Nighthiking

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The season is over. I know it in the way the air tastes first thing in the morning when I look out my cabin window past the trees. The grass in Round Meadow is brittle, dry and low. All summer the meadow has been tall with grasses and flowering plants. I take the nature trail to work every day, a path that I have used since my first summer here in Sequoia National Park. This “Trail for All People” follows a short, concrete loop around the meadow.

I walk slowly, stopping to look at the different plants. Each summer I discover a new wildflower I hadn’t noticed before. Velvety stickseed produces both pink and sky-blue flowers. The flowers rest in bright clusters at the top of long, narrow stems covered with green hairs. They are soft and fine to the touch. The plant is called stickseed because it attaches prickly fruits to whatever touches it—a way of spreading seeds and ensuring its survival. My favorites are yellow-throated gilia, sometimes called mustang clover. The plant has small flowers, almost unnoticeable, that favor the dry, rocky areas of the forest. Often they grow like grass near rough outcroppings of sharp, granite boulders. The ones up here at this elevation have five lavender petals with a starburst of yellow in the center surrounded by spots of black and white. Few plants bloom this late in the season. The meadow looks brown, tired, without color. The indigo-colored elderberries I always stop to pick are now hard and bitter to the taste. We will have to wait until next year when they are again sweet with juice before we can make wine.

I make a full pot of coffee before I remember that most of the others have already left the park for the season. Every morning, several friends and I would sit outside my cabin, drinking coffee around a small wooden table that my brother made as a birthday present. They have left to spend their summer wages on traveling and visiting friends before they arrive at their winter destinations—ski resorts at Lake Tahoe, Steamboat Springs, a large hotel in the Virgin Islands. I
suddenly remember that no one will be here for coffee this morning or the next. When the sun breaks through the dense tops of the tall trees I will sit alone in front of my cabin in a white plastic lawn chair. The mugs that my friends have used all summer are still unwashed in the stainless steel sink. They will remain that way until I begin packing to leave. I will wrap them in faded newspapers and place them into a box in the back of my car.

I know that the season is over in the way the ceramic mug in my hands doesn’t warm my fingers and the murky Italian coffee cools faster than I can drink it. What I taste in the air is silence. The absence of children’s screams and laughter. The absence of parents with still sleepy vacation voices calling to them to quiet down, behave. My cabin is at the edge of the guest lodging, and the tourists’ voices and laughter have awakened me every day for the last four months. Even the animals, the chickarees and golden-mantled ground squirrels, move through the forest with a quiet urgency I didn’t notice yesterday. They dig in the thick layer of pine needles and bury sugar pine cones that they will return for later in the winter. There is a stillness in the air of leaves about to fall.

The equinox is still a week away, but if I close my eyes and breathe deeply I can pretend it is autumn in the Midwest and I am in my parents’ backyard. The scent is so familiar, almost imperceptible at first, and it fills my lungs and clings to my hair. For as many times as I have done this before, for as many endings as I have known in this park, I am always surprised. I am never prepared when it happens. One morning in September I wake up with a sadness I can’t explain. Like I have slept restlessly in the night, dreaming that I am saying goodbye to someone I love over and over again.

I heard the rangers say that we may have snow by the weekend. The air will turn cold and dense and the fog will creep upward from the foothills. The air will surround the dogwood trees until it is as tall as the Sequoias. It will catch the tourists off guard as I laugh at them in the Village parking lot—dressed in shorts and tank tops and flip-floppy sandals. “But this is California, it’s supposed to be warm,” they say to each other as they shiver and pull their arms in closer to their bodies.

Business has slowed too. Last night, the Lodge Dining Room where I am the manager was only half-full with foreign tourists and young, childless couples
from Los Angeles. Sometimes this late in the season we get older couples who
decide to take their vacations after the crowds are gone. I like the park most when
I can hike a trail without seeing anyone at all. One of the reasons I have come
back here for five seasons is that this park is quiet, little known—unlike Yosemite
which is only four hours away. Even in the height of the season we don't have the
same crowds forming lines of people on the trails, trailers and RV's backed up in
long traffic jams along the only road in the park.

