

Time Traveled

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CHAPTER ONE: Environment, 1998-recent

Aldo

Imagine yourself standing—no—basking in glorious sunshine in the middle of a grassy field. A gentle breeze brushes tall blades of grass against your knees and causes a slight tickle. Imagine the humidity of a muggy Wisconsin summer day hitting the back of your neck as you look down to watch a butterfly sip nectar from a thistle. Picture yourself in this dream-like Wisconsin landscape that you thought only your mind's eye could conjure up, and then turn your head slightly to the right and take a hard look at the glorious shack looming in the distance. It is for this shack that you're standing in this field, yet part of you wonders why you're even here.

"So, is it everything that you imagined it would be?" I asked my new biology boyfriend, who more or less dragged me to this spot.

"Yes! Yes, it is!" he exclaimed as he, I think, wiped a tear from his eye.

"Are you crying?" I asked as I glanced at him and then over his shoulder to the shack.

"No," he assured me. "Okay, maybe a little bit. I mean, how can I not? Look at it! It's right *there*!"

And by "it," he meant the one tangible piece of evidence that practically determined the entire course of his life. For that shack was no ordinary shack—it was the Aldo Leopold chicken coop shack, and it symbolized everything he believed in.

I had met Eric only recently, but we ended up traveling to Wisconsin almost immediately after he learned that I hailed from America's Dairy State. I traveled back home quite regularly to visit my ailing parents, and he requested to tag along the next time I traveled there.

"So, you're saying you want to go to Wisconsin with me?" I clarified during one of our very first conversations together.

"Yes," he responded.

"To Wisconsin?" I wanted to make sure. "You do know where that is, right?"

"Yes!" Eric beamed.

I was suspicious. "Why do you look so happy whenever I say *Wisconsin*?"

"Because that's where the chicken coop is!" he replied.

A more cryptic response couldn't have been imagined.

"Say what now?" I replied.

"The chicken coop!" he repeated.

"I don't get it," I said.

"It's where Aldo Leopold wrote *A Sand County Almanac*."

"I'm not familiar with it," I said.

"*A Sand County Almanac*?" he replied, almost disgusted. "You don't know it, and you're from Wisconsin?"

"Guilty on both charges," I admitted. "So, what's it about?"

"Agh," he started, "if you don't know it, it's going to be hard to explain it to you."

"Just try," I told him.

"Well, you *do* know who Aldo Leopold was, right?" he asked.

"Nope," I said.

"Agh," he said, thoroughly disappointed in me. "Well, Aldo Leopold is my hero. He bought some worn-out farmland in the 1930s, nursed it back to health, and proved that even the worst land could be redeemed. The book he wrote about his experiences became the gospel of land management and inspired me to become a biologist."

"That's pretty awesome," I replied.

"It has always been my dream to visit the site," he wistfully stated.

"Would you rank it as a top 10 must-see-before-I-die type of a place?" I asked.

"Absolutely," he said. "I'd rank it as number one."

"Seriously?" I asked. "Number one?"

"Numero uno. Yup. Without a doubt."

"And you haven't been there yet?"

"Nope. Never been."

"Well, then, we should go."

"I agree! But...I don't know where it is."

"What do you mean you don't know where it is?"

"I *kinda* know where it is, but I don't know where it is *exactly*."

"But you know that it's in Wisconsin?"

"Oh, it's definitely in Wisconsin," Eric assured me. "Somewhere north of Madison."

"Well, it can't be that hard to find," I declared. "I bet we could figure it out."

Everyone knows the phrase "famous last words," right? To be sure, saying "we could figure it out" in 1998 was truly going out on a limb since the internet wasn't an entirely dependable invention yet. Indeed, the internet did nothing to aid our search because we failed to pinpoint the shack's exact whereabouts before embarking on our trip. We naively thought, "Well, that's okay. Someone in Madison will tell us where it is." Thus, I will reiterate the phrase "famous last words" and allow it to hang on this page.

The Elusive Chicken Coop

We were under no illusion that finding the chicken coop would be easy, but, my God, locating that shack proved to be way harder than it needed to be. Everyone needs to thank their lucky stars that the internet exists today because it was a little too easy to drive around in circles before its handy invention. As an experiment, I just now plugged in a search for Aldo Leopold's cabin and immediately got directed to the aldoleopold.org website. From there, I clicked on a link titled "visit the shack," which instantly led me to a page replete with tour times and directions. All this information would have been super helpful to us in 1998, not knowing where we were going other than "somewhere north of Madison-ish."

