

## The Tree That Listened

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Amy wasn't used to silence.

She lived in an apartment by the coast, where the sea whispered and roared all day long. Her bedroom window overlooked a busy harbour. She could name every type of boat: fishing trawlers, sleek white yachts, giant cargo ships crawling toward the docks like sea monsters. She loved it. The view was always changing. Life was always moving.

Even her quiet moments weren't truly quiet. There were the beeps of traffic below, the murmur of voices in the building hallway, the rhythmic squeak of the elevator, and of course—her phone. TikTok loops, message pings, YouTube in the background. Amy thrived on noise.

When she needed a break, she went to the park down the road. It had slides that squeaked when you flew down too fast, swings that creaked with every push, and tall trees that dropped cones she liked to crack open with stones. But even there, her phone came with her.

Then one morning, everything changed.

"No phones. No screens. Just nature," Dad announced cheerfully over breakfast.

Amy looked up, a spoonful of cereal hovering midair. "Sorry, what?"

"We're going camping," Mum said, sipping her coffee. "Three days. Forest. Tents. You, me, your dad—and Henry, of course."

Henry, their beautiful dachshund with a huge heart, gave a joyful bark, his tail wagging like a helicopter blade.

Amy blinked. “Wait. No signal? Like... on purpose?”

“That’s the whole point,” said Dad, clearly enjoying her horror. “A full digital detox.”

Her spoon plopped back into the bowl. “This is a nightmare.”

Friday afternoon, the car was bursting with gear: backpacks, sleeping bags, pots and pans, and one very excited Henry. Amy sat in the back seat, earbuds in—though they weren’t connected to anything. Her phone had been locked in the glove box. The silence felt like a physical weight in her chest.

The city faded behind them, the sea disappeared from view, and soon they were winding down narrow country roads where trees arched overhead and sunlight blinked through the leaves.

They arrived at the trailhead of Willow Pine Nature Reserve—a place Amy had never even heard of.

“This is going to be fun,” said Dad, swinging his backpack on.

Mum smiled and added, “And I promise we packed marshmallows.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “Wow. Nature and sugar. What more could a girl ask for?”

Henry barked twice like he was ready to lead the way himself.

The hike began. Pine needles softened their steps, and birds flitted through the branches above. Amy dragged her feet, earbuds still dangling, Henry charging ahead like a four-legged explorer.

"I don't get it," she muttered. "It's just trees. They're all the same."

"Not if you really look," Mum replied, slowing beside her.

Dad chimed in, "The forest doesn't perform. It invites you."

Amy made a face. "What is this, a mindfulness ad?"

Still, she glanced around. The bark of one tree was cracked like a jigsaw. A caterpillar inched along a leaf's edge. Something about the stillness was... strange. Not boring. Just different.

After what felt like a hundred squirrel-chasing detours from Henry, the trail opened into a clearing—and that's when Amy saw it.

A tree. But not just any tree.

It was enormous. Its trunk was thicker than their car, its bark twisted into braids, its roots curling above the ground like frozen waves. The late sun lit it from beneath, making its branches glow. Beyond its leaves, the sky opened in a swirl of orange, rose gold, and deepening blue.

Amy stopped mid-step. "Whoa."

They set up camp beneath it. Mum laid out a blanket, Dad pitched the tent, and Henry collapsed on the grass like he'd conquered the mountain. The air felt deeper here—like breathing in peace.

Amy sat with her back to the tree. For the first time that day, she didn't feel like she was missing something. No texts. No trending sounds. Just the wind and the occasional sleepy bark from Henry.

She tilted her head back, staring up through the branches. The sky peeked through in bits and pieces—soft, glowing slashes between rustling leaves.

"It feels like... I'm really small," she said, barely above a whisper. "But not in a bad way. More like... I'm part of something bigger."

Mum leaned gently against Dad. "That's awe."

Dad nodded. "It reminds us that wonder is everywhere. Even when we forget to look."

Henry snored in agreement.

That night, they gathered around the campfire, roasting marshmallows and telling stories. Amy found herself laughing out loud—real, belly-deep laughter—as Dad recounted how he once camped in Yellowstone Park on holidays but forgot the tent poles. The forest echoed with their laughter, or maybe it was just the wind playing along.

Later, cocooned in her sleeping bag, Amy looked out through the tent flap. Stars blanketed the sky—so many more than she could ever see from the city, where the lights dulled everything. Here, each one twinkled like a secret waiting to be told.

She fell asleep with Henry curled at her feet, dreaming of galaxies that grew on branches and trees that whispered in her ear. In her dream, the giant tree spoke not in words but in feeling: welcome, calm, connection.

In the morning, the clearing was wrapped in a misty hush. Amy slipped outside barefoot, the grass cool and damp beneath her. She walked to the tree, Henry at her heels, and placed a hand against the bark.

"Thanks," she whispered. For the quiet. For the stars. For the stillness she didn't know she needed.

The walk back felt different. The trail that had once seemed endless now passed too quickly. Amy noticed the way sunlight hit spider webs, how moss grew in fuzzy patches like forest pillows, how the birdsong changed with every bend.

Back at the car, Dad reached for the glove box. "Want your phone back?"

Amy hesitated. "Yeah. But maybe not just yet."

Mum turned, surprised. "Really?"

Amy smiled. "I kinda like hearing myself think."

They drove home with the windows down and no music playing. As they came over the hill and the sea reappeared, Amy leaned toward the window. The harbour sparkled, ships dotted the horizon, yachts bobbed near the docks.

But something had shifted. She loved this view—she always would—but now, she carried something else too. The quiet of the forest. The strength of that tree. The feeling of being small and grounded at the same time.

Back in their apartment, Henry flopped onto his dog bed with a grunt. Amy wandered to her bedroom window, watching a red sailboat drift into the bay. Behind her, her phone buzzed once from the counter.

She let it sit there.

Tomorrow she'd go to the park, maybe climb one of the old trees, maybe just lie on the grass. This time, she wouldn't bring her phone.

For now, she closed her eyes and let the memory of the forest wash over her. The hush. The roots. The stars.

In a world that never stopped shouting, she had found something extraordinary in the silence: space to hear her own heart.

And that, she thought, was something worth holding onto.