

Futures

The family tree

Planting for the future. By Russell Nichols

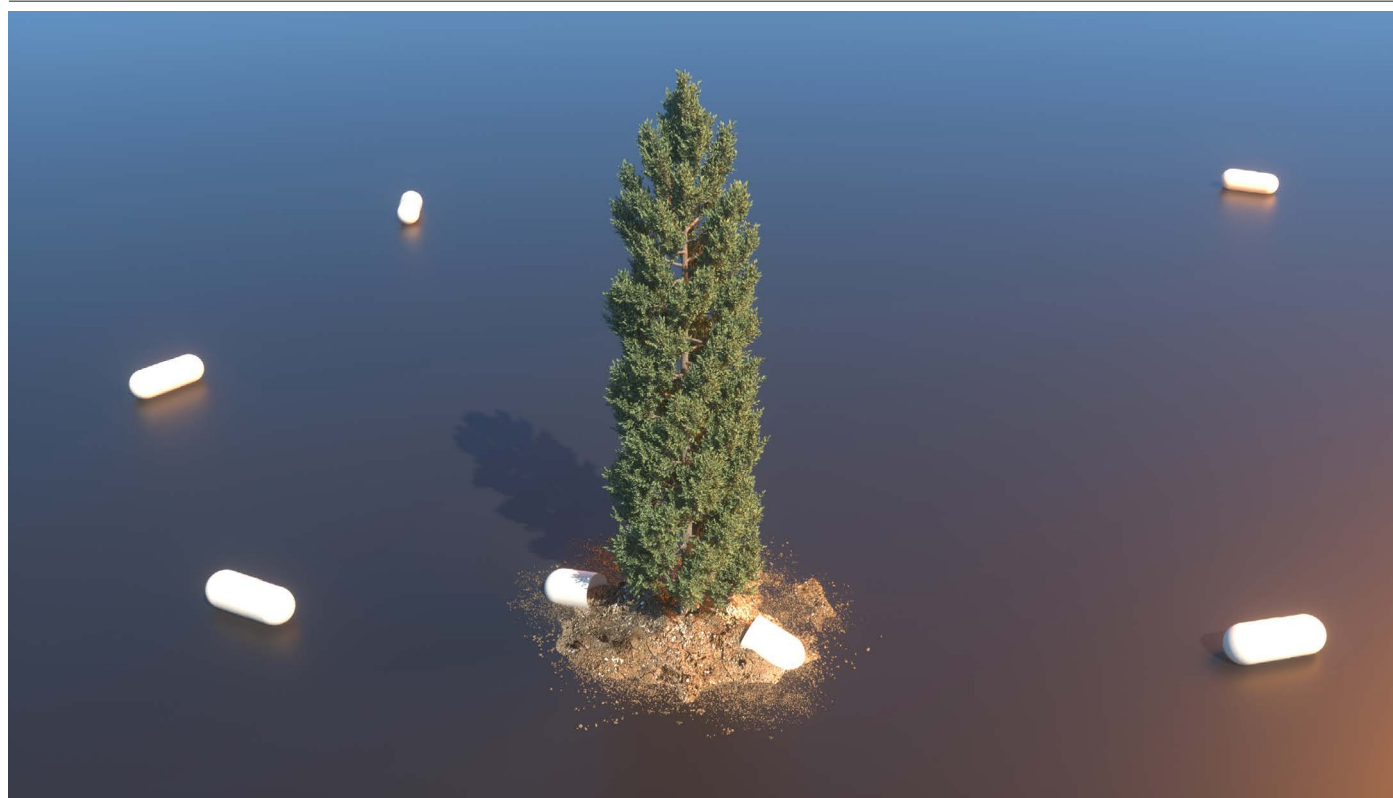


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

“How about cypress?” Summer asked. “Today I learnt they’re the only trees with knees.”

“Trees don’t have knees, smarty,” said her baby brother, Harry, with a burst of giggle.

The mother, Tessa, snapped at him. “Don’t call your sister ‘smarty’. This is serious.”

It was, once again, the hottest day on record. As instructed, all five members of the Jackson family had assembled in the living room. The windows – made of the same silvery film-like material NASA used for spaceships – stopped the heat from seeping into their solar-powered pod. But still, they were sweating like there was no tomorrow.

“Can I open it, Dad? Can I?” asked Harry, bouncing on the biodegradable couch like it was Christmas in June. He was six years old, recently ghosted by his two front teeth.

The father, William, shook his head and nervously set the white box on the table.

Standing beside him, Tessa rocked the

infant, sleeping and still nameless at four months old. Sweat oozed from her neck. Her anxious gaze kept switching from the ceiling vents to that white box – a single-walled box made of recycled wood chips, big enough to hold a candle or a mug.

“Summer, I thought you liked the live oak,” Tessa said to distract herself.

