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\$4.99 February 2018
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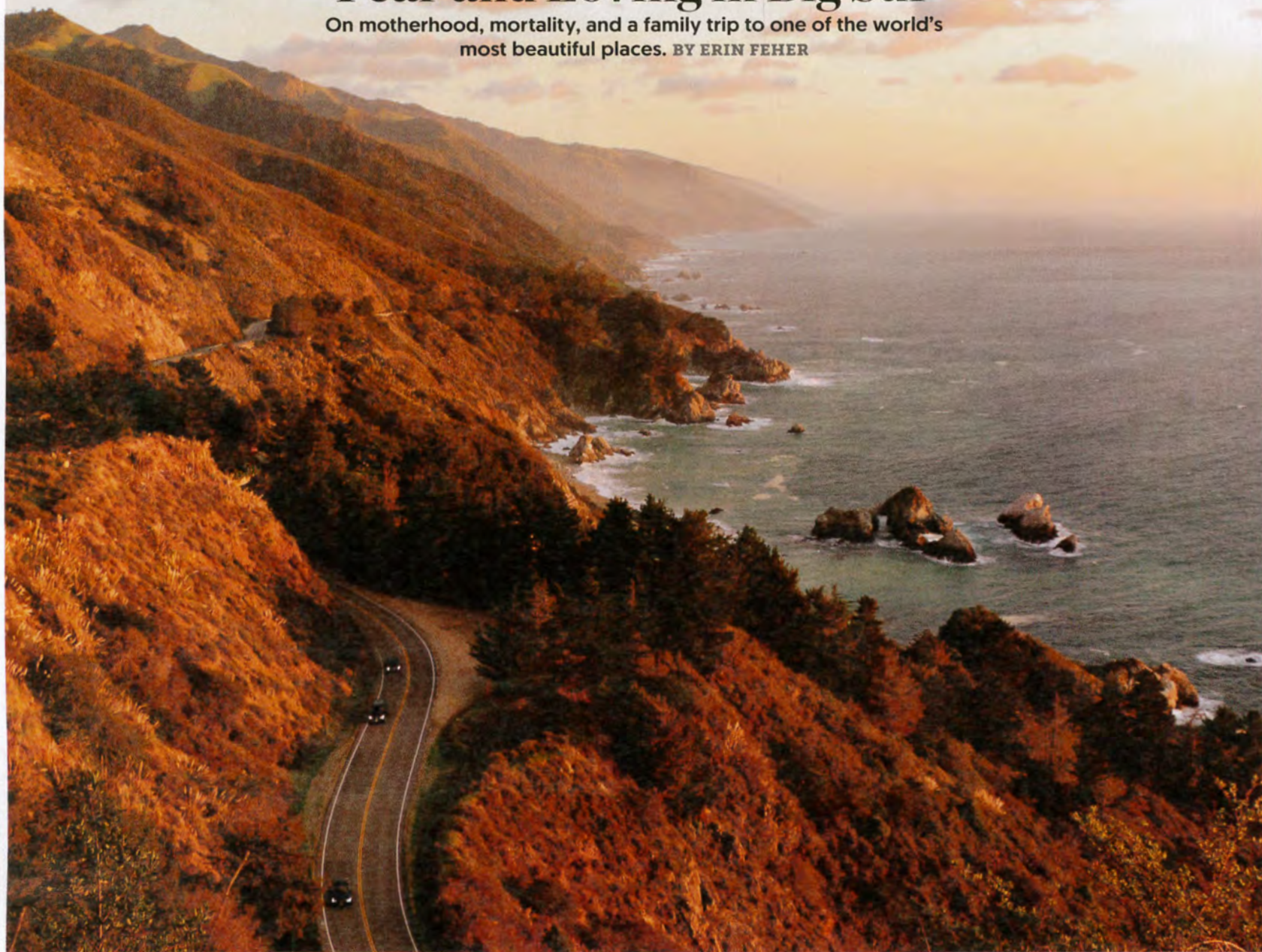


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WANDERING

Fear and Loving in Big Sur

On motherhood, mortality, and a family trip to one of the world's most beautiful places. BY ERIN FEHER



The first time we went to Big Sur, in 2011, we made a baby. The exact coordinates are up for debate, but it's safe to say that as my husband, Danny, and I hopped around from the yurts at Treebones Resort to the modest Fernwood Resort, where termite poop rained down on us as we slept, some cells collided and the potential for another person came into existence.

