AUNT META'S TREE
by Tony Giovia

Lately I've been getting a lot of high profile cases. You might think it's a reward for the success of my mission to Mentalos, a tenth planet discovered by Hubbel. But in truth all the Troubleshooters at the National Science Foundation - of which I am one - are getting caught in the spotlight. It seems the public has taken a sudden (and maybe temporary) interest in our sometimes technical work. It's just more proof that whenever the public's "right to know" meets its "want to know" plenty of reporters will surely follow.

That being said, Aunt Meta's Tree would have generated world-wide notices no matter what the public mood happened to be.

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"It's a real circus," Netto said as I paged through the file. He was Chief of Operations at the NSF and my boss. "You'll be lucky to get anything done."

I nodded. "The trick is to act just like another reporter so as not to attract attention. Otherwise you spend all day dodging questions."

Netto grunted.

I closed the file. I already knew the basics from TV reports and internal NSF news updates, but I waited for Netto to give it to me in his own words. He lit his pipe and an aromatic fragrance drifted my way.

"A fruit tree in Springfield is producing apples - and peaches, and pears, and cherries, and you name it - all at the same time. The tree was planted by a now deceased woman named Meta, no known last name, and is called Aunt Meta's Tree by the locals. Department of Agriculture scientists have run genetic tests on the tree, and found that its DNA is not stable. One test shows it to be an apple tree, and another an olive tree, and so on."

Netto paused, his eyes drifting into the far distance. When he drew on his pipe I could see an image of the red hot cinders reflect off his forehead, extending onto the top of his immaculately clean bald head.

"The Agriculture people have been on this for months, long before the media jumped in. They tried growing another Meta Tree, but the seeds of each fruit produced sprouts of that fruit only. Grafts have failed in the same way. The soil has been duplicated down to the smallest trace element, but nothing has worked. Interesting note, they injected a dye into the roots to see how far they ran, and

Agriculture found that the roots extend under the entire town, intertwined with everything already down there. Anyway, since they can't
reproduce the tree they decided to move it to a controlled environment."

"And that kicked off the protests and the media blitz," I said. Religious and conservation groups were right now staging sit down demonstrations in the streets of Springfield.

Netto grunted again.

This was the payoff, and I leaned forward. "What do you want me to do? Stop the tree removal?"

"No, that has been approved at the highest levels." Netto frowned. "I want you to find out what this Meta Tree is before they take a saw to it."

I took a deep breath. Some of our best scientists had examined the tree and come up empty. Now Netto expected me to succeed where they had failed. My face must have revealed my thoughts.

"Just say yes," Netto said finally.

"Yes."

As was his custom, he ended the meeting by standing up and shaking my hand.

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I have a safety valve named Tristater. He belongs to the upper class at the NSF, and despite the differences in our social standings we are friends. He is a good man to know when you need a clear head to point you in the right direction. I called his private number.

"Hey, I need some free advice."

"Manny. Hold on a sec." A minute later Tristater came back on the line, sounding exhilarated. "Hey dude, sorry, I was busy saving the world."

He might be kidding, or he might not. It's a fact that the President calls him all hours of the night.

"You know everything that goes on around here, so you know I just got The Meta Tree assignment."

"Yes. Sounds like fun."

"Yeah, big fun. I'm no botanist. What do I know about trees?"

"Netto doesn't want you to look at the tree as a botanist. This is more biophysical than botanical anyway. Netto wants you to look at The Meta Tree as Manny Levels."
Manny Levels is my name. "And what does that mean, Most High?"

Tristater laughed. "It will come to you."

It came, but I didn't see how it was any help. "Do you have anything on this woman Meta? The file is empty on her."

"It's intentionally empty. She was a researcher who developed her own system for organizing information - like the Dewey Decimal System is information that organizes all the books in the library. Our people say her system is very advanced but so far we haven't got it figured yet - we are still deciphering her notes, which she encrypted with her system. It's very rarified, and very hush hush - OK? ...."

"OK."

"... and that's why her bio - what there is of it - has been taken from the file."

I heard a phone buzz, and I heard Tristater pick up and mumble a few words. Then he said to me "Gotta go, gotta nail this down now. Let's have lunch when you get back."

"Right."

At the time I didn't think Tristater had really helped me. But I found out soon enough that he had given me all the tools I needed to do the job.

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Everybody was in Springfield. Dan Rather and Walter Cronkite were holding down an outdoor anchor desk with Arthur C. Clarke. CNN had Bernard Shaw walking around with a camera crew. Inside Edition was cataloging the contents of garbage cans. The state's governor was repeating his outrage speech to anyone who would listen.

