

On  
Sequoia  
Time

BY DANIEL KEYS MORAN

This is a work of fiction. None of the characters in it are real people and any resemblance to anybody, living or dead, is a coincidence – though my grandfather, R.D. Montgomery, did own a ranch in Arizona.

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*John Muir called the sequoia the “king of all the conifers of the world, the noblest of a noble race.” The trees were named for the Cherokee chief Sequoyah, the man who invented the Cherokee alphabet.*

*They are the largest and very nearly the oldest of all living things.*

WHEN MY GRANDFATHER CHARLES was seven years old he first saw the box canyon where he would spend most of his adult life, the canyon where he would plant the tree.

It was late afternoon on Wednesday, July 2, 1924, that Charles saw the entrance, and a little bit inside. They were driving a two-lane, poorly paved road through northern Arizona. (They were moving from Idaho to California. After twelve years of trying to make the same sixteen acres of Idaho farmland feed his family, with a little left over to sell, my great-grandfather had seen the writing on the wall, and packed it in.) Charles suspected they were lost, but from the way the muscles in his father's neck were standing out he knew better than to say anything about it.

Charles had very good eyes in those days, and when he pointed the canyon's entrance out to his older sister she could not see it.

They sat in the back seat of a battered old Model T, a car that had probably come off the assembly line looking old. It wouldn't go faster than forty miles an hour and it complained above thirty. Aside from their clothes and some boxes of kitchen utensils tied on top of the car it was the only thing their family owned.

His sister Abby peered out the dirty window at the place where two mesas came together, about four or five miles off. "Right *there*," Charles insisted. "There's a opening in there and you could go inside, maybe."

"I don't see it," said Abby crossly, and that was the end of the matter.

WHEN HE WAS TWENTY-NINE my grandfather came back looking for the canyon. It was the summer of 1946; World War II was over, and Charles had just gotten out of the Marine Corps.

His eyesight wasn't as good as it had been as a child. Four years of constant studying in college had damaged his vision, and it had gotten worse during the campaign to take Okinawa

from the Japanese. He'd broken his glasses early on and had to work and fight without them for several months; it had nearly cost him his life.

He went hunting for the canyon with binoculars and a brand new pair of glasses, a parting gift from Uncle Sam.

It took him a good part of the summer just to find the road on which his family had come to California. He drove a black pre-war Packard that reminded him sometimes of the Model T in which his family had moved to California. It ran a bit faster but it was just as ugly and beat up.

The hunt for the road took up most of his time. There were a dozen roads his father might have come by, including several that were not even listed on the map he had. His father had died during the war (at home, of a heart attack) and his mother had verified, when Charles asked, that they had indeed been lost much of the time while driving through northern Arizona.

On a hot, dusty day in early August he finally found it.

The entrance was just as he remembered it across the span of twenty-two years; a small gap between two mesas, not quite five miles off the road. In 1924 the road had been about as good as roads in those parts got; by 1946 it was rutted and worn away in places. By the time I first visited my grandfather's ranch in the mid-70's it was almost entirely gone.

Charles drove the Packard slowly off the road. The spare in back held air, but the tread was mostly gone and Charles did not want to take a chance on it. So he drove carefully, and made three miles before the terrain got so rough that he decided to hike the rest of the way. Driving across the desert floor like that raised up a cloud of dust that hung in the dry still air behind him like a long rope; when he got out of the car the dust trail was still visible all the way back out to the road.

He walked the last mile and stood at the entrance to the box canyon. The entrance was not wide, only about forty yards across. The way Grandpa told it to me years later, the instant he first stood there he knew he was home. A spring just inside poured up and over its borders, turning into a slow-moving thread of a creek that ran westward down the length of the can-

yon. Charles walked the canyon from end to end that first day, even though it was afternoon when he found it and after dark when he left. It ran over a mile and a half wide, and four miles long. Because of the spring, there were bushes and shrubs growing inside, and even a pair of small trees. He saw one rabbit that hid from him quickly.

He was a city boy, then, but he figured that if he saw one rabbit, there were probably twenty he didn't see, and he was right about that.

As he was hiking back up out of the canyon the wind hit him. It came up slow and gentle, a breeze that moved the warm, still desert air pleasantly. Then it got both stiffer and colder, and by the time Charles reached the entrance to the canyon he was leaning into it, shivering, pushing for each step he took.

When he left the canyon it stopped with remarkable abruptness.