I had wanted to be a mother for as long as I could remember, and we had been trying to conceive for nearly a year without any luck. So when the test came back positive a few weeks after our trip, all I could do was sob with a mix of relief, disbelief, and joy. *It was the trees! The ocean! The air that did it!* I thought. It was poetic that the moment of conception happened in Big Sur, a place where Mother Nature unabashedly struts her stuff, demonstrating both her power and her beauty in nonstop spectacle. But hypnotized as I was by the majesty of nature, I forgot to worry about its brutality. I'll never know what was actually going on in that tiny ecosystem inside my belly—was it rain, fire, quake, wave, or human error?—but the baby didn't make it.

I never held it, never named it, never even saw it, but for 12 weeks I imagined every facet of the rest of my life with it. And when I lost it, an indisputable truth was laid bare—

that even the most beautiful, most beloved things can be destroyed in an instant. My grief was deep and raw, but what alarmed me most was my shift in perspective. I had always considered myself a fairly fearless person, but in the year following my miscarriage, the fragility of life loomed large. It was the ultimate bum deal: I missed out on becoming a mother but was forced to grapple with a parent's biggest fear—that the thing you love the most in the world could die. Was it even worth it?

When I would think about the place where this calamitous journey had begun, I'd feel newly disturbed by it. Suddenly the appeal of Big Sur's massive redwoods, jag-

ged cliff faces, and churning ocean seemed downright morbid. Why do we so love speeding around the curves of Highway 1, stopping to snap pictures of rock slide warning signs while we stand as close to the edge of the world as possible? The place is essentially an operate-your-own amusement park ride with very lax safety requirements. A single jerk of the steering wheel—either of your own or of the complete stranger barreling toward you—would kill you in seconds. Even if you managed to avoid a wreck, the earth could very well shake you off with a shrug of its tectonic plates, or the ocean could swallow up the entire coast whole.

This is an awfully dark way of looking at such a sublime place. And these feelings eventually lessened as I grieved and healed, and then, two years later, finally got pregnant and gave birth. I now have two chil-

dren, ages four years and nine months, and I found myself ready to hash it out with Big Sur again, to put our anguished past behind us, and perhaps to renew my love for it.

DURING THE YEARS between my miscarriage and my return this fall with Danny and my children in tow, Big Sur suffered, mightily. In July 2016, an illegal campfire in neighboring Garrapata State Park sparked a wildfire that raged for nearly three months, burned 132,000 acres, destroyed 57 houses, and left a swath of charred ground and incinerated redwoods throughout the Ventana Wilderness. Staff at Ventana Big Sur, the iconic 42-year-old resort where we'd arranged to stay, recall seeing flames just over the hilltops surrounding the property, threatening to engulf the weathered cedar structures. Just a few months later, the rains came, washing the

The wild woods of Big Sur have been tamed for our enjoyment, albeit with a light touch.

