



KATARINA BIVALD

Translated from Swedish by Alice Menzies

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Originally published as *En dag ska jag lämna allt det här*, © Katarina Bivald, 2018. Translated from Swedish by Alice Menzies.

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Published by Sourcebooks Landmark, an imprint of Sourcebooks
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
sourcebooks.com

Originally published as *En dag ska jag lämna allt det här* in 2018 in Sweden by Bokförlaget Forum.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bivald, Katarina, author. | Menzies, Alice, translator.
Title: Check in at the Pine Away Motel : a novel / Katarina Bivald ;
translated from Swedish by Alice Menzies.
Other titles: Dag ska jag lämna allt det här. English
Description: Naperville, IL : Sourcebooks Landmark, [2019]
Identifiers: LCCN 2019009897 | (trade pbk. : alk. paper)
Classification: LCC PT9877.12 .I93 D3413 2019 | DDC 839.7/38--dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019009897>

Printed and bound in [Country of Origin—confirm when printer is selected].

XX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedication to come

Alis volat propriis. (She flies with her own wings.)

—OREGON STATE MOTTO

“You can check out any time you like,
but you can never leave.”

—THE EAGLES, “HOTEL CALIFORNIA,” 1977

PROLOGUE

“Here Is Henny’s Sand”

MY FUNERAL BEGINS IN AN HOUR.

I’m pretty sure I’m going to miss it. Right now I’m sitting on the motel rooftop, looking down on an almost-empty parking lot.

I imagine myself floating through the air, higher and higher, as if I’ve finally gotten the hang of flying. So high that everyone is nothing but tiny black dots, making their way to the Pine Creek United Methodist Church. Dad is probably already there, waiting patiently inside, an especially black dot on my own internal map. Cheryl will be with him, no doubt, like the supportive Christian neighbor that she is. I try to be angry with the two of them, but I don’t seem to have the energy anymore.

Before long, they’ll be joined by friends and former classmates, vague acquaintances, teachers I once had, Dad’s neighbors.

A confident guess at who will attend a funeral in Pine Creek: everyone.

They’ll try to sing along to old-fashioned hymns, and they’ll listen to the pastor’s empty eulogy. Dad will be sitting at the front, brave and desperately proper.

And then I’ll be cremated. A rather bold and surprising choice from Dad. I approve, but I’m apprehensive as well. On the one hand, I’d rather burst into flames than be shoved underground. I’ve always been a little bit afraid of the dark. But on the other hand, I worry that this—what’s left of me, my soul or consciousness or whatever you want to call it—will disappear when my body does.

I don’t think you can go on being a ghost forever. No matter how much you want to. There’d be more of us around if you could, that’s for sure. Maybe most people never even get the chance to stick around and see how their loved ones are doing. Maybe I should be grateful for the opportunity.

I'm talking about smoke and picturing myself engulfed in a wall of flames, but that's not how it works. The body—my body—will be heated through calcination. Everything organic, roughly 97 percent of me, will first turn to liquid and then become hot gas. They'll add oxygen so that the body can burn entirely without flames.

All that will be left of me is ash. Surely no soul can survive it?

Ash is actually a pretty misleading word. It's not like a fine ash automatically appears afterward, ready to be stored in an urn or buried under a headstone or sprinkled somewhere, whatever Dad plans to do with it. You need a special processor to grind the remains into a kind of fine-grained sand.

But I don't think that has quite the same ring to it. For the relatives, I mean. "Here is Henny's sand."

The whole process takes around two hours. I wish I knew exactly when everything was going to happen, so that I could prepare myself. It would be awful to disappear midthought. Or be thinking something completely meaningless when it happened—I wonder what time it is—and then nothing.

No, I want my very last thought to be grand and beautiful and important. A final message, even if I'm the only one who hears it.

Below me, the motel is closed for the first time since a snowstorm left us without power for three days in 2003. The reception area is dark, the computers switched off. The restaurant is eerily empty, all the chairs upside down on the tables. The rooms are locked. Only two cars are there: Camila's and MacKenzie's.

On the other side of the parking lot, the *Pine Creek Motel* sign glows faintly in the daylight.

Vacanci s. The *e* has stopped working.

Beneath that is a patchwork of strange little signs made from cheap metal, in all imaginable sizes, colors, and styles:

Vacant rooms!

