

# The Forester

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Once, a great forester, an old man, walked along a deer trail. As he walked he passed the familiar old giant, gnarled, and twisted oak tree. It was not a beautiful tree, he thought. In fact, it stood out in its profound ugliness. Yet, it had survived, by his estimation, for over 125 years through winters, and summers. Each day the woodsman felt compelled to walk along that same path and stop to gaze at the old ugly tree. He had seen many dead limbs come on the old trunk in recent years and the old man knew the tree would not last much longer.

In mid-September the forester walked the familiar trail on his daily survey of the woods he had made a life managing and protecting. It was a beautiful cool cloudless day with speckled sun light on the forest floor. At the old tree he stopped as usual, drawn to the magnificence of the ancient monster. "I am dieing," he heard a stately feminine coming from the tree. "I have lived well, use me well," it said. For weeks the old forester thought about the voice half believing he had lived alone in the woods too long. Finally, with his fire wood running low, he knew how to honor the old tree's life. The forester brought his axe into the woods on his next walk. He stopped at the base of the tree, looked it up and down then struck it with the axe.

A great cry rang through the forest as birds of every description flew from its branches. Thunderous flutters of wings echoed as he swung the axe again. Each time he struck the tree he seemed to grow weaker and weaker. Each time the head of the tool entered the noble old timber, it seemed that a part of his own heart split like the wood.

He was not sure now that cutting the grand old oak was the way to honor that wonderful life. Yet, it was gnarled and ugly and of no use to him or anyone else, except as fire wood. He said to himself, "Without this old tree standing here the younger more beautiful trees will get more sun and will have a better chance to grow taller and stronger."

The cutting was finally finished. The tree fell and laid motionless on the ground. The man trimmed and cut the giant into smaller pieces for his fire place. Then he carried them to his wood pile.

A few weeks later the wild north wind began to blow through the leaves and branches of the forest. Lush green foliage first turn a golden yellow then brown and then the summer stragglers released their grip then fell to the ground. The air grew colder. Winter arrived overnight in a gown of pure white.

The woodsman threw a piece of the old giant in the fireplace and stood by the flames warming his ancient hands in the light. But the memory of the ugly old tree stayed in his heart.

He put on his coat, boots and hat then walked out into the cold forest air. He found the deer trail and followed it back to the stump of the old tree. He brushed the snow aside and sat down on the stump to admire the young trees standing near by. He thought about the work he had done in the forest through the years. He remembered the effort of cutting the great giant down and hauling it to his wood pile.

And, then he heard the voice calling, "woodsman, woodsman." He looked around. He was alone. There was no animal or person to be seen. Again he heard the voice, "woodsman, woodsman, I am here," it said.

"Where are you," the forester asked?

"I am here. Look inside your heart," the voice said.

"I am the spirit of the tree."

The old man closed his eyes and let his mind run to his heart. In his mind he could see the old tree standing in that spot once again united with its stump.

"My seed came to this spot over a hundred fifty years ago. I have had my limbs cracked and fall in many winter storms. I was scorched by six forest fires. Snow and ice bent me into the shape that you saw me. Still, I lived and grew. Untold millions of birds came to life in my branches and filled the woods with song. For over one hundred fifty falls I have dropped my leaves to the ground.

Earthworms and grubs lived happily in the shade of my branches and became food for opossums, raccoons, and bears. I lived and was life. Not one creature; not one other tree ever thought I was ugly. Then came you, walking along the deer trail. Not until you saw me did any creature think that I was ugly and without purpose.

Do you see these young trees? They are my children. They are me. They grew from me. They are the story that remains untold of my life. You have fulfilled my destiny and now they go on.

We had a symbiotic relationship, you and me. You walked in the shade. You enjoyed my presents in the wood. I listened to your prayers. I smelled the fragrance of your cooking. All the while neither of us knew the divine nature of the connection we had, but now your time has come.”

The forest grew quiet. The voice was gone. No bird sang. No wind blew. No animal hopped or crept. The sun was bright on the new fallen snow as the old woodsman felt the pain in his chest. He managed to lay himself back into the cold firm snow that he had brushed from the stump. The snow was at the same level as the stump so the old man was able to lie flat out. He pushed up a little snow to use for a pillow and then he closed his eyes.

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In the early summer a young forester walked up the deer trail from the valley. He was startled to find the skeleton of a man wearing boots, old coat and hat lying on his back, draped over an old tree stump. As he looked at the remains he felt that there was something odd about the scene. It was almost as if the body had been placed upon that stump like an offering laid upon an altar. And there pushing up from under the old coat, between the ribs on the left side of the body, where the heart would have been, was a new little seedling bathed in the sun light of the opening where the old tree had been.