



PHOTO: KENT EATON

Spot of Mystery For Old Ellery

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Anticipation and afterthought are the two great muddlers, as retired detective Ellery Snobgrass will be quick to tell you. He was panning the cranberry sauce, which wasn't quite tart enough, while driving along Highway 152 from a Thanksgiving in Los Banos, when he spotted a sign.

"Ha! Betcha there's no Mystery with a capital 'm' to the Mystery Spot. Damn hoaxes, all of 'em."

"Yes, Ellery," his wife replied meekly. "It does seem interesting, though. And we don't have anything to do..."

The sign enlarged, twisted to the side, then was gone as Snobgrass pressed down on the accelerator. He began to protest, but she meeked him right into it.

"It's so close to home," she said with a winsome sigh, "and it would be nice to go there for our Sunday outing."

"Dozens of signs on every highway in the state of California," Ellery moaned, "but can you figure out how to get to the Mystery Spot once you're in Santa Cruz? The biggest mystery about that place is how to get there."

"Pooh, Ellery," said his wife. "Stop in at Sambo's."

Alongside the fliers for the Mercer Caverns and the Winchester Mystery House they found one on the Mystery Spot. "Ellery, it says here, '...numerous variations of gravity, perspective, compass, velocity and height that intrigue the visitor to come again. It's unusual, it's amazing, it's wholesome, interesting entertainment.' There's a map on the back."

Turning left off of Water Street at Adolf's restaurant you find yourself on Market Street. Before long, the identity of the road has changed to Branciforte, and signs begin to appear.

"As seen in *LIFE*. Featured on Art Baker's *You Asked For It*. Stranger than fiction. The Mystery Spot." About three miles north of Santa Cruz, a sign points off the road, and turning, you are confronted with a winding blacktop strip that splits itself around trees and ends in a rectangular parking lot. There is green grass, a few out-buildings, a ticket office with home-made turnstiles, and a winding path up the side of the hill. The forest looks normal.

"Ooh, I can't wait," said Ellen Snobgrass to her husband. He muttered something about anticipation, but she'd heard it all before. She'd read the flier completely on the way out. They hurried to the ticket house; a group of people assembled beyond, forming a circle around two slabs of concrete set in asphalt, with a carpenter's level connecting the two.

"Come folks, we're about to begin a tour here," said the guide, an older man wearing a cap and green spectacles. They purchased their tickets and Ellen said, "Oh, Ellery sure loves a mystery!" She noticed the reproach in her husband's eyes, but also she noticed how he straightened his back and smiled.

"As you can see," said the personable guide, "the two blocks are level. I need two volunteers. Yes, thanks, stand here. The Mystery Spot is a unique feature of nature, about 125 feet across. A force running from the southwest to the northeast exists, pushing everything away from the southwest. You can see even the trees lean to the northeast. Very few birds pass overhead, and small animals are uncommon in the Mystery Spot. The Mystery Spot distorts height."

The guide turned to his two volunteers. "The Mystery Spot is circular; it runs down the hill like so, through the

space between these two concrete blocks, and through those two redwoods and back around. Now, observe each other's height, then switch. The person on the inside of the spot gains height, the person outside shrinks. Would anyone else like to try?"

Ellen watched the faces of the two volunteers as they switched and surprise registered. She stepped up to one slab, while a tall girl took the other. They switched and suddenly she was taller than the girl. She couldn't help gasping. The guide laughed and said, "Anyone else?"

"Ellery, you should," Ellen said to her husband. He shrugged and said, "No, it's illusion, just a bit of trickery." "So, sir?" said the guide. "There's proof up the hill."

"The path is at a constant grade of 27 degrees, but you'll find yourself leaning into it as if it were steeper," said the guide, "but around this last curve here, the path itself is steeper—but you'll walk up it more easily." Ellery asked why to himself, but kept his mouth shut. He wanted to see the whole tour before venturing any questions.

The house lay reclining on the side of the hill, surrounded by a stone wall. An apparently rotting fence added to the solitude of the place. Trees loomed overhead, some twisting like cork-screws. One facet that immediately struck the retired detective was all the parallel lines and the similar triangles so peculiar to visual illusions he'd seen.

The guide went through a demonstration of a golf ball rolling up a board, rather than down. Ellery noticed the angle of the board with relation to lines outside of the walled-in house, and concluded slyly that the board only appears to slant downwards. He felt the satisfaction of solving a problem building inside him.

Inside the house, the floor slanted crazily, and everyone

stood like the people in the picture in *LIFE* magazine, tilted and out of square. He preferred to stay aloof from the proceedings, to remain as much a neutral observer as possible in order to solve the so-called mysteries of the place. The man demonstrated the "pressure from the southwest" by hanging on handles in a doorway between two rooms, then invited others to try. A signal light went on in Ellery's mind: vertigo is often a visual phenomenon, and removing foot contact with the floor reduces other types of feedback.

There were other demonstrations, but Ellery Snobgrass had already made up his mind. As the group travelled carefully down the path, he asked himself questions, and reminded himself of how easily a person's eye can be directed by someone they come to trust.

"It was wonderful," cooed Ellen Snobgrass, but she noticed the gleam in her husband's eye. "Now you just keep your trap shut, Ellery. I want to have fun today, and I don't want to have everything explained to me. I know everything has some sort of logic to it, and you've figured this place out. You always do. But not everybody wants to know the truth about every little mystery, and some even let themselves be drawn into it, and have some fun at it."

"You're so good at solving mysteries," she said, almost shrieking, then suddenly she dropped off to a mere whisper. "I wonder if you have fun with them anymore."

Ellery stared at his wife without comprehension and couldn't find anything to say. She looked up at him, her eyes beginning to tear, and said, "I so wanted to have fun today." She paused, then wistfully added, "And go to Castagnola's for dinner. I know it's so expensive, but..."

Her face took on her resigned, hollow expression, and the big pushover fell for it. □



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