

On the Way to Tassajara

*Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos*

— Robert Duncan

Tassajara is a hot springs and a Zen Buddhist retreat, miles inland beyond Carmel Valley, accessible only by a long, dusty road, a fabled spot with a creek and pool to dip into when the heat overwhelms, and since it's only open to public visits during summer months, the heat always overwhelms, for in fact, *tassajara* is a version of a Spanish word meaning "the place where meat is hung to dry." In other words, God's infernal oven. In addition to the spare sleeping accommodations and lavish vegetarian food (now called *glamping*), there are meditation sessions and talks, swimming and hiking, and while the springs are open all hours, the most inviting hour is under a star-spangled night sky, surrounded by scents from the forest and the gurgles of the cold, delicious creek.

In past years I'd visited Tassajara with my fiancé, a doctor who advised or examined the resident Buddhists while I enjoyed walks and swims, or played bocce ball with my kids. After the doctor and I parted company, a good friend proposed that we walk to Tassajara from Big Sur where she lived in a magical house perched over the hammering surf of Pfeiffer Beach, and from her front door with packs on our back, we headed to Little Joe's, a friend of my friend, handyman and poet, whose physicality suggested leprechaun, and who'd volunteered to guide us through the Ventana Wilderness.

Unlike the celebrity residences scattered along hidden roads, Little Joe had a modest cottage on a bald hill with a kitchen garden and corral, and after we arrived, he strapped our packs and provisions on his llama, and off we went: the llama and its keeper, two old friends, and unexpectedly, Little Joe's newest girlfriend Jamie. We walked slowly downhill around switchbacks that led to Highway 1 where a glade of towering redwoods shielded us from the glare of afternoon sun, and muffled the cars and trucks pounding the highway behind us. A few serene hours later, Little Joe pitched our camp by Sykes Hot Springs, pampering us with pasta Bolognese, green bean salad with tomatoes and mozzarella, fresh bread, and berry pie, and we sat on logs around a defunct old campfire, smoking a joint and sipping red wine. It was extremely enjoyable until my friend, who'd organized the trip and reserved our rooms at Tassajara, began to itch. She diagnosed the inflamed welts on her hands and arms as poison oak, pervasive in Big Sur and easily contracted, even by inhaling its oil, and when her antihistamine failed, in the morning she left to return to town for steroids, planning to meet us at Tassajara in a couple of days.

Three of us and the llama emerged out of the forest onto the bleached slopes of the Ventana range, the steep path exposing us to the blast-furnace heat, and we trudged up the mountain past

fields of desiccated grasses and wild flowers, the path getting steeper, and all of us struggling, especially the llama. I began to exhibit signs of heat stroke, and Little Joe made me sit and sip water, but when I rose to go, I had to sit again since I was nearly hallucinating like the time in Maui bushwhacking with Buddy across an overgrown, thorny hillside to reach a beach, and I saw imaginary fields of sugarcane set on fire by imaginary mutinous workers.

Up, up, up we continued until the crest where we could view the awesome blue Pacific stretching to the faraway horizon of blue sky, and then down, down, down to a little glen beside a creek where we dared not dunk our heads in the unfiltered water. Like poison oak, giardia was everywhere and unfortunately, all too familiar from my last oyster binge in New Orleans when my intestines turned into a swamp. Dinner was another extravaganza although Little Joe's cheerfulness seemed forced, for the trip had not gone smoothly: the sluggish llama more hindrance than help, our friend's unhappy departure, my heat stroke, and his own conspicuous confusion when he examined topo maps at various crossroads, suggesting we could get lost.

The second morning Little Joe and his girlfriend stayed in their tent until noon while I went to read discretely by the creek until after a late lunch she finally took her leave, planning to reach Highway 1 before dark, traveling in six hours what had taken us two days. A footnote about the contents of Jamie's backpack: a dozen Diet Cokes, a carton of Virginia Slims, and a kit with lipstick, eyeshadow, mascara, and pancake makeup applied as soon as she awoke.

Because we had lingered so long, waiting for Jamie and Little Joe to finish their romantic business, the hike was short and the night awkward for two strangers making dinner and small talk. While picking at the hair on his legs, Little Joe found a tick which he removed by holding a hot match to its head. "Probably Lyme," he said, now added to our list of perils.

The last day would mean ten or twelve hours of walking, and we started early, coming down the backside of the peak, Little Joe and the llama some distance behind me as I entered a primordial oak forest, shady and silent except for acorns crunching under my feet like tinkling glass. Glad to be alone, absolutely alone, I felt transported to a world where blood beat in time to wind and rustling leaves, a world that inspired the first poem. When the path widened and the ground leveled with proof of human habitation (barn, horse, wagon), the spell was broken, and I grew eager to reach our destination, walking briskly until dusk, my pace increasing after a mountain lion's roar echoed through the canyon. At the sight of the hand-carved sign (*Tassajara * Zen Mountain Center * Zenshinji*), I folded my knees and touched my head to the earth, thankful that I'd arrived.

Summer Brenner