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The Tragedy of the Rain Forest

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The Tragedy of the Rain Forest

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"They came again today. I do not understand what they want from me. I keep telling them that the best thing I can do, the only thing I can do is to try to feed and shelter my family. And still the man from the Peace Corps tells me I'm doing the wrong thing. Well, maybe I am by his standards, but not by mine."

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They came again today. I do not understand what they want from me. I keep telling them that the best thing I can do, the only thing I can do is to try to feed and shelter my family. And still the man from the Peace Corps tells me I'm doing the wrong thing. Well, maybe I am by my standards, but not by mine.

I am a poor but proud man. My wife Maria tells me, "Alberto, pride goeth before a fall," and what can I say? This land belonged to my father, and his father before him. They were all able to survive on the land, but I cannot any longer. The Brasilian government has proven itself not to care about its people and their welfare. So I am on my own; no longer is my father here to tell me what to do. But now I know what I must do. The rain forests must go.

We own a tiny house in a small clearing. The forests surround the house on every side. They have been there since long before the Mendez family settled in Brazil. My father used to take me for long walks in the forest when I was young. He would point out all of the different animals peeking out from behind the lush canopies near the tops of the trees and tell me that animals were very important and special, because God created them. Just before he died, he called me to his bedside, took my hands in his and said softly, "The world is changing quickly, Alberto. I have taught you what is right and what is wrong, and now you must build your own life, make your own decisions. The beautiful trees are now yours to show your sons, and I know that you will teach them to marvel at the beauty of them. I love you, my son, and I trust you to make the right decisions." Then he drew a last, quivering breath and was gone.

The years have passed quickly, and in the tradition of my father, I led my sons through the magnificent forests and they too are in awe of them just as I was when I was younger. But a vague shadow of apprehension has clouded my thoughts lately. My children's faces have become pale and gaunt. My wife, too, looks tired all the time. And finally, I realized I must face the awful fact that food is getting harder to find. We killed our last cow last week and although we are stretching it out and trying to make it last, the flour is running low. For a long time I sat on the front step, letting thoughts come and go through my head, and I felt guilty. I could not support my family any longer; I had let them down. And to make things right for them, I will be letting my father down.

A different man came to my house last week. He was well-dressed and well-spoken. He told me that he was a representative of a Japanese timber industry. I did not understand most of the things he said, but one thing was clear. He wanted me to sell my forest to him. I got angry and told him to go. He nodded as if he often heard that and gave me some papers—some sort of contracts, I think, and told me to think about it and he would be back. I said that I didn't need to think about it, that I would never ruin my beautiful forests no matter how much they were willing to pay me.

And yet, my wife grows weaker, the baby cries all the time, and boys no longer run about the yard, shouting and laughing. I have prayed to God and gotten no answer. I have sold almost all of our possessions, even the tattered Bible that has been in the Mendez family since Columbus sailed the seas, but the food is almost gone. The forests, which have always been my stability, my source of comfort and delight, and the single lasting link between my father and I, offer the only solution, and although I fight it every day, the hateful knowledge of what I must do haunts me.
And so I have made my decision. The man from the Peace Corps returned again today, and I told him of my plans. We argued for a long time under the hot sun. He shouted at me, "Don't you know the consequences for your action? Haven't you seen the smoke? Heard the saws? You can't destroy the forest knowing what will happen, knowing what your children will have to face!" Finally, I told him I did not care about the Earth getting hotter, or some invisible layer of the atmosphere disappearing; these things I could not see or feel. My children were dying in front of my eyes—it was them or the forest, I told him. And yet I wonder if he saw the agony in my eyes as I looked to the lush green forests that I had come to cherish almost like a part of my ancestry.

After a sparse dinner of rice, I sat down and signed the rich man's contract. As soon as my pen left the paper, I felt a fierce emptiness settle inside of me like a huge rock. My heart felt as though it had been ripped from my body, and I wondered if perhaps my father was clutching it in his hand at that very moment. I took a final walk through my beloved trees. The leaves rustled in the gentle breeze that always came at twilight. As my boots crunched the vegetation beneath my feet, the animals scurried to take refuge from the sound. I made a silent apology to them for stealing their lives and homes away from them. A quietness settled into the forest, as though all the animals were judging me at once. I ran from the forest and into a small clearing that would soon be ripped from the Earth. Looking helplessly toward the setting sun, my nose caught the scent of smoke destroying those trees which had already been condemned. The fire had come.

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