

The Quiet Forest

The man had walked and hiked countless times in the woods and forests. He was always highly fascinated and intrigued by the goings on in nature, especially when he hiked hours away from other people. For years and years, that led to decades, and finally, to a half-century, he hiked and camped along the trails of California and Plumas County. He had hiked in Plumas County's forests since he was seven years old, and now, half a century later, he would find the forests on the county's west side. He had walked so many miles and hours along the Pacific Crest Trail and other well-marked trails that he had long ago lost count of all the times he had hiked there. His little American Rat Terrier was his always companion, and since National Forest ordinances forbade dogs on their paths, they didn't hike there.

He would always hear birds singing and bees buzzing, and there would always be chatter in his head as his rarely quiet mind produced a running documentary for him to listen to. His curiosity ran amok when he was out in the forests. His eyes saw the melting snow water cascading over boulders or silently drifting through inviting pools. His nose smelled the wild bushes, and the pine trees, and his ears heard the occasional crashing of deer and bear running away as he approached. Since it was all so new, he often walked as if in a trance, yet smiling. He felt the heat and the cold, mosquitos bit him, and occasionally a butterfly would land on him. He got very close to several bears and twice very close to a mother bear and her baby cubs. But there was never an issue; there was no drama, just a casual meeting. Occasionally he would, on hot days, stop by a river's pool and soak his hot feet until they cooled. He and his dog often sat in the river with the water up to their necks until their bodies cooled down. He would listen to the

wind or a breeze in the trees or track an occasional cloud in an otherwise empty, deep blue sky.

His times hiking in the forests of Plumas County brought him deep joy.

And then, one day, as he and his dog walked the hours-long trail back from Blue Lake to Highway 36, a very odd thing happened. As they hiked along the now hot and dusty trail, the air changed color and seemed to soften, and then the forest became completely quiet. No noises were coming from the forest at all. His dog even turned his head towards the man with a quizzical look.

Sometimes the woods and forests go quiet when a bird or a squirrel spots a predator, and their squeak or call will send an alarm that makes all wildlife disappear, and silence prevails. But this wasn't that, or so it seemed to the man. This was the forest simply going quiet. He and his dog stood still, looking and listening in case a predator had caused the silence. But no, there was merely silence everywhere. They stopped for water, and it was still silent. Hours later, when leaving the trail for the parking lot and his truck, he mentioned the quiet to some assembled forest workers, but they weren't curious to know more. So they left for home.

On and on, the man and his dog hiked, and on and on, the man hiked after his dog passed away. Several times, over the next several years, he again experienced the phenomenon of the forest going quiet. And each time, it was as if something noisy was turned off suddenly; one moment, there was noise, and the next, there was no noise. So it was in the forest; the man would be walking along, and there would be all the various noises of the forest. Birds would sing, wings would flap, pine squirrels would sound the alarm as he approached, or branches would crack as a deer or bear would make their hurried exit.

Sometimes a breeze would waft the branches too, but something was always going on until the forest wanted complete silence. At those times, the light of day would suddenly soften as if a

light shade was pulled over the day's light. This change to a softer hue was followed by literally every noise going silent. Each time this happened, the man would stop and be amazed by the forest's ability to shut up. At first, he experienced some trepidation when this happened. After a couple of experiences of the forest going quiet, the agitation stopped, and he felt happy and even honored to be allowed to participate in this phenomenon once again.

The man felt as if the forest was honoring him with this experience. He had often yearned and longed to experience total quiet for as long as he could remember. Now here he stood, even holding his breath, so he could better hear the silence. The silence was spectacular for the man. Even the air he breathed and stood in was changed ever so slightly. The air had become looser around him as if it, too, was free of its responsibilities. The experience was a mystery he could accept without knowing why. As he continued his hike, he noticed he was walking within a forest of perfect quiet and absolute silence. He smiled a smile of deep appreciation for what was happening, and as he walked, he smiled more and more. There was no more fear for the man, and the distrust of this silence vanished. The man had learned that this silence was not to be feared at all, and he recognized that this silence was a gift from the forest to him.

He thought about the many fantastic tales of hobbits and leprechauns he had heard or read. He often wondered if the Indians who lived here before and how they worshipped the earth as their mother. And he often thought about nature spirits when the phenomenon would happen. But this didn't feel like any of those entities initiated it. Instead, this felt as if the forest was an entity itself and that the forest had decided to go quiet while the man was visiting.

The forest going quiet for the man was him receiving a blessing from the forest. The soft energy and vibrations of safety the forest produced left him feeling completely happy, content, and fulfilled. He was being honored with quiet while he was visiting. He felt the honor.

And then, one day, he was doing what had become his almost daily walk. His daily walk was along a two-lane road where he lived. The area was a vast, untamed forest until a large dam was built to provide hydroelectric power some eighty years before. Homes and roads were built, and thousands of trees were felled to make room for people or to heat their homes during the long cold winters. And despite all the changes brought to the area, the area was still a forest.

As he got to the halfway point of his walk and turned around to head back home, he felt the forest going quiet again. The air was the first to go silent, followed almost simultaneously by the light of day changing to a softer, slightly more opaque hue, and finally by absolute quiet and stillness. No cars went by, there were no weed blowers heard, and there were no sounds of boats or the loons on the lake. Yes, the man smiled the broadest smile he could because here he was, standing quietly and happily alone in perfect quiet. And yet it had not been so one minute before. He continued his walk towards his home, which was still one mile away, and the silence accompanied him as he walked. The silence accompanied him to his cabin and finally up his driveway and home. Sometime later, the quiet melted away; a breeze would make one of his outdoor chimes ding or dong, a log splitter or leaf blower would fire up, or perhaps a car or truck could be heard in the distance. Life in the forest would resume, and the man would once again be a part of all the noises that naturally occur in the forest where he resided.

He mentioned his experience to several of his friends, hoping they, too, could experience the forest going quiet if they hadn't already. The man believed that experiencing a quiet forest would be a priceless gift for each of them to experience for themselves, for their deep pleasure and lifelong enjoyment.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © November 5th, 2022