The older couples are the hardest to watch. They usually ask for one of
the tables by the windows which overlook two Sequoia trees, hoping to see a bear
in the meadow, silently sipping wine as if they have run out of things to say to
one another. In the background last night I could hear the voice of one of the
rangers giving his fireside talk in the outdoor amphitheater. His voice sounded
resigned, like he was finally tired of repeating the same speech about black bears
that he did nearly every night all summer.

The rest of the staff and I lingered in the bar where the heat from the
radiator is warm and dry. The servers could keep a disinterested eye on their
customers eating prime rib and lamb chops. I overheard some of my friends
talking about where they are headed for the winter. The question of where I will
go when the season ends haunts me from the moment I return each year, hangs
suspended in the forest air. I feel like I am always looking ahead, never able to
enjoy each moment that I am here. In the back of my mind is always the quiet,
persistent thought about what I will do when it is over in October. I try to answer
this same question from the tourists nearly every night, making up different
stories as I go because I don't really want to think about the future.

I have not belonged to my friends' conversations and plans, not this
season. I have become Management and I am not one of them anymore. Not like
I was all the other seasons before when I was just a waitress or a clerk in the gift
shop. We are segregated, a fact I have not been able to get used to. I don't live
among them, in their cluster of one-room cabins with wood-burning stoves,
roommates who leave clothes on the dusty floor and open bags of potato chips
for the mice to get into. Now I have a too-large three-room cabin, with a heater in
every room, a telephone, and my own bathroom. I share nothing.

I have not been invited to their parties after work each night. Even just
last year I would walk the trail in the dark, seeing by the light of my headlamp, to my brother’s cabin. When I got there we would drink Glenlivet and Wild Turkey and talk about Hesse or Rilke. I let them think it doesn’t matter that I am excluded. I let them think that it doesn’t matter anymore because I am not coming back after this season ends. When I pack my things into boxes this time and leave the mountain, I don’t know how long it will be before I see this forest again.

I continue drinking the coffee even though it’s cold. I wish I could crawl back into bed with Jezebel my cat, the propane heater on the wall hissing comfortably. Or if I had the day off I would hike to Alta Peak or Rim Rock or to all the places I never found time for in five years. So many peaks and canyons and clear alpine lakes I still haven’t seen. But this time of year I have a hard time finding enough people to fill the jobs in the restaurant and most of the time I am the one who waits tables or tends bar or makes caesar salads in the kitchen when we are shorthanded. I still have inventory and a wine order to do and it occurs to me that most of the summer is gone and I have not been able to do any of the things I thought I would during my last season. There is a mountain called Black Kaweah, far into the backcountry of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, that I have not climbed. I have not felt the clear, cold waters of Emerald Lake on my body.

Later that night, after the last dishes have been washed and the floors vacuumed, I walk back to my house to get my car. I am required to drive to the front desk of the hotel to make my day’s deposit, even though there is no one to rob me along the trail. The concessionaire has relocated the front desk away from the Lodge and the hotel into the Giant Forest Village, away from the ancient Sequoia tree that leans next to it, towering precariously. One of the trees fell during my first season. I had been leaving work 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 and when I arrived, a violent rushing river poured onto the ground from the exposed tangle of taproots. The roots had become so saturated that the tree snapped in half, unable to withstand its own massive weight any longer. For weeks the inner wood where the tree had broken was blood red, like a fleshy, open wound.
I wonder briefly what would happen if I just keep going in my car. If, instead of turning into the parking lot I drive west all the way to the ocean, all the way to Big Sur, Monterey, Santa Cruz. I would arrive at dawn. I could watch the sun crest the mountains behind me, the skies turning crimson, spilling light over the waves crashing against the high cliffs. I wonder who would notice and if anyone would miss me.

But instead I say hello to the night auditor, George, at the front desk. He is an old-timer; just like me, he has worked there for as long as anyone can remember. He is very old and devoutly Christian. I have never seen any expression on his face but a smile. I have always admired and been jealous of the way he seems so content, peaceful. He is doing a crossword puzzle and we talk about whether it will snow this weekend. Sometimes in the Sierra Nevadas, even an early autumn snowfall can leave eight, twelve feet on the ground.

