

When does one stop arriving?

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The Guest

What am I responsible for here?

I stepped out with my bag and waited, because everyone else did. I had brought less than I thought I would be needed. The instructions had suggested it. To leave room.

A gust lifted my hair, and it tasted salt. The sea was not visible but present.

The wind moved through the trees in a way that suggested they had been planted by people who knew when to stop arranging.

On my wrist, my travel companion had already gone into a soft mode. A pulse against the skin: *You have arrived. Please wait. the place is preparing for your precense.*

There were some other people who arrived with me. A couple holding hands, and an older man with a backpack that had been repaired more times than it had been replaced. No one spoke. No one filmed. No one announced or performed their arrival in any way.

I had expected to feel like a visitor. Instead, I felt like a person invited to someone's home for the first time, where you don't yet know if you should take your shoes off at the door.

The path ahead was paved just so much as to notice it. Gravel, and then grass pressed flat by repeated choice. There were no banners, no instructions, just a small hand-painted sign saying,

PLEASE WALK SLOWLY.

THE GROUND IS BUSY.

I smiled, then stopped smiling. It didn't feel like a joke.

My companion pulsed again.

Estimated waiting time: 7 minutes. Suggested practice: listen.

Listen to what, I wanted to ask, but the companion didn't like rhetorical questions. Instead I listened. A bird calling from somewhere close. Wind moving. Leaves touching.

I could do this, I told myself. I had applied for the long-stay because I could do the kind of work that travelled. I could take my meetings from anywhere with signal. I could learn to be quiet in a place that asked for it. They have warned that this was not a holiday, not a retreat, not an escape. It called itself a stay. Not a visit.

Stay meant duration. Duration meant impact. Impact meant responsibility. That was the arithmetic of my travel.

I had packed lightly, as advised. Leave room, they said. I wasn't sure what for.

Inside my bag were some clothes, a notebook, a small recorder I suspected I shouldn't use, and a book I had been told to bring. I'd read it before. I brought it anyway, like a talisman, or maybe a reminder that paying attention was an act.

A person came toward me along the path. Not uniformed, nor marked. Just someone in a thick sweater and a jacket that had been mended carefully, carrying a wooden box.

They stopped a few steps away, at a distance that felt considered.

"You're the guest," they said.

"Yes."

"I keep the place." They didn't offer a hand. After a moment, they added, "Before we go on, I need to ask you something."

I nodded, though I didn't know what I was agreeing to.

They held out the wooden box and lifted the lid. Inside were objects in separate compartments. A folded paper map, softened by use. A pair of earplugs. A tiny hourglass, no bigger than my thumb.

"What are those?" I asked.

"Ways of noticing," they said. "You don't have to use them, but they'll be offered to you."

I felt a flicker of resistance. "Offered by whom?"

"By the place"

I lifted the hourglass. The sand inside was black.

"This is one minute," they said. "Use it when it is needed to. Not to schedule you, but to see you."

I turned it over. The sand began to fall and I watched it without meaning to and the greeter who called themselves the keeper was whispering,

"How long you can sit without reaching for something. How long you can stay when nothing is happening. How long you can listen without preparing an answer."

The sand ran out and the hourglass was placed back in its compartment.

"And these," they said, touching the earplugs, "are for when silence isn't possible. We don't confuse that with choosing noise."

I felt an irritation rise, quick and familiar. Who were they to measure me? Then, just as quickly, the irritation lost its footing. The thought felt loud in my head.

"Why?" I asked.

The box was gently closed. "We don't measure success by how many people come here anymore," they said. "And because time is the only thing that doesn't return itself, and also, places can be harmed by speed as easily as by numbers."

We stood there. The wind moved again.

"We'll begin with fifteen minutes," they said. "Of being here."

"Here?" I echoed.

"Yes, if you can be here, you can be elsewhere. If you can't be here, you'll just arrive everywhere you go and never meet it."

I watched the path ahead. It disappeared into trees. Not wild trees, not a forest, but a curated depth, a place designed by people who understood that design could be a form of listening if you were humble enough.

My companion pulsed.

Do you accept the place's practice?

I hesitated. It felt silly, and then it didn't feel silly at all. It felt like the first real decision of the trip.

