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IF THE TUBS COULD TALK

By

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Did I tell you that a favorite pastime of mine on long road trips is to find off-road pit stops? Squatting in a gully next to a corn field, or an almond orchard or artichoke field, or even rows of desert palm is much better than inhaling the reeking odors of a dank cement room behind a gas station. Today I'm on one of my favorite off-road treats, turning off Highway 101, glad at last to lighten my foot on the pedal and leave cars moving at warp speed behind. The view of the fertile valley expands in the rearview mirror as I climb from Arroyo Seca up Cypress Road toward my 'secret retreat.'

I involuntarily slow my pace as vineyards, rows marked by rose bushes, give way to a grove of looming cypress pines. I find the perfect dirt road off to the right that weaves through columns of blooming cactus to pee in today. What a calendar I could make of 'California Pit Stops I Have Known.' I smile, looking up from my teetering crouch and say 'thank you!' wishing as I let go that I could as easily relieve myself of things I no longer need to make me feel worthwhile. Somebody else's project to report eloquently on. Another client's program to evaluate. Whether my business account will have enough in it to pay my quarterly taxes next month. If only stress could be eliminated as easily as it is to let go when we pee. I wobble and I hear my knees pop as I pull my panties up, my skirt down and stand, glad the wind didn't wet my sandals. A flash of 'what if my mother saw me' hits. Taking three hours on a weekday between business meetings for myself? Moi? Not their generation. But then there's something to that work ethic I've inherited. I'm glad for the triple digit salary, but I probably need a twelve-step

program for work addiction. Let me recover from needing someone else's details to make me feel worthwhile, instead of my own. Busy-ness is an anchor, it holds down my creativity, it doesn't get me anywhere; it's an illusion. It doesn't save me from anything. Depressed, lethargic, and bored are states I've managed to avoid quite well over the years, thank you very much. Give me manic any time. Still? Me? Well ... I'm getting better and better at it though, the older I get. Each trip I make to this hot springs helps.

Cypress Mineral Springs** are one of the Central Coast's best kept secrets: twenty-four oak hot tubs with names like *Serenity* and *Tranquility*, each totally private and protected by its own redwood fence, nestled in folds of California-gold hills dotted with scrub oak, sycamore and grape vines.

At the desk a twenty-something college student in khakis and Cypress branded Polo tee-shirt smiles and takes my twelve dollars. The springs, open twenty-two hours a day, offer soothing mineral waters for respite from whatever one wishes to escape, just as they have for thousands of years.

"Would you like an upper tub or a lower one?"

"Oh upper, " I say relishing the climb. "Is *Rendezvous* or *Lookout* available?"

"You're in luck, *Lookout* is, but *Rendezvous* has been reserved."

"Great," I say as I select lavender scented bubbles for another dollar and choose a bottle of Sobe 'Serenity' Elixir that the clerk pours in a non-breakable container.

"You know the drill then. Up the second flight of stairs and turn right at *Twilight*. *Lookout* is just past *DéjàVu*."

A fortyish college professor type is just ahead of me as I slowly ascend the three-story staircase entwined in flowering jasmine and ivy. I can't see his face, but imagine rows of

worshipful students looking up at him as he lectures. He has deeply tanned skin, and a closely trimmed beard. I fancy penetrating blue eyes while focusing on how the muscles in his lightly hairy calves twitch with each step. I chat with him about the wonders of this place, so close to home.

“Go figure, best kept secret, don’t tell too many people,” he mutters between conscious breaths as I turn right for *Lookout* and he goes left to *Rendezvous*. I lift the steaming cover from my tub, turn on the jets and pour in the lavender in the bubbles to soften the bitter sulfur smell. I go outside *Lookout’s* gate to turn the red valve that sends more hot water up. Careful to avoid the poison oak, I reach under the deck and retrieve a few crinkling condom and candy wrappers that have slipped through the slats from God knows when. A shuffling makes me look up toward *Rendezvous*. My professorial staircase mate is standing naked, pacing at the doorway to his deck.

