

MELANIE DYLAN FOX

## GIANT FOREST

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I have known from the beginning that I cannot stay. I carry this knowledge close to me like a secret I must keep, through every day that passes in the forest. It has become part of me now, woven in layers beneath my skin, entwined in flesh and muscle. It is deep like the roots I have planted in the hard, rocky granite earth at the edge of a mountain peak, the roots which make this my home. It speaks to me, calls to me quietly late at night on wind that rises from the valley below and wraps around the Sequoia trees. Sometimes I almost forget that in a few years, every part of my life here in Giant Forest will be gone.

In a box underneath my bed I keep an old photograph, its edges now curled, the image scratched and dull. The season was late spring, in the weeks just before the days change into summer. Rachel and I had spent three long weeks crossing the United States in a wandering, crooked path, driving further and further south until we reached New Orleans and then west toward our summer jobs in Sequoia National Park. We drove into the park, tired and elated all at once.

At the entrance to the park I saw a tall, wooden sign. We had arrived. I pulled the car to the side of the road and stood next to it while Rachel clumsily held the camera. I leaned my back against the sign, the wood worn smooth, bleached from years of sunshine and dry, central California heat. I remember the sun that afternoon was hot on my face and I had a nervous twisty ache in my stomach. The sign had the figure of Chief Sequoyah painted on one side; the colors settled in the deeply carved lines were faded and blurred.

In the photograph Chief Sequoyah looked off into the distance and up the side of the mountain, eyebrows etched into the straight, hard stare of the stereotypical Indian. I imagined that he looked into the future of what would become my life, my own history with the forest and mountains. I thought for a moment about the millions of others who had stood in that same spot, taking snapshots as they began their drive up the hill, something permanent to remember that they were really there.

The entrance sign is gone. Sequoia National Park now sees over a million visitors every season. The National Park Service began widening the road into the park in 1995 to accommodate this huge, yearly volume of park visitors, and removed the sign during construction. It has not yet been returned to its place among the long-leaved yucca plants and poisonous white jimsonweed flowers which bloom throughout the summer season. The image of Chief Sequoyah has been replaced by a long wall of artificial granite boulders which now border both sides of the twisting mountain road. During a recent drive back from the city of Visalia, the nearest major city to the park's entrance, I realized that this gesture was the first real sign I had seen of the deconstruction process of Giant Forest.

It is my last season here in Sequoia. I have said that before. Each season as the days grow short and cold and I decide where I will go for the winter, I say that I am not coming back. I say that it is time to move forward with my life, go back to school. I joke that I cannot hide in the mountains forever. And then, as the winter ends and I begin to notice the first faint taste of spring, I am unable to imagine a summer when I am not here. Often I wish to be anywhere else, but in the very same instant I know how I would feel if I never saw the trees again. I know the longing I would feel if the forest were no longer a part of me.

I have always had a vaguely unsettled feeling here in the forest. Not an unpleasant feeling, just a thought in my mind, tiny like a grain of sand trapped in an oyster. It is there, no matter how many years I have made my home here, or how familiar I become with the shape of the trees and the changing of the seasons. It is strange to begin life in a place this way, always waiting for the inevitable ending. I have had lovers like this. From our first, passionate meeting I am able to see with absolute clarity that it will end. I am not always certain how or when, only that something inherent holds us back, prevents us from being together.

This season the decision to leave is not mine. Next spring, when the days grow longer and I pack my belongings to return, the National Park Service will begin tearing down the buildings in Giant Forest. They will begin undoing a hundred years of damage that humans have caused to the landscape. This place that has been my home for five years will be gone, replaced only by the stillness of the forest as it existed long before me, before all the other humans who have also called it home.

The Sequoia trees grow in a band of seventy-five scattered groves along a 260-mile stretch of the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The largest clusters of trees are found in the southern region, which extends from Yosemite into Sequoia National Park, where the soil is fertile and moist enough to support their shallow root system. One of the largest and most spectacular of these groves is Giant Forest, where Sequoias 200 feet tall overshadow most of the other trees and plants. When Hunter Dowd first stumbled upon a grove of Sequoias in 1852, he had trouble convincing his fellow miners of the existence of such immense living things.

