The Way

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Abstract

ONCE upon a time in a great forest on the western slope of a high mountain lived many animals and birds. The animals and birds had always lived in the forest...
Once upon a time in a great forest on the western slope of a high mountain lived many animals and birds. The animals and birds had always lived in the forest.

The forest was very beautiful. Its trees were old and tall with many branches. Clear streams ran through it. The streams leaped and played over the falls where they cast shining sprays into the sunbeams. The forest floor was soft and springy. It took all the death in the forest and transformed it into life.

Life was everywhere in the forest. It sang from the branches of the trees. It called from the dark and hidden caves. It moved among the shadows. It whispered in the keening wind from the coast in the dark of the moon.

The little rabbit and the blind mole and the other rodents lived on the floor of the forest, and in the tunnels under the forest.

Everyone knew that on the other side of the rushing river lived the mountain lion, the bobcat, and the brown bear. Near the top of the mountain lived the grizzly, and the sheep, and the eagle.

Shy deer lived in the place of the poplar and the birch near the grassy meadow. The moose and the elk lived near
the place of the pine on the high plateau with the rough grass and the wild flowers.

In the streams were many fish. The brown trout lived in the deep pool. The rainbow flashed in the sparkling streams.

Terror lived in the forest, too. It preyed on the young, the sick, and the old. It had always been. It was the way of the world.

If you were not strong, you must be crafty. If you were weak, you must hide. If you were fleet of foot, you must be always alert. If you were strong, you must have patience to wait for the careless.

Although the forest was beautiful, no one who lived in it ever thought how lovely it was, because of the terror. The terror had many names.

It was called hunger. The bobcat, stretched on the ledge in the warmth of the sun, dreamed of the kill he must make in the night.

It was called fear. The deer who fed in the meadow kept together in the center, and never ceased watching and listening.

It was called greed. The birds darting among the branches that were full of seeds continued to call out, "This place is mine. Come no closer."

It was called desire. Everyone knew of the place where the great bucks lay, to this day, with locked horns and broken necks.

It was called the way of the world.

Sometimes a young deer who had lost its mother would ask, "Why?" The older members of the herd would answer, "It has always been. It is the way of the forest. You must be careful and anxious if you are to survive in the forest." Then the whole herd would move warily down at dusk to drink at the place of the deep pool.

When the little faun was drinking, he saw the rich brown trout swimming lazily in the pool. "Brown trout," he said, "Why?"

The brown trout swam near the faun and said, "It has always been. The brown bear is shrewd, and many of my brothers have been caught in his paw when they were care-
less. It is the way.” He would swim deep in the pool away from the silly faun who questioned the way of the world.

One day there was a great rush in the forest. All of the paths were filled with the running feet of the animals. The animals looked neither to right or left. They breathed together the horror.

Fire! Fire! Fire! No one hesitated. They joined those on the path. Fire! Fire! Fire!

The bear and the bobcat came from the high place and cried, “The wind, the wind has come from the desert on the other side of the mountain to help the fire.” And it had. It fanned the fire hotter and hotter.

The brown trout went to the very bottom of the pool searching for the coolness of the deep holes, but it was not deep enough. He died.

The rabbit and the furry rodent dug frantically to make a deeper hiding place, but it was not deep enough. The fingers of the fire stopped the mouth of the tunnel. They died.

Only the animals who could run very fast survived. They were huddled on the beach in great agony. The fire had scorched their back and burned their feet. Some of the animals had broken their legs when they fell from the rocks at the edge of the forest. They cried piteously.

Finally, the fire had eaten the whole forest. The wind had gone whistling out to the vast and lone sea. It was quiet.

Not one tree remained. Not even a skeleton of a tree was left to mark the place of the forest. The streams were hot and filled with dead limbs. Nothing lived on the side of the mountain.

The black scavengers of the air circled slowly overhead. The few animals on the beach moved in pain and beyond terror. “There has always been fire,” they said, “But never like this. Only a part of the forest was ever taken before. We must find another forest.”

They began to walk across the ashes on the side of the mountain. As far as they looked they could not see another forest. They walked on and on. The faun and the bobcat walked side by side.