First, though, the trip officially began with the requisite visit to my parents. The excursion started with us bringing over some sloppy joes for my dad to make a mess with. A debilitating stroke landed him in a nursing home when I was only a teenager, which is a story that requires fleshing out some other time. After that, we went to my mom's and took her on a mini journey. My mom was an avid gardener who could recite the names of every plant she encountered, but I failed to inherit her scientific naming prowess. As a kid, I never appreciated her ability to speak in

veritable tongues whenever we went to a garden store, but Eric quickly caught on to her botanical talents. Thus, I immediately regretted introducing them to each other when we all took a little stroll in a nearby forest.

"Oh, look at that *Latininus Wordis Floweris* over here," one of them would exclaim.

"I will, but you first have to come over here and check out this *Blueis Petalis Prettiness*, a rare specimen indeed," the other would counter.

I had absolutely nothing to contribute to their conversation because I had no idea what they were talking about for a solid hour. I more or less trailed behind them and said things like, "You guys just missed an *Australopithecus africanus* walk by because you were too busy looking at flowers." Of course, I now regret that I never asked my mom to let me in on her botanical secrets, for hers was the one botanical brain I now want to pick.

I, of course, learned nothing about gardening from my mom, but it wasn't from her lack of trying to teach me a thing or two about the secret world of nature. She was a great gardener, but I'm a mediocre one. I tend to ignore all the information printed on a specimen's label that explains what a gardener needs to do to make a plant happy. I know full well what "well-drained soil" is, and I know I don't have it. I've also developed the ridiculous habit of planting everything too close together so everything eventually merges into an oversized clump. I will forever wonder if there is a difference between a bush and a shrub, and I will always confuse annuals with perennials. In short, I have to say that it really sucks that my mother is no longer around to guide me around my own garden.

After our little hike, we got on the road and gambled that the tourist office in Madison would be more than delighted to

point the way to Leopold's old farm and maybe even be so kind as to provide us with a map and directions. Unfortunately, our hopes and dreams were immediately dashed when no one, and I mean no one, would reveal where the chicken coop resided. Furthermore, everyone quickly mentioned that the site was not open to the public. We explained that we didn't need it to be open per se because we just wanted to drive by and see it. Explaining ourselves didn't make a difference, though. Everyone's lips stayed resolutely sealed, and its location was to remain a mystery. No one was even willing to tell us which road it was on. It was as though everyone who worked at the visitor center was initiated in some Masonic rite that had them swear with their blood that they would never reveal where the Aldo Leopold farm was located. Seriously.

Eric was getting horribly discouraged, and I started feeling really bad for him. He must have given one of the ladies behind the desk some sad puppy dog eyes, though, because right as we were leaving, she sneaked up and whispered which road we needed to take. Of course, we only noticed later that she failed to tell us which direction to go in once we actually reached that sacred path.

All I really remember now was that we drove until we hit a "T" at the magic chicken coop road. We then took a 50/50 shot and turned to the right. It was a lovely forested area, straight out of a Wisconsin tourist brochure, and the scenery even included deer dashing through the trees. It was a perfect spring day with gorgeous sunlight and a gentle breeze. However, it seemed like we were driving for quite a long while without seeing anything that resembled the hallowed shack.

"Maybe we didn't turn the right way," Eric lamented.

Yet, the area looked correct, for it seemed like the perfect place for an old farm to be located. Old farms, in fact, were everywhere; we just weren't finding the correct one.

We turned around, but I was itching to get out before heading down the street again. I was desperate to pee, so I asked Eric to pull onto a dirt road. Thus, we pulled aside, and I took a moment to stretch out my legs. Once outside, I immediately started to admire the plethora of wildflowers surrounding me. I then had one of those strange moments you think only happens in dreams when life suddenly feels too perfect. Birds, bees, and butterflies proliferated. The sun was radiant, the breeze was divine, and we heard not a single noise from the cars that weren't coming. For a few minutes, life appeared utterly flawless. Butterflies were even landing on my shoulder. It was creepily perfect. It felt like I was standing inside a memory inside a dream. That was when I knew we were getting close to where we wanted to be.

We got back in the car and drove to where we initially made a right at the "T" and continued straight. Less than a mile later, we, lo and behold, had our hallowed shack sighting.

