

SCRATCHPAD

On breaking out of a routine

By **ERICK BENDEL**
COAST WEEKEND

How easy it is, when you've lived in an area long enough and the novelty starts to wane, to suddenly stop exploring it. I am fortunate, though, to have people in my life who sense when my routine may be calcifying into a rut, and politely pull me out of it.

As our region underwent a brief bout of ridiculously nice weather, I found myself hitting several sites I've never seen — places mundane to others, perhaps, but to me were small, uninvestigated wonders.

Last weekend, my partner and

I ventured southeast on Oregon Route 202 to get acquainted with the Blue Jays' track — the blue jewel of the Jewell School District.

We'd half feared it wouldn't be as blue in real life as it was in The Daily Astorian when the track was finished last spring, that Colin Murphey's Photoshop wizardry had maybe deceived us. But no. That track is seriously blue — Papa Smurf blue — and though our multimile run was probably a one-and-done, it was worth the 45-minute trip.

We then stopped by the Jewell cemetery, located on a sheltered hill a short drive off the main road. A solid layer of snow

was untouched save for faint deer tracks. The burial ground holds several persons born in the mid-19th century; their lives began at roughly the midpoint between the last Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake and the present. It's one of those tucked-away spots of early settlement where, when you squint and blur out the traces of modernity (newer tombstones, a random traffic cone, litter), you can picture how the white winter scene might have appeared to previous generations of mourners.

As we headed back to Astoria we came upon a white van that had flipped onto its side. The young occupants were milling about, apparently uninjured, and, along with others in their caravan, remarkably calm. We checked on

them, saw they were OK, drove on and, once we had wireless bars, called emergency services.

Our last planned stop: the Olney Saloon ("The Big O") for Taco Sunday. But, after the graves and the rollover, cheap deluxe tacos didn't entirely displace my thoughts of mortality.

I suppose the subject has been on my mind since my back seized up last month (many years of sloppy posture finally taking their toll) and forced me to accept that my 20s are well behind me.

Years ago a friend said I already walk and behave like an old man, somewhat hunched over and prone to getting trapped in daily cycles. It was a friendly observation but also an admonition, one I try to remember whenever I feel content to

enjoy the same diversions day after day, month after year. So while I believe in seeking new experiences for their own sake, I'm also fighting against a natural impulse to get too settled.

We creatures of habit cling to the safety of sameness — the same hangouts and eateries, the same views and vibes. And, when what you do for a living requires constant engagement of the gray matter, there's a seductive comfort in not thinking too hard or pushing yourself too far, especially when no one's making you do it. It often takes, at least for me, great strength of will to break that pattern, to escape its gravitational pull.

Luckily, the escape can begin by finding nothing more than a different road to drive on. **CV**

coast weekend

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

arts & entertainment

4 THE ARTS
The Oikos Collective
Arts and crafts for all ages

7 FINE LINES
PoetryFest 2019
Event offers workshops, readings with major writers

8 FEATURE
'Living on Love'
Romantic comedy opens at Coaster Theatre



12 TRASH TALK
Message in a (water) bottle
HRAP program turns beach plastic into art

FURTHER ENJOYMENT

MUSIC CALENDAR.....5
CROSSWORD.....6
SEE + DO 10, 11
CW MARKETPLACE..... 15, 16
BOOKMONGER 19



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COAST WEEKEND EDITOR
ERICK BENDEL

CONTRIBUTORS
KATHERINE LACAZE
LYNDA LAYNE
BARBARA LLOYD McMICHAEL
CARA MICO
PATRICK WEBB

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Phone: 503.325.3211 Ext. 217
or 800.781.3211
Fax: 503.325.6573
E-mail: editor@coastweekend.com
Address: P.O.Box 210 •
949 Exchange St. Astoria,
OR 97103

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