

## A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE

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(1) The hectic life I led as an office flunky definitely required a chance to relax and get away from ringing telephones, stacks and stacks of work, and irate bosses and co-workers. Tranquility became more precious to me than gold. But where could peace be found during a forty-five minute lunch break? Certainly not in the bustling office building. Therefore, each day I would grab my lunch and dash (not too precipitously) out of the building and towards my own private, peaceful nook. Across the swelter of the parking lot I would hurry, straight at the row of trees that loomed ever larger until it blotted out the sight of a large old house on the right and a cluster of high school buildings on the left. Once within the shade of the trees I would slow my pace, savoring the change in temperature that is not really a sensation of coolness, but rather a lessening of heat. At a particular break in the trees I would stop and seat myself on the ground, preparing to relax for an uninterrupted--though brief--time.

(2) Arranging myself comfortably on the slight hill, I would first remove my sandwich from my lunch bag. As I ate, I would concentrate both on the action of eating and on the panorama of darkness behind my closed eyelids. As I did so, I would hear a few birds twittering listlessly in the searing summer heat as well as the faint rumble of cars on the nearby freeway. Sometimes a slight breeze would stir so that I could hear fluttering leaves rustling above and around me and feel the dry, hot air as it brushed against my skin. Usually I could smell only overheated blacktop from the school parking lot, but sometimes the wind would carry the faint aroma of grass burning or, rarely, the perfume of a wildflower. Most of the time the air just lay heavily upon me, dormant and passive.

(3) Once my sandwich was finished, I would open my eyes and begin to observe my surroundings. As the juice from the orange I was peeling sprayed my face and filled my nostrils with its scent, I would watch the sunlight flash and play in the summer air, reflecting off sleek cars speeding along the highway. I would smile slightly, thinking to myself how those drivers were rushing, rushing, rushing as I sat in my self-contained stillness. Occasionally a car would pull into the high school parking lot, entering and leaving my line of sight within seconds since the trees I sat among obscured my view of most of the lot and the school buildings. Such cars came rarely though, for it was summer and few people have business at a high school during the sultry summer months. Once or twice a driver would look up as he drove by, and I would just catch a glimpse of his startled face as he noticed me there among the trees, all alone--then he would be gone from my sight and my life.

(4) After I finished eating I would carefully gather up all my sandwich wrappings, orange peelings and whatever other garbage I might have, since I wanted to keep my nook in the pristine state in which I had found it. Obviously no one ever came to this spot but me, and I wanted to be sure that the only signs of my visits were the depressions I left in the dry summer grass where I sat. Sometimes ants, attracted to my lunch, would crawl over my legs and on my hands. I could spend long, long moments watching them scurry, under this leaf, over that blade of grass, and I naturally wondered what sort of concerns governed their busy lives. Amused by my own fancy, I would throw back my head in laughter, sometimes silent, sometimes audible--but never to anyone but myself, since I was alone with the sunlight and the ants beneath the trees. As I looked up I could see the light filtering through the close-knit leaves of the trees and feel the warmth on my face as I tried to imagine what sorts of patterns that light must form on my features. If I tilted my head back as far as possible I could see the large grey house to the right of the trees. I never saw anyone there, but I often wondered who lived there and what they thought and did. I also wondered if they had ever seen me among the trees and if they had ever wondered similar things about me.

(5) These actions formed my routine every day of the work week, and I enjoyed them thoroughly each time. Some days I would read a bit or try to write a letter, but usually I just sat and enjoyed the sun and the stillness. Though the scenery never varied, I was never bored, and I always left my little nook in a more refreshed and relaxed mood than when I entered it. My greatest regret on the last day of work was that I would no longer have access to my hideaway, since it is a great distance from my house. Now my regret is even deeper as I realize that, even if I get rehired at the same office this summer, chances are that my special place will no longer exist, since the school is planning to remove that small grove of trees. As I feel sorrow for its loss, however, I can comfort myself with the knowledge that I enjoyed, while it lasted, one of the city's last spaces of tranquility.