed servicing. Caroline seemed to like him. The tour group in Ulaanbaatar wanted to stay in separate hotels following a catastrophic argument in Sukhbaatar Square.

He tried to concentrate on the light from the sun, but the day was grey. Would it even work? Could he make it happen? Could he give himself to it completely, like the others, or would something within him, something animal, something manic and muscular and gasping, prevent it? He smelled coffee. He wanted coffee. He tried to focus on a puddle at his feet, but it felt cold and damp, and he longed to be inside, warm and dry. He felt the breeze rustling his hair, and wondered what it would feel like to have gently swaying branches bursting with leaves. How peaceful it would be to be still. To be perfectly, utterly, unendingly, still.

To watch the world pass, and not be concerned with its passing.

“Hey, you’re not going to be able to do that up here, buddy.” He turned to see Mae addressing the man on the other side of the rooftop. She bent down and flicked at the roots that were beginning to form at his feet. “Look, they’ve got nowhere to go. There’s no sustenance for them. You’ll be here for six months then you’ll wilt and die. That what you want?”

The man opened his eyes. “Trees are adaptable. Trees grow on the sides of mountains.”

“Yes, but mountains have dirt and a good supply of water. You’d do better on the side of the road. Or at the park.”

“I want a spot for myself. I don’t want to be competing for the last drop of rain or shaft of sunlight.”

“Okay, whatever. But if you want your treedom to last you’d do better somewhere else.” She spied Rourke. “Hey, boss.” She lit a cigarette. “Mind if I join you?”

He coughed and mumbled, “Not at all.” He moved his heavy bones to the railing next to her.

“I’ve sorted out the Ulaanbaatar group.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“I don’t know why people do that to themselves. Look at all this. Why would you want to give all this up?”

A Norwegian cruise ship was leaving the harbour through a gauntlet of anchored freighters. Seaplanes darted around the sky. Below, the cars, the people, and the noise.

It was all dwarfed by the snow-capped mountains, covered in spruce, fir, pine and cedar. Hundreds of thousands of trees—perhaps millions, billions—that he did not know and could not name.

“I think they might be the lucky ones,” he said.

Mae smiled. They finished smoking and turned back to the office. The man was gone.