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Anthony J. McGough
Humboldt State University

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Grave of the Forest by Anthony J. McGough

With every step I took, the sounds of the campus died away, leaving me immersed only in the tranquil din of the forest. Tall, mighty, and proud redwoods towered over me, wondering what business I had in their forest—their guarded sanctuary.

“Just exploring,” I said softly, “just clearing my head.” The gentle swaying of the leaves over my head told me they accepted my reason, and granted me passage. The leaves in particular were a stunning flourish of reds, yellows and oranges. Some of them fell to the ground, laying a path out in front of me.

The wind was brisk and refreshing, bringing the musky smell of fresh earth and wet bark. I marched across the fallen leaves, letting them lead me deeper into the forest. The sun was setting, casting beams of light through the open patches in the tree line; specks of dirt and dust danced through the air. Through it, I could see the last remnants of the passing storm, grey and dark clouds, broken up into small chunks.

I decided to take a detour to my normal spot, turning right at the break in the path. A group of joggers ran past, wishing me a good evening. I greeted them with a smile and a wave and continued on my way. The new path was uphill, and my legs burned from exhaustion. Still, I pressed on, stopping to examine a stump with leaves growing out of it like hair.

Bushes and trees perfectly lined the path, creating a corridor through the forest. Going in this direction, you would have never noticed the little house nestled away off the path. It was elegant despite its size, made of polished, dark wood. One of the windows caught a glare from the sun that reflected into my eye, a wink of sorts.

I looked up as the trees thinned out a little, taking in the beautiful blend of autumn colors and blue sky. It stirred a memory within me; I had seen this particular blend of colors before, long ago. It was a surreal and curious moment, yet the memory eluded me, dancing just out of reach. With a sigh, I pressed on, passing the fenced off oil drum. Next to it was a small pile of broken branches, the leftovers of standing trees.

I rounded the corner, stepping across soft dirt as opposed to the usual crunchy gravel. It was a nice change but it wouldn't last. Another hill, another push. The evening sun painted the tree trunks a nice shade of a maroon.

Further up, I noticed the trees were spaced a little more, and there was a mass of lumber between them. There was an unorganized, chaotic scene as opposed to the natural chaos of the forest.

I crested the hill, and to my left there was the body of a tree, snapped in half with both its sides resting next to each other. I could see the red innards of its corpse, surrounded by splinters and large bark fragments. I sucked in a sharp breath, unsure how else to respond to the discovery of a fallen guardian.

Just a little further, I entered a graveyard filled with its brothers.

It smelled of Christmas, but it looked like death. Trees lay fallen on both sides of the path, their insides and branches strewn about, sap still bleeding from some of them. Even the gravel had been cleared away, leaving a path of dirt that led to the culprit: a yellow murderer in the form of a timber crane.

I lingered amongst the bodies, but dared not to take too long. An ominous presence hung over this carnage. Down the path, I found the sign that said 'Timber Yard.' The forest was rich with thousands of trees, yet my heart ached at seeing the fallen ones.

It took some time, but I finally arrived at my site. The dirt road ran across the clearing, flanked by two slopes. One ran down to a small river that babbled with the cadence of running water. Dandelions and buckwheat stood like soldiers in an army across the dry grass that coated the hillside.

Across the way, a young family played near the set of concrete cylinders lying on their sides. The parents watched as their sons built a rock pile.

Overhead, the wind pushed the fluffy cloud in front of the sun, dimming the world. A lone slug laid in its own slime near the wooden bench just sitting off the path. The fresh scent of pine leaves and flowers wafted across the hillside as I sat down.

I thought back on the graveyard of trees I had stumbled upon. It had left an odd melancholy in my heart that I didn't know what to do with. I thought about the tree that would eventually sit in my living room, and wondered how I was different from those who tore them down.