Hungarian botanist Stephan Endlicher named the California coastal redwoods *Sequoia sempervirens* in 1856, when they were first

discovered by Euro-Americans. The Sequoia trees, distant relatives of the redwoods, were given the name *Sequoia gigantea*, a name that would remain in use until 1939 when they were given their current name *Sequoiadendron giganteum*. Historians guess that Endlicher's passion for linguistics inspired him to name the trees after the legendary Cherokee chief who had invented a simple, influential alphabet for his tribe.

I too live in their shadow. From the window of my cabin I can see the broad, spreading base of the trees, the dense leaves growing at the very tops. It can take as many as twenty people grasping hands to encircle one of the Sequoias. The fuzzy bark is the exact color of sweet cinnamon sticks. I stand at the base of the tree just outside my house and touch the tree with my hands. The bark is soft and fibrous, almost fur-like. I feel as though I am petting a large, docile animal. If I knock gently on the wood, the sound is low, as if the tree were nearly hollow inside.

Some trees bear the scar of fire that has swept through the area—ashy black gashes which cut through their bark, shallow in places, deep in others. The Sequoias rarely die as a result of fire. Most continue to grow up and around the charred, damaged parts. Along the nature trail I can stand inside one of the trees, its underbelly hollowed out by the intense heat of fire.

I am amazed at their resilience, their adaptation to the natural elements. Sequoia bark is nearly impenetrable to insects and other pests which would kill an ordinary tree. Some of the trees are estimated at three or four thousand years old. I think about young saplings standing in the dizzying sunshine of that forest during the rise and fall of empires, the exploration of the planet, the birth of nations and people. They possess the ability to remain solid and unwavering in the midst of flux, chaos and disaster.

No matter how I would like to believe they will remain standing watch over Giant Forest for many more lifetimes, the Sequoias are not invincible. Human beings are the one thing more destructive to them than any natural element. In our desire to respect and protect them, we have blindly forgotten about the consequences of our devotion and admiration. The National Park Service now fully recognizes the problem of human impact on the Sequoia forest. The only way to truly preserve Giant Forest is to remove the buildings and concession facilities from among the Sequoias.

Giant Forest has existed as a national park since 1890, the first park created in California. It is one week older than Yosemite and has the distinction of being the second oldest national park in the United States. George Stewart and Frank Walker of the local newspaper the *Visalia Weekly Delta* wrote letters to every governmental figure they could find, asking for the establishment of the park to prevent the threat of logging to the Big Trees. The Sequoia wood was of little practical use. The trees were difficult to fell by hand and the wood was too soft for substantial building materials. These immense trees were relegated to use as firewood, tooth-picks, fence posts, and many were shipped in pieces around the country and reconstructed as novelty exhibits. The native Mono Indians held the *Wawona*, or Sequoia tree, as sacred and warned that bad luck would follow anyone who destroyed them. Even a century ago, the need for the preservation was realized.

Instead of destroying the Sequoias, people came to appreciate the Big Trees, to worship them, amazed by their immense size and tremendous age. They came to photograph them, trample them, and touch them. And now, over a hundred years later, the trees show subtle signs of wear below the ground in their roots, and in their halted growth.

The current plan for the evacuation of facilities in Giant Forest is the culmination of a longstanding battle to preserve the Sequoia trees. In 1926, the prominent forest pathologist Emilio Meinecke published a report at the request of the park director, which detailed for the first time the negative effects of human impact on the trees. In the early days of Sequoia National Park's growing visitation and tourism, Meinecke's findings were disturbing and unwelcome. He clearly demonstrated that the trees in Giant Forest had already suffered root damage caused by the soil compaction of human foot traffic. He also found that the roots were often disturbed or severed in the construction of roads, water lines, and buildings. Meinecke recommended that all construction in Giant Forest be halted and for all activity to be moved to a less sensitive location before the trees incurred any further damage.