"There it is!" Eric exclaimed and almost drove the car into a ditch.

Of course, it was more than the shack that Eric wanted to see; it was the whole kit and caboodle he was seeking. He was on a personal quest to see, feel, and touch the thing that molded a big part of his identity. That farm, that shack, that man named Aldo Leopold burned inside Eric's mind and helped create the man he grew to become. Words are hard to find to describe what that genuinely means to someone.

"So, is it everything that you imagined it would be?"

"Yes! Yes, it is."

Where we were standing was, in Eric's eyes, holy ground. In 1935, Aldo Leopold bought an abandoned farm that resembled many of the abandoned farms that dotted this portion of Wisconsin. The land was worn out from being overused, and weedy grasses invaded the once-healthy soil. The previous owner left behind a burned-down farmhouse and a shack-like chicken coop filled knee-deep with manure. In most people's eyes, the land was "through," having been used up, done with, and tossed aside. Leopold, however, was appalled at how easy it was for people to declare land "finished." He was disgusted at how easy it was for people to ruin one farm and then move on to ruin another. He felt it in his marrow that land was not to be treated that way. He wasn't opposed to using land to reap its rewards, but he was wholly against using land so that it became exhausted. He knew there was a balance to be found somewhere in the soil, so he made it his life's goal to find and then present his methods of land ethics to the entire world.

Aldo Leopold successfully managed to nurse that worn-out farmland back to health, and his diary of how he did that became the book *A Sand County Almanac*, which he never saw published (his family published it after his death). The book was no-nonsense poetry to the land, even though the story itself made for some seriously dry reading. What stood out, though, was his heartfelt plea for everyone to understand that we all had the capacity to respect nature. And when Aldo Leopold said "nature," he meant soil, water, plants, animals, and people. All of it. We are all on this planet together. He never lets his readers forget that, and it's almost shocking how often we need to be reminded. Indeed, the world needs more Aldo Leopolds to guide us into the future.

Nature

Eric found his hero in Aldo Leopold, and I found mine in the environmental activist and writer John Muir. I can sum him up in two quotes when he says: "In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks," and "I went out for a walk and concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in." I love what both of those sentences say, for he speaks of the riches to be found in the natural world.

Humans always seek wisdom and wealth, and John Muir knew that nature provided both. Rare has there been a time when I went into the wilderness and didn't find something I didn't have before. John Muir's words will always be my mantra and the reason why I believe in the power of a muse.

I love nature, but not enough of it surrounds me. City life comes at a cost that is typically paid through the removal of trees. Yet, absence makes the heart grow fonder, and my admiration for the natural world grows the longer I'm away from it. I'm particularly drawn to old-growth forests, but they are sadly a rare commodity.

California serves as a prime example, for it exists as a shell of what it used to be. The California that prevails now is far from the same as when the earliest pioneers first encountered it. The gargantuan forests that once blanketed the state in a seemingly endless sea of green no longer exist due to modern man's insatiable desires. All memories of those grand primordial forests have since been packed into neat little pockets in notoriously difficult-to-reach places.

Yet, not all old-growth forests exist in remote locations. Muir Woods National Monument, for example, can be found 12 accessible miles north of San Francisco. This 554-acre park protects a small remnant of the estimated two million acres of ancient redwood trees that formally blanketed the state. To walk

in that forest is to walk into Earth's memories. The average age of redwood trees there is between 600 and 800 years old, and they silently watch the world drastically change around them while they willingly provide the lungs to support it. The Earth and trees are symbiotic; when one dies, the other gradually goes with it.

The fact that Muir Woods is so accessible means that it is often awash with visitors. Walking around that forest is incredible, but it's rarely completely silent. If a person wants to get truly intimate with an old-growth forest, it's best to go to one that's more difficult to obtain. I'd been wanting to visit the small pocket of redwood trees at Stout Grove in Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park for a very long time, but getting there was never going to be cheap or convenient. Yet, its remote location and diminutive 44-acre size were the precise reasons why I harbored a burning desire to go there. I yearned to stand in the middle of that forest and quietly listen to the wisdom of trees.

