# 1

I am this world and I eat this world. Who knows this, knows.

*Taittireeya Upanishad*,
ca 7th century B.C.E.

Late one autumn evening, a hundred miles below the Forest of Nicene Marks State Park in California, the great turtle on which the earth depends flexed its carapace. Eased by the action, it slowly settled into comfort and dozed again, to lie almost still and silent till some other irritation of growth or decay should urge it once more to wakefulness.

On the surface the shock was palpable. Houses on the ridges that worshipped Loma Prieta were blown off their foundations, to land where they would as ruins and rubble. The downtown districts of both Santa Cruz and Watsonville, the centers of each end of the county, were devastated. A hundred miles north, by some quirk of energy transmission too subtle for the scientists, the landfill of San Francisco's Marina District pulsated, the Bay Bridge partly fell and the Oakland section of I-880 collapsed.

At 7.1 on the Richter, the Quake of October 17th, 1989, was a Pretty Big One. Half a dozen residents of Santa Cruz County died and thousands more lost millions of dollars worth of things, from trinkets to palatial estates. Some fled but most remained, shocked but determined to remake their lives, their towns, in the face of catastrophe. In the eerie, candlelit evenings that followed there was a grim sense that they had taken the blow they half-expected, rarely acknowledged and always feared. There was anger, fear, grief, and occasional bleak humor, mixed with collective love and determination into a roiling mess of feelings encased in a sense that the way onward was up.

What followed was worse. Not the dozen or so 4.0 or greater quakes that hit in the first seven hours; not the ninety measuring 3.0 or more that came in the next thirty days; not even the lengthy 5.0 that scared the living daylights out of everyone two days after the Loma Prieta Earthquake itself. What was terrifying was the cumulative effect of five *thousand* separate aftershocks in the following month — one every eight-and-a-half minutes on average, much less near the beginning, longer later, but stretching on for months, maybe years.

After a couple of weeks, the survivors learned to remember to forget, like novice sailors finding their sea-legs, but then Cal-Trans reopened Highway 17 and shoppers could drive to the better-stocked stores of San José. In the new routine, they opened their car doors and braced themselves for the tiny adjustments that the quivering land continually demanded … and shook themselves because the pavement was still.

They were out of sync with their world.

Everyone always is, to a degree, except for the odd ecstatic mystic and the occasional artist surfing the zeitgeist to immortality, but most of the time most of us resonate closely enough with our universe to ignore the anomalies and accept the mundane realities of everyday life. We accept the paradox of a shared culture of individuality. We know that molecules are mostly empty and the earth barely more substantial than the vacuum of outer space but still, when in need of balance, we say we ground ourselves.

Solid ground is a convenient approximation, a useful fiction, part of the consensual reality that we agree to honor.

Solid ground is a cliché.

Solid ground is a myth.

(*Searching for*) *Solid Ground* is a quest for right living in a wrong world.

It's also a love story of sorts, but then what tale worth its salt is not?

# 2

> Only connect! … Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height.
>
> E.M. Forster,
> *Howards End*, 1910

"I don't get it," said Annie, trying not to wrinkle her forehead. "I just hit a time-warp."

"Forward or back?" asked Brendan casually.

"Back, definitely," she nodded. "That's how I know it's a time-warp — it's weird but it's sort of familiar. If it was a forward time-warp it would only be strange, right?"

"Unless you hit a place where time went backwards. Then you'd jump forward to the familiar and back to the strange."

"Well it's back to the strange, all right, but I remember it anyway," she explained confusingly. "I haven't felt this way for twenty years."

"How?"

"I dunno exactly. It's like, I'm the only one in step. You know? There's an entire universe out there that's completely out of its tree and they can't see it and if I say so they say it's me and I say it's them and … the whole thing's crazy. But I know I'm right."

She widened her eyes and inspected her beer. They were perched on bar-stools at the Front Street Pub in Santa Cruz, California, sampling the Lighthouse Lager and wondering where to have dinner. Brendan took a solid pull and smacked his lips noisily before setting the glass down with an air of decision.

