

Woke Up on a Bodega Morning

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On the plus side, while I did not get to go out on the boat with Jaques Cousteau or anyone else of similar inclination, a nature preserve adjoined the laboratory, and the cove, reached by a short flight of stairs, was also a preserve, open only to researchers and lab employees. The lab itself, with its multitude of specimen tanks, constituted a giant aquarium filled with exotic species. The fish, eels, and invertebrates may all have been native to Bodega Bay and the Pacific coast, but they were all new to me.

Depending on how late I'd worked the night before, I would usually begin my work day with a walk out on the headland that adjoined the laboratory and the nearby nature preserve.

Early in the morning just after dawn, was always better than later on, as it gave me more opportunity to linger on the path, not a single human in sight, and, with luck, catch a glimpse of the larger animals that lived in the area, foxes and bobcats. I never did see a bobcat, but once I saw a fox, invisible for the most part but for her tail, cross an opening between bushes, followed by two, perhaps three kits.

As I approached the cliff's edge, the sound of the surf would grow louder and louder where the waves broke against the rocks below. Over time, the falling sea had uncovered a weak spot in the bluff, gradually widening the opening in the cliff as a potter's hands might enlarge the inner surface of a bowl. Now, the waves rolled in big and fat and it was here that the seals and the otters played, riding the waves in a manner far more skilled than even the best of our species' own wetsuit-clad surfer.

The spray quickly coated the face of any onlooker and only salt-loving plants survived by the cliff's edge. Even today, when I walk the same path, the feel of the spray on my face brings back the view of the headland to my now-sightless eyes.

Overhead the gulls and black oyster catchers circle in the hopes that a fish might just break the surface of the waves. I can see it all in my mind's eye, the winter light, the seals, the waves, but when I walk along the cliff's edge today, I have to rely on the birds' cries and the smell of the sea to bring this vision back to me.

I'd been warned, not only by Jerry but by virtually everyone I'd come in contact with in my first days at the lab, not to take the walk without first going on a guided tour with one of the lab people. No loss, as I'm sure I was introduced that way to many things I might otherwise have overlooked, as well as the one thing they wanted to be sure I knew about. I was instructed and would instruct others in turn to remain on the well-worn paths in the areas that were overgrown with lupine and gold brush. A multitude of small creatures, mice, moles, and voles, made their homes there. And it was essential that a wide berth be given to the burrow where a vixen was supposed to hide during the day along with her three surviving cubs.

Of course, that vixen and her cubs were the natural predators of those same small animals as was the rumored but-still-unseen bobcat along with the kestrels and red-tailed hawks that hovered silently overhead, sudden death for any stragglers.

Marine life was equally at risk in the sea. Man, otters, and starfish competed for the shellfish, and the seals gobbled up scores of the finny kind.

Still, the most fearsome predator of all was man. Developers visualized million-dollar homes on the headlands and the Pacific Gas and Electric Company thought Bodega Bay would make the ideal location for a power station, no matter that it would destroy the entire ecology both on land and at sea.

While I was grateful to those at the lab who first introduced me to the area—and to Suzy, the young graduate student, who'd been the only local so far to satisfy my cravings, the main reason I liked to go out on the headland early, before I'd started my work day, was because only then could I be alone, totally at peace with nature.

You'll understand that I was not at all pleased as I wandered along the narrow pathway to find myself gradually coming face to face with another person. He was one of those nature geeks who can't go for a hike around the block without just the right clothes from Northface or REI, guaranteed to repel rain (but not protect against a heavy downpour), wick away perspiration, and be made from materials that place absolutely no burden on the rain forest.

He wore a food-stained khaki jacket, khaki pants that could be converted from long pants to shorts in a heartbeat—not likely to be necessary this close to the cold Pacific ocean, and a wide-brimmed safari hat that, once the morning mist had dissipated, would, hopefully, keep the sun away from his pasty white face. In this poor fool's case, the clothes didn't quite fit, probably because he'd bought them on sale and his hollow chest and bad case of scoliosis would have made a proper fit impossible even if he'd bought them from a London tailor.

He had the requisite amount of facial hair for a Berkeleyite. A scraggly beard was a salt and pepper shade as was the thinning hair that protruded from beneath the safari hat; his bushy mustache was a somewhat different color and would later prove to be completely fake.

His beak. . . I mean his nose, tapered almost to a point with a slight downward curve. It could and should have been ignored by the politically correct onlooker, except that he was constantly reaching up to touch it as he spoke drawing his listener's attention back to the unfortunate protuberance again and again.

My notion when I pass someone on a path is to give a brief nod—if I can't avoid their gaze completely, and move on. But from his perspective, it was as if after a hundred days in the bush, seeing me, he'd come upon proof that he was not really alone in the world. As he prattled on, I soon felt like a wedding guest trapped by an ancient mariner.

We—he, that is—discussed our surroundings—either he knew the name of every noxious weed or he was faking, but as I'd always wondered what the little blue flowers were called, I made no attempt to walk away.

"What are those birds up to?" he asked, interrupting the flow of his own conversation. He looked back over his shoulder and I followed his gaze. Almost half a mile away across the coastal scrub, we could see a murder of turkey vultures circling a to-us-invisible body on the ground below.

"Dead cow," he suggested when he saw I was looking where he pointed.

"Dead rabbit is more likely."

"Too many birds for that."

"And the mother fox would have scooped up the rabbit long since," I added.

"Let's go see," he suggested and stepped off the path as if to make a beeline across the meadow toward the unseen corpse.

"No," I hollered, perhaps a bit too loudly, for he looked at me strangely. I took the time then to explain about the litter of kits. "We don't want to disturb them. Stay on the path."

"But aren't you curious?"

"Not that curious." It had to be at least a mile to where the birds were circling if we went the long way, the correct way round. Besides I had to work.

"I would like to see."

Then go look then. Leave me be. But what I actually said was, "You need to stay on the path. Besides, the spot where the birds are circling looks as if it is next to the road. There aren't that many tall elms around here. Walk back with me to the lab parking lot and take your car instead."

"Oh, I'm not parked here." Well then, where was he parked? Where had this strange creature come from? "I'll just stay on the path." He walked away, while I, deprived of my morning stroll, had no choice but to return to the laboratory and my chores.