There was also an international contingent of reporters, using dozens of vans with huge satellite dishes pointed ominously at the sky. There were dozens of state and local cops. Just outside town an army transport unit stood ready, ostensibly to caravan the tree to its new home after it was uprooted. That may indeed have been its purpose, but it didn't explain the tanks and heavy armored vehicles assigned to the unit.

The mayor had set up a command post, replete with fire engines and first aid squads. Every few minutes he announced that he was in complete control of the situation.

An impromptu press conference was in progress near the center of town. Several picnic tables had been strung together, and a selection of Springfield residents, adults and children, were seated along one side. Opposite them were a group of reporters firing questions at them. One of the children was talking.

"... to the peach grove down by the red and green barn. My brother and me - he's a year older than me - so he is nine - ran around picking up all the good peaches that had fell to the ground. Aunt Meta said to handle each peach with respect, and so we did, and that night Aunt Meta made peach pie for us. And the next day - there was peaches on Aunt Meta's Tree, right next to the oranges!"

"That is a great story," said Gabe Pressman, a reporter wearing a Fox Five card in his hat. "You call your friend Aunt Meta, but she was not really your aunt, was she?"

"Oh no, but everybody called her Aunt Meta. Everybody."

I couldn't hear the next question, but the answer was similar - Aunt Meta had taken the child to a cranberry patch, had made cranberry pie for her, and the next day cranberries were growing on her tree.

Jim Lehrer, anchor of PBS news, asked one of the adults about the tree's history. A man I guessed was in his forties responded.

"I was there the day the tree was planted, about twenty years ago. Meta came over to our house for dinner sometimes, she lived around the corner and played in my wife's card club. One day I came home from work and I saw Meta walking with some kids in the neighborhood, and I asked them if they wanted a ride. They piled into the back of the pickup and I took them where Meta told me to, and she planted the seeds right in front of me and the kids."

"Did she say anything when she planted the seeds?"

"She might have. I don't remember."

Four younger adults spoke up to let everyone know that they were also there that day, riding in the pickup and seeing everything. No one remembered if Meta had christened the tree in any special way.

Over the next few questions and answers I learned that although the tree was twenty years old, only recently had the multiple fruits begun to appear. Meta herself had died two weeks ago in a fire that had completely consumed her remains. Word of the multiple fruiting tree had been immediately investigated by the government, but the story had been slow to spread to the national media, no doubt due to a statement by a federal spokesman that the tree was a fake.

Someone asked what Meta looked like.

"There is only the one picture of Meta that I know of," said an elderly woman sporting a wide brimmed hat replete with three roses. "That's the one they put by the tree."

It was time to see the beast up close. It was a couple of blocks away, and the security was tight. I scrapped my original plan to pretend I was a reporter and instead flashed my NSF badge for maybe the third time in my life. Eventually I worked my way to within a hundred meters of my goal. From there it was mostly a matter of picking my way through the sitting protesters, who had arranged themselves in concentric circles around the tree. I was pawed and cursed and hissed at, but nobody stood up to challenge me. The tree loomed larger as I approached. It was big.

Between the last inner circle and the tree itself was a perimeter of state troopers. It took a few minutes for my badge to be confirmed, and then I was let in. I stepped onto a small platform of aluminum planks that had been laid down to serve as a temporary floor.
The planks were necessary because the ground had been excavated to expose the tree roots. At the edge of my platform I could look down into the maze of roots as they thickly interweaved their way into the depths. It reminded me of a complicated molecular design. I had to walk carefully because the platform was actually balanced on the roots, and there was a danger that the floor would tilt, sending me over the side.

Above me tree limbs reached high and wide, pendulant with fruits of every type - oranges, kiwis, apples, mangos, bananas, plums, peaches, tangerines, cherries, lemons, pears. I counted thirty-two different fruits in all, and that was just what I could see at this angle.

Videos of Aunt Meta's Tree were one thing. Standing next to it was another. My mouth watered.

"May I help you?"

I admit I was startled. On my right stood a man smaller than myself with detailed simian features. Not only was his face ape-like, but his exposed arms were massively hairy. He was also hunched forward.

I flashed my badge. "Levels from the NSF. Just looking things over."

He flashed his own badge at me. "Traveller, FBI."

I noticed that he and I were the only people inside the police perimeter, and that all the troopers were facing away from the tree, toward the protesters.

"I understand there is a photograph of the Meta woman here."

"Yes. One of the townspeople found it in her attic yesterday. We made copies and put one here to make the locals happy." He curled his finger at me and I followed.

We carefully negotiated several island platforms, connected to each other via double plank bridges. Some platforms were more secure than others, but none felt completely stable.

