



JULIA SHIPLEY

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PART ONE: FIRE

IN THE PREDAWN HOURS of Monday, January 16, 2012, Ed Forrest, an off-duty battalion chief for the Seminole County Fire Department, woke to a voice on his two-way radio. A request was out for Tanker 24 to respond to a fire in nearby Longwood. Forrest recalls lurching from his bed, confused: Longwood is a small city on the outskirts of Orlando; six-thousand-gallon water trucks like Tanker 24 are reserved for backcountry wildfires and infernos. Forrest called the dispatcher, who explained to him that the oldest tree in the state—a thirty-five-hundred-year-old bald cypress named The Senator—had burst into flames.

Within minutes Forrest was accelerating toward one of the last vestiges of primeval Florida, a towering organism that had been photosynthesizing sunlight a century before the existence of Moses and millennia before the births of Socrates and Plato. A mile away Chief Forrest could see black smoke, and by the time he reached the forest preserve, streaking orange flames. Though the tree is normally hidden by lush vegetation, accessible only by a long narrow boardwalk, Forrest plainly saw the fireball engulfing The Senator's crown. The tree was, in firefighters' terms, fully involved.

Forrest watched flames shoot out of the tree's full

height, 118 feet above the ground. "It was like a blow torch, or a roman candle," he said. "It was heartbreaking to see."

It had been an exceptionally dry winter in Central Florida, and the fire had everything it needed—woodfuel, a good draft—to burn perfectly. A temperature-detecting camera estimated the heat at nearly a thousand degrees; fire chiefs considered sending a helicopter with a bandy bucket to dump lake water on the crown. Forrest craned his neck and watched embers spark off the top. Already fully ablaze by the time crews arrived, it was too late: at eight a.m., the largest tree east of the Mississippi, one of the six eldest trees in the world, collapsed.

For a while, no one knew anything definitive about what caused the fire. All they knew was that overnight, the oldest living thing in Florida—a tree already three thousand years old when Ponce de Leon set foot on this peninsula in the early 1500s, a tree that had withstood innumerable lightning strikes, perhaps hundreds of hurricanes, and the logger's axe—had mysteriously ignited and was gone in a single morning. Beyond the plaque declaring the tree Florida's original spectacle, there was a huge hole in the sky.

A columnist for the *Orlando Sentinel* noted that a pile of twigs and branches had been discovered at the tree's base, and wondered about whether someone had started this blaze deliberately. Had a homeless person let a campfire get out of control? Despite the otherwise calm evening, others suggested that lightning had struck the tree's exterior. A division of forestry investigator concluded: it burned from within.

THE FLORIDA that European explorers found in 1513 was columned in ancient bald cypresses, their soaring canopies hung with boughs of feathery foliage. Years later, the trees were prized by timber companies. Because cypress lumber does not rot, it became the most sought-after wood in the Southeast, used for cross-ties for trains, so that more trains could haul more logs out of the woods.

By the turn of the century, Florida's 27 million acres of old-growth forest were almost completely felled. The biggest and best trees were taken first, and then the next-best trees, and then all the trees. Today, two stands of virgin cypress remain: one in the Barley Barber Swamp in South Florida, the other in Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

In the opening paragraphs of his self-published treatise, *Cypress: From Creation—Thru Exploitation—To Regeneration*, Marvin Buchanan, the operator of a wholesale nursery and

the son, grandson, and great-grandson of lumbermen in Central Florida, writes, "During my short life of 60 years, I have seen very dramatic changes in the ecosystems in my small world of Lafayette County, Florida."

The way Buchanan sees it, man has sinned a long time against the land. The Creator made everything as it should be, he says, the right tree in the right place, and we've messed it up mightily. In his book, he tells of how virgin cypresses once had trunks more than fifteen feet wide. Buchanan's woodsman kin would first girdle the

wood, and then return the following year to cut a hole to insert a platform from which to saw down the giant tree. Mule teams would drag carts, or, in some cases, pull boats, to bring the logs to mills. We took the best of the best, he says: trees, deer, turkey. Now, after many generations of picking off the good stuff, we're left with genetically inferior stock.