‘Mmmmm, nice legs,’ I think, remembering what I might have called across to him in my single days a few decades ago. A light pounding on the steps interrupts further fantasy. A lithe blonde twenty-something, backpack over a bright pink tank-top, strides the steps two at a time and turns into his tub. For a second I’m blinded by a beam of reflected sunlight from the silver ring at her navel. I smile, shrug and return to my own steaming waters.

I remember to pull off my own ring as I undress, wondering exactly what minerals Mother Earth releases from her womb for our pleasure that can also turn silver black and if the blonde’s ring was as easily removed. I sink ever so slowly into the 106-degree water, and stifle a cry of shock from the heat. I push aside thoughts of the workshop I’ll lead tomorrow, the impending deadline for the report that remains precariously perched on my desk at home. Arms above my head almost in prayer formation, I slip in. I shudder. I close my eyes, remind myself to

let go. Another thought of the professor and his blonde of the semester floats up and I wish it away. I sink into the oak tub/womb, floating in fetal position, my muscles Spanish moss melting from my bones. As I notice the tingly bubbles gently massaging every pore of my body, I find myself wondering what these tubs would say if they could talk.

My, what they must've have witnessed over they years! These waters have cradled literally thousands of bodies in their depths! I can't get the words of the Eric Burdon song out of my head: 'tall ones, skinny ones, fat ones, short ones.' Playmate material at eighteen; everyday American spread circa forty. Sagging breasts and siliconed; hairy chests and shaved ones. Muscles and flab. Hearts and bones.

Marital assignations. First dates. Relationships straining from parenting young ones, renewed by leaving a babysitter at home. Closeted gays meeting in private. Single businessmen strategizing after a golf game. College students rewarding themselves for finishing exams, smells of sensimilla mixing with the sulfur. Wine in paper cups lubricating conversation and god knows what else. Bones formerly broken, now arthritic; backs twisted from years of improper posture or days of driving; their tension melted and massaged by the spa's muffled jets. Or lone travelers like myself just taking an hour to let go, to listen to the silence.

As I soak, I wonder if during the middle of the night *Tubby* might ring up *Hideaway* and compare notes. Or would all the tubs have a conference call and put in their two cents?

"Okay," Nirvana would gurgle. "What was your most special treat today?"

"Well, I had that television newscaster and her cameraman again," Tubby would babble. "The energy those two have! *Get this*. I caught each of them looking at their watches while they were making love so they'd get back to the studio by 5:00. That's responsibility, eh?"

"So what! *Good for them*," *Shangri-La* would spout up. "At least they 'do it.' I haven't felt anybody make love in weeks. Maybe my thermostat is too hot. Water ain't the best lubricant you know."

"My favorite today was *Gramma and Pops*." *Twilight* might bubble. "Didn't you think it was cute, how they were kissing and holding hands? Round is the only word to describe those two. Seventy-odd years of meat and potatoes wrapped round their middles, their pale skins mottled. They even gave each other a massage. He didn't even flinch when she touched his scar from gallbladder surgery. And I loved it when Pops suckled the dark nipples of her one full breast, then actually kissed her chest where the missing one should've been. I could tell that mastectomy had to have been at least twenty years ago. No silicone replacement therapy for them. If their grandchildren only knew how touching and totally accepting of each other they are. Who says they're ain't life after sixty!"

"Aaah, how sweet," *Hideaway* would slosh. "Quite a contrast to what I saw today! Two dark unshaven men took me from eleven o'clock til 3 a.m.! It wasn't the

gang numbers on the back of his neck, or the talons of the dragon tattooed around the other guy's shoulder that got me. Nope, not even the lines of coke they snorted. Or even the shots of Jack Daniel's they drank. It was the guns! They were so angry, so tweaked! I was afraid one of them would shoot a squirrel he got pissed at for dropping acorns on the deck. It took everything I had to soothe the savage inside those two. They just didn't belong here. But when they turned on my jets full force, for a few minutes I helped them forget what it was they were running from."