We stopped less than a meter from the tree. The bark was weathered and ribbed horizontally, and the two lowest limbs extended outward in a classic expression of supplication. Leaning against the base of the tree was the 8x10 framed picture of Meta.

As I leaned down to take a closer look, I already knew. I brought my nose to within inches of the photo and confirmed my thoughts. At the moment I clearly formed the words "Ms. Terry" in my mind the photograph winked at me. I uttered a weird sound and jumped backwards.

I had first met Ms. Terry on Mentalos, the tenth planet of our solar system.

The simian-like Traveller chattered and quickly climbed up the tree trunk onto the lowest limb. Immediately he was hidden by the thick inner foliage. I followed him up.

Bandwidth, the ruler of Mentalos, was sitting on his haunches waiting. The top of his head above his eyes was missing, and his mind - a three dimensional kaleidoscope of colors, shapes and flickering energy - enveloped the interior of the tree.

"Tell me I'm not dreaming," I said.

"You are not dreaming, as you define the term." He spoke with typical finality.

I settled into a semi-comfortable position on the limb where I was perched. "So this tree is your idea?"

"Everything is my idea. Get with the program."

"Well, what is the point of this? A tree with multiple fruits. So what?"

"It is the physical expression of a complex idea. Looked at one way, this is an apple tree. Looked at another way, a pear tree. Looked at a third way, it is an orange tree. Meta's Tree is all these individual things, and all these things combined."

"But what does it mean?"

"It means one tree, many meanings, with each meaning dependent on the parts of the tree you include in your computations. When Meta planted the seeds of the tree she knew that one day the meanings of the seeds would combine into one integrated idea. She chose her seeds with care so that information common to each meaning - an idea common to each meaning - would one day unite all the ideas into one whole."

"And what is the idea that combines them all?"

"The tree. Meta's Tree."

"Oh." I felt like an idiot. I was talking instead of thinking, so I started thinking. Tristater told me Meta had developed a system for organizing information - an "idea common to each meaning", as Bandwidth put it. I got down to basics to make sure of my footing. "Meta's Tree is a real tree and it is also an idea. An idea is an idea because it represents something - an object, a value - so by definition an idea has meaning."

"Every idea means something."

"OK. Meta's Tree is an embodiment of the idea that every thing means something. Physical objects are things, and their meaning is the material role they play in the physical structure of the Universe. Ideas have meaning by definition, because they refer to physical objects or to other ideas. So every thing means something, whether the thing is an object or an idea."

Bandwidth's mental light show exploded with miniature fireworks; blazing streamers scorched the close air. He chattered and beat his chest. "Meta's Tree is saying three things. First, every thing means something. Second, every thing means many things, with its meaning dependent on the other ideas it is associated with. Third, everything means something." He pronounced the last "everything" like one word, while spreading his arms to include the whole sky.

He stood up and started climbing further up the tree. I remembered something Netto had wanted me to ask Bandwidth if I ever saw him again.

"Bandwidth! What do you want from us?"

He stopped and looked at me over his shoulder. "You have it backwards."

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Netto's face was grim.

I had stayed in Springfield long enough to watch Agriculture move Aunt Meta's Tree. It wasn't practical to unearth the tree's roots completely since they extended under the entire town, so the scientists just measured and cut what they believed to be a safe length to support the tree in its new location.

Within hours all the fruits and leaves had fallen from the tree.

"Sure it's dead?"

I leaned my head left, then right. "I'm no botanist, but I'd say dead or dying."

Netto grunted. "And no Bandwidth, of course."

"Long gone."

Netto banged his pipe clean. "So Aunt Meta's Tree had a purpose beyond simply feeding the stomach. It also fed the mind."

"Yeah. According to Bandwidth, it was a demonstration that every thing means something, and every thing means many things. Since everything is made up of every thing, then everything means something - the sum of all the individual meanings."

"Nothing new really, just said right." He sat motionless for a long time. "I get the feeling this fellow Bandwidth is not just passing through."

"Agreed. The information that Meta planted the seeds for her tree twenty years ago has been checked out and confirmed by Agriculture. If Meta and Ms. Terry are the same person...." I let it hang.

Netto lit his pipe and puffed serenely. "So he said we've got it backwards, eh?"

"Yeah."

He nodded his head. "Damn wiseass."

I smiled. The phone rang and Netto picked it up. After an "Is that so?" and a couple of "OKs" he hung up.

He looked me right in the eye. "Seems a new tree has sprung up in Springfield. Another Meta Tree."

Netto sat back, and blew circles at the ceiling.

THE END