Given the rate at which Florida's forests were felled, The Senator's survival was an anomaly. By the early twentieth century, it was almost alone in an area of Florida whose logged acres became orange groves and artichoke farms and then suburbs in the shadow of Orlando. By the turn of the millennium, Big Tree Park, The Senator's eleven-acre

home, was an island of green amid muffler shops and a wicker-chair factory; today it's bordered by General Hutchison Parkway and the Old Dixie Highway, in the vicinity of bail bondsmen and divorce attorneys, Big Lots and Starbucks, a fire station and the courthouse.

THE SENATOR got its name from Florida Senator Moses Overstreet, a man whose fortune was built from forest products, like turpentine and timber. And so it was ironic, perhaps, that Overstreet protected the behemoth tree from becoming railway ties or the frame of a now long-gone house. In the early 1900s he purchased it and its surrounding patch of wetland, and though Overstreet logged much of his parcel, he did not fell what was known



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back then as “The Sentinel Tree” — and thus forfeited its commercial potential. According to one newspaper, the tree contained the board feet to build five bungalows, or become a million boxes of toothpicks, with enough left over to cut into nine cords.

Though Overstreet might have considered cutting the tree, a hollow large enough to crawl into on its far side, probably dissuaded him from harvesting it. Its presence meant that the tree would never yield clean, full logs, which diminished the value of its lumber. By the mid 1920s Overstreet had become a Florida state senator, and when he donated his parcel of land to the town of Longwood, they renamed the tree in his honor.

Yet it was that great inner chamber, a detail which saved the tree from the lumber industry’s saws, that played a role in its demise.

IN THE DARK HOURS before the fire-department dispatcher awakened Ed Forrest, a twenty-six-year-old Floridian named Sara Barnes scrambled over the first fence surrounding Big Tree Park. According to police reports, she was with a friend, Thaddeus Peralta, who gave her a boost over the second fence, a wrought-iron one, surrounding The Senator itself. Once they crawled inside, the two stood within the shelter of the tree’s great hollow, where Sara lit a small fire. The fire, she later said, was “for light,” so she’d be able to take a hit of methamphetamines, paraphernalia for which was found in her possession.

Her flame accidentally kindled tinder in The Senator’s dry interior, and the flames quickly blazed beyond her control. She and Thaddeus fled back over the fences. She considered trying to put the fire out, but it moved too swiftly. The two drove to a nearby fast-food restaurant where they sat and watched fire trucks rush past.

Within days, Sara posted to her Facebook page photos of flames engulfing the tree. It was followed by a comment: “I can’t believe I burned down a tree older than Jesus.” She was arrested shortly after and charged with unlawful burning of lands. When local news outlets ran the story, she was widely vilified and the subject of scathing criticism.

She told police she was remorseful.

PART TWO: AFTERLIVES

WHEREAS THE SENATOR has a thick file at the Museum of Seminole County History stuffed with a century’s worth of newspaper clippings (which is accompanied by a hallway full of photos, artwork, and framed poems about the tree’s existence), what we know about Sara Barnes fits a single page.

She has a bellybutton ring. She likes the Beatles. She sometimes plays poker online. She also plays guitar. She appreciates marijuana. Growing up, her family had a Chihuahua named Sophie.

According to her autobiographical profile on Model Mayhem, a website for professional models: “I am a diamond waiting to shine for the world in ways beauty and intelligence can only be used to describe. I am a nature enthusiast and I love capturing nature at it’s best, which is always, through a camera.”

It’s likely that Sara’s relationship with The Senator began long before the morning of January 16, 2012, maybe when she was a little girl. Her first visit to the tree might have been with a parent, a tradition among many Florida families, during which mothers and fathers share with their children the giant cypress they first glimpsed as kids. Or perhaps she arrived via an elementary school field trip, clambering off the bus, led by teachers, to trek the boardwalk to the home of the impossibly tall tree. She would have squinted, her head tipped to its limit to distinguish the tree’s branches and foliage far off in the sky.

