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GUERNEVILLE, CA

ERIKA TIBBETTS

There's a town off the coast of California where I grew up, but I've never lived. It's a small place, a place with one grocery store, two coffee shops, three gas stations, and a lot of hippies. There's only one street light, and in the summer when the flatlanders come up from the Bay, cars pile up all the way to Old River Road, on their way to Armstrong Woods, or Johnson's Beach and fifty cent snow cones. Come Memorial Day, Friday through Sunday, people pack the beaches, the resorts, and the Safeway parking lot. I am not one of the summer people. I've never hiked through the Redwoods in Armstrong Woods, and the one time I went to Johnson's Beach I lost three layers of skin to first degree sunburn. No, after Labor Day, when the flatlanders pack up and head back to their cities, that is when the little river town of Guerneville is at its best. The warm days are cooled down by salty ocean fog that blows in at sunset, and settles just below the mountain tops.

California Redwood trees, also known as Coastal Redwood trees, or *Sequoia sempervirens* if you're into that kind of thing, are the tallest trees on earth. They are found mostly along the Pacific Coast, many between 300-700 years old, but are able to live over 2,000. In the San Francisco area, one group of Redwoods descends from a group of trees that existed 160 million years ago.

Five miles outside of town, off a gravel road that will knock your kidneys loose if you don't have good shocks, is my Guerneville – the Guerneville I know best. It's called Sweetwater, for no other reason I know besides being off of Sweetwater Springs Road. Before I was born, Dad worked on a construction crew building a three story retreat house on Sweetwater's hundred and eighty acres. When the house was finished my parents were hired by the owner, a Catholic priest who ran a publish-

ing company, as care-takers to make sure there was food for the sheep and the cats, that the carport was always stocked with firewood, and that the house was still standing when groups left after retreats. It wasn't a guarantee that it would be when some groups left. When I was young I would help my parents, sometimes sweeping the dry autumn leaves off the deck that piled up under the wisteria arbors, or folding fresh towels to put in the bathrooms when a big group was coming, but usually I just played with the cats. I grew up there, raised under the shade of the redwood trees, getting their soggy, rotten leaves caked to the soles of my shoes while I hauled firewood, or ran away from llamas. Of all of the places I have known, Guerneville has been the most constant. But it's never been my home.

While most redwoods grow along the Pacific coastline and in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, there is another type, the Dawn Redwood, which grows in the Sichuan-Hubei region of China. The tree was discovered in the early 1940s, and in 1995, North Carolina established the Crescent Ridge Dawn Redwoods Preserve, where hundreds of Dawn Redwoods were planted in order for people to experience the trees outside of their native China.

I was born in Santa Rosa, California, the youngest of three. I lived with my brother, sister, parents, grandma, and uncle in an old stucco house in a neighborhood with no other kids, which worked out great when everyone wanted their leaves raked, but wasn't as fun when you were sick of only having your brother and sister to play with. My favorite thing about the Santa Rosa house was the fort in the backyard that Dad built. It was on pillars in the middle of a sandbox that we never played in. All the stray cats in the neighborhood used it as a litter box. My brother, being the oldest and thoroughly obsessed with all things Ninja Turtles, painted the fort green and named it the Turtle House. Then, when my sister and I came along, the Turtle House got flowered curtains. I liked it well enough, living in Santa Rosa. Mom didn't drive, but the public library and Barnes and Noble were only a ten minute walk away, and there was an ice cream stand across the street that made dipped cones. I liked it well enough until my aunt, uncle, and cousin moved in, bringing Bertha, their evil Chihuahua with them. After that, I tried to convince Mom and Dad to buy a farm in North Dakota. Eventually, when my brother was in college and my sister started telling boys she loved them after only a week, we moved. Not to North Dakota, but to Lake County, a place that people from the Bay and the Los Angeles Times liked to call Methland, but I always thought the sign on Highway 29 reading, Now Entering Flake County, was more accurate. The moving process was a slow one, not without its blood, sweat, and tears. Mom and Dad decided we were going to build the new house ourselves. It was January when we started pouring the foundation. I remember because my gloves were too big for my hands, and the

water from the hose kept getting in them. My fingers had never been so frozen, and my eleven year old self kept counting the days until spring.