Cabins!

Forest views!

Microwaves in every room!

Air-conditioning!

Now with color TV!

Restaurant!

Bar!

Pool!

Open

Vote No on Measure 9!

Oregon—Proud home of anti-gay ballot measures since 1992!

MacKenzie added the last two.

CHAPTER 1

Caucasian Female, 33 Years Old

MY VERY LAST THOUGHT ALIVE: *MICHAEL'S BODY*.

I was thinking *Michael's body, Michael's body, Michael's body*, as if repeating a miracle I still didn't quite believe in.

Every detail on the road was familiar to me, and yet they all felt magically new, as though I was seeing them for the first time. The asphalt, which looked even more worn-out in the afternoon sunshine, the gravel at the sides of the road, the sweet scent of pines. I was smiling. I know that. I had been smiling the entire weekend.

The next thing I remember is standing there on the road, feeling slightly bewildered, looking at a strange heap some twenty feet away.

At first, all I feel is a vague sense of curiosity. I don't realize it's a body, and the idea that it could be human doesn't even cross my mind.

It's only as I get closer that I can make out a right leg, unmistakably human, bent at an unnatural angle. While that initial shock is still sinking in, I recognize my good jeans and what's left of my favorite blouse.

The bright-red polka dots are clear enough, but I'll never be able to get the rest of it white again.

I don't recognize my hair. The pale-brown strands are mixed with gravel and engine oil and what I guess must be blood. My left arm is sticking straight out from the body, and my right arm is...missing.

Instinctively, I look down at my own right side, but my arm is still there.

Up ahead, a truck is straddling both lanes of the road. A man in his forties is leaning against the right-hand side of the hood. His eyes are fixed on the ground, and it looks like his knees are about to give way beneath him.

He takes two unsteady steps toward the edge of the road, where he bends down over the ferns. I look away when he starts throwing up.

Somehow he manages to make it back to the truck without falling apart. He's slim, his shirt a little too big for him, and his hands are shaking as he pulls out his phone and calls the police. *Accident. Pine Creek. Near the motel. Just after the exit. One...injured.*

We're alone here among the pines. He rocks back and forth as he mumbles to himself, and I can't think of a single thing I can do to help. I try patting him on the shoulder, awkwardly and apologetically, but it doesn't make much difference.

Then I hear what he is saying.

It's like some kind of mantra. Over and over again.

"Don't be dead, don't be dead, don't be dead."



Just fifteen minutes ago, I was head-over-heels happy.

I'm thinking about that as though happiness should be some kind of shield against being mowed down by a truck. And I'm thinking about how quiet everything is around us, as if nothing bad could ever happen on this old road.

This is a nightmare; that's all it is. Any minute now, I'll wake up in the Redwood Cabin and be fascinated by how such a familiar room can look so different when you're lying on your back in it.

Before I open my eyes, I'll reach out to check if Michael's body is still there beside me. Then I'll smile when it is.

Providing everything with Michael even happened, of course. If all this is just a dream, then maybe Michael was, too.

Maybe I'll wake up in my own bed, alone again, and get back to cleaning motel rooms as usual.

The truck driver stops mumbling to himself, but that just makes things worse. He stops rocking, too. Instead, he starts shaking.

When Sheriff Ed Carmichael arrives, I run toward him, relieved. I want to grab hold of his arm, harder than I've ever grabbed anything before, and force him to walk faster, do something.

Sheriff Ed will know what needs to be done, I think.

He's the third generation of Carmichaels to be sheriff here. When he started at the sheriff's office, both his grandpa and father were still alive. He'd dealt with that the way he dealt with everything else in his line of work: stoically, with valiant patience and calm competence.

I didn't think anything could shock him, but I was wrong.

"Jesus," he says. "That's Henny Broek."

He calls for an ambulance first, then the state troopers, who promise to send "a couple of cars" as soon as they can.

Sheriff Ed turns to the truck driver. He asks some routine questions about the man's name, driver's license, and registration, and then moves on to what happened.

"I...I didn't see her. She just stepped out into the road, and I tried to brake, but..."

The truck driver starts rocking again, and shaking. The sheriff fetches a blanket from the trunk of his patrol car, wraps it around the man's shoulders, and guides him over to the back seat.