Later, as an adolescent, she might have visited the tree after dark, as part of an illicit rite of passage. (Teenagers were rumored to sneak into the concealed hollow late at night.) Maybe Sara continued coming to the tree even as she entered her twenties, for a reprieve from Florida’s punishing heat. In addition to providing shade from its canopy, cool air tends to pool in cypress hollows, furnishing a tiny breeze. As the pressures of adulthood mounted, maybe The Senator seemed like a sanctuary.

Certainly that’s the feeling that Sam, the boy at the heart of the young-adult classic *My Side of the Mountain*, has when he encounters a big tree in a northeastern forest. Readers of that book open to the first page

and encounter Sam holed up in a snowstorm, snuggled within the cavity of a hemlock six feet in diameter. Though the outside air is bitter cold, “I can sit here inside my tree,” he attests, “and write with bare hands.” Sam builds a little fire for warmth, aided by “a chimney that leads the smoke out through a knothole.”

My Side of the Mountain was initially refused for publication on the grounds that it could induce youth to quit their bedrooms and make for the woods, where they might each find a hollowed-out tree for shelter. Nevertheless, Jean Craighead George’s book was printed in 1959, and now, more than fifty years later, children everywhere read it in school or at home.

Maybe Sara Barnes was once one of those readers. Let’s say you grew up a thousand miles south of Sam’s hemlock in the Catskills, where, instead of rustling leaves, you heard the sound of wind in palms—the impulse to hole up in some great benevolence would appeal to you just the same, yes? Perhaps some half-remembered version of this was what Sara had in mind when she slipped inside the hollow of the thirty-five-hundred-year-old bald cypress while most of greater Orlando was still asleep.

“Standing before the biggest tree and the oldest and the most kinglike of them all, I suddenly had an idea,” Sam tells us in *My Side of the Mountain*. “Inside I felt as cozy as a turtle in its shell.”

IT’S WORTH CONSIDERING—just for a moment—that there might be more to Sara than what the police reports and scornful newspaper articles suggest. And it’s worth noting that, at the end of February 2014, after being pulled over under suspicion of drunk driving, a police report detailed how she began to weep, saying that she didn’t want to go to jail, that she’d already served time for burning the tree. That she loved trees.

Once, two years after *The Senator* was burned, I spoke to Sara briefly over the phone. I shared my hunch that the tree had been significant to her, and not just on that fateful night. She agreed, confirming that she had visited it throughout her life. I asked if there was a reason she went there to take drugs as opposed to any other place. Had she read *My Side of the Mountain*? Was she trying to follow Sam’s retreat, and take shelter inside the hollow of a being she’d known since childhood?

“No,” she replied. “But do you know *The Giving Tree*?”

The Giving Tree, an illustrated children’s book by Shel Silverstein, is another young-adult classic. It describes a tree’s life-giving service to a human who, as a toddler, gazes up into its canopy and swings beneath its limbs, and then, later, as a growing boy, climbs up into its branches, happily chomping its fruit. Time passes, and the boy is a teenager carving letters into the tree’s trunk. He returns as an adult, to cut and sell the tree for lumber. The tree and the human are united once more when, well into old age, the man comes to sit on his childhood tree’s stump and rest.

“That’s one of my favorite books,” Sara said, “and that’s how I look at what happened. Basically the tree saved my life. I didn’t intentionally burn it down. I was addicted to meth for eight years, and now I’ve been sober for two. But, like I said, I owe my life, I am alive, because of that tree.”

What Sara meant by this is unclear. Was the fiery end of *The Senator* the beginning of her adult sobriety? Can killing a tree save a person? We can’t know: Sara is currently completing a two-and-a-half-year suspended sentence, performing 250 hours of manual labor, and paying off over \$14,000 in restitution for the costs of removing *The Senator*’s charred remains and investigating why it burned. She no longer speaks about the incident.

