

The Things We Take

By Zora

“I just left it there.”

I recoiled in shock. “WHAT???” I gasped. The man in my company, a tall golden haired Californian with the calmest energy I’d ever experienced, just nodded.

“It belonged to nature, I didn’t want to disrupt the ways of life. Humans aren’t meant to take the way we do.”

He was right, I knew. I felt shame heat my cheeks, rising from my gut to my face. It had never occurred to me that anyone would think to leave a piece of gold sitting where they found it. I didn’t think he was crazy for leaving it, I immediately knew deep down that he was right. It wasn’t natural to disrupt the world the way we so often do as humans. And people like me, with my immediate greed, are the reason we’re destroying the world.

I was on a mountain in northern Italy when this conversation occurred. It was the summer of 2023, and over a year later I still think about it once a day. Working as an au pair in Bolzano I had met a multitude of interesting people throughout my travels, but this man, Jake, he was called, is one I know I will never forget. We had met on my way up one of the many mountains I scaled that summer, and instantly struck up a conversation that lasted all the way to the top. He was a nature photographer from Los Angeles, travelling the world and taking pictures. As we walked, Jake told me all about his life and the places he’s seen, but he spent the most time talking about how much he loves being from California.

He really embodied my idea of a Californian man. He was so laid back, and it seemed that the things in life that often upset me, he just let roll right over him like the waves he surfed. He told me he regretted nothing he’s ever done, he’s just on earth to learn and experience. We talked about how putting good things into the universe means you’ll get good things in return, and that he is a living example of that. He told me he always chooses to be kind and optimistic, and things work out for him. He joked that his friends hate him because

they can't understand why incredible experiences just fall into his lap, like the time he met a French man who let him live in his apartment in Paris for free for three months. I really liked his vibe, and we were on the same page for most of the time we spent together, until the topic of the gold he found arose.

"I was hiking up Mount Whitney, one of the tallest mountains in Cali, when I stumbled upon a little chunk of gold in the river, missed during the mining days," he explained.

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "What did you do with it?" I thought to myself, waiting for his response, about the things I would've done had I stumbled upon a piece of gold. I probably would pocket it and sell it, or perhaps turn it into a beautiful gold necklace. Or maybe even turn it into a little block and sell it later along in my life.

That was when he told me he'd just let it where it was. He said he picked it up and put it back down and that was that. It was just something cool for him to admire, not to take and use for his benefit.

The shame I felt was strong and I felt myself change then and there. We aren't meant to just take, take, take, take all the time in life. Some things were just meant to be appreciated. I reflected on the selfish nature of man, and how it was my immediate instinct to think about how nature could make me rich. Life isn't meant to revolve around money, it's about beauty and observation.

Moving forward after that day, I found myself practising selflessness in a way I hadn't before. I gave up my comfort for the comfort of others, I shared the last chocolate with my brother. I had a new insight that the world wasn't meant to cater me, I was here to serve the universe. If I was good to life, life would be good to me. And it's benefitted me! I have found that good fortune seems to seek me, and I believe that it's because I am open and I am giving.

I'm grateful to Jake from California for expanding my mind, and showing me how to admire without taking.