After he looked at the lay of the land he realized what was happening. What was no more than a gentle breeze outside the canyon was being channeled and tightened by the converging walls of the two mesas, until the breeze, moving across several dozens of square miles, turned into a small hurricane at the entrance to the canyon.

That was why he planted the trees, of course—as a wind-break.

HE NEVER COULD tell me, or anyone, why he'd come looking for the canyon in the first place. The one time I asked him why he'd spent an entire summer looking for something he'd seen just once, when he was only seven years old, Grandpa looked at me with those wise blue eyes, scratched his bald, leathery skull, and grinned at me. "Danny, damn if I know."

CHARLES CAME BACK to the canyon permanently in 1951, with his wife Laurinda and their three children. One of them was my mother.

I FIRST SPENT THE SUMMER with my grandfather in 1975, when I was twelve years old.

Grandpa was fifty-seven then, and Grandma was fifty-two. I don't believe I knew their first names then.

The only people at the ranch were my grandfather and grandmother; all the children had left long ago. The ranch, the desert surrounding it, the mountains rising up above it, were both fascinating and very foreign to a boy from Los Angeles.

There are two kinds of sequoias; I don't specifically remember having seen one of either kind before then, though surely I must have. The tree was not impressive, the first time I saw it; just about my height, and struggling.

Over the course of the years Grandpa had planted several rows of trees at the entrance to the box canyon, staggered to muffle the wind. It worked; the trees at the entrance to the canyon got shaken up every afternoon when it got cold and the wind came up, but the trees away from the entrance were barely stirred at all, and back at the ranch house the wind was never worse than a gentle breeze.

Five rows of trees had been planted when I stayed that first summer. Lots of them were fruit trees—apple trees mostly, because Grandpa liked apples and apple pie. There were a couple of citrus trees too, though because of the cold they never did so well. (It gets very cold in northern Arizona at night, and during the winter you get snow and ice.)

Grandpa ended up planting seven rows of trees before he died. There were orange trees and apple trees, oaks and a couple varieties of evergreen. There was even, for a while, a cherry tree, but as I recall it died the second or third summer I spent at the ranch.

The sequoia stood in the fifth row of trees, with scraggly orange trees on both sides of it, well back from the wind. Grandpa had just planted it that summer, and it was still small and thin, about five feet tall, but you could already tell it was going to do better than the citrus we had planted around it.

I SPENT THREE SUMMERS at the ranch. When I was fifteen I stopped going, not because I wanted to, but because my parents got divorced and life spun out of control for a while.

The sequoia was nine feet tall then, in the summer of 1977.

MY GRANDFATHER DIED almost twenty years later, in '96, of pancreatic cancer. It is one of the more unpleasant ways to die. Grandma lasted three more years, but after Grandpa died she was never really the same. She died in June of '99, and that summer was the last time I ever visited the ranch.

We flew to Arizona for Grandma's funeral. It was a small funeral; myself and my older sister Janet, my mother and her sister Beth, and half a dozen of my grandmother's friends, old folks of her generation who made the rounds at the funerals, waiting patiently and with not much fear for their turn to come.

After the funeral my mother and aunt and sister and I drove out to the ranch together. Janet had never been there before; we wandered around and looked at things while my mother and aunt went through my grandmother's few possessions.

The ranch had gone to seed. I'd done the work that had to be done on my visits, but no more, and it showed. The wood needed painting, and the pens where the cows and the one pig had been kept were falling apart.

A small colony of coyotes who didn't know they were supposed to be afraid of humans had taken up residence in the abandoned horse shed, about sixty yards from the main house. I suppose Grandma had never gone out to the shed after the horses were sold. The coyotes stared at us and we stared at them, and we all agreed to leave each other alone.

The creek kept along as it had since that day in '46 when my grandfather had first seen it. It was small enough a that a grown man could step entirely across it. Janet had to take a slight hop.

You could barely see where the garden had once been. It was a slightly empty spot, with a couple fewer weeds, in the midst of the general desolation.

THE TREES WERE GORGEOUS: a small forest, shady and cool in late afternoon. The evergreens were all doing well, and the oaks, and the walnut tree. Only half of the citrus trees had survived, though, and none of the tropicals my grandfather had tried to plant. The corpse of a palm tree, about nine feet tall and virtually mummified, had managed to avoid falling over. I guessed it had been dead at least as long as Grandpa.