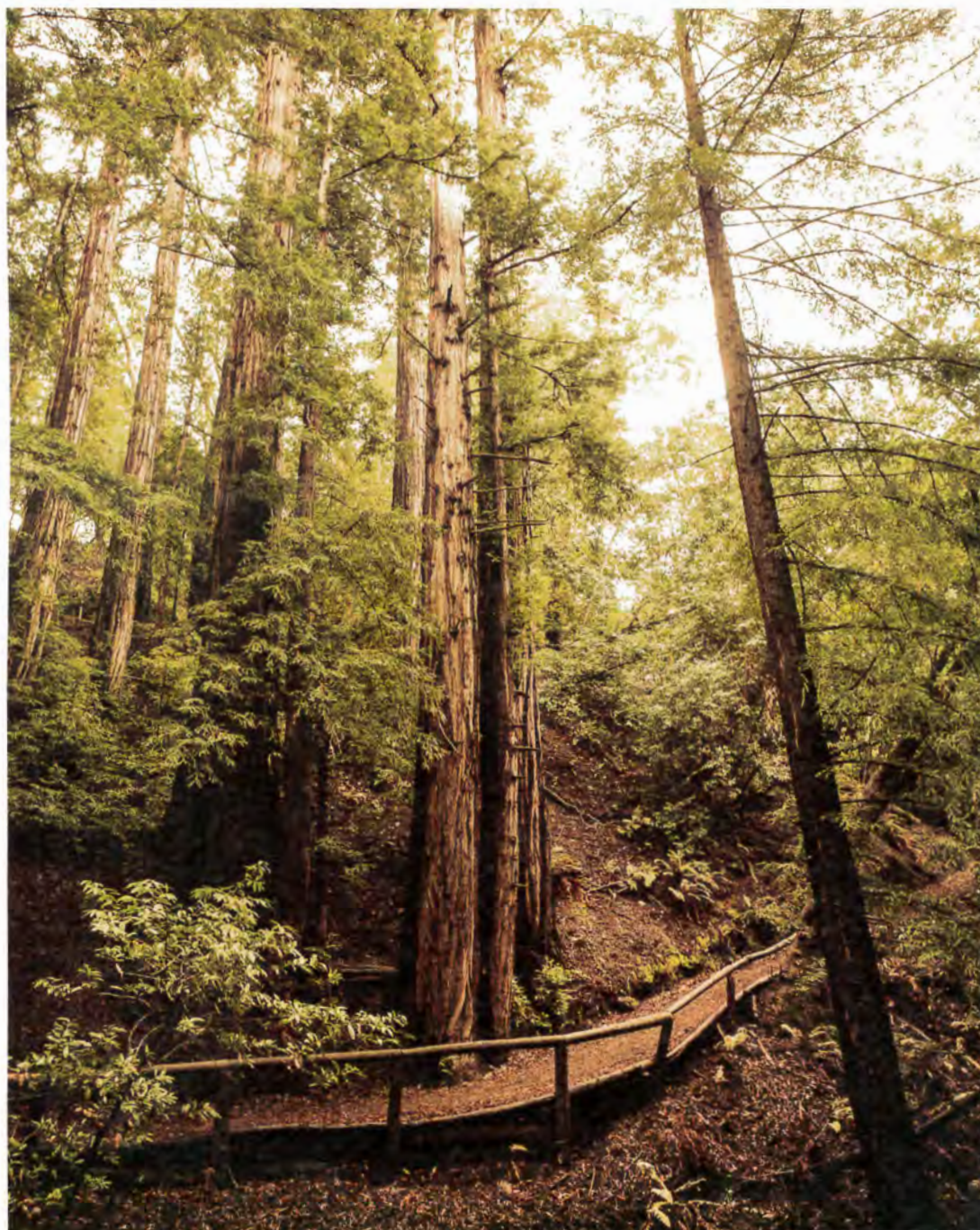
newly exposed land down off hillsides and over cliff faces. A section of Highway 1 was covered in five million cubic yards of dirt and rock, and the columns beneath the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge were so badly damaged that the bridge had to be demolished, leaving sections of Big Sur completely unreachable by car.

For eight months, the community closed in on itself. Some people simply packed up and left, the reward of living in one of the most beautiful places on earth no longer worth the risk. But many others took the painful, isolated time to shore up their foundations. As the roads were being cleared and the bridge was being rebuilt, the region's handful of hotels and restaurants were closed but not dormant. Ventana used the time to execute a multimillion-dollar renovation. Ownership refreshed the 59 rooms and common areas, planted new organic gardens, and revamped the restaurant and spa. Down the hill from the inn, under a redwood canopy, 15 canvas tent cabins were outfitted with plush mattresses, fire pits, and arguably the most luxurious camp bathroom in history.

This November, mere days after the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge reopened (projects of this scope typically take years, not months, to complete), the four of us spent three glorious days camped out at Ventana. We hiked through the redwoods, popping out of the canopy after strenuous climbs to stupendous ocean views, and took not-so-rustic breaks in the newly designed Social House for wine and cheese in the late afternoons. In the mornings we walked to the main tent for hot coffee and pastries and indulgently roasted and devoured s'mores before 9 a.m. At night we dined at the Sur House restaurant, where we all enjoyed the chef's tasting dinners—four courses for Danny and me, a colorful plate of tuna crudo for our daughter, and a selection of roasted heirloom carrots for our son, who would approvingly suck on them before ceremoniously tossing them to the floor.