The reason the Redwood tree grows so well along the Pacific Coast is due to the mild, cool climate. Redwoods need temperate weather, large amounts of rain, summer fog, and rich soil in order to live so long and grow so tall. Their root systems, growing fifty feet from their trunks, entwine with the roots of other redwoods, helping them withstand the more harsh California weather.

Lake County only lasted eight years. After Dad's doctor told him he was in the stages of pre-colon cancer, it was only a matter of time before my parents had to choose between paying the mortgage and paying for surgeries. When they told me the bank was taking the house, I was somewhere between my second community college and the University of Montana. I was tying steel—cutting eighteen foot pieces of rebar and tying them into foundation cages—my muscles burning from being bent at a ninety degree angle for two days. I tried not to cry into the hot red dirt at my feet. I didn't want Dad to feel like it was his fault somehow. But I did cry, for the loss of another house, for the loss of the familiar, and for the loss of my bedroom. The steel I was tying was for our new house, a cabin at Sweetwater where my parents would be permanent care-takers. But no matter how many times they said it was ours, it wasn't. Once I packed up my old room, my boxes never got unpacked. Like me, they had no place to go. Everything Montana-bound went behind the couch in the loft I slept in, while the rest went forgotten in storage. I made the rounds from my parent's loft, to my sister's guest room, even to my brother's couch in Oakland, drifting around until the semester started at University of Montana. Once my feet hit the Pantzer parking lot, and I pushed that squeaky wheeled cart piled with what was left of home into the lobby for check-in, I was no longer a Californian. It only took fall semester for my family to decide I was from Montana now, that my room was not in California, but in the dorms. That's something I wish I'd known before I left, that when everyone went home for winter and summer break, I would go to California to visit.

The title of Tallest Tree is one that constantly changes due to logging and changing weather conditions. Today, the tallest living Redwood, named Hyperion, is found in the far north of California, in the Redwood Creek watershed. At 379.3 feet tall, it stands higher than the Statue of Liberty, Big Ben, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the White House, and a Boeing 747.

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Logically, calling Guerneville my home should be easy. I have more memories there than anywhere else in California; it shouldn't be as hard as this. I should feel at home in a place where I use to spend weekends with my cousins. Where our favorite thing to do was take mattresses off of the third floor beds and slide down the staircase, a California kind of sled. We were so small back then, we could fit all six of us on a mattress at once, our little hands using the railing spindles to pick up speed, shrieking as we slid into the second floor living room. Once, when the power was out, we played laser tag for what felt like hours while our parents went to Safeway for food and flashlights. When the power came back on, we turned off all the light and kept playing. I learned how to drive at Sweetwater, just like my brother, just like my sister, but no matter how many memories I dig up, I always feel like a visitor, like I've become one of the summer people. I come on Memorial Day, and leave on Labor Day, floating from couch to couch and living out of suitcases.

Back in the day, building codes in San Francisco required builders to use only Redwood lumber in new foundation structures due to the wood's natural durability. The tannin in the wood makes it resistant to fire, while also protecting it against insects, fungus, and disease. There is no tougher wood.

After what feels like five years, I have a room at home again. I have four walls, a roof, and a door. I have shelves for all my five hundred books, an armoire to hang my cloths, and a bed to sleep in. I forgot I owned so many things: my great grandfather's typewriter, grandma's tea set with the purple flowers, my Berenstain Bear books. It's overwhelming seeing so much of me in one place, but in truth, it's not home yet. While the walls are filled with the many parts of me, there is nothing of me now, me today, the girl that moved away to Montana to figure out where she belonged. Home is still the smell of ocean air, the feel of salt on my skin as it blows in the wind. It's campfires, ham and cheese rolls, pumpkin candles, and Mom's perfume, the spicy Estee Lauder perfume that lingers after she's left the room. It's the prickly scratch of Dad's beard when he hugs me. Home is still all of the things I didn't leave behind, going from house to house, and city to city.