The sequoia was eighteen feet tall.

My sister and I stood together and admired it. It was worth admiring: the tallest tree in the small forest by a good bit, the thick bark was a healthy deep brown and the needles glistened a lustrous dark green in the late afternoon sunlight.

When we were done admiring it we left it alone and went back to the ranch house to pick up Mom and Aunt Beth. Aunt Beth was worried about Grandma's cats; she'd had four and they weren't in the house, and Aunt Beth couldn't find them. We looked briefly but it was getting late and I didn't want to drive back in the dark. We drove away from that canyon and I don't recall looking back.

No human ever saw that canyon again.

#### THE TREE GREW.

In 1972, when my grandfather planted the sequoia, humans had wiped out most of a population of trees that had existed since before the coming of humans to the American continents. The only remaining native populations of Great Sequoias were found in an area about 280 miles long, and less than twenty wide, in California on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. They were almost never found at heights of less than a mile above sea level.

The summer I was thirteen I took two books on trees with me to visit my grandparents' ranch. I knew that the small tree was a redwood, but what type of redwood neither I nor my grandfather knew.

The books told me. It was a California big-tree, a *Sequoiadendron Giganteum*. Of the two kinds of sequoias, the giant sequoia is the one likeliest to survive in the cold, at high altitudes. My

grandfather had planted wisely, at least this once. The Sequoia Sempervirens can grow taller than the sequoiadendron, but it's thinner and it handles the cold more poorly; and that canyon got cold.

The tree found itself in an environment that suited it. The other trees, particularly the thick-sapped pines, helped protect it from the wind; and it was closer to the water than most of the other trees, too.

By the time the tree had reached thirty-five feet the United States was fighting a "police action" in Brazil to preserve what was left of the rain forests. Without euphamisms it was a war, and a losing one. Too many people had a vested interest in the slash-and-burn beef-growing economy that was consuming the rain forests, starting with the desperately poor South American Indians who had no other way to survive, and working step by step up the economic ladder to McDonald's corporation stockholders.

While the rain forests died, life in the canyon flourished. The rabbit population, without my grandfather's .22 rifle to keep it in check, exploded. My grandmother's cats—tough farm cats, pushing twenty pounds—did well even without Grandma to take care of them. Shortly there were eight cats, and then eleven, and the cat population leveled off at around twenty. There would have been more except that the coyotes wanted the same food, the desert mice and squirrels and rabbits, and were tougher about going after it. The coyotes rarely hunted the cats; it happened at times, but it was always a fierce fight. For five years one tom, a big orange glandular monster who weighed thirty-three pounds, made it a riskier proposition than usual; he killed and ate two young coyotes before a rattler finally got him one night.

The rattlesnakes my grandfather had spent nearly four decades warring against outlasted him; they killed more of the cats than the coyotes ever did.

About the time the sequoia was nearing forty-eight feet, a couple of owls nested in its lower branches. The owls fed off the

snakes, including the rattlers; baby owls were born the next summer.

The sequoia broke fifty feet the year the last of the rain forests went up in flames.

LIFE IN THE CANYON continued quietly. Water came up from the ground. The sun warmed the canyon during the day, and during the night the mammals retreated to their burrows, the owls tucked their wings beneath their heads, and the snakes and lizards and insects grew still. Tree sap turned sluggish; it would stay liquid, and keep the trees alive, well below the freezing point of water.

The sequoia's bark grew thicker as the tree grew taller. It was still very young, for a sequoia. Giant sequoias can live a very long time; nobody really knows how long. Humans had found giant sequoias as much as thirty-five hundred years old, and there was no reason to believe that they might not live longer.

The sequoia in my grandfather's canyon might have been expected to live a long time, even by sequoia standards. Though it had competition for soil and water, it grew fast, and got up into the sunlight, putting most of the other trees into its shade. By the time it was tall enough to take the brunt of the canyon's wind itself, there was no danger that the wind would kill it.

The giant sequoia was not the only thing that thrived in that canyon. So did the pines surrounding it, and the animals that lived among them, the owls and the snakes and the lizards, the coyotes and the rabbits and bees. There was water and there was sunlight and there was food enough for everything; and the wild creatures flourished.

Some days, when the sun came slanting down into the canyon just right, it was so beautiful that seeing it would have made you glad to be alive.