"I know what you are," he announced, pausing for effect, "You are alienated."

"Oh no I'm not," she laughed. "I'm a psychopathic deviate."

"You wha'?"

"Really. It's official. I did the MMPI tests when I was getting career counseling at Cabrillo and the instructor told me. I thought she meant I was nuts at first, I was really worried, but actually that's not what it's about."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, all it is, is I don't follow rules just 'cause they're rules, I've gotta know why."

"Oh, I get it," Brendan cut in, "Of course. Your answers deviate from the norm of conformity. Hell, that's what I'm saying."

"You mean I really am alienated."

" 'Fraid so."

"Alienated. Darn. Just when I thought I was getting over it. You don't have to be young, huh?"

"Nope." Brendan usually had the answers.

"How about hungry? Do alienated people eat dinner?"

"Only if it's vegan; vegetarian at least."

"How about Seychelles?"

She meant the restaurant of that name, though no-one who knew her would have been too surprised if she'd made a bid for hustling off to a tropical island. Exotic warmth had become her favorite coping mechanism, her drug of choice at the end of the muscle-bound eighties. They drained and dismounted, tipped and left, laughing in the warmth of a summer evening in Northern California, and floating away again from darker insights, slowly coalescing underneath.

# 3

Titles are but nick-names, and every nick-name is a title.

Thomas Paine,
*The Rights of Man*, 1791

Blackie and Whitey hung around Kabul in the days of the weasel king. They added immeasurably to the gaiety of nations, not least because of their outfits. Blackie had a black corduroy safari jacket, with belt and large patch pockets, that he wore with matching cord Levi's and a charcoal T-shirt, while his mate had a tropical suit that, from a distance, in the late afternoon with the sun behind him, looked rather like one of Tom Wolfe's cast-offs. Even the French freaks dug the gear; for a pair of Limeys, they were striking.

Everyone knew them by sight and nobody knew who they were. This they obviously encouraged: It only helped their collective reputation as minor masters of the mind-fuck, not to mention being a sound precautionary measure for a pair of sub-rosa entrepreneurs. No one was too clear how they kept themselves afloat (natch) but it was generally accepted that if you needed a little crank of a morning, Whitey was a major dude, while those who wanted to mellow out on the sticky Afghani hash with little flecks of opium blended through it would be well advised to have a quiet word with Blackie. Acid, Mandrax, mushrooms, 'ludes, bombers and other such commodities were a mutual endeavor and subject to availability but the staples were always in stock and under a continuing, rigorous program of quality control.

Advertising was not an important part of their operation, although if they had to file tax returns they would presumably have been able to write off a significant proportion of their personal consumption as a business expense (the free samples alone would have sent shudders down the controller's spine). Not for them the corner-of-the-mouth 'Hey mister' come-on or the deniably sibilant 'Hassheeesh?' They just lounged around the courtyard with Rizla papers and Samsun tobacco and passed the time with anyone who felt like stopping by. If the subject came up, which was not unknown under the circumstances, well, yes, they could help you out. Price was not a big deal — shit was so cheap that negotiations were on the basis of say-a-buck for yay-much — and everyone was happy. It's a rare privilege to find yourself doing so well by doing so good.

This activity cannot have passed unnoticed. Indeed, nothing whatsoever in Kabul passed unnoticed, which seemed to be an unstated keystone of their local marketing plan. Back in those halcyon days of the late sixties, the most remarkable things were available in the bazaar, at competitive prices dictated only by the invisible hand of classical capitalist theory, not forgetting the quantifiable transportation and risk factors. Every currency in the world was available, at exchange rates that bore little relation to the fantasies of the *War Game Journal*. Disque Bleu cigarettes cost less than they did even in Paris, where the government took its cut as profits rather than taxes. You could find Pentax cameras and pre-war Lee Enfield rifles, traditional carpets and workmanlike scimitars, elaborately embroidered waistcoats in vibrant colors with tiny mirrors sewn into them and (it was widely rumored, having been on the front page of the London *Daily Excess*) eighteen-year-old hippie chicks who'd been kidnapped and sold into white slavery for a taste of the awful potions of the orient.

