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No Uncomfortable Silences

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It has become a benign ritual sitting here at dusk, swatting mosquitoes and percolating past shadows through our thoughts. I imagine we do it to excavate our lost senses, keeping us vital in this passage of age we enter. Wilfred's hat hides his drowsy eyes as he swings on the porch swing. He's tired but he won't admit it. He's been in the habit of playing Scrabble with Roy Kelly till late in the morning hours, always working to build his already abundant vocabulary. I tell him we're both in our 70's and the words won't stick anyway. He sighs and drops his chin, peering at me through the reflection in his glasses.

"AMBULATE," he says.

"I prefer to use 'walk' instead."

"Interpolate."

"I wish to *interpolate* the notion that you, with much affectation, are engaged in a foolish discourse you cannot win."

"That has verisimilitude."

"Verily."

The sun began its drop behind the trees, and we sat in a silence that two people share who

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have known each other all their lives. There are no uncomfortable silences, just a respect that is warranted by time, like two brothers aging across decades of life. It was time for what Wilfred likes to call the *Raconteur* hour of our evening, and like clockwork he'll start up. Watch.

"Elliot, do you recall the whispering pines?" he says. Of course I remembered. "The Smoky Mountains, winter of '34," he continues. I stare at him, at those little grey eyes I've known most of my 74 years, like I've forgotten the entire thing. It really irks him to no end.

"Tell me how old we were again so I can do the math."

"You were *twelve*. In chronological dog years, 7 years older than me."

We were both in Boy Scouts then, long before the war stole our innocence. We had a good troop here in the Carolinas, and leaders that used the weekend camps as subterfuge from their domestic lives so they could show us how to cook stew in tin foil and carve sticks.

It was a weekend camping trip in the Smoky Mountains. It was winter, and a thick powdery snow hugged the ground. The trees were a white velvet; the branches looked like thin pins holding a foot of white snow against the blue sky. On the way up, our troop leader, a retired plumber named Lloyd Johnson, enlightened us on the story of the whispering pines.

"And you believed it," says my friend. "The entire time." He laughs.

"And you didn't. Sure you didn't. We all believed it eventually. Not only that, we never questioned it for 15 years," I say.

I remember when Lloyd Johnson spoke about the psychology of the whispering pines.

"Only in these mountains can you find these rare whispering pines. They're rare, indeed.

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Very rare,” he told us. “You see, they are sensitive to human touch and emotions; they pick up on them. If you very silently approach them and take the needles of a branch in your hand, then gently,” Lloyd had one big plumber hand in the air and he took his other and caressed it like it was a baby, a smirk on his thin lips, “gently stroke them, well, that whispering pine will respond by swaying back and forth in the moonlight like it knows you. And if you listen careful-like,” (here he whispers deep in his throat) “you can hear the whisper it makes as it sways.” I recall shooting a surprised grin at Wilfred then, and he just shook his head at me like he didn’t believe it. But he did. Later.

“Not at first,” says Wilfred, squinting into the setting sun, then looking at me and lifting his eyebrows. “I had my doubts, you understand my analyzing everything. Besides, Lloyd Johnson the plumber? He was good at whittling sticks and cooking stew and fixing leaky faucets. But he was no *horticulturist!*” No, Wilfred did not believe old Lloyd Johnson right then.

It was two nights later we went to find the whispering pines. A heavy snow had fallen that evening, and Lloyd Johnson gathered all 15 of us into the cabin living room to give his speech. He was a heavy man, with a thick turkey neck that shook when he spoke, burying his chin in folds of skin whenever his mouth was open. His thin lips were no match for his form, in fact we often joked that God had stuck them on by mistake. He leaned on a cane he just finished whittling, and it had (like all his sticks had) a spiral handle that spun around into a ball at the top.

“Boys, we are about to go searching for the whispering pines, certainly a most mysterious tree here in the Smoky Mountains. We will all have flashlights, but once we get to the area we

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must be silent and turn off all the lights or we'll frighten them." Wilfred raised a brow at me across the room as he spun his flashlight in his hands. "The other scout leaders are already out there trying to locate the pines. Stay together!"

We walked through those silent woods on padded snow; the trees were heavy with the thick cotton fortress and their branches bent low to the ground. There were muffled sounds of low whispered conversations between us, our lights flashing over every object and into each others faces shining white in the blackness. Our breaths formed clouds of steam, and I am sure we resembled a sloppy, dark train trudging slowly through the forest, the steam-breath tailing behind us and twisting up to the bright night sky. When our voices were too loud, Lloyd Johnson was quick to turn his chubby face to us and wave his giant Eskimo gloves to the ground.