The cats, living in the wild where size was important, got bigger and bigger with the passage of the years, until most of them approached the size of the glandular monster who had once been such a freak. These were not mutants; the genes for size had been floating around in the cat population, but they had not

been selected for. Now they were selected for and the cats got big, quickly, and gave the coyotes and owls some real competition for the rabbits and desert mice, snakes and lizards.

Quickly is a relative word: the sequoia continued to grow, too, at its own pace. It was young and beautiful, with dark brown branches laden with dusky green leaves, the branches radiating outward from its trunk in a conical pattern, all the way from the ground to the top of the tree. In later life the branches near the ground would wither away, leaving the tree with a smooth trunk reaching up as much as two hundred feet; but for now the tree was young, and its growth was everywhere. The tree drank the water, and dug down into the soil, and reached for the sun.

As adults, giant sequoias can reach heights of three hundred and fifty feet; by this time the sequoia in my grandfather's canyon had nearly reached a hundred.

—I was dead by then, of course, and so were you, and your grandchildren, and everyone your grandchildren had ever known or loved.

And still the tree grew.

WHEN THE TREE was a hundred and sixty-one feet tall the skies above it turned scarlet at midnight.

Two warring groups of humans had tossed nukes at each other, and everyone else.

(Who were these humans? I doubt it matters, but for what it's worth they were a group of people in what used to be India, and another group in what was once South America. Why did North America get nuked? The United States was gone a long time by then, and its remnants were of no threat to anyone—but everybody had extra nukes they didn't need, and there was not a continent on the planet that didn't receive a few dozen.)

The bombs fell, in a nuclear rain that lasted for days, through a preemptory first strike and a retaliatory second strike, through retaliatory second and third strikes, until only submarines and spaceships remained to launch weapons at one another. Through all of this, the bombs fell, and fell. The nuclear explosions were bad enough in and of themselves, and were succeeded by firestorms of epic size that burned to the ground every sequoia on the west coast of North America.

Worse was to follow. Vast clouds of dust and earth were blasted into the sky. Whole continents disappeared beneath them; and temperatures began to drop.

IN THE CANYON, the sky was an angry orange color for two or three days, and then it got dark and started to get cold.

In the war, and the small Ice Age that followed, most of the living things on the planet's surface died, and a lot of those beneath the ocean. The canyon I had spent three months in, during the days when I was alive, survived better than most places. The canyon was not near any military targets, and most of the species living between its walls made it through. The rabbits had a very hard time of it, and as a result the coyotes died out. But six of the cats survived, four of them females, and in time kittens appeared, and the cats and rabbits struggled on.

It was worse almost everywhere else in the world; and worse in ways the world had never seen before. There had been die-offs before, to be sure. The great majority of the species that had ever existed on the surface of the planet were extinct by the time the last sequoia was planted by my grandfather.

Sixty-five million years ago an asteroid crashed into the Earth, near what is now Mexico. It blasted so much soot and smoke and dust into the sky that years passed in which the planet received no sunlight. Every species of land animal larger than a turtle died off.

This die-off was different, though. It was an orderly catastrophe, planned for and carried out by our children, twenty-five generations removed. This disaster is what finally killed the whales, who had hung on through the slaughter of humans who wanted to slice them up and use their fat as a lubricant or a fuel; who had hung on while those same humans bred new humans, billions upon billions upon billions, and with sheer numbers poisoned the water the whales lived in and the air they breathed. They had hung on through the rise and fall of empires, but they were the largest of all the animals and the ones most damaged when the radioactive debris was inevitably washed down to the sea. The Earth tried to cleanse itself, to wash away the poisons; and the water ended up where it always did. It destroyed the food chain the whales depended upon; and it is a good question whether the last whales died of radiation poisoning or starvation.

THE TREE WAS NOT a complex thing, but it had a sort of awareness, a knowledge of when things were well and when they were not. For a very long time after that things were not well. Many of the trees that had provided it with a windbreak died off as the cold got worse. The spring that fed the stream slowed for several decades, and when it eventually resumed its flow, it was contaminated by radioactive isotopes that might have killed the tree, had it been younger or smaller. It did kill some of the other trees, among those that had survived the cold.

Slowly though, slowly even by the tree's standards, things began to get better. The winds that had nearly killed it, winter after brutal winter, stopped being so severe. The winters themselves grew warmer, as did the summers; and the radiation levels, still lethal elsewhere in the world, declined in the area around the canyon to the point where plants and animals stopped dying of it, much, and started mutating instead. Most of the mutants died too, of course; that's what mutants do.