The tales of women (and men!) who had suffered fates worse than death (and worse, death!) were the nub of the local tourist-based distribution opportunity for organic and/or manufactured relaxants and stimulants. Let's face it, the bazaar was exotic and fascinating but it was also, if you had a brain in your head, scary. Freaks who stuck around got used to it, or at least learned how to cope, but the smart ones never forgot just how weird it really was.

The simple code of the Afghan male was: Don't fuck with me. Since this was assumed to be reciprocal, a mutual understanding between men was not hard to maintain. Step out of line, though — just

give a hint of something that could be construed as disrespectful — and the polite if taciturn offers of tea and a puff at the hookah disappeared fast. Even in the big city, where not everyone carried a gun at all times, a knife was as much a part of the costume as the flat Afghani turban, and it was large and sharp and expertly handled.

Western women had to have a lot of nerve to wander around on their own. Being chattels, they were fairly safe with their putative husbands (male pride was assumed to extend to protecting the wife and even if these European kids were as feeble as they looked, who knew what they were packing) and more or less fair game without them (male pride also extended to the challenge of conquest, although shameless infidels were presumably easy pickings). In this, Afghanistan was more direct and arguably more honest than Britain, but not so fundamentally different. It was a man's man's man's world, in the hippie subculture as in the dominant paradigm, and the good-looking old lady, epitomized by Marianne Faithfull [*sic*], was as much of a trophy as the businessman's Barbie, and often as fucked over, fucked up and generally ignored (except for fucking and even then).

If a woman had the temerity not to buy into the game, to show a quiet pride and hide fear, she stood a chance of establishing herself in a special category — Amazon, perhaps — that opened interesting possibilities, but it was a hard row to hoe in London, and potentially deadly in Kabul. Most split for India pretty quick. To get there, you admittedly had to get through Pakistan, where the hassles were at least as numerous if less lethal; in the considered opinion of one experienced woman traveler, "Lahore is the armpit of the world." Once you made it through, however, you found that Hindu women's lives were vastly more accessible. The Muslim women of Afghanistan were practically invisible to the outsider, the chadoor an impenetrable black hole within which personality disappeared.

The frisson of danger that never quite left the visitor's awareness was attractive — controlled fear can even be a turn-on, as more than one woman silently stretching a relationship to get her through the rest of the Muslim countries could attest — and added immensely to the entertainment value of Kabul as a tourist destination, but it was a tedious accompaniment to routine transactions like scoring. Besides, good authority (the U.S. embassy) had it that drugs were illegal and even though better authority (the street) was certain that the weasel king was personally in charge of the hashish industry, not to mention the odd numbered bank account in Zurich, absolutely nobody wanted to get busted.

Enter Blackie and Whitey, your friendly middlemen. They were as safe and simple to deal with as the neighborhood Tupperware hostess, and much lower-pressure salespeople. Hell, they gave away as much as they collected for and the thoroughness of their testing procedures ensured a well-satisfied clientele. In fact, their customers were generally so completely zonked that they never noticed the essential illogic of this charitable activity disguised as a commercial venture. Not that they had anything to complain about, and the few economics majors and budding capitalists who started to apply practical dentistry to the gift horse in front of them soon concluded that they were just too stoned to understand and why on earth not.

After all, the operation evidently ran on the interesting principle, 'Stay high, sell low'.