I eventually seized upon my desire and made the journey to my fantasy forest sometime in the early 2000s. It took me two hours to drive to Stout Grove from Medford, Oregon, but it was a drive I didn't mind doing because the landscape was entirely new to my eyes. There's something about unfamiliar scenery that keeps my interest piqued and makes me think that long drives go quicker than they actually do. I found myself standing at the entrance of Stout Grove in what was seemingly an instant, and my immediate reaction was somewhat unexpected. I was aghast that the forest was not tucked into some remote corner of the planet but stood at a cul-de-sac on the edge of a Crescent City neighborhood. Here was one of the world's last remaining old-growth forests, and someone who lived nearby could jog there before breakfast and still make it to work on time in the morning. I was stunned at the ease of accessibility and was half-

tempted to go house hunting even before setting foot upon the trail. I was dumbfounded and jealous simultaneously.

The woods invited me in by saying nothing. I approached the forest with a lot of noise inside my head, so it took a sudden blast of silence to make my inner thoughts cease. The trees in this forest were here before our nation was born. They were here when California belonged to Spain. They were here when Native Americans spoke their own languages. Their heights towered into the sky, which made me feel wildly insignificant. I felt too small and unworthy to be standing among them. These trees were significantly older and far wiser than I would ever be.

Forests allow people to put life into perspective. Sometimes, it takes a walk in the woods to remind oneself that humans are not the only things that matter. As I walked the trail, I focused my thoughts outwards rather than inwards. I wanted to hear the forest rather than listen to my own ideas. I intently focused on the sound of trees rubbing against each other in the wind. I looked up to see where the trees were touching but failed to see the tops of the rubbing behemoths. I tuned in and listened to a cacophony of eerie sounds coming from places beyond my vision. It felt like I was walking on the lowest layer of a universe that harbored multiple realms. Being inside that redwood forest was the closest I ever felt to being a character inside a fantasy book. Had I encountered a dragon sleeping beside a giant felled log, I wouldn't have been the least bit startled, mostly because I was actively looking for one.

It's incredible how the combination of sun and trees can inspire sublime introspections. There's something about how leaves filter the sunlight that makes it possible to recall memories buried deep inside the cerebral cortex. Going into a forest means remembering whatever it was that you didn't even know you forgot. There exists a philosophy of the woods and a primordial

connection to the natural world. To go to the forest is to go back to the self. One's mind can stand naked in the wind. Unexposed, one's thoughts can then morph into an intangible collection of recollections, dreams, and ideas. Of course, all of this risks being blown by the breeze, and one's thoughts may zone into nothingness. I've often stood among trees and thought about nothing at all. My blank slate of mind absorbs its surroundings as I look at the immediate world. In these moments, I find myself most vulnerable to the impressions of nature. It's during such times that I feel most one with the trees.

The forest itself had no interest in talking about massive floods, heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, melting glaciers, rising seawater, drowning polar bears, warming oceans, bleaching coral reefs, the depleting ozone layer, intense storms, shifting animal patterns, deforestation, earlier springs, drier winters, dying bees, or worldwide pandemics. The forest did not want to discuss my concerns about urban sprawl, expensive housing, gas-guzzling cars, useless wars, trillion-dollar debt, terrorism, immigration issues, health care woes, corrupt CEOs, oil spills, market crashes, drug wars, crack houses, substance abuse, homelessness, sex trafficking, guns in schools, elderly abuse, child abuse, stupid presidents, or the culture of fear. The forest harbored no desire to hear about anyone's problems about personal debts, bad relationships, horrific car accidents, traffic jams, long commutes, boring jobs, jackass bosses, incompetent coworkers, aging parents, wayward teenagers, cheating spouses, messy divorces, foreclosures, repossessions, getting sued, flat tires, broken roofs, leaky faucets, dirty dishes, or piling up laundry. Life itself can often feel daunting. Yet, despite all the world's woes, we all get up and somehow manage to go about our day. Every day. Day in and day out. We essentially become immune to the world, dare I say, even dead to it. We collectively feel that we don't essentially

matter. And when I say "we," I mean the "I" in all of us. We all say that "I" can't make a difference, so why even bother trying? All those "I's" add up to becoming "we's," and that is why the planet is heading into the tailspin that it is. Yet, the forest wanted to hear nothing about these things. The forest simply wanted to share its small patch of peace and quiet. The forest only asked one thing from me, and that was stillness. Unmoving, I learned to stand with the forest. The forest revealed itself to me when I took the time to watch it do nothing and everything simultaneously.