THINGS WERE A LITTLE SIMPLER in the canyon, a little less complex; here as everywhere else the great war had knocked out some of the links in the elaborate chain that made life on Earth a viable affair.

But life in the canyon hung on. The tree pushed ahead with the serious business of growing. It broke two hundred feet just weeks before a human being staggered into the canyon to die.

The man came in off the desert, from the east where the fireball sun hung in the morning sky. He was half dead already. He was six generations removed from the men and women who had pulled the trigger and launched the nukes; but in six generations the fighting had not stopped. Instead it had spread, though with less dangerous weapons now, north and south and east and west. He wore combat armor that was supposed to protect him from incidental radiation, still high six generations after the great war, and it did that. What it did not do was protect him from the artillery that had destroyed the rest of his squad. I've said that my sister and I were the last human beings to see the canyon, and this is true. The soldier was flash-blinded and deafened. His right arm was shattered from the elbow down, and a stress fracture in his right leg slowed but did not stop him. Occasionally he called out, in a high cracked voice, words that may have meant something to someone who spoke his language.

He climbed up into the canyon, walked a few hundred yards and then sat down in the shade of an apple tree that was almost as bad off as he was.

It took two days before the lack of water killed him. He was only a dozen yards from the slow small stream that now curled

its way around the sequoia's wide base, but he could neither hear nor see it, and so he suffered, screaming out occasionally to an audience of cats who were trying to decide what he was, and whether he was edible.

The tree took little enough notice of it. The man's dying was not affecting its sunlight or its water. Indirectly, after the cats ate him, he would end up fertilizing the ground in the great tree's vicinity, which was all to the good.

We might dwell upon that man, that soldier dying in pain in the desert beneath the harsh sun. We might, but we will not. He was only one man; and worse was coming.

NOT ALL HUMANS died in that great war. Some of those who did not decided that, if the human race was to survive, the race itself needed to change. (Perhaps they were right about that. I don't know. The old design hadn't worked out very well, but then the new one didn't do much better—)

They remade themselves. With genetic engineering they created children who were stronger and faster, who thought more clearly and more quickly than you or I. They reinvented themselves from the ground up, generation after generation, to be the greatest warriors the world had ever seen. Before the tree had reached two hundred and twenty-five feet, the new humans had killed off the remnants of the old humans, the ones who looked more or less like you and me, and were therefore forced to turn their attentions to one another.

You might wonder if these humans were really human. They were. They were people, at least, more so than you and I in all the ways that count. They did not always look like us, but that does not matter. I do not know if you could say that they were better than us; but they were more than us.

When I was a boy I used to read sci-fi stories, or watch episodes of *Star Trek*, about how as humans evolved we would turn into something that was all brains and no hormones, all intellect and no emotions.

That isn't what happened. These people who were descended from us were capable of a range of experience that would have

destroyed any of us, our best or our worst. They were more dangerous and more generous than us; they grew angrier and happier, grieved harder and rejoiced with more abandon. Love was an emotion so deep they could not lie about it, hatred a passion so black it was always lethal to someone.

The tree was three hundred and fourteen feet tall when the human race finally killed itself, and everything else too. They did it with nanotechnology. One group of humans, who were good people—they would tell you so—created a molecule-sized nanomachine that fed on living creatures, and that reproduced itself, using common materials, to make more such nanomachines. They intended to use the nanomachine on other humans, who were bad people and who they hated and wanted to kill.

Unfortunately something went wrong.

It was humanity's last mistake in a very long line—the Big One. The nanomachines got loose before the good humans who had created them completed the controls that would have let them protect themselves from their creation.

The nanomachines ate them and their children first. Poetic justice, you might say, if that sort of thing amuses you. The nanomachines did not stop after eating their creators; they were not designed to. They drifted out on the winds, to the oceans, to the furthest reaches of the planet. And where they found biomass, they ate it. They swarmed over living creatures, reproducing and eating. They ate indiscriminately, people and pets and leather and wood and rubber and plastic; and when they were done nothing remained but a gray sludge of dead nanomachines with nothing left to eat.

The tree was—well, I do not know if fortunate is the word. It was all the way around the planet from the spot where the world ended; and years passed before the first spores of the gray sludge came drifting in across the desert, born on the back of the wind.

