

A TREE IN THE FOREST

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Once a tree fell in the forest when nobody was around to hear.

It was a massive tree, straight and tall, with a girth many arms could not have circled. The trunk thrust out of the ground as if it were a force of nature unto itself, straining to declare its power equal to any storm or landslide. From below, the tree's crown was invisible in the canopy far above, beyond the outspread limbs that had reached through those of kindred giants on every side, linking one tree to another across ridge after ridge for miles.

Now those limbs, shorn away in its fall, lay across the steep slope as if to touch again every needle that had ever floated down from them. No human foot had pressed into this thick mat or hands pushed aside the arching ferns to make a path. Only the moldering remains of trees that had toppled before this one were to be seen here, their former might now all but buried in decay. Uprturned roots slowly let fall huge boulders torn from the earth, and splintered stumps beckoned like the hands of Titans disappearing beneath it. All while broken shafts of light settled through the shadows as though the moon and not the sun ruled here.

In the dense quiet of this world, as spiders gingerly began their embrace of the tree, the tree itself began to reflect upon its state. To have been standing so firmly rooted there and now be lying here and soon to be no more, the changes might have seemed an undoing of the tree's life and then of its having existed at all. Leaving no more trace than the sudden thunder of its collapse had left in the air.

But what difference did it make whether anybody had heard that thunder, let alone witnessed the tree's fall? Or that nobody had even known it might be found deep within these woods in the first place? Did what counted about it depend in the slightest on the number of those whose understanding of such things began and ended with "Wow, what a big tree!"?

There could be no doubt it had come crashing down, as all trees must. Or that the moss in which it lay had not been torn and tossed by its striking of the ground. And even though moss would cover it in time and reclaim the forest floor when it had finally rotted away, until then its inch-by-inch decline would still bear the shape of centuries drawn up through its veins and now returning as one to the soil.

Every ring grown out from the tree's heart spoke of a life barely held in by what might be taken from the outside for its measure, the strained and riven bark that soon would split open with new seedlings nursed by its remains. How many of them would fall in their own moment, early or late, without a single notice being taken of what sprouted, grew, and passed away here?

Nor did it matter. Knowing you'd stood here for your allotted span was enough. As was knowing the forest that stood within you. None of this depended on the "oohs" and "ahhs" of any who might have tramped by on their way to somewhere else. It depended only upon you. You, who'd heard the sound of your falling with the same fullness you'd heard the wind race through your branches or the first snowflakes of each winter come to rest there. You, the only evidence needed. Great or small had nothing to do with it.

Witness or no witness had nothing to do with it.