Then he asks if I have ever heard the story about the bear. During an overnight shift one winter, a bear was walking around on the roof of the hotel when some of the shingles gave way beneath it. The bear fell right through the roof and landed on the floor in the office with him. George is terrified of bears but he loves to tell this story. At least once a week he asks, “Have I ever told you the one about the bear?” I answer, “Which bear? No, I don’t think so.” Still smiling, he begins the story I already know by heart. After I let him finish tonight, nodding my head at the appropriate times, I put my money into the safe and say “See you tomorrow” just like I always do.

Outside, instead of getting into my car, I sit down on the curb and stare up at the Sentinel tree. It is not the oldest or the largest, but it is one of the most famous, standing over the cafeteria and gift shops. It is one of the most photographed trees, the first of the “big trees” tourists encounter when driving into the park.

This area known as the Giant Forest Village has existed since the early part of the century. The market has stood in its original building mostly unchanged, since tourist services were first offered. It will be the only structure in Giant Forest to survive the eventual deconstruction process. The other, worn-out buildings will be removed by the National Park Service and a new, modern hotel complex will replace them several miles up the road. This will give the trees room
to grow, repopulate, survive.

The lights from the Cafeteria glow faintly. Through the window I can see the vague outline of the janitor moving a mop back and forth across the floors. At least once every season we have a wicked thunderstorm and all the power on the entire mountain goes out—all the way from the Ash Mountain Visitor Center in the foothills to Giant Forest where we live and work at 6,500 feet. The last time it happened was in the middle of the summer when the ground was dry and parched. An uncontained wildfire had destroyed one of the stations nearby that supplied us with power.

We were cold and dark for two whole days. It is nearly impossible to describe the sort of darkness that sets into a forest like that. The trees are so tall and the leaves on the high branches so dense, the forest becomes impenetrable to light. The forest grows quiet and dark as the last remaining sunlight disappears over the dusty, agricultural towns that make up the San Joaquin Valley. It happens quickly, sometimes almost without warning. Even with a car's headlights on, there are still long and desolate winding stretches of road that exist in complete blackness between the tourist sights along the General's Highway.

When I first arrived in the park, both the darkness and the quiet scared me. I hadn't come from a big city, but I was unprepared for the stillness. I worked at 5:30 a.m. and would take the same trail, carrying my flashlight in one hand and a mug of coffee awkwardly in the other. Each terrifying morning when I moved half-asleep from the amber-colored lights of the cabins into the dark, my breathing became shallow and rough. The air was cold and the scent of the sugar pines was dizzying, intoxicating. I could hear the rapid beat of my heart echoing in my head. I would sing the loudest song I could think of. I tried to trick myself into being distracted, so that I wouldn't worry about what I might meet headlong in the darkness.

I no longer need distractions. I have been startled, surprised and scared too many times already so that I am prepared for something to come out of the shadows. I have been charged by bears no longer afraid of humans, nearly trampled by a panicked deer. I have known fear for a friend who was arrested and taken to jail by the park rangers. I am as comfortable in the darkness of this forest as I am in my own skin. When I would awaken at night as a child, I would
feel my way down the hallway and across the furniture without turning on the lights, remembering instead the exact placement of each obstacle in my path. It is the same way with the forest.

Tonight I decide to hike to Sunset Rock to sit beneath the stars for what may be the last time here. I have forgotten my headlamp in my cabin but I don't care. What slivered moon there is tonight is still hidden behind the sheer granite faces and thick trees. I drive my car to the chained NPS service road near Round Meadow. On the other side of the road the path is wide and I know the direction it takes from my years of use. I walk straight until I feel the soft ground turn hard, then right when the forest thins out. I know each twist and bend as the trail follows the edge of an old pine forest. Twigs and fallen branches snap under my feet as I walk slowly.

I do this more to savor the act of walking than to feel my way in the darkness. Nighthiking is an instinctive act. I move forward. Eyes open, then closed. My heart beats loudly, rhythmically, but the sound does not frighten me. I am still unable to discern tangible and familiar shapes, but it hardly matters. This is a darkness to which human eyes cannot adjust. The same inky color of the ocean at night. There is always the possibility of falling, stumbling over a large rock underfoot. I trust. With each movement, each step, my feet will meet solid earth. I walk without hesitation. I walk with the same sort of ignorant faith that once made me believe a former lover when he had lied to me many times before. The air overflows tonight with the scent of decaying organic matter on the forest floor.