"Yes," I said out loud.

"Before you stay," the keeper said quietly, "tell me what you think you've come to take."

The Keeper

Boundaries required.

I do not watch them arrive all at once. That would be too much, for them and for me. I notice details instead. How they step into the place. How their eyes move. Whether they rush to orient themselves, or allow the place to remain larger than their understanding for a moment.

This one carries her bag as if it still belongs to her. That is neither good nor bad. Just early.

I have learned not to meet the eyes of guests immediately. It makes them perform. Instead, I let the place greet them first. The wind does that well, and the ground, too. People forget how communicative soil can be.

I wait until the companion has gone quiet. When the device stops instructing and begins listening, I choose to approach.

"You're the guest," I say, because names come later, if at all.

When they accept the hourglass, I feel the familiar tightening in my chest, stemming from responsibility. The old language may have called it hosting, but that word implies generosity without limit, and therefore we no longer use it. Instead we use caring, which implies duration, maintenance, refusal when necessary.

Fifteen minutes is not a test. It is a courtesy. It gives the nervous system time to arrive before the rest of the body insists on going somewhere.

While they stand there, holding the hourglass too tightly, I step back. I do not disappear. That matters. People need to know that attention can be present without pressing.

I walk the short distance to the bench under the leaning pine. From here, I can see the path and the open space beyond it, where the grass never quite decides whether it wants to be a lawn or a field.

Someone is already there.

They sit with their back to the bench, on the ground, legs folded badly, as if their knees have given up negotiating. A mug between their hands. No companion on their wrist. That absence is deliberate.

"You're early," I say.

"I never left," they reply, without turning.

This is the one who opted out. Or, as they would say, opted aside.

Once, they were part of everything. Planning, co-design, the long meetings about flow and impact and care. They knew the language better than most. They helped write some of it. Then one day, they stopped coming to the meetings. They stopped responding to the invitations that had been carefully rewritten to sound less like obligations.

They still live here. They still tend the edge of the place, where the cultivated gives way to whatever comes next. They just refuse to be counted.

"I saw the arrivals," they say. "You've got another long-stay."

"Yes."

We sit in parallel silence for a while. This is allowed. Silence that has consent does not need supervision.

"You know, they'll ask you eventually, about the expectations, their role and responsibility" the resident says.

"Yes."

"And what will you say?"

I watch the guest at the edge of the path. She has turned the hourglass once now. Her shoulders have dropped. That is usually the first change.

"I'll tell them what I tell everyone," I say. "That arriving ends when you stop needing the place to confirm you."

The resident snorts softly. "That's almost a sentence."

I smile and ask "What will you tell them?"

"If they ask me?" The resident shrugs. "I'll tell them that staying is just another kind of movement. And that some of us move by refusing to participate."

"That sounds like a disagreement."

"It's not," they say. "It's just a different tempo."

They stand, slowly, joints complaining. Before leaving, they look at me properly for the first time.

"You're tired," they say.

"So are you."

"Yes," they agree. "But I'm tired in a way I've chosen."

That is the difference. It always is.

They leave, moving along the path that never makes it onto the maps we offer. Some routes are learned by repetition only.

I return my attention to the guest. She is no longer watching the hourglass, but the ground, as if it might speak. Sometimes it does.

When the fifteen minutes end, I do not announce it. Time that has been noticed does not need punctuation.

She looks up at me, uncertain. That is a good sign.

"Is that it?" she asks.

"For now," I say.

They nod, then hesitates. "What happens next?"

I consider the question. There are many possible answers, and most of them are wrong.

"Next," I say, "you'll be shown where you can put your things. Then you'll be shown where you can put your attention. Those are not always the same place."

As we walk, she gestures toward the trees, the careful openness of the space.

"Does it work?" she asks. "What you're doing here?"

I slow down, and almost make it a stop, enough to mark the question as important.

"Sometimes," I say.

"And when it doesn't?"

I think of the resident. Of those who leave angry. Of those who stay too long and become brittle.

"Then the place tells us," I say. "And we listen. Or we fail."

She considered this. Then, quietly: "Is that why you don't count visitors?"

"Yes."

"What do you count, then?"