Before bedtime, we would each grab an electric lantern and make the short pilgrimage to the Redwood Canyon Bath House—the new facilities built exclusively for glamping guests—which features heated stone floors, marble countertops, and rain-style showers. Then the four of us would huddle under the electric blankets while trying to name constellations in the sky.

A few days into our trip, it occurred to me that the act of building Ventana was a kind of parenting in its own right. The guy who originally birthed this place—the film producer Larry Spector, who was said to have financed it with his *Easy Rider* paycheck—



had to exercise a fair amount of magical thinking to reason that he should create something so exquisite yet so full of risk, literally teetering on the edge of the earth.

This is an imperfect metaphor for the kind of mother I try to be. I want my kids to live on that cliff face and stare with wonder at the sea, to live adjacent to risk, to bask in adventure, to constantly seek joy. And yet to be that person, I have had to master my own brand of magical thinking: to trick myself into believing that the cliff will not eventually crumble, that our children will grow up safely and their suffering will be sparse and short. It is an insanely narrow tightrope we parents walk, and it hovers right on the brink of the abyss.

On the second day of our stay, we arose just after dawn and dressed the kids in layers. After a sugary bump from the s'mores kit, we hiked along the winding trails of the resort to a clearing in the forest set with redwood benches. A ruggedly handsome man in his early 60s stood surrounded by four large green metal boxes. When we sat down, something strong and apparently agitated rattled around inside one of them, and despite being sweaty from the hike in, I got a chill down the back of my spine.

The man, Antonio Balestreri, unlatched one of the boxes and pulled out a peregrine falcon. My daughter audibly gasped, and my son blinked curiously at the regal, black-eyed bird with its hooked beak and streaked feathers. Balestreri, newly hired by Ventana as the resort's master falconer, brought each of the other raptors out one by one, letting us pet a couple of the more agreeable specimens, like the great horned owl. He talked about the incredible strength and brutality of each bird, about how some strike their prey at more than 200 miles per hour or kill by slicing an animal clean in half with their talons. I tried, and failed, to keep myself from imagining the worst-case scenario involving my unsuspecting kids and these merciless birds of prey.

Balestreri asked who wanted to put on a glove and catch a falcon; my daughter eagerly raised her hand. The falconer handed her a piece of raw meat and then blew a whistle to entice the bird to dive down from a high tree to land on her gloved hand. Her face beamed with wonderment. I can't say what that moment gave her exactly, or whether she'll even remember it years from now, but I know what it taught me. It's the experiences and the places that have the potential to destroy us that make life worth living in the first place. ■



HOW TO LIVE ON THE EDGE, FABULOUSLY

Stay: Ventana Big Sur (ventanabigsur.com) is known for its luxe accommodations, and following a recent ownership change (Allila Hotels and Resorts took over Ventana from Joie de Vivre in 2017), S.F.'s BraytonHughes Design Studios was tasked with refreshing the guest rooms and public spaces. A night at the adults-only resort runs from \$675 to \$2,950. Redwood Canyon Glampsites, located on the property just down the hill from the resort, start at \$325 per night and are family-friendly. If you

have your own gear, you can also book a standard campsite for under \$100.

Do: The new Allila Experience Program at Ventana offers everything from drum circles to falconing to photography workshops and can be arranged for groups or individuals. Prices start at \$100.

Eat: The Sur House at Ventana offers dining with killer views. At dinner, go à la carte or opt for the four-course tasting menu, with ingredients sourced from local fishermen, foragers, and the onsite

gardens—and be sure to sip on something from the 10,000-bottle cellar of small-production Central Coast wines. The famed Big Sur Bakery (bigsurbakery.com) is just a few minutes up the road and a must-visit, either for morning pastries and coffee or for the exceptional dinner service.

Chill: Ventana offers two outdoor pools—one of them clothing optional—with adjacent Japanese hot baths. Spa guests can opt for a soak and massage in one of the shaded

cabanas overlooking the forest. For a distinctly Big Sur experience, sign up online for the public night bathing sessions at the neighboring Esalen Institute (esalen.org). For \$30, you can soak in the cliffside hot springs from 1 to 3 a.m.

Getting there: It's a straight shot down Highway 1 from San Francisco—well, *straight* may not be the right word. Stop in Pescadero for a still-warm loaf of garlic-herb artichoke bread from Arcangeli Grocery (normsmarket.com).