The report confirmed the park superintendent's fears. Colonel John Roberts White, Sequoia National Park's longest governing figure, had believed for some time that Giant Forest could not continue to grow and support its tourist activity without long term problems. In addition to the documented environmental damage to the trees, Colonel White expressed concern for the quickly diminishing aesthetic environment in Giant Forest. In a report to the park director on July 4, 1930, he wrote:

The problem of handling such numbers (of visitors) in the congested central Big Tree area at Giant Forest is a serious one; and much study and planning must be given to developing new areas for hotels, housekeeping camps, public camps, etc. in order to accommodate the increasing crowds. If we do not plan carefully and transfer the major part of present activity away from the heart of

Giant Forest, the beauties of that area — already badly tarnished — will be further impaired.

On the day he penned this report, nearly 1,200 cars brought almost 4,300 people into Giant Forest. The heart of the grove had become a sprawling maze of cabins, tents, people, and traffic jams. But to close the facilities would mean taking part of Sequoia National Park away from the people who loved it — an impossible dilemma.

Over the next several decades, the debate over Giant Forest continued alongside growing numbers of visitors and building development. In the 1950's scientists discovered that air pollution from the industry of rapidly growing nearby towns was being trapped in the San Joaquin Valley and spreading to the mountains, killing young Sequoia saplings and oak trees. From the huge granite boulder of Moro Rock which overlooks this valley and the Great Western Divide, you used to be able to see all the way to the coastal mountain range. Now I take my parents there when they visit, and I see a heavy layer of sepia-colored air on the horizon, hanging in the sky above the valley floor three thousand feet below.

I have been asked the question about why the National Park Service is closing Giant Forest more times than I can possibly count during my seasons here. My friends and I are not employees of the Park Service; we work instead for the concessionaire who operates “Guest Facilities” within the park's boundaries. We make beds in the hotel, sell plastic, kitschy souvenirs in the gift shops, or serve three-course meals in the fine dining restaurant. Yet we all have memorized the answer to this question. It is deeply embedded inside of us. We are inseparable from the knowledge that Giant Forest will eventually be gone.

I am still not used to the sound of the words I say to the tourists who question me every night in the Lodge Dining Room. I give the speech about the closure of Giant Forest automatically, instinctively. I often feel that the spoken words come from someone else, not me. I wonder if perhaps I won't allow the words to become real. As if, by uttering them aloud and really hearing them, I will finally reach acceptance that this place is changing. I cannot reconcile the idea that when the forest returns to its natural state, my image of it will be just a memory.

The most important reason that the National Park Service has decided to close Giant Forest is to protect the trees. They are already "protected" in the areas within the park, safe from the long-ago days of commercial exploitation. Yet they aren't thriving the way they once did, they aren't repopulating themselves as they have for thousands of years. While the diminishing range of the Sequoias can also be attributed to climatic changes and an increasingly warmer and drier environment, there is an increased emphasis now on the regeneration of the remaining groves of trees.

During two out of the five seasons I spent in the park, one of the Sequoias fell. The Park Service has isolated nearly a dozen more which lean at dangerous angles. It is a remarkable event, to see one of these massive trees collapse. The Sequoias have a root system only three to five feet deep, which spreads out in every direction surrounding the tree, often covering an acre. The root system intertwines and tangles with the roots of other Sequoia trees and nearby vegetation. The networks of roots are what tether it to the ground, the only thing which maintains the tree's stability and structure.

I am amazed that this small fraction of the trees' actual size maintains such a vital function. If something should interfere with the



roots, this tenuous grasp on the earth is compromised. The unnatural weight of too many human footsteps near the base of the trees, directly above the fragile root system, and the complex underground pipe system, can only weaken the tree from the ground. During the park's early years when visitor use was not closely regulated, guests could camp alongside the trees.