The forest was truly enchanting, yet wayward thoughts still managed to infiltrate the minute crevices of my brain and disturb my reverie. The only way to exorcise the rude intrusion of ideas was to write them down in the notebook I was carrying. It was a guaranteed fact that my thoughts would get distracting, so I anticipated doing a mental purge of some sort. As is often the case, the purging involved nothing more than documenting snippets of thoughts. "Strange that the color green is associated with both nature and greed," was the first entry. "It is as though we must use up all the space by sometime yesterday because we assume that there will never be a tomorrow," was the next. I penned a poem and titled it "Concrete Arteriosclerosis." I'm an avid poetry writer, and poems often serve as the only reminder that I experienced something while traveling. Allow me to share what I wrote while I sat under a 1,000-year-old tree:

Concrete Arteriosclerosis

Silence in my eyes
Wind in my step
I am the forest
the rain

the air
Nature
is
I
in the
city
we do not
need.

I adore poetry. Poems are snippets of thoughts, like pencil sketches done before a painting. Yet, I often think that paintings are nothing more than copies of original ideas initially set down on paper. As I see it, my poems are pencil sketches, and my books are paintings. I could have just as easily printed up all my poetry and delivered it to the public with a note saying, "Here you go. These are all my travel stories," but they would come across as gibberish. I may understand my words, but other people certainly would not. No one would necessarily know that I wrote that poem while sitting on a log in a giant redwood forest, but I remember exactly where I was. I remember that my eyes were full of nothing, *and it was sublime*. I could see the quiet. It felt like I was walking on air. I wanted the sunlight, the green, the forest; I wanted to stay sitting on that log forever. That is what I translate inside my head when I read that poem, but not everyone else would know to do that. Hence the need to write everything out in long form. If ever my writing comes across as florid or poetic, it's usually because I'm copying sentences from a poem I wrote during one of my travels.

Olympic

I know that I have an idea in my head of what I would like my life to look like, and it looks completely different from the life

that I'm currently living. I'm very much an active participant in the rat race, and I despise it. But like everyone else, I have little choice in the matter. I need to make money to pay for the roof over my head, the car I drive, the food I eat, and everything else that comes with the cost of modern living. It's all very unavoidable. But my ideal life would see me paying for none of these things. In my perfect world, I'd be living in a paid-off cabin far, far away from the bustle of the city. There, I would grow my own vegetables and collect an endless supply of eggs from chickens. I'd work on my hobbies during the day and gaze at the stars at night. My ideal life would be very uncomplicated. I'd go for a lot of walks and do plenty of reading. I wouldn't have any neighbors. My perfect life would be very tranquil. I would take up pottery. Or glass blowing. Something like that.

I don't like that I can't live amongst nature and still live a modern life. It's as though the two are not allowed to go hand in hand, which baffles me. Why did we not build our cities around nature rather than over it? Why did we not build up rather than out? Why the urban sprawl? Why the desire to possess both front and back lawns? Society does a superb job of teaching us to want and own things. Everything is never enough. There's always something more we think we need.

Well, there's one thing I always need: getting the heck away, albeit preferably when it's not raining. I love immersing myself in nature and forgetting that urban life exists; however, I tend to obsess over comfortable couches and warm beds whenever I find myself hiking in miserable weather. The biggest problem with planning hiking trips in advance is not knowing what the weather will be like when you reach a destination. I'll be the first to admit that I suffer from the ailment of eternal optimism, which never does me any favors when I find myself in situations that I reluctantly have to admit are less than agreeable.

A case in point was when I planned a hiking trip to Olympic National Park in notoriously rainy Washington state. Naturally, I knew that precipitation would be in the forecast because rain in that part of the world is always, yet I don't know why I didn't think that rain would be much of a problem. I had never hiked in a perpetual rain shower before, so I may have approached the prospect of hiking in wet weather as a new adventure rather than a soul-crushing experience that should have been wisely avoided.

Even though I read that the Hoh Rainforest registered as one of the wettest places in America, I bizarrely convinced myself that it wouldn't rain much during a hiking trip there. Nevertheless, I should not have been surprised that it was drizzling when Eric and I picked up our rental car in Seattle, nor should I have been shocked that we were not out-driving the rainy weather as we edged ever closer to Olympic National Park. I had no reason to be disappointed that it was a torrential downpour by the time we arrived, nor should I have been dismayed that a park ranger greeted us in a parka. For whatever reason, I felt optimistic that the sun would start shining any minute.