Finally, after a 30 minute hike, we stopped and huddled around the plumber. In front of us a gorge dipped to blackness, but the other side was lit up by the moon's aura, and I could see the shadows of the great pines weave a jagged horizon line. Lloyd hushed us all and when our chatter stopped the silence was powerful. You could hear clumps of snow falling from trees 20 miles away.

The plumber stood at the foot of an enormous pine, its needles manicured with thick snow all the way up. The branches hung heavy, the lower ones actually kissing the ground and forming a solid base. "This," Lloyd began in a whisper, steam rolling out of his mouth, "is a whispering pine. We must be very silent and not raise our voices, because they are very sensitive, as I said, to sound." We looked at each other, and I recall those faces were set in frozen amazement, afraid to

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blink or move. Lloyd had us all. Including Wilfred.

Lloyd's great form stood in front of us, his fat Eskimo gloves sweeping us in with his gestures, and we the followers, the innocent students, the ensemble of idiots, watched as he lifted an arm and gently took the pine needles in his glove. He took his other hand and stroked the branch like it was a pet. In that silent evening, and from the thin mouth of Lloyd Johnson, plumber, came tiny epithets of baby gurgle. "Nice tree...ahhuh...mmm...indeed." And then that tree moved. It swayed a little as if from the wind, and as he continued to coax it swayed back and forth like a great pendulum. Lloyd turned his proud face to his disciples. "See?" And he grinned. "They are very sensitive to human touch." He turned back to the tree and murmured more gurgle.

We took turns then, one after the other, under the careful guidance of Lloyd Johnson, stroking that tree's branches, talking to it like it was a baby cradled in each of our arms. It swayed so much that the snow fell from the top in a sprinkling of magic white dust over all our tiny heads. Lloyd just stood there with the other scout leaders grinning and chortling like he knew something we did not.

We finally made the trip back to the camp after over an hour of standing on that cold mountain side talking to a pine tree. The group was filled with an excited energy, like we had discovered an ancient secret that would forever change the course of Boy Scouting. The 15 of us walked in leaps, anxiously chattering about the way that tree swayed in the night sky as we stroked its needles. We stayed up late that night, whispering about making the cover of *Boy's*

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Life, our flashlights bouncing off the cabin walls in a blackness filled with the bear-like snores of Lloyd the plumber and the other scout leaders. When we did finally sleep, we dreamt of wandering through the forest over a cotton ground lit only by the moon, and all around us whispering pines bent low as we passed, gentle giants watching over us in their world.

“Really had us, didn’t they?” I say to Wilfred now as I watch him sip the last of his coffee. The sun has lit the sky up a bright crimson red.

“Until 1949,” he says to me then. “Right before old Lloyd Johnson died.” I just look at him forgetful-like and don’t say anything, because I want him to tell it again. As I had said, gets him every time. Here he goes.

“Yep. It was fifteen years later. I was back in Asheville for a family reunion, guess I was twenty-five. Well, there was Lloyd at this gathering, all hunched over on his cane. Time hadn’t been at all kind to him. I sat next to him in the corner under this big pine tree, and he still had that damn laugh of his. He looks at me and says, ‘Wilfred Beems. You still pick your nose?’ I asked him if he still carved sticks like a crazy fool. He held up his cane, and it had that curl handle that ended in a ball at the top. ‘Last one I carved. Stroke,’ he said. Then we sat there in silence, like there was nothing left to say. I glanced up at those pine branches.

“ ‘Think it’s a whispering pine?’ I asked him. His face kind of turned to the branches, and then back at me, his mouth twisted up into a crooked grin, and he let out a muffled, phlegm-filled laughter like he was having a heart attack and couldn’t breathe. He turned to me still laughing, and said, ‘Could be, if you get a thin yacht rope and tie it to the top, then go hide over

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there and get a group of Boy Scouts interested in talking to a goddamn tree.'

"I kind of froze then, just stared at his lined face, and for a moment I felt like a part of my childhood had been stolen. Then I turned to him and I says, '*Lloyd Johnson, you old son of a bitch.*' And I laughed with him. Everybody was staring, thought we were out of our minds.

When I stood to go, he handed me his cane. 'I won't need this anymore,' he told me. He up and died two weeks later."

When Wilfred finished, he looked up at me and I sat with my feet up on the railing, feining sleep like I was not listening to the story. He shifted in his chair, annoyed, until I grinned at him.

And the silence continued like that, until the cicadas buzzed in the trees and then they, too, fell silent, respecting the space where nothing is said.