# 4

> They can drop all the atom bombs they like for all I care : I'll never call it war, and wear a soldier's uniform, because I'm in a different sort of war, that they think is child's play. The war they think is war is suicide, and those that go and get killed in war should be put in clink for attempted suicide because that's the feeling in blokes' minds when they rush to join up or let themselves be called up.
>
> Alan Sillitoe,
> *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, 1959

Back in the heyday of Tricky Dick and Spiro, Annie and everyone she knew lived their lives at the edge of society. The straight world called them crazy and the feeling was surely mutual. Faced with the multiplying insanities of Selma, Watts, My Lai, Kent State … what could the young folks do but listen to a rock'n'roll band?

Life did get very weird, for a while back there, and the freaks got ripped out of their skulls. Getting by, high and strange.

Not again, she hoped, wasn't once enough? Was it all coming back? Heaven preserve us, that'd be a scary thought.

In the time between Watergate and Desert Shield, Annie tried, they all did, to reach an accommodation with the outside world. Getting high gradually dissolved into just getting by. Dope stopped being important, and who the hell felt strange anymore?

Not Annie. As the nineties began, she was working as a physical therapist and, as far as she could tell, blending right in. She still didn't buy the hierarchical crap that went along with the sale of medical services in her country, but that was normal — most of the other workers in the industry didn't either. And, as in any job, she mostly talked to her co-workers, not her customers and certainly not the big boss, whoever that was. Some group of doctors, she presumed, or other rich people. It made no difference to her.

The PTs, like the X-Ray technicians, the nurses, and all the other subgroups in hospital society, were not a bunch of clones. It was a matter of scale, of course. From far enough away, or from microscopically close, they were all essentially identical carbon-based life forms, but that's not the human experience. When you looked at them as people, no two seemed to be quite the same. They defined themselves by the choices they made, and Annie had come to think of the selections as parts of a multiple-choice list, a social smorgasbord, itself the local variant of some greater grouping. For example:

| CATEGORY | CHOICES | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (*a*) | (*b*) | (*c*) | (*d*) |
| *House-hold* | nuclear family | couple | house-mates | other |
| *Partner* | opposite sex | same sex | either sex | other |
| *Hair color* | blonde | brown | black | other |
| *Diet* | omnivore | no red meat | no flesh or fowl | other |
| *Vacation* | Disneyland | Yosemite | Baja | other |

And so on. Pick all (*d*)'s and you'd be pretty unusual; but not much odder nowadays than a straight-(*a*), generically known as the Ozzie & Harriet. Annie saw herself as a *b–a–b–c–d–*… and reckoned she was normal. She liked to work rather less than most, and not many others thought that it was worth quitting a job in order to spend the winter in Thailand, but that just made her kind of

interesting. Her choices generally fell within current definitions of acceptable behavior, which are rather more elastic than once they were.

She knew very well that the men who signed the checks and put their names on the invoices set up the system and profited from it. And that part of their trip was to convince themselves that they were normal. More precisely, that everyone else either was or wanted to be like them. No one else seemed to be taken in, which put the bosses in the minority and made them the strange ones, right?

The customers probably assumed that anyone in uniform was a fully paid up supporter of the régime. That didn't necessarily mean they approved — they didn't have anywhere else to go. Anyway, there wasn't much time to chat and most of them were too sick and self-absorbed to get into political discussions, unless they were about health insurance.

It's just the way it is, the way Annie saw it. It's a dumb old system if you take it at face value but no one does; so, like everyone else, you find a way of working around it, or through it, or under it like some tropical weed that hides under the concrete until it can work its way through the cracks and force them apart and bring the building down and dance over it in flowers.

Let's face it, Annie was an old hippie and proud of it.

She may not have looked like it (oh yes she did) but then she never did (oh yes she did). This was a woman who refused to do without eye shadow, even when living in the Haight in its heyday. "I'm doing my own thing and I like eye-liner," she said, foiling her hippie critics with a call to the higher dogma of self-expression. Besides, face-painting was fun and Keef Richards was getting into kohl … but that was a long time ago.