The trail is not long and I know that I am there when my boots scrape the huge granite boulders. I am in a clearing now, and I focus on the outline of the valley below. The moon has risen slightly and the rocks reflect the pale light, illuminated white and shiny. I came here once my first season, to see fireworks with friends on the Fourth of July. I hadn't realized that the towns would look so little. I remember being disappointed that the ledge where we sat was higher than the tiny, far away explosions. I was disappointed too that there was no sound, no loud booms or firecrackers, only the midsummer sounds of crickets and owls.

I have spent so much time here. We came to these rocks to drink wine and tell ghost stories, to watch the sunset or sunbathe in the late summer before
the weather turned cold. I realize that if I could put all the time together in a straight and continuous line, Sequoia is the one place I have lived the longest since I was a child.

I suddenly notice a dark human figure far to the right of where I am sitting. He is higher up on the rocks, and next to him is a towering black shape. I watch for a moment. He doesn't notice me right away when I walk over to him. I cough loudly as I get closer to let him know I am there. I understand how easy it is to be startled in the forest.

The tall object next to him is a telescope, larger and more powerful than any I have seen. On the other side of the telescope is a folding card table with a laptop computer and a chair. I ask the man questions, who is he, where is he from, what is he doing on top of Sunset Rock at eleven o'clock on a September night. He tells me he is an accountant from Los Angeles. This is his hobby; one weekend a month he drives to the mountains to view the stars and skies.

"There's too much light pollution in L.A.,” he tells me. “You can't see anything. There is too much light pollution in a lot of places. This is the best time of year too, the skies are clear and bright in the fall."

“It looks heavy, how did you manage to get it all the way out here? How much would a telescope like this cost me?”

Instead of answering my question he laughs. “If only this were my real job,” he says. He is quiet for a moment. “It's too bad I only get to do what I love once a month.”

He asks me questions too, but not many. I say a little but I can tell that he is more interested in what he sees through the telescope than in hearing about life in the park. I am embarrassed at how our life sounds when I talk about it out loud like that. I don't want to have to tell him that we don't do much in our free time really, that drinking is the predominant pastime.

“Want to have a look?” he says. “Jupiter is especially bright tonight and you can see several of its moons pretty clearly.”

Through the lens I see a bright circle and three smaller fuzzy circles surrounding it. He shows me the points he plots on the computer which tell him how to turn the telescope to the exact, right angle. We take turns looking and he shows me what he calls a lacework nebula. It looks like layers of finely spun
spiders’ webs, radiating out into the sky. For a moment I forget that I am seeing something billions of miles away.

It is difficult to see my own life that clearly, unhindered and unaided. I sometimes spend whole days here without remembering to notice the trees, the plants. I wonder if I have taken the forest for granted. Or if it is this life that I have taken for granted. It often feels as inaccessible and far away as what I see through the lens. When I pull my eyes away, I notice voices and shadows in the distance, moving closer. I recognize some of them from work and I don’t want to talk to anyone right now. I mumble, “Thank you,” as I retrace my steps back along the rock. I hear someone else asking the same questions I asked 15 minutes earlier. I sit back down on the rocks, far enough away so that I cannot hear the voices and I think about how I had forgotten to ask the man his name. I realize that I never even got to see his face. I would never know him if I saw him again.

I lie on my back against the rocks. The granite is cold and rough. I look up at the sky and try to find the few constellations I know. Aries, the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the Pleiades. Since I was a small child I have searched in every clear nighttime sky for those same constellations. I can always be comforted by knowing they are there, fixed and constant. At this high elevation the stars seem close enough to touch if I reach out my hand, and the Milky Way looks like a curling ribbon of smoke that weaves in between and around the stars. I see the planet Jupiter as a single star, not much brighter than the others. And in the place where I know the lacework nebula exists, I see nothing.

I am feeling very small, humbled by the vastness of such a sky. I will need to make a decision soon about where I will go when I leave. I have clarity enough to know that I have learned what I needed to from this forest. I am feeling very small but I am not scared of the open expanse of life in front of me. The shadows and tall trees will outlive me.