"The state troopers will be here soon," he says. "They're going to take you down to the station. They'll need to take some samples. Breath, urine, blood. Do you understand? They have to do all that."

Sheriff Ed studies the truck driver as he talks. Maybe he's looking for signs of intoxication. Maybe his work as a sheriff has made him suspicious.

But I'm pretty sure it happened just like the driver said. I was thinking about Michael. I was happy, my body high on adrenaline and exhausted from too little sleep, and suddenly I was lying in the middle of the road.

"Henny Broek," the sheriff says with a shake of his head. "She was always such a good girl."



The ambulance is the first to arrive. At the sheriff's request, paramedics give the truck driver a quick, uninterested once-over, and then they move on to me. Not that there seems to be much they can do. They cover my body and lift it into the ambulance. The state troopers arrive just as they are leaving.

Their sirens sound muted even when they're right next to us, and I blink at the revolving, psychedelic blue lights. Fragments of conversation: "What a waste." "Do you think he was drunk?" The state troopers are strong and tough, and they all look incredibly young.

The commanding officer walks over to Sheriff Ed while the two others set up a detour with a flashing sign reading *Lane Closed*. A car passes, slowing down so the driver can take in as much as possible, and I feel embarrassed by all the fuss. *I never meant to cause this much trouble*, I think.

"Sir," says the commanding officer. As their sirens fall silent, I can hear the sound of the yellow-and-black plastic tape flapping in the wind.

"Did you know the deceased, sir?"

The deceased.

"Henny Broek," the sheriff replies automatically. "Caucasian female, thirty-three years old. Works at Pine Creek Motel and Cabins." He nods down the road toward the motel.

"Worked, sir."

"Huh? Yeah, right. She *was* in charge of the motel, along with MacKenzie Jones. They both live there. The motel has three cabins nearby, so I'm guessing she was on her way to or from one of them. From, I'd say, given the direction the truck was traveling. The driver's name is Paul Jackson. Resident of Pine Creek. Says she ran into the road without looking. He tried to brake, didn't make it."

The deceased, the deceased, the deceased. I fight the urge to laugh.

"MacKenzie and Henny manage the motel, but they don't own it. The owner doesn't live in town anymore. For a cheap motel, it's a pretty good place. Not much trouble. They have to kick out difficult guests from time to time, but that's all. Nothing unusual."

The state trooper doesn't come out and say he doesn't care about the motel, but I can tell he's thinking it.

"And next of kin, sir?"

"Just her father. Lives at 17 Water Street. Her mom's been dead a long time."

"Maybe just as well," the trooper says, and Sheriff Ed pulls a face.

So this is what it's like to be dead, I think. Shouldn't there be...I don't know, *more* to it? Should I really be able to stand here on the road

beneath the trees, smelling the same, old dusty asphalt, pine needles, and ferns?

Not that the trees care about what happened to me. They were here long before I came along, and they'll be here a long time after me. What I did during my short life doesn't matter to them. Not how it ended, either.

"You want me to inform her father?" Sheriff Ed asks.

"That might be best, sir," the trooper replies, sounding relieved. "Better if it comes from someone he knows."

"Sometimes I really hate my job," Sheriff Ed says, sighing wearily.

CHAPTER 2

“She Didn’t Feel Any Pain”

JESUS IS WATCHING OVER US IN DAD’S LIVING ROOM.

I rode over here with the sheriff. When he started walking toward his car, I just climbed in and sat behind him in the back seat. It was only once I was sitting there that I realized I’d walked straight through the locked door.

Dad and Cheryl are side by side on the couch. Cheryl is Dad’s closest neighbor, and she came over the minute she saw the police car. The sheriff is sitting in the best armchair, the one Dad normally uses for reading in the evening. There’s a floor lamp right next to it, to save Dad’s eyes, and the armchair is angled toward Jesus, to fill Dad’s soul with godliness.

On a shelf behind the couch, there is a small plastic figurine of the baby Jesus. It’s a cheap Christmas decoration, but Dad has had it out year-round for as long as I can remember. Next to the shelf is a portrait of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns, his face meek and downturned. The local artist who painted it has more religious zeal than talent, and it looks like Jesus is wearing a bird’s nest on his head.