A couple of decades later, Annie had, according your point of view, sold out (cheap?), bought in (dear?), found her place, lost her way, given up, hunkered down, gone to sleep, woken up, forgotten the question or found the answer.

Interpret it as you will, she wasn't fighting her surroundings so much anymore. Sure, to some extent she'd gone along to get along but, hey, it had worked both ways. Hadn't it? She might not like the way a lot of things were around her, exactly, but they were better than they used to be. She remembered people laughing at her and calling her a screwy eco-freak as she flattened her cans and separated her bottles in the early days of volunteer recycling; now, when she volunteered to help with the local (20th anniversary!) Earth Day celebration, everyone thought it was a good idea except a couple of idiots on the radio — she never actually met anyone who said they were anti-environmentalist. That's progress, right? We used to be the cranks and now they are.

The planet might be collapsing but at least the country was at peace. The Cold War was over and if the superpatriots wanted to say we won, well it was sort of true so let them have their fun. Just so's we weren't doing any fighting. The Vietnam War was long gone and no one would dare do anything that crazy again. Would they? If anyone tried, everyone would just stop them. Wouldn't they? Wouldn't they?

It didn't work out that way.

During the build-up to the Gulf War, in October 1990, she found the precisely right peace-symbol brooch in Macy's. It was silver, about an inch and a half around, with the angled lines not squished too close together and not splayed too wide apart, solid enough but not clunky, just the exact thing. She wore it on her uniform the next day, kind of nervous and ready to justify it. She would talk to anyone about war and how idiotic it was, patients, doctors, anyone. Really she kind of wanted someone to object, so she could stand up for her beliefs but her principles wouldn't let her force her views on anyone, so they'd have to complain first.

No one actually told her to take it off. They just put on their stars-and-stripes lapel pins and smiled, or in some cases glared.

Uh-oh.

Strange? Her? Again?

Annie picked up on this sense of distinction and figured out how to ride with it. She could have decided to bury herself a little deeper, to encourage the sense of identity she wanted to feel, even with the straightest of her co-workers; she could have flung her differences in their faces and pursued pol-

itics in the workplace, at some risk of reprimand or worse. Characteristically, she considered and compromised. It was one thing to take risks, quite another to do so blindly. She did, however, refuse to deny her self, and in so doing began again the great task of defining and discovering and celebrating the truth of who she was.

Not strange, but a stranger at home.

# 5

There's nothing at the end of the rainbow
There's nothing to grow up for any more

Richard Thompson,
"The End of the Rainbow," Richard and Linda
Thompson, *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*, 1974

Nothing about Blackie and Whitey made much sense at first glance. Both of them, by their accents, were clearly Geordies ("Where the Animals came from, before Eric Burdon got soft," they explained to Southerners, Americans and anyone else unfamiliar with the magical properties of Newcastle Brown Ale) but not much more was obvious.

Blackie, for a start, was white. That is, pinkish. He had the ruddy complexion, deep freckles and auburn hair that is often associated with folks north of the border, where the men are tough enough to wear knee-length skirts and the women smart enough not to. He was lumbered with the handle Winston Leonard Spencer Black by a remote and elderly father who seemed more choked that the old warmonger had been flung out of the office he'd never been elected to than that his wife of nearly a quarter of a century had died in childbirth, leaving him with an afterthought to go with three teenagers. The aunt who took over the household had enough smarts to preserve the boy from the torment of being a 'Winnie' and everywhere north of Leeds he was known as 'Len,' which might at least have been after the immortal Hutton. When he reinvented himself in college, he stuck to the simple variant of his last name and eventually began to dress to match.

Whitey, by contrast, was not black, although he claimed to be half Cherokee on his father's side. His mother Mandy insisted, with impressive detail, that her fiancé had died over Dresden, during the most obscene bombing raid before the flight of the *Enola Gay*. Her cattier neighbors wondered how she could be so sure, since allied losses surely weren't high enough to cover all the candidates, but most of them went along with the posthumous engagement "for the child's sake." When the babe was born, his genes obviously supported the young mum's story but the general reaction was shock rather than relief. "It's a bloody papoose," one cynic who learned his racism at the movies put it, and the community attitude was fixed.

