

Angels in Camouflage

Camping, opal mining, natural springs, mountains, hiking and hot food cooked over a camp stove – words that dreams are made of connoting relaxation, warmth and well-being. Such were our feelings as we set out last September for a 2 week/3000 mile road trip through southern Washington, Oregon, northern Nevada and the California coast. While our dreams might ultimately be fulfilled, surprises and guests (welcome and unwelcome) were in the offing.

The first few nights were spent in a variety of camping locations, fairly remote and "rustic", speaking euphemistically. At one of the Forestry campsites that we arrived at very late at night (read that "*very* dark"), we found an awe-inspiring sign the next morning that cautioned us to beware of the cougars. Since we were, literally, the only people in this enormous campground and we were, again literally, dozens of miles from any habitation, I must admit to being relieved that I had not seen the sign the night before in the quiet darkness but rather during the light of the supposedly safe day. And yet, cougars were not going to be the tool of choice for the Universe to allow us to experience an angelic apparition. No, no, we had a much more exciting and unexpected adventure lying right around the next corner or, should I say, round the next lake.

Having finished a circumnavigation of mystically blue Crater Lake, we decided to head down highway 97 toward a spot on the map that had the ubiquitous little tent sign alleging the presence of a campground. These little road atlas signposts had been relatively "on the spot" and though this one looked like it might include quite a bit of off-road travel, we decided to head for it. We had become very adept at erecting our tent and setting up camp in the dark. Intrepid campers we were.

Down Hwy 97, past a small campground that looked more like a screenshot out of the movie "Deliverance" then a place to sleep and across Crater Lake Highway, we hit Seven Mile Creek and the expansive vastness of the valley through which it runs. Our targeted destination was on the other side of the valley in the sequestered forest lands of the surrounding foothills. Down Nicholson Road we traveled, following signposts and, to the best of our ability, the map. We missed the fact that two roads met at a jog and bore off in the wrong direction until we were quite far through the valley. With nothing left to do but retrace our steps, we found our navigational error,

corrected it and continued back across what was by this time feeling like much more than seven miles.

Arriving, finally, at the entrance to the forest, seeing the Forest Service road signs and what served as a "welcome" sign, we felt secure that we were on the right path. I imagine that right about now, the angelic realm was putting out a 911 call for our future experiences. We were blissfully unaware, tired and longing for flat, open ground on which to collapse.

Following the Forest Service road numbers was not an issue. They were clearly marked and, according to our ever-present silent guide – our map, we were to head down road 3384 and we would be there even though road 3384 ended and then we would be somewhere that no one felt required numbering. I must admit that this gave me a bit of apprehension, i.e. we are going "no where". Yet, we followed the road signs studiously, felt our good natures slipping a bit and maintained driving while navigating through overhanging brush, dirt, trees and semi-regular signposts. After about an hour of this travail (whoops, travel), we had to admit, albeit brusquely, that we did not know where we were. At this point, we would take anything that resembled solid, flat ground. We simply wanted to sleep.

It was just about at this time that we saw a large opening where the road ended. It looked like a quarry of some sort and it was flat, unoccupied and dry. Happy, happier, happiest – we pulled out the tent, blew up the air mattress, threw the blankets down and were asleep in minutes not caring where we were so long as we could finally stop and rest. Pancho, our 90 pound watchdog, took up guard duty in front of the tent and the night slipped away under a myriad of stars filling the Milky Way so distinctly overhead.

Awaking in the morning, we were delighted to see the sun peeking up over the treetops and while Philip prepared espresso (oh, yes, we have a camp stove espresso machine – a necessity), I began preparing breakfast enjoying the sun on my back and the anticipation of the next leg of our adventure. It was just about this time that we heard the sound of an engine coming up the road. It felt very strange to think of people coming all the way out to such a distant, hidden destination so I walked closer to the road to see who was approaching. We had seen a Forest Service office at the original entrance the night before so I assumed that we might be getting a visit from a lonely Forest Service employee. As soon as I could see the front fenders of a late model, maroon Dodge Ram (and they could see me), the truck stopped,

backed up and left. It was a strange maneuver inasmuch as the road was barely wide enough to accommodate a vehicle much less turn around in that extremely tight space. Yet, we gave it little thought brushing it aside with the enjoyment of our solitude.

It wasn't until about 45 minutes later that we received our next set of visitors and these ostensible companions definitely *were* out of the movie "Deliverance" together with their truck. How that vehicle made it up the shambles of a road to its destination was truly a mystery. We stepped forward to greet them and found three men crowded into the cab of this jalopy, the middle of which was quite older and holding the trio's supply of bows and arrows.

"Hi, there," they said. "Must'a been you folks that put the trees across the road blockin' us from comin' up here," they announced. "We moved 'em. Had to use the truck to move the big'un. Ya coulda never moved it with that there car."

Philip and I looked at each other with a What? on our faces. Trees crossing the road? Not hardly!

"What are you talking about?" we asked. "We came up here last night, put up our tent and went to sleep. We have only been awake a short while. What trees across the road?"

The oldest of the three did the talking. "I'm too old to hunt. Ah just hold the bows and arrows. We come here ta elk hunt. There were logs, big uns, cross the road. A couple these two here could move (nodding to the two younger men) but we needed the truck to move the big un. You didn't put 'em there?"

All of a sudden light shone clearly in my mind. The men in the Dodge Ram were coming here to elk hunt. Upon finding the space occupied, they were angry and dealt a telling blow. They locked us in our campsite in retribution for using a space they considered theirs. It was a turf war.

We explained what we believed had happened and our three rescuing, elk-hunting angels were delighted that they had been messengers of service. Their faces lit up and they actually glowed while they proudly showed us an empty coffee cup. "See this cup," said one of the younger men. "We had

another un and I wrote a note and left it in the middle of the road; wanted to let whoever done it to know we fixed it. Look for the cup on your way out; you'll see it." He screeched open the passenger door of the jalopy and relieved himself by a tree while examining the mushrooms growing along side the road. Then, with a dialog worthy of an article in *Epicure* magazine, he showed me the difference between the mushrooms with spots and those without; the lack of continuity in the mushrooms that had exploded across the top from the dry air and the ones that would taste better. These were truly indigenous mountain men.

"You have truly been angels sent to save us," I told them. "You will get your elk. You have earned it." Semi-toothless smiles gapped at us as they eased their junker away. A deed well done; city folks rescued, read their faces.

Philip and I packed up our camp, Pancho Villa climbed into the back of the Touareg and we headed out to the next leg of our mining venture musing over the awareness of the Universe in all circumstances. A short while down the road we came upon a coffee cup positioned in the middle of the road. To the left and right of us were a tumble of tree trunks that had been moved by muscular force – or was it by mystical force. I don't know and I don't want to know. Many, many miles from any human being; totally out of the range of cell phone reception, we had been pinned into the forest without our knowing. It would have taken at least a day and a very long hike to get help and move those logs. Yet, that was not necessary because it was elk hunting season and angels do wear camouflage.