The ten-year-old lay on the floor with smartshades on, swiping left on profiles of Florida trees. “Ew, I hate the live oak,” she said. “The Rodriguezes chose the live oak.”

William sat down. Tessa sat too and put a hand on his shaking knee.

“Mr Warner,” William said and a chime rang out. “We’re all here now.”

Harry blurted to the ceiling. “Can we open the box now, Mr Warner?”

Mr Warner, the pod’s virtual assistant, responded: “Yes, you may open the box at this time. Best of luck, Jackson family.”

William rubbed his hands together to psych himself up. Harry leaned in. Summer sat up.

William reached for the box, but Tessa grabbed his arm.

“What?” William said.

“Just hold on a second,” Tessa said.

Summer threw up her hands. “Oh my God, what are we waiting for?”

“Open it! Open it! Open it!” Harry said.

The baby started crying. Tessa stood up, shaking her head and the baby, and moved to the window over the kitchen sink.

“Tess, you know how this works,” William said.

“I know, I just ...” Tessa stared outside. “I need time –”

“We don’t need time.” Summer slammed her fist into her palm. “We need to act.”

“Give your mother a minute,” William said.

“Aww, man,” Harry groaned.

Summer huffed. “We don’t even know if we’ve been capsuled yet!”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “The box could be empty like the last times.”

Tessa kept staring out into the forest as she

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nursed the infant. There were trees everywhere. Mostly oak and maple. As Mr Warner had explained: "Trees with larger surface areas of leaves mean more photosynthesis." There were conifers too, which absorb more heat, such as pines and red cedar. To the south, in a clearing where a cluster of live oaks would soon be growing, was a green pod, where Summer's ex, Daniel Rodriguez, lived alone. Tessa pictured their other forest neighbours sweating in their own pods over their own white boxes, which were left on their doorsteps every Sunday.

The voice of Mr Warner shook her. "You may open the box at this time."

"Tess ..." William said.

Without turning around, Tessa waved her hand for him to go ahead. Harry whooped. Summer crossed her fingers and closed her eyes while muttering: "Don't be me, don't be me."

William breathed heavily. "Here we go," he said and lifted the top.

"Did we get capsuled?" Harry asked.

Tessa turned around. From William's expression, she knew. William plucked a white capsule from the box and held it up, his eyes welling.

An eerie silence seized the pod. William tried to speak, but words left his mouth to dry. He could only nod when Tessa said: "It's me."

Summer snatched off her shades and grabbed the capsule from William's trembling hand. "Lemme see that." Harry scooted over to see it too.

Sure enough, in small black letters along the side of the capsule was the name Tessa Jackson.

"No," Tessa said. "No, no, no, I can't – it's not right!"

"Mom, you have to," Summer said.

Steeling himself, William dabbed his eyes and went over to his wife.

Tessa pulled away. "No!"

The voice of Mr Warner announced: "If you have been capsuled, you may take the capsule at this time. I'm sorry for your loss."

William held out his hands to take the infant.

And again, Tessa moved away, clutching the baby and darting around the pod. "Mr Warner, can't somebody else take it for me?!" Tessa said.

"Negative," Mr Warner said. "Capsule substitutions are not permitted, as per Article 422."

"This is serious, Mommy," Harry said. "Don't you want to save the planet?"

Tessa looked at her little boy with that big gap in his mouth and her heart softened.

She handed William the infant. Summer dropped the capsule in her outstretched palm.

Tessa dry-swallowed it.

"Mr Warner," she said, "I have taken the capsule. And we're choosing cypress."

"Very good," Mr Warner said. "Thank you, Jackson family, for your compliance. Cypress trees will be planted in your name. Your commitment to reforestation will not be forgotten."

Tessa sat on the couch, wiping her clammy hands on her knees. The others sat beside her, holding her as the overhead vents opened and the toxin hissed into the solar pod, the eyes of the Jackson family closing all around her as Tessa, unaffected, filled her lungs with clean air and exhaled.

Russell Nichols is a speculative fiction writer and endangered journalist. Raised in Richmond, California, he got rid of all his stuff in 2011 to live out of a backpack with his wife, vagabonding around the world ever since. Look for him at russellnichols.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Russell Nichols reveals the inspiration behind *The family tree*.

I had an idea for a satire on overpopulation. It was just a seed. I didn't know the characters or the setting or the plot. All I knew was how it ended: A chosen candidate steps into a chamber to be protected from a toxin that kills the rest of their family. For years, I tried to write the story, but didn't know where to begin.

This spring, while working on a couple articles on carbon removal and reforestation efforts, it hit me: trees are the key.

Soon after that, I was introduced to the Jackson family. They invited me into their solar pod. They showed me their green world. Once there, I learnt there was no protective chamber. The fate of the family resided in a familiar box (made of recycled wood chips) that had a capsule inside with a name on it. And with this updated, twisted ending, I could finally begin.