The sheriff turns resolutely toward Dad. Dad’s hands are clasped in his lap, and he seems defensive and confused before the sheriff even opens his mouth to speak. All his life, Dad has been obsessed with doing and saying the right thing, but nothing could have prepared him for a visit from the sheriff on an ordinary Sunday evening. He’s probably wondering what the neighbors will think.

“Sir,” Sheriff Ed begins. “There’s no easy way for me to say this. I’m very sorry, but your daughter, Henny, died earlier this afternoon, in a traffic accident just outside the motel.”

“The motel,” says Dad.

Cheryl raises her hand to her mouth and says, "Oh, Lord."

"Yes," says Dad as though that should have been his reaction.

"If there's anything I can do..." the sheriff continues.

I pace back and forth across the living room floor. I shouldn't be here. I should be back in the Redwood Cabin, with Michael.

Strictly speaking, I should be at the reception desk to relieve MacKenzie from her shift. It's several years since Dad's old wall clock stopped, but I'm pretty sure I must be really late. MacKenzie has already worked all weekend because of me.

"Henny was always such a good girl," Dad says suddenly. "She always did as she was told. There wasn't a child on the street as polite and well behaved as my Henny. It's true. I'm not the only one who says so. You can ask anyone."

The sheriff's eyes are drawn back to the baby Jesus. "Like I said, if there's anything I can do, anything at all..."

Dad looks helplessly from the sheriff to Cheryl and then back again. "I'm... You'll have to forgive me, but I seem to have forgotten what to do."

"Sir?"

"I've buried my parents and my wife and *her* mother. But I don't seem to be able to remember what I do next."

"The funeral parlor will be able to help you with all that," the sheriff reassures him. "I'm sure the state police will release the body shortly."

MacKenzie! I think. *She'll* be able to fix this. I need to find her and explain what happened.

"What...what does it look like? The body. Henny, I mean."

"She didn't feel any pain," says the sheriff.

"She was always a nice kid," says Dad. "Never caused any trouble."



She didn't feel any pain.

Of all the idiotic things to say, I think as I walk quickly toward the motel. It's definitely not true.

I might not have felt anything as the truck slammed into me, but it definitely hurts now.

MacKenzie isn't at the reception desk. She isn't in the restaurant. She isn't in her room. I walk through the entire motel without registering anything else. Afterward, I can't even remember who *was* in the reception area. All I could think was *Nope, not here.*

We argued the last time we spoke, but now I have an intense longing for her. I want her to pat me on the shoulder in that encouraging and slightly dismissive way of hers. Dismissive of my problems, not my feelings. I'll sort it out. It'll be fine. It's not so bad. *Come on, Henny, are you going to let a minor detail like this stop you?*

MacKenzie has a joke for every occasion, so maybe she'll be able to joke about this, too.

Henny, have you been playing chicken with a truck?

At least you can stop cleaning rooms at the motel now, Henny. Because you've gone to that big motel in the sky.

You've gone to the place where Netflix can't follow you.

Once, when I had a hundred-and-four-degree fever and could barely even smile at her jokes, she pushed my hair back from my face. Gently, with her fingertips, a calming almost-movement. It sounds motherly, but MacKenzie really isn't the motherly type. The fact she pushed back my hair was a gift. It was something unexpected, not something she does all the time.

"How're you doing, my friend?" she asked me. Cool fingertips against my forehead.

I miss that now.

That's not what she said the last time we spoke, of course. On Saturday. *Yesterday.* It was the second time that weekend that I'd asked her to cover my shift at the reception desk, and now she knew why. I assume she had gone through the reservation system. She tried to make me see sense, but I refused.

"It's been fifteen years," she said. "You're not the same people you were. You don't even know why he's back, or how long he's planning to stay. Last time he left without even saying goodbye."

"But you like Michael."

"That's not the point. I don't know him anymore. And neither do you."

"I don't know why you're so determined to stop me from being

happy. What difference does it make if it eventually ends? He's here now, MacKenzie. He came back."

"And what exactly do you think is going to happen? That he'll spend one weekend here and then move back to a town he's always hated? Or were you thinking that you could just have a nice weekend together and then stand here and watch him leave without having your heart broken again, like always? Do you really think you're strong enough to handle a one-weekend stand?"

"Can you cover my shift or not?" I asked.