Remembering when I still thought success was something you could stand outside of and count, I finally answers in courtesy of her question, "We count pauses. We count returns. We count how often someone chooses to sit when they could move on."

"And silence?"

I nod. "Silence is the most delicate metric. It resists being measured and performed."

She smiles, not for me, but inward. That, too, is a sign.

As we walk deeper into the place, I feel the familiar, fragile hope. Not that this guest will stay. Not that they will understand everything.

Only that, for a while, they will stop arriving.

Later, when the guest has been shown where to put her things and where not to put them, I walk my way back.

There are places here that are not for guests. Not that they are secret, they simply do not ask to be entered, and therefore most people pass them without noticing. Some notice and keep walking.

Near the old beech tree, I stop. The child is there, crouched low, fingers dark with soil, speaking softly.

I do not interrupt.

This is one of the things I have learned, not all listening belongs to me.

The Child

...of a place

I know when someone is new because they look up too much.

They look at the trees the way people look at maps, trying to find where they are. Sometimes they ask what things are called right away. Sometimes they don't ask at all and just take pictures, even though the companion tells them not to.

I don't have a companion. I did before, but it broke and nobody hurried to fix it. They said I already knew how to listen.

I was talking to the beech tree when the keeper came back, but I didn't turn around. The beech tree doesn't like that. It prefers when you finish what you're saying.

The new guest walked past on the path, slower than before. She didn't see me at first, like most others.

She stopped when she heard me say the name of the small yellow flower that grows close to the roots. Not the one people like to photograph. The other one.

They waited until I finished.

"What's that called?" she asked.

I said the name of the flower.

She repeated it, carefully, like she was placing something back where it belonged.

"Why do you learn all the names?" she asked.

I thought about it. Nobody had asked me that before. Mostly they ask what the names are, and say they are beautiful, not why.

"So I can remember," I said.

"What happens if you don't?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Then the place has to remember for you. And it gets tired."

She looked at the ground, then at her hands.

"I'm trying to stay," she said. "Not just be here."

I nodded. I knew what she meant.

"You don't have to try so hard," I told her. "Staying happens when you forget to leave."

She laughed, but not too loud. More like the kind of laugh that doesn't scare things away.

Later, when she walked on, I stayed with the beech tree until the light changed. I practiced saying the names again, the old ones and the new ones. Some of them are borrowed from people who lived long before I was born.

Sometimes the keeper says the names differently than I do.

Not wrong. Just older.

They learned them from people who learned them from other people, and sometimes from books that were written when the place still had different edges. Some names are shorter now. Some have softened. A few are not used anymore because they belonged to things that are gone.

I asked about those.

They said we don't erase names when things disappear. We carry them differently. Like you carry someone who has died. Not in your arms, but in how you move.

Once, I asked if the place would remember me when I was gone.

They didn't answer right away. That usually means the question is good.

They said the place remembers patterns more than people. How water moves. Where feet tend to slow down. Where things are protected without being fenced.

They said if I wanted to be remembered, I should pay attention to those patterns.

So I do.

When I plant trees, I don't plant them where I want shade. I plant them where the ground has already decided to rest. When I learn names, I learn the ones that are hard to keep. The ones that don't stick unless you say them out loud.

Sometimes guests ask if this is my land.

I tell them no.

I tell them this is where I am in the work.

They usually nod, like they understand. Sometimes they really do. Many guests have passed this place, and they usually speak to me like the child I look like, not who I am.

I don't know who will come next. I don't know who will stay.

But I know this,

If you know the names of things, you don't walk so fast.

If you remember where you are, you don't need to arrive all the time.

I learned at a very young age from my ancestor that believing yourself as a possessor of the land is a damaging practise. I believe them. My ownership of the apple grove, the beech tree is an illusion that some people entertain as a societal formality. The place I live in is not mine to have, but mine to nurture. I am responsible.

By Petra Trobäck

I plant trees. I plant them knowing I might never see them grow enough to bear fruit. That I might even be dead or elsewhere before I can sit under the shade of it. This is OK.

When the keeper passed me again, I didn't look up.

They already knew I was here.

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Ask me what I am made of and I will tell you to look down.

Not at the ground as property, but at the ground as witness.