THE TREE WAS, in a sense, the last representative of the human race, the last thing that might have said to an uncaring universe, they were not so bad. My grandfather planted that tree,

and he cared for it while it was young and needed the care. He planted that windbreak for himself, for his own reasons; but any orchard of trees might have served as a windbreak, and more effectively than the trees he planted and labored over. And he loved that sequoia. It was the first tree he showed me, the first summer I visited him; it was the only one I ever heard him mention, or worry over. He worried that it would survive the winters, worried that he had planted it in a location that would stunt its growth, or kill it. And partially because he worried about it, it did survive; and because of the location he picked, it lasted longer than anything.

There were other things created by the human race that stood in monument, despite the nanomachines that were busy turning the world, from the depths of the Mariani Trench to the heights of Everest, into a vast gray sludge. Between its wars and its building humanity had inflicted scars upon the planet that would be erased only in the course of geologic time. The nanomachines did not eat metal or stone or cement or glass; weapons and vehicles and buildings littered the surface of the planet when the nanomachines were done.

But of the good things the human race did, there was one thing that still survived; and that one thing was the tree.

Perhaps it's foolish to talk this way, for the tree was just a tree. So far as I know it had no emotions. It could not think or reason. And yet it could feel, and had a sort of awareness of itself, and it knew that something was wrong. The nanomachines first entered the canyon on the wind; and they made short work of almost everything. All the animals, the lizards and bees and snakes and cats and rabbits and owls and crows, died within hours. The smaller trees took days to die, and even the oaks, large though some of them had grown, were gone within a week.

But an adult California big-tree, a giant sequoia, is *huge*. The gray sludge ate away at the tree, stripped it of its leaves, but the tree was made of more than two million pounds of living hardwood. Its bark alone was two to three feet thick, and the bark served to slow the attack of the nanomachines. The bark pro-

tected the tree, as evolution had designed it to, significantly slowed the nanomachine attack.

Months passed while the tree struggled for life. It was the last living thing on the surface of the planet that humanity had killed.

HERE ARE SOME of the things we killed:

Hawks and seaweed. Horses. Puppies and kittens and parrots. Lions and lizards, lobsters and clams. Sharks. Grass and crabgrass and all the flowers, every last one of them; a rose by any other name was just as dead. Bats and vultures and pigeons and bluebirds, boa constrictors and garden snakes and earthworms. Elephants and marijuana plants. Milkweed and tumbleweed and all the other plants humans named “weeds” and tried to destroy because they couldn’t figure out a way to make use of them. Snails and frogs and raccoons and bears. We killed the dolphins and the seals and the squid and the starfish, jellyfish and sea anemones and sea horses and all the animals that made the beautiful shells humans treasured.

We killed *everything*—the air and the ground and the water, and everything that lived in those places.

THE LAST THING we killed was the tree.

Half a year had passed since the gray sludge’s arrival. The tree’s leaves had gone first, and then its branches. The nanomachines ate inward, chewing away at the hardwood. They worked quickly enough, under the circumstances. The tree was twenty-five feet around, and it took the nanomachines a long time to eat their way through it. They got started at the base first, about ten feet above the ground. Other nanomachines attacked the tree along its length, but the invasion at the tree’s base was the worst one.

If by some quirk of fate my grandfather had been able to see the canyon at that moment, he would not have recognized it as the place where he’d grown old and died. Every tree, except the great sequoia itself, had toppled to the ground and sunk into a sludge of gray dust. Where grass and shrubs had sprouted, bare

rock stood forth. The wind that had always gathered at the mouth of the canyon once again had nothing to stop it, and each evening it blew the dirt and dust back into the canyon, leaving nothing but the exposed rock behind.

Only the one tree still stood above the expanse of pale rock, covered in a gray blanket of molecule-sized machines.

Only the one tree, in all the world, still maintained a flicker of life. Sap flowed sluggishly within the tree's core, even at the end. The gray sludge ate inexorably away at the tree's base, until the day the wind came up, the wind that had tried to knock my grandfather over almost two thousand years before—

And the tree my grandfather planted, fell.

The fall took quite a while, at least on the human scale. On sequoia time it was faster than the downstroke of a hummingbird's wings.

The fall lasted either a long time or an instant; it doesn't matter. When the tree's thousand tons of hardwood struck the bare stone surface of the canyon the tree shattered, and the sound of its death echoed up and down the length of the canyon for almost thirty seconds before it faded, and the canyon grew quiet again except for the wind.

The End