MacKenzie folded her arms.

"Fine," I said. "I'll stay here at the desk. If that's what you want."

"Henny..."

And so I sat there, desperately unhappy and with nothing to do, while Michael, my Michael, was only five hundred yards away. But MacKenzie came back after half an hour and made a weary gesture with one hand. I snuck off immediately, before she had time to change her mind, pulling on my favorite jeans and my favorite blouse, the one with the red polka dots, and running over to the cabin as I tried to make my heart beat like normal.

That was the last time I saw her.



I eventually find her car parked outside Timber Bar, the local dive where we always hang out. Darkness has fallen, and the streetlights are illuminating the deserted parking lot.

I walk straight through the door without thinking about what I'm doing, then pause and blink in the gloom. The dark wooden tables are empty, and the room smells faintly of sweat and stale beer.

Buddy and two of the other regulars are in their usual spots by the bar. All three look acutely uncomfortable and are staring straight down at their beers.

Word of my death has already reached them. Catastrophe spreads fast in a small town.

It's about respect, too. Grief is raw and naked and revealing, so they show consideration by looking away. It's like when our kindergarten

teacher's mother went crazy and started walking around town in her underwear. No one laughed. You looked away. You tried desperately not to see her shuffling down Main Street in her rabbit slippers and lace underwear—*lace*—while our teacher hurried after her with a jacket that she kept throwing off.

MacKenzie is alone by the dartboard at the very back of the bar. She has a beer next to her, but she isn't drinking. She is wearing one of those huge men's shirts that she loves, a flannel one that has become silky smooth through years of wear. Even rolled up, the sleeves are too long for her. She keeps having to shake her arms to free her hands, an unconscious gesture so natural and familiar that, for a moment, it feels like everything is right again, everything is normal. I just need to buy a beer, and I can keep her company.

But then I notice how tense she is. Like an animal frozen midflight: every muscle, every synapse, is utterly under control. When she eventually throws the dart, it comes as a relief.

It hits the board too hard and bounces back to the floor.

MacKenzie doesn't care. I'm not sure she even notices.

She throws another dart.

"I bought her a backpack when she was nine," MacKenzie says.

I don't know who she's talking to, but Buddy and the other regulars all jump.

"Did you know that? It was the most pathetic backpack you could imagine. Ugly purple canvas. No Disney print, nothing. A real low-budget backpack."

I smile for the first time all evening. I remember it.

"And backpacks were important back then. All the others got a new one at the start of the school year. Henny did, too, but I didn't know that when I bought it."

The room is silent. It feels like everyone is trying to merge with the walls or become one with the bar's dark counter. Not even Bruce Springsteen is singing. Buddy's constant companion, an old CD player, is silent next to him.

"I just wanted to give her a gift. Dumb, huh? But right as I was about to give it to her, I realized her dad had already bought her a new

backpack. A big, fantastic one, with some kind of print on it, whatever was cool that year. I don't remember exactly, *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Little Mermaid* or something. Anyway, there it was in the hallway, all shiny and new, and it made the backpack I'd bought look ridiculous. I'd already wrapped it up, so I couldn't exactly pretend it was for myself."

She throws another dart. This one misses the board completely and burrows into the wall.

I lean against the table, the one I usually sit at while she's playing darts, right by the wall and out of her line of fire.

"But do you know what the stupid woman did?" she says quietly, sounding almost confused. "She wore my pathetic backpack to school every day for years."

MacKenzie falls silent, as though she suddenly realizes that she's standing there, talking, and doesn't know why. When she picks up her beer, her hand is shaking.

"MacKenzie..." I say, but she doesn't react. No one does. They can't hear me anymore.

I walk over to her and place my hands on her shoulders. I want to shake her, *force* her to see me, to laugh again, to be the old, tough MacKenzie that I know so well.

"I'll fix this," I say. "I swear. Somehow. It'll be okay."

Then I turn away. I suddenly can't bear to see her blank face.

"I can't be dead," I say. "I've barely even started living."



Buddy gives us a ride back to the motel. He's six foot five and weighs at least 330 pounds, but he was still shaking a little when he refused to let MacKenzie drive herself home. "Friends don't let friends drive drunk," he mumbled as he stared down at his shoes.

