

MEMOIR

In a Desert Oasis

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We're three women, driving from California to an all-female rafting trip in northeast Utah. It's the first day, and we've been on the road for eleven hours. We're crossing Nevada on Highway 50, the loneliest road in America. They have taken down the signs that claim this, but it's still true: basin and range, basin and range, with nothing green in sight except knee-high patches of sage.

"We'll practice camping," Meg says. "I'll show you my favorite hot spring."

I am a southerner. For us, camping is sleeping on the screened porch. But I'm traveling with two California natives and determined to be a good sport. Besides, the words "hot springs" sound promising. I picture rocky pools steaming in the middle of lush vegetation. Looking around, I see nothing but desert from one horizon to the other. She must know about a secret oasis.

At Meg's direction, we turn off the highway onto an unmarked road and head south. We turn off that road onto gravel and head north, straight across the basin and up the next range. We're followed by an enormous cloud of dust. After a few desolate miles, Meg points left and we turn up a dirt road, deeply rutted and dotted with boulders.

I wince when the bottom of my car, a newish Volvo, chosen as the most reliable of our three vehicles, begins to scrape the ground.

"I forgot you don't have four-wheel drive," Meg says.

We bump over a rise and spot a few people sitting on the hard ground, feet dangling into something I can't see.

"That's the big spring," Meg says, "but we don't want to go there. I'm looking for the private one."

We wind left and right, apparently at random, the road by this time no more than a track. Every time the car sinks into a dry rut and stones scrape the oil pan, I shudder. This is our good car; my husband will kill me.

We top another rise. "There it is," Meg says.

I see nothing but more desert—hard-packed alkaline soil and a few sagebrush.

"Darn, somebody got to it first." She points to a van, half-hidden over the hill. "Never mind, we can park on this side."

We pull up to a random piece of earth and I finally spot the spring. It's a cow trough, a big rusted tub, with pieces of hinged pipe coming out of a hole in the ground. This is Meg's favorite hot spring, her secret oasis? Water from the pipe dribbles into the tub. Seated in this, up to his neck, is the man from the van, who says hello and turns his back on us.

Meg throws a plastic ground cover on the packed white earth next to our car. This is our bed. When night falls, we're supposed to line our three sleeping bags up and plunk our bodies down onto this enormous dried plain.

"When I come up here with the desert-survival group," Meg says, "we don't even use a cloth—we toss our sleeping bags right on the ground."

Weenie that I am, I lay claim to the back seat of the car. "No, no," I say when Meg and Linda protest that it's too small. "I'll just bend my knees." Faulkner wrote that the earth wants to take us back. Plopping myself on the naked ground under this enormous sky feels like an invitation.

With the sun gone, the air turns cold. We're in the high desert at 6,500 feet. We put on our warmest clothes and sit on the ground cloth to eat dinner: carrots dipped in hummus, hard-boiled eggs from Linda's chickens, cheddar on rye crisps, ginger cookies and a

banana for dessert. When the man vanishes inside his van, we take off our clothes and cross the baked earth to soak in the tub. Meg and Linda have brought beach towels to wrap themselves in. In the name of saving space, I have one of those quick-dry travel towels the size of a dishcloth. Linda lends me her meditation sheet.

In the last red glow of sunset, we sit neck-deep in the tub, surrounded by mountains that turn black and two-dimensional as it grows darker, paper cutouts against the sky.

Water flows from the pipe at 109 degrees. We can control the temperature by moving the pipe in or out of the tub. Meg says the secret spa people make these refuges. Spot a spring, haul in the tub, hook up the pipe, put down pieces of old carpet so you don't have to step directly onto the ashy soil. Set planks on rocks to use as benches when you get too hot. Sink large, now algae-slimed rocks under the water to sit on. We sip wine and turn the color of cooked shrimp. Outside it gets colder. A night hawk circles, swooping low with a lonely cry. The stars come out in a splendid mass and a sliver of moon rises in the east.

Dressed in everything we own, we crawl into our sleeping bags. In the back seat of the Volvo the seat-belt fasteners dig into my butt and back. I fall asleep anyway but wake every time I turn. I stretch my cramped legs, twist and let myself be gouged in new places. I'm freezing.

The cold, dark silence is broken by loud braying. The three of us sit up like prairie dogs popping out of our holes. Linda shines her light around. In the grass growing from the tub's runoff, a burro paws the earth, giving out loud hee-haws. A few steps and it will be hoofing over my friends.

"Get away," Meg shouts, waving her flashlight.

I am so happy to be inside the car.

"I haven't slept for one minute," Linda says.

"Neither have I," says Meg. "What time is it?"

I pray for it to be at least 5:00 am, but, according to Linda's watch, it's only 3:15. I reach up and turn the ignition key. The outside temperature is 30 degrees.

“I have never been this cold,” Linda says.

Meg fetches the tent we have not set up and spreads it over them. They move closer together to share body heat. Linda calls this “biting the bullet.”

Morning finally arrives, bringing warmth with the sun. When nature calls, I try to find a sage bush big enough to hide me from the man in the van and a car I’ve spotted on the ridge above. Meg has provided us with a trowel to bury whatever we produce. The ground is iron-hard. After scraping ineffectually, I settle for hiding mine under a rock.

I decide to test my quick-dry underpants and give them a soapy rinse in the run-off from the spring. They dry quickly enough, complete with colorful streaks of green slime and rust.

We eat breakfast: granola, peaches, yogurt, and tea made over Meg’s camp stove.

“Little kangaroo rats ran around on our ground cloth all night,” Meg says. “Probably after the crumbs from supper. I opened my eyes and one was staring right at me.”

Good grief.

We take a last dip in the rusty tub and pack up. Folding the ground cloth, we find a gift from the kangaroo rats: two rusty thumbtacks. The plan was to camp all the way to Utah, but Meg is bleary-eyed. She votes for a motel that night and we second and third her.

Driving back down the rutted trail, the “Check Engine” light comes on. I’m not sure how to find our way out of this place, but somewhere down the road I can feel that motel beckoning: white sheets, pillows, a mattress.