

From the book: *Road Noise*
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Craving Sunlight

Redwood Hostel Redwood National Park

Small stones hit the underside of the car as my tires spun in the gravel driveway that rose to the entrance of the Redwood Hostel. It was 9:30 PM when we finally arrived. I wanted out of the car, but I wasn't sure I could move. Steve was already out and running up to the entrance.

Eight hours of driving was double the daily plan for this trip, and I felt twisted and pinched from the neck down. Outside it was cold and damp, typical for the Northern California coast. It had been a long drive from Los Gatos—nearly 400 miles.

I pulled a small flashlight from the console and moved in a circle around the car. I was looking for something—a mountain lion, the madman with the claw, bigfoot. It was just a mother's instinct. Check the grounds. Look for suspicious activity. Assess possibilities—cliff ledges to fall from, bodies of water to drown in, rocks to fall over, oncoming cars, vicious dogs, or perhaps alien craft looking for abductees. Take mental note. Keep most concerns to self. Motherhood rule number five—control obsessive worry over nothing. I frequently failed.

My forty-something aging eardrums fluttered in the nighttime silence. There was only the persistent rhythm of Pacific waves across the highway. I couldn't see them, only twinkly moonlit streaks tumbling onto the shore. With eyes blinded by darkness, my other senses woke up and I could feel the vibration of the ocean through my feet and smell the thick briny mist. A black sand beach just over the road hugged the coastline crossing the border into Oregon and I knew I would be up before dawn to sink my toes into the cold pebbles and shiver against the early gray fog.

“Mom. Oy—Mom! Is there a television in the room?” The silence was broken by Steve's sweet voice. It was still young, gentle, and childlike. His face was still smooth and round. How long did I have before his voice lowered and his legs got long and hairy? How long before he would reject my hugs?

“What? Oh, no. This is a hostel. Remember, I was telling you about what a hostel is? There might be one in the community room. You can stay up for a little while, but we're going to bed soon; we're leaving in the morning.”

“Why aren't we staying here awhile? It looks cool. I want to go to the beach tomorrow.”



Author Debbi Lynn, at the time of the trip

“Sure, we’ll go to the beach. That water is cold, you know.”

“I don’t care. I don’t mind the cold; I just like the waves.”

“Okay, but just in the morning; we’re heading north along the coast and there will be plenty more beach time. Besides, we’ve been to the Redwoods before. Remember our camping trip when we went tubing with your friend Mark?”

That pleasant weekend shot back into the front of my brain. A smile came to my face recalling those two seven-year-old boys splashing and laughing all day in the shallow river. Those perfect moments get lost sometimes in the daily routines of undone homework and arguments over bedtime or Saturday shopping trips for new pants. For two days I sat on a lounge chair at the edge of the river with my favorite things—a book and a cooler full of snacks and iced tea, and three pre-made margaritas I had frozen inside Sprite bottles. If every day could...

“Can I bring the boogie board?”

“Yes. But remember, we can only stay for the morning.”

Managing expectations is challenging with an active child. I had to pick my words carefully and make a logical argument. He wouldn’t let me get away with just any explanation. If I didn’t have the right tone and presentation, talking with Steve could be exhausting.

Steve had already reached the entrance of the hostel. “Hey, hey, come back! Little help here.” He ran back to the car with the same energy he had at 8 AM.

“Take this bag and that bottle of water.” I pointed to my gallon bottle of distilled water I carried everywhere. He grabbed the bag and bottle and ran back up to the door like it was a relay race.

The hostel was an old two-story wood-frame house set just off the road on a hill directly across Highway 101 from the ocean. A pony-tailed young man with a tie-dye scarf headband and a single black hoop earring eyed us strangely as we entered. I don’t know why we got an odd look since I had called ahead, but I would realize later that the two of us would get strange or prolonged looks throughout the trip.