Buddy is a handyman in town and at the motel. Anything we can't fix ourselves, we leave to him. He always knows a guy who can lend him the right tools. But he can't fix MacKenzie. I can tell from his eyes that he is longing to put things right with a forklift truck or a steel saw, but there's nothing he can do. MacKenzie doesn't say a word the whole way home,

and by the time Buddy drives away from the motel, he has broken out in a cold sweat.

MacKenzie goes straight up to her room and slumps onto the bed, but she doesn't fall asleep. I keep her company as she twists and turns.

I'm sitting on the windowsill in a room that quickly becomes claustrophobic with anxiety. I abandoned her over the weekend; I can't leave her now.

I want to reach out and run my fingertips over her forehead. *How're you doing, my friend?* Swap roles completely. As incomprehensible as me speaking and her not listening.

My head feels like I've been battling with some kind of impossible puzzle for hours: *If a train leaves...* My brain feels swollen and overheated, as though it's pressing against my skull. All I want is to switch it off and take a break. *If a body is loaded into an ambulance going in one direction, and a soul grabs a ride in a police car going another...*

Eventually, I leave her there. My feet find their way in the darkness without any input from me. Suddenly, I'm just walking toward the Redwood Cabin. That's where Michael is, and it's where, only twelve hours earlier, I felt so unbelievably, intensely alive.

I try to be brave, I really do, but it's hard when you don't even know what is going on. Everything seems worse in the mockingly familiar area around the motel. I can *hear* the wind rustling the silver birches, but I can't feel it. I'm walking around in the middle of the night, wearing nothing but a thin blouse and jeans, and don't feel the slightest bit cold.

A silvery moon flashes on the dark surface of the creek. Beyond that is the complete darkness of what I know are the mountains.

Michael is asleep; his breathing is deep and calm. The faint glow of the moon seeps in through the open curtains, across the bed. He is on his side, and all I can see are his left cheekbone, his eye, and his nostril. Half of his mouth, slightly open. He's snoring, but he stops when I curl up against his back.

I bury my face in the nape of his neck and feel absurdly grateful that I can still make out his scent.

"You know, Michael," I say. "The strangest thing happened to me today..."

CHAPTER 3

Once Upon a Time, Boise Was a Coastal Town

IN THE BEGINNING, WE DIDN'T EXIST.

Michael used to tell me about how everything began. Four and a half billion years ago, the earth was just a fiery ball of lava and smoke and darkness. Nothing could live here, he said, but he didn't sound sad about that. In his world, rocks had always been most important.

We were seventeen. Michael hadn't gone off to college yet, and he hadn't begun his nomadic existence as a field geologist. But he already knew everything there was to know about Oregon's geology. Rocks were his first true love.

And where were we? I asked.

We?

Oregon.

There was no Oregon. In the beginning, we didn't exist. Hundreds of millions of years ago, when all the land on earth was gathered together in one big supercontinent that stretched from pole to pole—Pangaea—there was only ocean where Oregon is today. One big ocean, Panthalassa, as big as all of our current oceans put together. Its waves rolled onto Idaho's beaches. Boise would have been a coastal town.

He only said *Idaho* and *Boise* to amuse me. He loved how stubbornly I tried to force our own insignificant geography onto the earth's impressive history.

Our enormous mountain ranges, from the Cascades to the West, to the Klamaths in southwestern Oregon, and the Blue Mountains over here by us in the northeast, were still just isolated volcanoes. Some of the land around here was still at the bottom of the ocean. If you walk around

Pine Creek now, you can see traces of the volcanic islands we once were, surrounded by shallow bays and rivers and coral reefs.

Were there trees? I asked, and Michael laughed. He might have loved rocks, but I wanted something living, something that changed over time.

Rocks change, too, Henny.

I loved listening to Michael talk about geology. I loved the double approach to time and space that he had; the way he could stand on the barren banks of Pine Creek, with the high mountains and tall pines behind us, and see coral reefs.

I always wanted to hurry past the Permian-Triassic extinction event, past the dinosaurs and *their* extinction, to quickly skip over billions of years of history and get to our mountains and trees.

Our?

Pine Creek's.

I wanted to get to the mountains that had been worn down into sand to become the concrete that built the motel, the trees that had grown and been felled to become the cabins we built that summer.