Nevertheless, I asked the park ranger how long the rain would be around. He chuckled at my inquiry as if we pulled up in our rental car for the sole purpose to amuse him, and he didn't even bother to answer. I had to prove that I was asking him a genuine question.

"No, really," I had to say. "Is this rain going to stop either today or tomorrow?"

In his bemusement, he simply waved off my question with a flat-out "no" and put out his hand to collect the entrance fee.

I looked at Eric, who I dragged along on this hair-brained journey, and asked if he was still interested in hiking despite the rainy weather. "Well, we came all this way now, didn't we? We

may as well make the best of it," he said as he looked out the window while zipping up his jacket as far as it could go.

We only learned after the fact that we really shouldn't have bothered. The forest was insanely beautiful, but it wasn't easy to appreciate through a constant flow of water. The trails were muddy, and the slugs and snails were so numerous that we constantly had to monitor where we placed our feet. The rain was making us wet, and it took only one day of hiking in the pouring rain before we both concluded there was no joy in doing so. The rain was chilly, and the cold soaked right into our bones. We stayed out in the cruddy weather longer than either of us wanted to because neither wanted to admit that we were feeling miserable. We were making the best of it, goddammit! We were having fun! Wasn't this forest pretty?! We both secretly wondered how long we needed to pretend this was where we wanted to be. Neither of us wanted to be the first to break out of character.

On day two of trudging in a rainy and muddy forest, we both started sounding a little too much like tuberculosis patients with scratchy throats and hacking coughs. At one point in our hike, I finally reached my limit and blurted out that I had enough. There, I said it, and I didn't care that I said it first. I was done. I knew it was only day two of our four-day Olympic trip, but I couldn't take it anymore. I wasn't the least bit interested in seeing what day three would look like because I was completely over it. I was ready to move on and put Olympic National Park behind me.

"Is it okay to say that I want to go?" I asked.

"Sure, I'm okay with it," Eric said with a hint of relief.

So, move on, we did. We decided to drive four hours to Cascades National Park, thinking we'd be getting far enough away from the Olympic-sized rain shower. However, we

discovered that four hours of driving in Washington state wasn't far enough to outrun rainy weather. I was pretty sure the cloud parked over the Cascades was the same cloud that was parked over Olympic, which led me to believe there was one massive cloud in the shape of Washington State directly over our heads.

"Do we make the best of it again?" I asked in dire hope that Eric would say no.

He looked out the window and started to contemplate. The ball was in his court; he was going to have to be the one to make the call. What was he going to say? Did he think that maybe the Cascades' rain was more tolerable than the Olympic rain? He looked like he was considering it. Oh, crap, were we going to have to get back out there and be miserable again? I hoped that he would say to forget it. Maybe I needed to beat him to the punch. We had about six days left of our vacation. We could drive anywhere. Quick, I had to say something before he suggested we get out of the car and hike in the rain again.

"We could drive to Montana!" I spontaneously suggested, not even knowing how far a drive that would even be.

I'd been wanting to go to Montana ever since I saw the movie *A River Runs Through It*. There was something about that film that made Montana look like it was the kind of place that I wanted to come home to. I was under the impression that the landscape was filled to the brim with rivers and sunlight. The yearning for Montana was strong inside me. Part of me resisted the desire to visit the state in person for fear of disappointment. Yet, here we were, sitting in a rental car, listening to the pitter-patter of a Washington rain shower, deciding what to do.

"Montana?" he inquired. "That sounds really far." He then started to poke around the seat cushions just as he said that. "Now, where did we stash that map?"

I gave a long glance out the window. "It's either Montana or more of this," I said. "I vote we leave this entire state."

He was still rummaging around for the map until he eventually said, "Voila! I found it. Let's see how far Montana is."

We opened the map and saw that Montana was still really far away, like, several hours' drive far away. Yet, in my eyes, it looked like the closest I had ever been to my fantasy state.

"You really want to drive that far?" he asked.

"Sure!" I said. "Doesn't it sound more fun to go there?"

He looked at the map. "Where in Montana do you want to go?"

I had no idea and said, "Anywhere there's a river."

He grimaced at the notion of doing more spontaneous driving and said, "No, you have to pick somewhere specific."

I looked for the closest national park in Montana and pointed to Glacier National Park. "There," I said. "We'll go to Glacier."

