

THINK TANK

ing to say that Russia did not meddle in our elections, trying to say that any evidence about people on his team that are connected to Russia is just politicized. So as he runs his own disinformation campaign, I think we feel a responsibility to the country to make sure that people understand that we were attacked.

SF: So far, all the evidence of possible collusion is circumstantial, right?

ES: So far, yeah, it's circumstantial. But remember...DNA evidence, for example, is circumstantial. You know, I don't know if we'll ever find a video recording of collusion or a signed document with fingerprints and DNA on it of a U.S. person saying, "I'm going to go to work for Russia." So that's why this case is even more complicated. And I want people, at the end of the investigation, to have all the faith in the world that whether it's circumstantial or direct evidence that's put forward to them, that that evidence has been tested and is credible.

SF: Some people might think that you have your eyes on higher office already. Any truth to that?

ES: I have my eyes on making sure we go into 2020 in a much better position than we are in right now. I think that the country right now is anxious about economic stability. I think people are concerned about the threats posed abroad, and I think they're looking to Congress to see who the leaders are who are going to step up in this angst and in this despair and try and lead us forward. I want to be in the team that does that.

SF: If Senator Dianne Feinstein were to decide not to run in 2018, would you consider running for her seat?

ES: I hope she runs. I think she's a terrific senator. She's been a mentor to me, especially on issues of intelligence.

SF: But if she doesn't, it is something you would consider?

ES: Of course, yes, of course.

SF: So when you're in D.C., what do you miss the most about your district?

ES: Johnny's Donuts [in Dublin]. Two maple bars. I really should cut it down to one. I've been doing that every weekend for five years. ■

This interview was conducted in cooperation with the This Golden State podcast and has been edited and condensed for publication.



HAPPY PLACE

Born Again—and Again

One woman's love letter to the rejuvenating power of Big Sur, which has always been a world apart—and now is literally so. BY REBECCA FLINT MARX

THERE WERE TWO of us in the car, driving north to San Francisco from a wedding in Ventura, and we weren't expecting the fog. It wreathed the road in impenetrable but romantic gloom, turning the landscape into a heavy-lidded dream. We crept up Highway 1, unable to discern the continent's edge, until we came upon a phoenix. That it happened to be a statue outside a restaurant's parking lot was incidental; the better explanation was that it was another figment of the fugue state I seemed to have entered a few miles south.

Jeff parked and we got lunch at the restaurant, Nepenthe, but I couldn't tell you what we ate. All I remember is that I finally saw Big Sur: The fog lifted as we gazed through the restaurant's windows, revealing hills the color of a golden retriever and swirling ocean tides that seemed angry at being viewed by human eyes.

Jeff and I were both drawn to ornery beauty—it was one of many things we'd had in common when we'd met a few years earlier in Alabama. We were postcollegiate interns at a publishing company where nei-

ther of us fit in: Jeff was gay and pierced, and I didn't own a twinset. But we fit each other, and now, as we drove from hotel to motel in the vain hope of finding a room, the desk clerks assumed we were a couple. We didn't correct them; Jeff was too cool to care, and anyway, who needed to know? I wasn't even sure where I was, exactly—was Big Sur a town? a vaguely demarcated stretch of coastline? some dharma bum state of mind?—but I knew that someday, I would come back.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about how I can't go back, at least not for the near future. In February, winter rains cracked a support column in the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge, cleaving Big Sur in two and cutting it off from the rest of California. So I find myself trying to revisit it in my memories, which you could charitably describe as loaded.

I returned to Big Sur five years after my first trip, alone in the ashes of a breakup and armed with the kind of determination to write a New Life Chapter that drives people straight through their navels and into the woods. In my case, it drove me from

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Brooklyn to Deetjen's Big Sur Inn. I'd found it on the Internet while hunting for a post-breakup apartment and was immediately enthralled: It looked like the kind of enchanted bohemian hideaway where you'd find Stevie Nicks weaving a dream catcher, or Henry Miller stripping women with his eyes. Once I arrived there, I understood why I'd started plotting a return to Big Sur almost as soon as my boyfriend of three years and I had decided to part ways. It was everything I felt: wild, isolated, vulnerable, and teetering on the edge of something vast and unknown.

It was also where I found Deetjen's guest books. The inn is justifiably famous for these registries, which contain a universe within an already parallel world. Roughly 99 percent of their entries are written by people at the end or beginning of something—love affairs and marriages, but also vacations, illnesses, and middle age. They're by and for souls in flux, so full of desire and regret that they practically vibrate. My single room had no television, cell service, or walls thick enough to obscure the sounds of people having sex down the hall, but I didn't care; I was content to sit on my twin bed and luxuriate in other people's miseries, triumphs, and ambiguities. The entries made me feel alternately voyeuristic, humbled, and smug, but, more than anything, I felt less alone, and relieved that my sadness was nothing special.