The Giant Forest area has housed tourist facilities such as restaurants and lodging since the early part of the century. The surging influx of visitors demanded that the Park Service build more structures to provide them with what they needed. Indoor plumbing was a natural part of this service and Giant Forest now has a complex system of water and sewage pipes running beneath the ground. This too interrupts the natural workings of the Sequoias' root system, preventing the roots from spreading out enough to provide the stability the trees need.

I did not see a Sequoia fall during my first season, but I arrived almost immediately afterward. I had been leaving work at the gift shop when I heard the noise. It rumbled and shook the ground and I thought for a moment that I was in the midst of an earthquake. I followed the direction of the sound to the source, a tree near Round Meadow. A violent rushing river of water poured onto the ground from the exposed tangle of taproots. The Sequoia trees depend heavily on water, pushing an average of 300 gallons through their roots every day. The roots had become so saturated that the tree snapped in half, unable to withstand its own weight any longer. For weeks the inner wood where the tree had broken was deep, crimson red, like a fleshy, open wound.

This is the most common way for a Sequoia to die. The wood though, survives for much longer once the tree has fallen because of its high tannin content. Few insects and other pests disturb the acidic wood.

Some remnants of Sequoias remain little unchanged on the ground in the same place where they fell hundreds of years ago. One intact remnant, carbon-dated in the late 1960's, fell 2,100 years ago.

When tourists ask me why Giant Forest is closing, I also talk about fire which plays an integral part in the regeneration of the forest. The Sequoia trees need occasional fire to clear out the “duff” — the debris and underbrush on the forest floor. Unlike the park's white firs which can thrive in the shade, the Sequoias need clear areas of direct sunlight for saplings to grow and to survive the inter-species forest competition. Natural wildfires also spread through the forest, the heat from the flames cracking open the small, green cones and scattering the seeds throughout the forest. Some of these seeds will take hold, place their own roots into the ground, and become Sequoia saplings. When I walk through the forest I see these young trees, some with only a few inches of narrow wood that will eventually grow into a mature tree a few hundred feet tall. A long history of overprotection from fire in the park has severely slowed the rate of re-population.

Because more than a million people visit Sequoia National Park each year, allowing natural wildfires in Giant Forest would jeopardize the safety of the people, destroy buildings, and of course, negatively affect tourist business in the area. For many years the National Park Service has relied on the technique of “prescribed burning” to mimic this vital, natural force which keeps the Sequoia species alive.

To manipulate the land, the natural elements, can only be a temporary solution to the question of fire in Giant Forest. The largest group of thriving young Sequoias were saplings during the last, natural wildfire in the park, almost eighty years ago. The forest needs more than clusters of burns in small areas throughout the forest.

Fire brings other dangers. These burns don't always remain within the control of the park rangers and biologists. I have seen huge, raging fires spread through the dry foothills, taunting and teasing dangerously, creeping toward the forest. A prescribed burn once changed direction with the wind suddenly and we spent several days waiting uneasily for the single word: evacuation.

These are the things I tell the tourists, night after night in the Lodge Dining Room. The deconstruction of Giant Forest has been more publicized domestically than overseas, and the ones who ask questions have usually seen an article about the park in a local newspaper or magazine. I spend five or ten minutes giving my speech, while the family of tourists nod their heads up and down as if they are really paying attention to the answers. They don't understand the pained expression on my face, that each new telling of the story is a reminder of a difficult and inevitable knowledge. When I finish, one of them usually says something like, "Yeah, that's too bad. They shouldn't close Giant Forest." And I wonder if they have been listening at all. The well-being of the forest overshadows everything else. It really doesn't matter how I feel, how any of us feel about it.

The nature of working in a national park is that you come in contact with many tourists from all over the world. Some of these people you may see for a day, two or three days, occasionally as long as a week. When it happens that you recognize the features on someone's face from one season to the next, the impression is clear and distinct.

