



Coast Range Chronicles 1: “Feral Pervert”

by

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A few years ago I was hiking in Sonoma County and happened upon a redwood tree growing near the trail. I stopped and eyed it in surprise. The tree itself wasn't big or particularly special, but the location was: drier and further inland than I'd ever seen the species. Redwood normally grew in the coastal region, extending inland where fog and stratus could penetrate, or where otherwise suitably mild conditions prevailed during the dry season.

But I stood on an inland slope cut off from the coastal air, the summers hot and dry, the soil thin and rocky. The surrounding vegetation consisted of gray pine, live oak, madrone, toyon, chamise, ceanothus, manzanita. Pretty dry stuff for the region. Yet the redwood thrived here on a convex, well-drained slope. A pretty sweet find for a plant ecologist.

I uncapped my water bottle, took a few sips, and gave the tree and its odd location the respect and admiration it deserved. I studied it for a bit, thinking about the topography, vegetation, and climate, wondering how the tree got there and how it survived the scorching summers. I grabbed my camera, snapped a few photos, and smiled like an imbecile.

Then I heard rustling below the trail, near the tree. I peered through the shrubbery and saw a man and woman entwined naked on a blanket in a small clearing next to a picnic basket. They'd obviously been fornicating but had stopped, eyeing me as I studied the tree.

I'd been staring down the slope, right above their heads. And, I realized, at that angle it looked like I'd been watching them the whole time, sipping water, snapping photos, and grinning like some feral pervert. The angle couldn't have been more perfect for the misunderstanding.

Strangely, they didn't yell or curse or crawl under the blanket. They just studied me like I studied the tree, vague and curious. Then the guy stood and started toward me. He was quite excited, if you get my cheesy drift, and hacked through the chamise like some pale and hairless Sasquatch.

I froze, confused by the turn of events. Perhaps I could explain to him about the redwood and its amazing location: the thin soils, lack of fog drip, high evapotranspirative stress. But I sensed it would be an awkward exchange. If you've never had an aroused naked man charging you through a stand of chamise, let me give you a heads-up: it's not a good time for ecological chin-tugging.

Not good at all.

I didn't know what to do. Based on his unreadable demeanor, he could've been coming to kick my ass or invite me to join his shindig. I really had no clue.

Neither option appealed to me. Yet I remained glued to the spot. He drew closer, eyeing me as he pushed through the vegetation. Finally I kicked into gear, capped my bottle, and hustled down the trail.

It wasn't a loop trail, and I quickly reached the end. With the sun low on the horizon, I had to head back soon, right past the love nest. Hopefully Sasquatch wasn't one of those everlasting tantric types, had done his deed and hit the trail.

I did not want to fight him with his sword slashing wildly. I did not want to be recruited into some wilderness threesome. I just wanted to go home.

Dusk arrived. I could wait no longer, and started hiking back. As I got near the redwood I glanced around warily, feared Sasquatch would lunge from the bushes. I heard voices down below the trail, sounded like they were preparing to leave.

No time to dawdle.

I heard them climbing toward the trail, and quickened my pace. They would not catch up with me. But man, that tree. I couldn't resist. I stopped and snapped a photo of the drab green canopy at dusk—admired the location one last time—before turning and jogging down the trail.

It was pretty sweet.