



Stags Leap

FOURTEEN WATERFALLS AND ONE CURIOUS COUGAR

Memorable experiences are often characterized by extreme conditions—disruption of sleep patterns, excessive weather, grief. Here it is geology. Jagged rock faces lean casually against each other, presenting a nearly vertical slab to the vineyards below. It is dawn. the wild Turkey barks twice.

Palm trees surrounding the manor house are exotics in this northern California landscape, and speak of the ideals of settlers. It's the native oaks in their varied humuncular gestures that are the defining background to the walks and silhouettes, to the land, and the Stags Leap Palisades that dominate, preventing the sun from hitting the inhabited area of Stags' Leap Winery until mid-morning.

The rocks are doing push-ups on a geological time frame. Blocking the rising sun from the east, they leave the buildings and gardens in a cool damp one remembers later in the afternoon with fondness.

It is at this time of day, in the cool of a spring morning, that you can surprise a whole hillside of lupine out back of the historic winery. Underfoot: oak fingerlings innocent and limpid as the tender green curls of poison oak. Stepping through grass thick with wildflowers, here below, up above. Monkey flower, sagebrush, paintbrush, rough-hewn timbers, the occasional farming implement abandoned decades ago, and up, up the steep, flowered hillside, the girdle. Turning, the Mayacamas range to the west is bathed in morning light, and a clean line of shadow runs north-south down Napa Valley, moving with assurance towards the east. It isn't until almost seven in the morning that the line of sun catches up with the planted vineyards, and eight o'clock before it hits the gardens. Pickup trucks are already parked in the vineyards, and figures move out through the rows of staked and pruned vines, just starting to leaf out.



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Once up the first stretch of hill, the rock face falls back a pace, in that trick that peaks have of receding once one starts moving towards them. It leaves room for a swelling series of oak-studded meadows and dimples in the grass that reach down and become grottos, cool with rock and moss, maidenhair fern. Rock outcroppings rest at all the viewpoints, temporarily tired of their gymnastics, home to lizards, snakes, and all the crawly things.

Actually 16 waterfalls. Oldtimers talk about it as a regular occurrence, something by which they could set their rain gauges. You can see the Palisades from directly west, across the valley in Yountville. At a certain point in the rainy season, the earth saturates, and then it begins. For every inch of rain, a new waterfall blossoms across the face of the rock and they have been counted, and named, like constellations, or wandering comets.

And down out of these mineral theatres comes the liquid form of the mountain, soft paws, molten color to its fur, waiting for no sun. Pacing down over the same timbers and crushing the same grasses and flowers. Pausing at the entrance of the new wine cave, listening, smelling within. The mountain being curious about itself. The creatures who dig caves and stain their shirts with freshly crushed grapes excavating until they reach the moment of awe: puma, mountain, human.

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