We calculated it to be a ten-hour drive away. To someone who didn't harbor a secret Montana obsession, a ten-hour drive sounded like a dreadfully long journey, but to someone who *did* harbor a secret Montana obsession, a ten-hour drive sounded reasonably close. I was ready to hit the road and make some good time, so I turned on the ignition.

"Oh my God, you're being serious," he said, sounding astonished.

I didn't realize that he wasn't taking me seriously.

"Yes, of course I'm being serious," I said. "I'm driving us to Montana. Right now. Here, watch me turn on the wipers so we can see where we're going." I don't know why I felt I needed to reiterate how rainy it was by turning the wipers on at full speed.

"It's not raining *that* hard," he told me.

"Yes, but it *is* raining."

"What if it's raining in Montana, too?"

"Yuck! Don't say that."

"But what if it is?"

"Well, if it's raining there, at least we'll be able to say that we've been to Montana."

I wasn't going to let him talk me out of driving there. I was going to Montana, and since he was in the passenger seat, he was going with me.

I put him in charge of navigation. I told him to find places on the map that had even the slightest chance of sounding interesting along the way.

"There's a place called Ginkgo Petrified Forest State Park that we'll be driving near," he announced.

"Perfect!" I said. "You got me at *Petrified*. We'll go check that place out!"

Ginkgo

Once we escaped the grip of the Cascades, the rain went away, and the sun decided to bestow us with its presence. I was so happy to see the sun that I reacted as if I'd just been released from solitary confinement. It was proof that our hiking trip could be redeemed after all.

My mind's eye was busy conjuring up visions of a lush, cool forest as we headed our way to the Ginkgo Petrified Forest State Park. Words of John Muir were ringing in my ears, and he was saying, "Of all the paths you take in life, make sure a few of them are on dirt." However, most of the trails we'd been on so far were slathered in mud, so I was hoping that this forest we were heading to would be a great place to stretch out our legs and perhaps picnic by a stream. For some reason, my brain conveniently glossed over the "petrified" part of the title, and I

failed to consider the possibility of walking around a "forest" made of nothing but stones.

We pulled up to Ginkgo Park's headquarters and immediately noticed we were in a landscape completely devoid of trees. As we exited the car, we were greeted by heat waves rising from the pavement. Fifteen million years ago (give or take a couple of million years), this place would have surely looked like what my mind's eye was envisioning, but since the planet was no longer in the Miocene epoch, the landscape now appeared decidedly barren. There were only a few trees around, which we assumed were planted to provide the only source of shade for the entire parking lot.

"Look at those leaves!" Eric exclaimed as he inspected one of the trees. "These are ginkgoes! Don't they have the neatest shape?"

I quickly realized that I had never seen a ginkgo tree before.

"Wait for the wind to blow and watch them dance in the breeze," Eric suggested.

I had gotten out of the car only two minutes ago and could already feel the sun beating down my neck.

"What is this thing called *wind* you're talking about?" I replied as I peeled off a layer of clothes. "How the heck is it so hot here? Are we even in Washington anymore?"

It was weird how different the weather was compared to where we had just come from. It obviously had something to do with the mountains and the fact that we were no longer around any.

"Well, at least you won't be complaining about the rain anymore," Eric quickly replied, glancing over the landscape. "Although, we should have brought some with us by the looks of it."

Indeed, whoever was in charge of Washington was really bad at drawing state lines. By all appearances, we had crossed at least three different borders.

"Well, shall we go have a look-see?" Eric asked as he tossed his jacket and sweatshirt back into the car.

"Most definitely," I replied. "Do you think I should bring along a jacket, just in case?"

"In case of what?" Eric asked.

"In case I get cold," I said.

"Oh my God, no. I don't think you'll need it," he said.

"I'll bring it anyway and leave it tied around my waist. We are in Washington state, after all," I said, and then never once put it on the whole time we were there.

Ginkgo forests once grew prolifically in North America and elsewhere in the world but were virtually wiped out during the ice ages. I learned from the visitor center's dioramas that the world's few surviving ginkgo forests retreated to safe enclaves deep in the crevices in China. The ancient Chinese valued the many health benefits the ginkgo tree provided, so they planted small ginkgo forests in many Buddhist monastery gardens. I learned that most, if not all, of the ginkgo trees worldwide today are descendants of those cultivated in sacred temple nurseries. I also learned that the trees were tenacious survivors, for they were the only species of tree that managed to survive the Hiroshima nuclear blast. No other trees in Hiroshima went into leaf the next spring except for their ginkgoes. After reading that, I was hooked. I was in love with the ginkgo.

