



Beth Perkel

An Age With a View

The rebel in me thought it was a good idea to take a solitary stroll through thick fog on a darkened volcano the week before my 40th birthday. By all indications, what was marketed as a luxury tour of Maui's Haleakalā had turned out to be anything but. After hours sardined with a group of 10 strangers in a well-worn Hawaiian van, we had become champions of the exercise in futility; a foggy storm allowed us to see not a foot past the finger-printed windows while we ascended the dormant beast, and by hour four, I decided I'd had enough. As the rest of the passengers ate their brown-bagged dinners of soggy sandwiches and wilting salads, I formed a plan to slip out into the darkness just as the remaining vehicles on the mountain collectively gave up hope of any breathtaking view and headed home in a winding caravan of reduced-speed dejection.

Our van alone remained waiting for the fog to lift. We were given hope that the night

sky would become visible for a star-gazing portion that could redeem the tour, or maybe just ensure a long enough attempt to make tour participants feel awkward requesting a well-deserved refund. After all, as our toothy tour guide kept repeating, "Volcanos — very unpredictable."

Only the 10 of us remained, and I was feeling claustrophobic enough to whittle that down to a temporary party of one. I quickly whispered into my napping husband's ear that I needed to stretch my legs, and there was no need to follow me when he woke up. Within moments, I was out the dented door and enveloped in cool mist and weighty fog that followed me along the expanse of the mountain. It was terrifying and exhilarating, as only nights like that can be, as a person contemplates a new decade of life, reviews the record log of their winding past and wonders what it is exactly they are doing here and how they could possibly do it better

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or abandon all attempts at a redo.

When we booked the trip, it was the birthday present I had requested from my husband for my 40th birthday. The truth was, in the weeks leading up to the milestone, I desperately felt that I needed the time for a midlife reevaluation — lest my symptoms escalate into a midlife crisis.

As I treaded a wet path of ancient dirt, I was so lost in thoughts as I vanquished regrets, relived triumphs and attempted to rewrite failures that I didn't notice how far I had wandered. I spun in a circle trying to get my bearings as I realized the van's headlights were no longer a north star I could calibrate to. I noted the absurdity of desperately escaping the van, only to now long for its uncomfortable comfort. Wasn't that life, though? Weren't we all sometimes lost, alone and always ricocheting between the comfortable and uncomfortable, not knowing exactly which makes us feel more alive?

As the fog eventually lifted, I made my way back to the van, with many of my questions still trailing at my heels. They remained there for the rest of our breathtaking Hawaiian week.

My husband and I flew home on an overnight itinerary. On the second leg of the trip, I slipped out of my airline row to use the bathroom, careful not to stir my sleeping husband.

These were my last few hours for quiet contemplation, as I knew we would have to hit the ground running with carpools and work assignments upon return. I was back to pondering my existence, this time in an airline bathroom, when I felt the world closing in on me again (sans fog) as I realized I could not slide the lock open! I was in the most claustrophobic bathroom I had ever been in. It's easy enough for your retina to be bountiful with calculating sizing in a prospective home with-

in your price range, but when you are stuck behind a broken lock in a space giving off the vibe of a 2"x 2" upright sealed cardboard box, your retina suddenly isn't so generous.

I tried and tried over again to free the lock, this time switching my Olympic sport to the definition of insanity (doing the same thing over and over and yet expecting a different result), but to no avail. I then began calls for help, quickly supplanted by the unrefined urge to bang on the door and scream like a madman.

How long will it take for my sleeping husband to notice that I'm missing and search for me? I thought. As I pummeled the shaking door, I realized the deeper question I was really tip-toeing around all week: *How long until I wake up and find myself?* Do I need to do an internal audit to ensure I am on the right path? Can I let go of the *hevel* of this world that keeps me stuck in manufactured panic over what other people think of me or judge me for, or whether I am following the exact right script? How long until I do a software update on the self-consciousness from young adulthood that I no longer need to carry?

The truth was that getting lost on a volcano and locked in a tiny airline bathroom within one week certainly felt like a message confirming that I needed to work on broadening my vantage point: aging was a *brachah* and there was much wisdom to be had as soon as I could get myself metaphorically *unstuck*.

When someone in a back row finally located a pair of flight attendants and they got the door open, I was ready to see age 40 for what it was. A new decade to decide. A new adventure. A wide-open space where I could gather triumphs and battle tribulations to review and evaluate in another 10 years. This time, hopefully, with much less drama and much better hand soap. ●