

Hotel with a View

By Darcy Alvey

The Beachside Hotel rests on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Built in the 1960s to replicate an adobe hacienda with thick walls and rough-hewn pillars covering a wide flagstone walkway, its eight guestrooms face the view. A skirt of Bermudagrass fronts the building and stops at the edge of the cliff before plunging forty feet to sea level. Over time the yellow grass children nibble for the sour insides and small native shrubs have come to line the drop-off and cling, like barnacles on a whale, to the jagged rock embankment.

After checking in, the Ripley family--Anita, Stuart and little Baxter--head for room number four. Throwing his dinosaur backpack in their room, Baxter darts across the grass to see the ocean. The boy is delighted with the scene. With exuberance he shakes a large clump of wild pampas grass. The feathery seeds fill the immediate sky. Hotel guests lounging in Adirondack chairs with lemonade and magazines bat the seeds away. They look around for the boy's parents. Anita, noticing the flurry, hurries across the grass calling her son's name.

Holding Baxter's arm, mother and son look down to railroad tracks at the bottom of the cliff, just beyond the talus. A rusty chain link fence protects the thoroughway from blowing sand and errant beach balls. They watch a train pass, the sound of it muffled by the thundering break of the ocean.

Straight on from where they stand a t-shaped fishing pier juts into deep water. Its long gray legs look too fragile to handle the constant pounding of the ocean, but the

jetty stands sturdy enough. At its far end fisherman can be seen baiting hooks and bobbing their lines in the foamy sea. Maybe we can go fishing, Anita says to Baxter. He claps in anticipation. On either side of the pier local families dot the beach. Blankets have been spread forming a patchwork quilt, tacked against the wind with flip-flops and heavy plastic coolers. As mothers unwrap jelly sandwiches, seagulls hoping to nab a crust of bread or potato chip sneak forward in a game of red light, green light. Baxter is anxious to get to the water. He tugs his mother's shirt.

Wait, she says. The path down is steep. We'll go together, she says. They head back to the room and change into swimsuits and load up sand toys. Baxter is ready first. He hops up and down in the doorway.

Finally, they're ready, father loaded with gear, mother's pale shoulders slathered in suntan lotion. The descent to the beach starts at the far edge of the lawn and zigzags down. It is flanked by palm trees that give the setting an exotic air. Baxter runs ahead. Shaking her head in exasperation, his mother follows.

There is a single spot to cross the tracks, an opening in the fence at the foot of the pier. Train engineers aware of the trail sound a whistle in advance of passing by. Still, it's no surprise that one time out of a thousand a warning should be missed by an excited child with the blue ocean in his sights. It's no surprise that the timing would be so exquisite as to have child and train meet at the same spot at the same moment, sending a small unblemished body into open air as it would an empty plastic bag or desiccated palm frond. It's no surprise.

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