The clerk who made a point of telling me he was not the regular manager, was abrupt, but not unfriendly, and for \$28 offered us a private room and a list of rules. The rules included no shoes in the house, a closed kitchen after 9:30 PM (which it was), locked-in hours, and a request for us to be available at 8:30 AM to help with a chore. I glanced at the list—things like sweeping, watering the garden, and trash. I told him I planned to be up at dawn, in meditation on the beach, and out of there by 10:00 AM, but I would take the kitchen trash out to the bin before I left. He nodded in satisfaction and walked back to a wooden chair with frayed netting on the seat and picked up his book, *This Wheel’s on Fire*. Immediately I heard lyrics of The Band in my head...

I said, “Hey, Carmen, come on let’s go downtown”

She said, “I gotta go but my friend can stick around”

...

Our private room overlooked a quiet deck and lush natural gardens. At least, that’s what the cheaply photocopied black and white flier said. I pulled back the dusty curtain—a sheet hung on a metal rod. There could have been lush natural gardens, but it was too dark to tell and I was too tired to find out. It could have been doobie weed for all I cared. Humboldt County has always had a reputation for the private gardens that thrive among the public Redwoods.

A single chipped wooden chair with a lopsided leg stood in one corner and nearly toppled over as I threw my bag on the seat. On the other side of the room, a weathered and unraveling rattan table supported a plastic philodendron about to sprout a life form in its dust. Next to the fake plant was a stack of magazines. A quick flip through discovered both a 1976 *Field Guide to Pacific States Wildflowers* and the April 1972 edition of

Cosmopolitan, the one with the Burt Reynolds three-page nude centerfold—a first in the history of male magazine nudes. There he was, still folded into the pages, arm carefully placed to obstruct the star of the show and keep us wondering as to its true magnitude. A few former guests had penned comments or drawn pictures around the sides that resembled tongues or open lips and a penis or two. I got out my pen and added a drawing of kissing lips with my initials on them.

A metal clothing bar, the kind you would find in a closet, had been rigged to hang from the ceiling above the chair which I later used to dry our wet shower towels. Although the accommodations were modest, the showers were hot, the bathrooms were clean enough and never occupied, and the two twin mattresses were semi-comfortable and bug-free—at least they looked like it.

As promised to ponytail man, I was up at dawn with the fog and my Nikon all alone on the black sand beach while I let Steve sleep a little longer but left a note on the door in case he got up. I wondered again about being on the road for three months with him. How much of a challenge would it be cooped up in a car or cheap motel room day after day? How, when, and how often would he take me to the edge of frustration? It hadn't occurred to me that morning just how much I would also frustrate him.

My lungs filled with the cool air from the ocean. I smoothed out a bamboo mat on the dark pebbly California sand, pulled the hood up on my sweatshirt and sunk down cross-legged. I shivered against the cold as my legs hit the mat, closed my eyes, and listened. I would not think about the decade past. It was a new day and time for new dreams. I was craving some inner sunlight.

Meditation was a form of relaxation I started during the divorce. Long meditations calmed my turbulent gut and kept the panic attacks to a manageable level. They may have been the only thing that kept me from losing my mind during that traumatic ending. It was time to feel whole again. I wasn't expecting a religious transformation—I just wanted a method to cope with my pain and panic and take myself to a place in my head that was calm and peaceful. I felt connected to something, but I didn't believe it was a personally attentive god. I was long past the god who was called on to answer the prayers of individuals begging for mercy from a terrible disease or a personally desired outcome of a sports team. If there was a god of such glory and talent as to put together such a multiverse—it would not waste time with individual specks of sand praying for personal gain. All anyone had to do was look around at the ugliness that had swallowed humanity. Prayers were either going unanswered or bad outcomes were excused away as god's mystery.

My belief in a connectedness was a pragmatic one—a universal energy that was all around, connecting us to everything, including these giant redwoods and swirling through every grain on that black sand beach. Every breath in was a potential healing of body and mind. The force—the god—was within; every day was a choice to connect to that energy of the whole. We are just one sliver of bark in the Redwood forest and one fast-dying spark in the biggest of forest fires.