"We sensed something dangerous going on," *Harmony* would pipe in.

"Do you think they were drug dealers?" *Enchantment* would splash.

"Darkness rarely shows its face here, but we all knew you'd be all right."

Gemini changed their flow with: "Well, did any of you catch Mrs. Whitney and Mrs. Rockford today?" They treated themselves to lunch after tennis this week, and had a whole bottle of wine. They almost tripped coming up the stairs they were giggling so much. Eleanor actually convinced Esther to forgo the bathing suits! They took a tub naked! Thirty years of keeping their bor-ing husbands happy; their only solace is their weekly tennis game and soak. But listen to this. After a while Esther held Eleanor's hands as she wept about her daughter's divorce; and you know what? For a brief second I thought they wanted to kiss."

"Nah, you're kidding," *Lookout* would answer.

"Nope," *Gemini'd* reply. "If I'm not mistaken I felt the vibration from a lust that dare not speak its name."

"Speaking of lust," *Rendezvous* would burble in, "did you see Professor Clapham and his blonde of the semester this time? I wanted to spew over the edge of my tub. If I hear about 'the validity of subjective measures of competency based education' one more time, I'm going to boil over. I wonder if she realizes that he dyes not only that blonde quasi crew cut of his, but his chest hair too! "

"Ah come on now, doesn't he get that we all age?"

"Exactly, what do you think the nineteen-year-olds are about for him? But this one really spars with him. He's actually beginning to be smitten by her. She'll go places with that thesis of hers; that is if she lets go of the fantasy that he'd ever leave his wife and settle down with someone nineteen. Is she dreaming?"

"Ssssh, come on now," *Lookout* foams. "We're all absorbing a bit too many human traits here. We're about healing, not judgment remember? I had that writer again today. She always picks *Rendezvous* or me because she can see more through the trees at this height. Haven't had her in a few weeks because of the holidays. She's taken another day job for the county; important work, good money. But I had to remind her that's not what she's really supposed to be doing, what

she's here for. As I surrounded her, my minerals whispered not to be afraid of her own creativity, to let that voice be heard."

"Did she light a joint again before she went under?" *Rendevous* would slush.

"Actually she hadn't in a long time but today she did," *Lookout* replied.

"What the hey, whatever it takes. I'm always glad when she comes here to soak and quiet herself. She gets so wound up, that mind of hers runs so many conversations simultaneously; it's all I can do to absorb even some of that stress! The hemp helps her get out of her head, and that helps me. I actually sensed a shift in her. Very little, but some movement in the direction of quiet, calm."

"Wow, quiet. Wish I'd had some peace today. All my customers were gabby," *Atlantic* would continue. "Sometimes I want to put a gag in their mouths. My minerals are still being replenished from 4:00's insomnia, 5:00's marital troubles, and 7:00's arthritis."

"Now, now. You know how long it takes sometimes," *Erewhon* gurgled in. "Cut your writer a little slack *Lookout*. At least your customers do something meaningful. I got mostly high school girls in bathing suits worried they don't look more like someone named Brittany Spears, all trying to attract the same guy who wouldn't know what to do with one of them if he caught her. And yikes, the

language young girls use these days. When did the f- word become something young ladies let slip from their mouths?

"I totally agree," *Shangri-la* might burst up to *Starlight*, "And when did this body piercing thing start? That guy I had at nine o'clock had enough jewelry on to short-circuit a computer! Must have been his first time, because he forgot to take it off. I was worried I'd turn into a battery from the chemical reaction!"

"It's different now than it used to be," *Tranquility* slurped, "most of them move so fast. We're here to slow everything down, remind them that time is precious, help them remember what it was like when the Native Americans first discovered us. I can still smell the sage, hear the chanting. I miss the ceremonies they used us for."