I spent most of the visit buried in the books, but I surfaced late one night to drive to Esalen, which opens its hot springs to the public between 1 and 3 a.m. I sat in a pool by myself, oblivious to the naked strangers. The only sound was the ocean slamming itself against the rocks hundreds of feet below; above me, stars clotted the night sky. With apologies to my secular Jewish upbringing, the two hours I sat in that pool were the closest I've ever come to spiritual transcendence.

It took five more years for me to return, this time with Tim. We'd been going out for four years, and as we sat in one of Esalen's bathtubs, he got down on one knee and asked me to marry him. I heard myself say "yes" right as my gut said "umm"; he was the love of my life, but there were issues. There was his late-stage cystic fibrosis and crushing debt; there was my martyr complex and willingness to loan him \$20,000 I knew I'd never get back. But it was 2 a.m. in Big Sur and every last star was out, and later that day we opened one of Deetjen's guest books and wrote hopeful, heartfelt words.

We broke up almost a year later, just in time for Tim to get a double lung transplant. We stayed together through the six months of his recovery, and then I loaded up a rental car and drove from New York to San Francisco. I suppose you could say it was grief that made me do it, or the kind of existential horror that comes with being 36 and suddenly at loose, unraveling ends. As New York receded behind me, I felt like the living embodiment of Deetjen's guest book, which is to say that I felt like shit, but also cautiously hopeful.

I waited for almost a year after that to go back to Big Sur—there was too much Tim there, and too much of who I had been and no longer wanted to be. When I did return, it was with John, a date who had become a friend and then a friend with benefits before turning back into a friend. It was a confusing arrangement, made more so by the fact that in the two weeks leading up to our long-planned trip, I'd gone on a first, second, and third date with someone else I liked.

Big Sur was generous that weekend: It gave freely of its beauty and silence, but not of Esalen's baths—they were booked, which more or less saved me from myself. Unable to wallow in past sorrow, I instead looked forward, writing a long entry in a guest book in Deetjen's Van Gogh room, where John and I slept chastely in twin beds, and taking furtive pillow selfies for this new guy I seemed to be dating.

By the time I came back to Big Sur the following year, the new guy had become Ned, my boyfriend. It was an imperfect trip: Deetjen's was booked and we had to stay in Cambria, an hour-long drive from Esalen. But I told myself it was no big deal: We could always come back.

Now, of course, we can't, at least not anytime soon. So I sit here in San Francisco, at a loss. I donated money to the Big Sur Relief Fund and to Deetjen's, which was severely damaged by the storms and will remain mostly closed for the next several months. But I wish I could do more. Big Sur has always given me what I needed exactly when I needed it, without asking for anything in return. But it's as fragile as any of us who have tried to make sense of our lives in a hotel guest book. Now it is asking for time to rest and heal. So perhaps, as with any relationship, the best thing I can do is stop taking it for granted. One day I will go back to Big Sur, and whether I'm at a beginning, a middle, or an end, I will be grateful for whatever it will give me. ■



Sick Mood at Sunset. Despair (1892)

Five-Minute MFA

Self-Portrait in Hell

SFMOMA's new Edvard Munch exhibit has it all—except *The Scream*.

You love *The Scream*. You've had it on a beach towel, or a dorm-room poster, or maybe a really awful necktie (you were high). So let's get this out of the way: The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's upcoming exhibit **Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed** does not include *The Scream*. Still, with 45 paintings covering 50 years of the avant-garde Norwegian's life, the retrospective offers another angle from which to view one of the most important artists of his time. Here, a primer. JUN. 24–OCT. 9, SFMOMA.ORG I.A.S.

1. Reflections on an artist

Munch was in many ways his own greatest subject. The exhibit includes 15 of his self-portraits, including *Self-Portrait in Hell* (1903) and one of his final works, *Between the Clock and the Bed* (1940–43)—perhaps his second-best-known work. That piece even served as inspiration for a Jasper Johns painting, *Between the Clock and the Bed* (1982–83), that was recently on display at the museum as part of its 2016 Campaign for Art.

2. Revise, revise, revise

Munch frequently made duplicate versions of his works, including *The Scream* (copies of which exist at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Munch Museum in Oslo). He painted six different versions of *The Sick Child* between 1886 and 1927; two of them are included in the exhibit.

3. Prelude to *The Scream*

One year before *The Scream* came a compositionally similar work, *Sick Mood at Sunset. Despair* (1892). "It's a solitary figure who seems like he's feeling disconnected from the other men walking along this pier," says Caitlin Haskell, the museum's associate curator of painting and sculpture. "Munch is really interested in psychology—how bodies and souls are in this constant state of integration and dissolution in the world."