

Adam Sarlan

The Mountain

One blustery spring afternoon, two of my companions and I decided to cross Society's bridge into nature to escape the vileness and commotion of the towns we live in. We were all bundled up in jackets, for even though April had pulled the sun out from behind the clouds and sprouted the roots from the once barren ground, she was not done with the sheer cold yet, letting him stick around during the beginning of her season. Before we could even begin our hike, we looked around for sufficient, thick branches to serve as walking sticks to support our bodies. I lagged behind and watched my companions forage by the roadside, examining tree branch after tree branch until they both found adequate poles for themselves. Each pulled out their pocket knives and wasted no time in fashioning a handle on the stick for their bare hands to hang on to. How the tree bark cried as they were clipped off like sheep's wool on the farm! I walked over to where my companions were, picked up the dead tree bark on the pavement, and tossed it into the woods. If these brown, lined, cut pieces of bark were to die, they would not die alone, but would die surrounded by their brothers and sisters in the forest. That was the least I could do for them.

My companions waited for me the entire time I went through this ritual, and when I was done I walked back over to them. They were satisfied with their new walking sticks, and I was satisfied that I returned the dying bark to its birthplace to complete the circle of life. We crossed the road, left the loud sounds of car engines rumbling down the road, and entered the songs of the forest. It was as if we were entering a new world. The forest was eerily quiet, and had a mist that sat above and around the canopy and forest floor so as to block out the outside world. The trees moved their branches aside and revealed a dirt path for us. Before I started my journey, I walked over to a huge tree branch, put my arms around her, and thanked Mother Nature for welcoming me home. As I felt the rough tree bark and ran my fingers along the uneven, long grooves, the leaves above me shook in the newly wafting breeze that had made its way in from above. I let the wind wisp through my blonde hair, sending the strands in all directions, and felt the air tickle my body all the way from my arms to my legs. After my time with the tree, I started off on the dirt path. The terrain was not challenging: Mother Nature threw the harmful roots and plants aside and replaced them with a smooth ground that was covered with citrus smelling thyme and sweet lavender. Intermingled within the light green thyme and violet lavender were handfuls of leaves, the last remnants of Autumn that were determined to stay. Every year, Spring laments Autumn's disappearance. This time, the two seasons were together, reunited like two lost lovers who find themselves on the same remote island and rekindle their extinguished flame. Winter had done his fair share of damage, dimming the once red leaves to a dirt brown and scything their stems from the tree branches. But Spring had won the war, preserving the last remnants of Autumn and never letting her go. I was careful not to crunch over the leaves and shouted to one of my friends not to pierce Autumn's soul, but instead walk around her and leave her limbs healthy and in peace.

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They say that society gives you the best opportunity to be wealthy, but I have grown rich from my time in nature. I am rich in spirit. Throw away the preconceived notion that money makes you happy. Look at all these professional athletes and workers who receive millions of dollars, only to see the stacks of currency disappear after a short time and their spirit broken? Money is shredded by the scissors of time, left in pieces flowing down the river of the universe. Societal wealth is short lived: richness in the natural spirit is everlasting. I am filled with the song of the navy bluejay, the smell of the sweet scent of the tall, waving evergreen pine trees, and the sight of the newly blooming tulips and roses at the beginning of Spring. Nature fills my soul with happiness, with richness, with the utmost wealth, for my spirit is healed when I enter her palace. Look at all the fractured souls in society struggling to find a way out of their misery. Nature can help them, for an afternoon in the whistling wind on a mountaintop or an evening watching the pink sunset on the sandy dunes washes away all our burdens and replaces them with a new soul: one full of happiness and love. Nature is happiness. Nature is love.

I went to the woods because I wanted to find myself, to throw away the expectation of society and live in this microcosmic, leafy, quiet world and receive a new life, one of love, purpose, and peace. I went to the woods to love myself, to start anew, to throw away my old self, to bury it deep in the fractures of the Earth, never to be seen again. Only in Nature am I born again from the dust of the Earth by our maker who made me eons ago. Standing here among the trees, I was made new again. My mind was blank as I took in the clear air that washed away my stress, replaced it with tranquility throughout all the veins and muscles in my body. And how I made my mark in the dirt of the hills of that mountain! Stepping forward and looking behind me, I saw the ground make a mold of my bare sole like a mother makes a cast of her newborn's feet, saving it forever. I am my Mother's child. risen from the roots of the Earth and forever implanted in Nature to carry out her will.

We belong to Nature. We are her children. We do not own her. We do not have any power over here. She is superior; she is God. I continued on the path up the mountain and eventually reached a garden of rocks pointing the way uphill. The climb was dangerous, but I had no fear, for the tree branches and vines shot out and grabbed my hands and arms to lift me over the jagged and loose rocks up the mountain. To be connected with nature is to truly be at peace. I thanked my brothers and sisters once they had delivered me from this trap, and watched them slink back down to their places in the grooves of these stones. The trees, the vines, my brothers, sisters, and ancestors extended their hands to help my unworthy soul up the mountain. How can I ever repay them?