"Holy water!" *Paradise* complained, "I'm just about steamed out. Just look at what we've absorbed! No wonder they drain us every morning between five and seven a.m. Look. Anthony's on the first level now releasing the valves. I'm ready to be sucked dry and be re-mineralized for two hours. We'll all be one again soon. Let's chant before our stress filled waters go back down into Mother Earth.

"OOOOOMMMMMMM. "

"Oooooommmm. "

The chime outside the gate to my deck rings. Stunned, I open my eyes. Fifty of my sixty minutes are already up! My arms feel heavy, my head light, as I sit on my towel and rub cream slowly into my callused heels, between my toes, up my legs. I realize, these conversations weren't imaginary. These are the voices in my own head. And yes, they do stop when I turn the jets off, lay back and float, resting enough so that all I can hear is my own breathing, the beat of my own heart. I feel ever so grateful, so blessed for having taken one more step to *Learn to be Still* like the Eagles song.

I slip back into reality and pull on my clothes, forgoing the bra, too constricting. No, I thought, if the tubs could talk, they wouldn't. As I slip back to reality and dress; I get that these tubs wouldn't gossip, they wouldn't care. They wouldn't be concerned with conditions, judgment, evaluation.

IF they could talk, it's not secrets these tubs would tell!

If the tubs could talk they wouldn't care if you were alone or wonder why you weren't a couple, or even whether you loved the one you were with.

They'd just tell you to slip in, slide under, float, and BE.

"Look up through the trees," they'd beckon.

"Notice nature."

"Let the squirrels and birds sing you to sleep."

Serenity wouldn't whisper of jealousies or *Tranquility* spurt inconsequential comparisons between body parts. *Erewhon* would never ripple in judgment victimizing someone for causing the disease that brought them seeking here relief. Never.

Infidelities wouldn't interest *Harmony*, nor would *Nirvana* brag about the orgasms enjoyed in its embrace. *Starlight* certainly wouldn't care about someone's weight, or how much water they displaced.

I finally get it. These waters are about acceptance. Their supply from geothermal depths is endless, infinite. If the tubs could talk, *really* talk, they would wonder what the hurry is all about. They'd ask where people have been to so tightly knot their muscles, what forces wind them up so much inside that it twists humans' god-given architecture. Waters which spring from the center of the planet and rise from molten rock, to fill man-made chalices in which we play, or pray, would only ask us to hope. They'd wish us to leave renewed. Reminded. Remembering our source. Cypress springs only envelop. If they did speak it would be in a whisper:

“Surrender.”

“Float.”

“Forget.”

“Fly.”

“Wrap yourself in love.”

“Be with me now.”

I descend the staircase one step at a time, and notice that the professor has left before me, and hear his student arranging with the timekeeper to stay another hour alone. I smile and head out to the parking lot. I put my gym bag and wet towel smelling of sulphur in the trunk. I gasp when I look at my watch that I'd left in the car on purpose. I have a meeting at 6:00 in Salinas and less than an hour to make it. I quickly set the CD player to the Eagles 'Hell Freezes Over,' roll the windows down and head for the freeway. On 101 my foot firmly on the pedal, I

scan for police cars as I zip into the left lane, and then pull back over as a dark maroon SUV in the rear view mirror tailgates and dwarfs my Honda Civic. I am doing 77 as he passes me. Not three minutes later I see the SUV stopped by a cop. I wipe my brow relieved it's not me and smell a hint of sulphur on my skin from the tubs. I ease over into the right lane, switch the CD to Enya, and remind myself that there's always enough time.

** Cypress Mineral Springs are based loosely on Monterey county's hot springs in Esalen and Paraiso; but more directly resemble Sycamore Mineral Springs in San Luis Obispo County at Avila Beach. <http://www.sycamoresprings.com>.