THE SENATOR always drew a crowd. Long before Spanish sailors reached the New World, the Miccosukee and Seminole Indians used the towering cypress as a landmark, a guidepost for finding their way on their annual migration inland from the coast. Centuries later, in 1931, a photograph of *The Senator* shows members of the Christian Fellowship gathered beneath the canopy. Eleven people stand shoulder to shoulder, equating the tree’s girth. Another photo, taken in 1928, shows two men standing spread eagle across the trunk. Like God reaching for Adam and Adam reaching back, you can see their fingers just barely touch, and where they touch, you can see inscriptions carved in the bark: LMB, MC, CMB.

In the late 1800s, an entrepreneur named Mr. Lord hitched his work mule to a cart to haul the curious over for a look-see at the magnificent tree. Back then, visitors

got off the cart and hopped from log to log. Later, in the first decades of the 1900s, they traversed a boardwalk of palmetto stumps. By 1929 there were concessions stands, souvenir postcards, and a presidential dedication; soon there was an official plaque, lightning rods, and an increment borer to obtain a core sample. In the endless parade to see The Senator there were daisy chains of generations, kids who grew into parents who grew into grandparents and great-grandparents, the elders taking the young by the hand to meet the tree. Through it all, people tried — unsuccessfully — to propagate genuine Senator offspring, so that these visits could continue in perpetuity.

“No one has yet been able to collect [The Senator’s] cones that produce seeds,” a reporter wrote in the *Orlando Sentinel* in 1991. The scant cones they did find were duds. In 1999, one man was dispatched to climb up and take clippings for the Florida Champion Tree Cloning project; however, the lab handling the clones—an outfit with patented techniques and a contract to grow forests for Disneyland—struck out.

But one day, in 1997, in a series of events unknown at the time to reporters and park administrators, a man named Laymond Hardy drove up from Miami, parked in the lot of Big Tree Park, and proceeded to do something remarkable.

Hardy, who recently passed away, was a high school science teacher, but he was also recognized as a horticulturalist, a genetics researcher, and an accomplished naturalist. One friend declared him “a one man consulting firm in a variety of biological subject matter.” He bred a Columbian orchid to a Georgian orchid to develop a cold-tolerant orchid called the Enduracold. He invented the inverted root graft, a technique for establishing commercial plantings of pond apples and oranges. He helped the Bahamas establish kiwi fruits.



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A photograph of Hardy shows a stocky man with a mostly kempt shock of sandy hair, his slightly cherubic face burdened with thick glasses. There’s one of him playing harmonica. There’s another another where he tends his honeybees, shirtless.

During his visit to Big Tree Park in 1997, Hardy might have spent the day gawking at The Senator or prowling the nearby hammock swamp. But what’s certain is that winds from a recent storm had sheared off a limb of the famous cypress, which Hardy picked

up and used to swat mosquitoes. After squishing around, studying dragonflies and cabbage palms, he returned to his car and stuck the branch in the seat beside him. Leaving Big Tree Park, he steered the car northwest toward the town of Mayo, almost two hundred miles away, where Marvin Buchanan, the aforementioned great grandson of lumbermen and the author of *Cypress*, lives.

In the late 1980s, in an effort to preserve native cypress, Buchanan began collecting seeds from the purest stands of pond cypress along the banks of the Suwannee River. He used the seeds to propagate an orchard of superior genetics, and, with the help of a genetic researcher at the University of Florida School of Forestry, he adopted clone technology. When Hardy handed over his switch from The Senator, Buchanan used the buds on the branch to begin ten clones of the famous tree.

In August 2013, Seminole County’s Board of Commissioners called Buchanan to purchase two of the seven surviving clones, which are now eighteen years old. They were transported by truck and installed just over a year after The Senator’s destruction. The one planted in Big Tree Park, near where the charred remnants of its three-and-a-half-millennia-old-parent still stands, is young and feathery but biding its time. It’s called The Phoenix. 🦅