My companions were waiting for me at the top of the mountain, and I was shocked to find that they escaped the labyrinth of stones unscathed. But I failed to realize that nature has many ways of helping others. The vines and branches helped me, but maybe the flying red-tailed hawks and running rabbits carried my companions past the rocks. Nature is the helping hand that extends towards you, always offering her assistance to bring you to the temple of spiritual peace. We reached the top of the mountain, and our resolve was good and our spirits were greater. We trekked up a pair of stone stairs to an overlook, in which we ducked under

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and made our way to a lonely cliffside. We went through a maze of dark green shrubs and low, prickly grasses to this empty, quiet spot where we decided to take a rest. Nature closed the shrubs and dropped her leaves to hide us from the view of anyone who might chance to come upon this path, leaving us to enjoy her presence.

Looking out from the cliffside, I saw the cool blueness of the sky and the transparency of the clouds. My eyes rested upon a bald eagle soaring through the sky with his white face, dark feathery body, and a beak that was as bright as the Sun. I watched the eagle fly in circles, seemingly enjoying his afternoon in the nice, cooling wind. I felt a tap on my shoulder, and heard one of my companions ask if I wanted some crackers, but I refused to take my eyes off the eagle. My companion persisted, and I finally relented, turned to him, and softly took the food he had provided me. When I turned back to watch my revered bird, he was gone. How the good things in life enter our view as quickly as they disappear from it. How the joys of life are fleeting, ready to exit out the back door just as we start to enjoy them.

A period of time passed, and, signaling my welcome was over, the wind picked up my companions and I with his chilly hands, creating goosebumps all over my body. We traveled back into the forest and started back on the path that would take us down the mountain. Walking through the quiet forest, I took note of the stillness of the place. All our lives we are told to keep moving, never to be bored. But are we really bored? Walking next to the still trees of the forest, I thought about the simplicity of this world. Just because we are still and enjoying ourselves doesn't mean that we are bored. I long for a life of simplicity, a life where every morning I can walk out my door, into the forest, and sit on the mountaintop and read Whitman and Mary Oliver and write poetic verses of my own, praising the glory and beauty of nature that gives love and peace to us all!

I naturally lagged behind my companions, but I kept on walking through the forest. Emerging from the green leaves and dusty path, I found myself on a smooth cliff face of large boulders blanketed by the smiling sun. I looked around the boulders and noticed my companions ahead, staring at something on one of the gray rocks. I walked over to them, figuring they were watching a cool beetle walking across the surface, or spying on a bird in the grasses feeding her chicks. Instead, I saw a vile drawing they were looking at, and asked them what it was. They explained that it was graffiti. A couple of these images stood plastered over the rocks, hiding the redness of the boulders and the soft cushions they provided for seating. How revolting these pictures were! Who would even have the thought of defacing nature? These were not Van Gogh's or Monet's: they were child's works sprayed in anger. If only they could feel the West Wind blowing and hear the melody of the tree leaves shaking as I could, they would be at peace. To deface nature is to defy God.

I lamented these innocent boulders and walked on the cliffside and back into the forest. The quietness continued, and I got the idea that the forest was probably resting. Not wanting to disturb her, I walked cautiously around the bushes, softly on the grasses, and carefully over the fallen trees. Who am I to interfere and disrupt her from her rest? The rabbit that hops across the path and tramps loudly over the leaves deserves to inter-

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ferre more than I do. I contorted my body through the forest like a gymnast. It was tough: my lack of balance and agility almost caused me to fall a couple of times, but my precision and knowledge carried me through. Nature gives me those gifts to navigate her so I may never get lost. I never need a map or directions when I am in the forest, on the beach, or traveling up mountains. I know immediately where to go. I am an internal compass in nature, guiding myself to Mother's welcoming embrace.

I chanced to turn around and see if I could see the mountain range from where I stood. Perfectly in view, I saw the tall, brown peaks littered with leafy, tall, light green oaks and pines and dark ryegrass. Above the mountain, my eagle had returned and now sported a companion. I watched the two fly over the clay cliffside and screech their piercing cry for everyone to hear. The sun shone over the range and the wind blew the dancing foliage back and forth. If one does not see beauty in nature, they do not see beauty in life. Nature is like the woman of our dreams: loving, caring, beautiful, smart, and our best friend. She always knows when you have joined her, and always welcomes you to her home, your home. You are always welcome in her arms. You are her son and daughter, born from the dust and seeds of the Earth, meant to grow taller than the giant sequoias, meant to have a heart deeper than the darkest basins of the ocean, meant to love more than the calming and caring beach and forest, whose waves and wind wash your burdens away. To be in nature is to truly be at peace.

I have not left nature. She is my true home. My presence in her world is like the boulder that sits atop the mountain: unbreakable and steadfast. My prints are forever molded across her world. The snake that slithers under the leaves and the hawk that flies along the mountainside know my scent now. They are my friends. Sitting atop the mountainside and watching the sun set over the vast forest, I know that I am right where I need to be. I have cast aside the expectations of those who use me for their own gain, and traded that life for one in which I am welcomed, forever loved, and happy in the natural world. I will spread my soul throughout nature like giant tree roots, forever living in this calm and familiar world.