The visitor center whetted our appetite for ginkgoes and made us excited to see some petrified examples. With no shade to hide from the sun, we hiked uphill in a barren landscape littered with oodles of rocks. According to our handy dandy park map, we were apparently searching for ginkgo tree stumps that were

supposedly tucked someplace amongst the many hills. Even though the park went by the name of Ginkgo Petrified Forest State Park, we weren't finding any petrified ginkgo specimens. We had no problem stumbling across petrified stumps of maple, walnut, spruce, sycamore, chestnut, Douglas fir, and basically anything else that wasn't ginkgo. Nearly one hour into our hike under the blazing sun, we were unsuccessful in finding one single damn stump of ginkgo.

"Why isn't this map helping?" I inquired.

"Because it was made in crayon by the park ranger's five-year-old son, that's why," Eric explained. "This map is completely useless."

"I don't think they actually have any ginkgoes," I announced. "This is just a grand conspiracy to get fat Americans to walk around in circles."

We took a look around and noticed that not a single other person was out there. We were the only ones exercising.

The *Ginkgo biloba* tree coexisted with the dinosaurs. Alongside the *Ginkgo biloba* tree stood other similar trees that were part of the overall ginkgo family; however, none of the other ginkgo-like trees are alive with us today. The *Ginkgo biloba* is the lone survivor of its kind and is described as being a living fossil. It's incredible to think that something, some catalyst, was able to wipe out entire species of living things, but that destruction was too weak to take out one particular head-strong species of ginkgo.

"How in the heck did anyone know that ginkgoes were buried here?" I wondered out loud, frustrated that we could still not locate a petrified one. "I think I'll elevate the guy who discovered the petrified ginkgo stumps to God status. There is no way a mere mortal could have found anything so unfathomably rare here."

Again, referring to what I learned at the visitor center, the discovery of the petrified ginkgo tree was not expected. In the early 1930s, a road was being built through the area, and construction workers were constantly pulling out chunks of petrified wood. By chance, a geologist from the Central Washington State area was driving by and saw someone walking down a hill with one of those chunks of a petrified tree. Now, imagine the sound of his car wheels screeching. He determined that since the mountain was belching out such an obscene variety of woods, he was hopeful that at least one of the petrified woods would be that of a ginkgo. Many academics scoffed at him because finding petrified ginkgo was akin to finding a unicorn. Ginkgoes left the fossil record in the Americas about 15 million years ago. However, many other types of trees remained, so chances were if anyone found any kind of petrified tree at all, it was certainly not going to be that of a ginkgo. Nevertheless, this geologist named George F. Beck had a hunch, and as he dug his spade, he knew he was going to make a name for himself. He was the first to discover the petrified tree that no one believed anyone would ever find in America.

Right about when we were both ready to give up, we made the same discovery, too. Our finding was, of course, only sensational amongst ourselves, but we felt duly rewarded. The elusive ginkgo tree was finally ours to admire. It was precisely there, on that remote hill in the middle of Washington state, that an incredible tree met its demise millions of years ago. Surprisingly, it was one of the smallest stumps we found that day. Most of the other tree stumps we had seen were much bigger, but no other stump got our admiration more. I can't say I've ever cried over a tree stump before, but, damn, that little bugger felt powerful right then and there.

Once, that petrified stump was alive. It was a seed that grew into a tree that bloomed and felt the warmth of the noonday sun. The time that separated us from when this tree was not a hardened lump of stone was vast. Fifteen million years was not something I could calculate inside my head. Fifteen million years ago, right where we were standing, there once was a bountiful, lush forest full of trees and currently extinct creatures. Now, the once luxuriant landscape looked like an abandoned rock quarry somewhere on Mars. A lot had changed in 15 million years, but not the *Ginkgo biloba*. It's the one thing that not even 15 million years had the power to alter.

Walking back to the car, I stopped to admire the planted ginkgo trees, and I thought to myself, "Sacred Chinese Garden, huh?" In 15 million years, when the parking lot would be long beyond gone, I wondered about an extensive ginkgo forest possibly being there instead. If so, it would undoubtedly cause a stir in the fossil record for future humanoids to figure out.