Each season that I have worked in the Lodge Dining Room, the Stantons come to visit. An older couple from near Sacramento, for over a decade they have spent their yearly two-week vacation in Sequoia National Park, staying in cabin #65 at the Lodge. On the first night of their stay

each year, Mrs. Stanton greets me with a warm hug and asks questions about how I spent the winter. During the off-season which I usually spend in the Sonoran desert of southern Arizona, she often writes me letters and sends photographs of her life outside the park. The Stantons know each of the staff members' names and home states. During their nightly visits to the restaurant we linger at their table, sharing stories about Sequoia. They are the sort of people who still have something to say to one another during dinner, after forty years of marriage.

This is the last year the restaurant will be open. Even though the rest of Giant Forest will be closed gradually over the next several seasons, the Park Service has decided that the Lodge Dining Room will be one of the first structures removed permanently after this season. Like most of the other buildings in this part of Sequoia, it was constructed a long time ago, in the early part of the twentieth century. Each concessionaire has neglected the buildings, hesitant to spend any time or money repairing what will eventually be reduced to splintered boards and nails. This is another reason that Giant Forest is being closed. Most of the buildings were never designed to endure fifty years' worth of visitors, families and children on their summer vacations, bear break-ins and rowdy employees; many are literally falling apart. The building which houses the Market is the oldest building in the park, and will be one of the only structures spared by the deconstruction process. It will remain standing just as it does in seventy-five-year-old photographs, becoming an informative visitor center.

The management plan calls for all the buildings in Giant Forest to be torn down and replaced by a new, large hotel up the road six miles. The new facility, Wuksachi Village, will be a self-contained complex, with hotel, restaurant and gift shop all in one central location. It will be

surrounded by fir, oak and lodgepole pine trees, away from the immense Sequoia trees of Giant Forest. When completed, it may be possible for guests to spend their entire vacations in the park without ever leaving the hotel complex.

To celebrate the Stantons' last night in Sequoia this season, each of us signed a card, knowing that we would not see one another like this again. Mrs. Stanton took a sip of white zinfandel from her stemmed goblet and smiled at all of us gathered as a group around their table by the window. As she opened the card and read each message, her eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you," she said as she tried to maintain her composure. "You all mean so much to us, this place means so much to us. Do you know that I used to work here? Fifty years ago I was a waitress in the restaurant, where the cafeteria is now. Just like most of you are."

As she spoke, she seemed to look past us and out the window to the two unnamed Sequoia trees overlooking Round Meadow. I noticed that the family at the table next to us had stopped eating and was listening to our conversation.

"I was a busboy," Mr. Stanton said. "I was a busboy in the restaurant fifty years ago. That's where I met Ruth, when she was a waitress."

I think often about that conversation. Mrs. Stanton has seen the forest grow and change in ways that I can only imagine. I realize that to feel sadness about the closing of Giant Forest is selfish. I have neglected more than just the trees. I am not the only one who is affected by the sound of the words or the knowledge that it will all soon be gone. There are others who have lived, worked, and loved here before me, who have found a home in this same place. There are so many people like Mrs.

Stanton whose histories and memories are deeply rooted in the mountains and forest, surrounding the trees, spreading in every direction. Even though I know the preservation of the trees is the only way, it is hard to ignore the pull of my memories. I try to imagine how Mrs. Stanton will feel when she returns next season and the next and these buildings are gone.

I do not sense sadness in Mrs. Stanton's voice when she talks about the closing of Giant Forest. She speaks fondly and reverently, undisturbed by the idea that the forest is changing as it always has. I admire her acceptance of the changes here. It is as if her memories and images are enough, enduring as strongly as the Sequoia trees in Giant Forest.

For the first time I am able to see past my nostalgia and sadness to the life I am leaving here. Here beneath the General Sherman Tree, at the summit of Mt. Whitney, in the clear, rushing waters of Buck Creek in the springtime. My home is not about the buildings and the places where I have lived. My history remains in the moist, fertile earth of the forest floor. I am able to see through and past what I thought was the ending, to what lies beyond. The hope of healing and room for the trees to grow. ❖