

Portfolio Note: This flash fiction piece (mainstream / literary fiction) was originally written with a hard cap of 1000 words.

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The Place Where the Trees Sing

By Marc "Scott" Summers

There is a place I know of. A quiet place. Full of life and luster and all the things worth longing for. In the early morning, the fog rolls across dew-dipped conifers like hair curled through a comb. The branches whisper and whistle as fresh sunlight tickles the trees with tales of its adventures on the far side of the world.

I tried to listen to those stories once, seated beside a smoldering fire with little more than a tent and the contents of a rucksack to my name, but to no avail. Perhaps it is not the way of things for humans to understand the language of creation. Even so, there is tranquility in that place, enough that a weary soul might find respite from any earthly trouble.

That is where I met Ana for the very first time.

Our first encounter was one of chance. As I gathered up my belongings from my campsite and made ready to depart, I heard a sharp intake of breath behind me. I turned to find a woman standing there, a mane of blonde hair clamped tight around her neck by the red knit cap seated atop her head. A bright flannel shirt and khaki pants wrapped her body while dried mud on her boots bespoke the breadth of her wanderings.

I opened my mouth to greet her, surprised to see another soul wandering these woods, when she placed a finger over her own lips and looked around. Her deep eyes, green like moss after a fresh rain, swept wide across every twig and timber.

"The trees," she sighed. "They're singing. Listen."

We stood there -- the pair of us -- amid rustling branches and swishing boughs, the whisper of the wildlands fresh in our ears. For the faintest moment, I thought I might hear it: a song nestled between creaking pines and rasping hemlock.

Then it was gone, and those verdant eyes turned to me. I knew everything and nothing of time in that moment, its passage fleeting and long forgotten. We could have stared at one another for an eternity, the brevity of it counted in the space of our fogging breath.

"Did you hear it?" she asked.

"Almost," I said. "Maybe you could show me how."

Her eyes brightened at that, and a wisp of a smile touched the curve of her lips. "Maybe."

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There is something about companionship that splits a reclusive heart in two. The first half yearns after that friendship and clings to it; the latter half longs for days when solitude was provisioned, rather than pursued. In my years with Ana, I learned something of both.

We became friends first, then lovers, then something more – if such a thing exists. We hiked together through forested mountains of summer and through the snowy fields of winter. I can still hear the sound of her laughter, as bright as first light on the wildflowers in spring.

But I never heard the trees sing.

"Your mind is too busy with its own thoughts to hear the world around you," she explained. We were seated beside a river nearly ten miles from our first encounter. Autumn leaves flecked the murky water with hints of gold and scarlet. "Take a breath. Slow down. Listen."

I tried.

Nothing.

"What are they saying now?" I asked.

"That's not how it works."

She looked up at the trees and grinned before turning those green eyes on me, and for the briefest moment, I could only hear the slow thunder of my heartbeat quicken in my chest.

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If you were to ask Ana what she disliked most about the world, she would've blamed the roads for everything. Roads bring people and people bring trouble and the world suffers more for it. She loathed those scenic photos of winding, countryside roads that landscape photographers and automobile marketing teams adore.

In the end, there was a sort of poetry in that distaste.

Ana died to a blown tire and a panicked driver while standing beside one of those roads that she despised so much. I like to think that the trees tried to warn her, that she tried to escape in those final, fleeting seconds.

I will never know.

I was miles away, hiking alone with my thoughts and listening for the trees, trying to hear that wild voice that Ana always talked about. When I heard of her passing, I blamed the forest for failing to keep her safe. Ana would have laughed at that and asked what good ever came from placing blame.

In the following months, I retreated into myself at the loss. Those thoughts Ana always spoke about turned dark and angry, like the summer sky before a storm. I thought about following Ana to the next life or reaching for a bottle or a pill to numb the pain. But even in death, Ana's forbearance shone through. She would have disapproved, and I knew my weakness would disrespect the finality of her passing.

Instead, I set those thoughts aside, gathered up my belongings and headed back out among the trees to the place where we first met. I wept harder that night than I have in my life, those tears hissing to steam as I flicked them from my fingertips toward the cusp of grim firelight.

Somewhere between that crackle and hiss, I heard it: the trees were singing.

It was a slow, sad thing, a resonance like nothing I'd heard before sighing through creaking boughs, twisting timber to tone. I knew in that moment that the trees wept for Ana, that they blamed themselves as I had done in those early days.

Standing beside the fire, I watched the swaying branches and counted my precious breaths while I tried to find the words to set the wild night at ease.

"It's not your fault," I whispered and wondered if they could hear me as Ana heard them – or if they were too busy with their own songs to listen.