Mandy soon found her boy a step-dad, who was free enough with his fists to silence anyone who insulted the kid, which might have been more useful had he not relied upon the same technique to teach the lad "our ways." Not surprisingly, the boy preferred the way of the pink Cadillac. When Elvis betrayed the world he had created by going into the army, the young loner dived into the nascent blues scene. There his high cheekbones, smooth skin, straight black hair and inscrutably indeterminate age made him instantly memorable. Unfortunately even the cops managed to figure out who he was, which led in fairly short order to a stint in Borstal, being thrown out of the house, and escape to the smoke a little ahead of the pack, just in time to catch Alexis Korner at the Marquee and the six-man Stones in Richmond.

His timing was fabulous.

Whitey turned seventeen the month before four Scouse wiseacres with cool boots and pouffy suits released their first single. In the next two years, the scene exploded. The Stones made it, and then — *pace* Keef and Brian — the really hip bands started to get signed. Bowing to the inevitable, the record companies declared that street credibility was in and Fabulous magazine began to feature such uncompromising groups and unlikely teen idols as The Animals (who were), Them (quite) and even The Pretty Things (who weren't).

In this context, a six-foot Apache who had toured with Slim Harpo (well, a five-eleven half-Cherokee who'd heard of him) could become a professional bass player. His agent called him Running

Bear after the old Johnny Preston hit and used his picture and phony bio (but not his limited musical talents) on three dodgy singles and one appalling album. Out of this, he got a year's worth of hash, several enthusiastic screwings, a number of useful contacts and a lasting moniker, courtesy of Sonny Boy Williamson. He was introduced to the old bluesman back stage at *Ready, Steady, Go!* one afternoon when the bullshit was flying even more copiously than usual and the television asslickers had been drowning the great man in Scotch. Sonny Boy glared at this Limey kid in a flowered shirt who'd been introduced as an Apache. "Look like Whitey to me," he growled, and it stuck.

Blackie at the time was trying to get himself thrown out of the London School of Economics. This was harder than you might think, since the invariable rule among English universities was that the more exclusive the institution the more infallible were the admission procedures — after all, if you're grooming the leaders of a hierarchical social system, you can't have them thinking that luck played any part in their selection — and the LSE certainly thought it was pretty hot shit. So did the New Left neo-Marxists who were beginning to dominate the student body. They were thrilled to welcome a rough diamond from the north, with the authentic working-class donkey jacket and jeans, the taste for an ale or ten after a Saturday afternoon on the terraces and the fock-you way of talking. Most of them did not want to hear that the accent was only slightly more authentic than Mick Jagger's cockney and the clothes were a pure reaction to a bourgeois background. (The beer and football, however, were for real.) Len Black had spent nearly two decades buttoning his lip and despising his surroundings; the habit was becoming hard to break.

The astute reader (pay attention at the back there) will already have divined the catalytic agent that brought these two outcasts together. Ale was part of it, and football too, but what connected them first was Afghani black at ten quid an ounce. Whitey had access and Blackie had a little cash. This was in the days when three and a tanner would get you a couple of pints, two in the back stalls and cod 'n' chips on the way home … not exactly, but ten pounds was a week's wages for a lot of crummy jobs. The quid deal, at about twenty to the ounce, was the most common unit for transactions.

The connection didn't start out primarily as a business. Stoners were a rather exclusive sub-group in the days before Dylan turned on the Beatles, who proselytized the world with the help of an enthusiastic volunteer advertising campaign centered on San Francisco. Jazz musicians, poets and beatniks manqués were the main users. Mods and rockers alike stuck at first to uppers, such as the famous Purple Hearts, the better either to dance the night away or to have a punch-up on the beach, which after all was why the army popularized amphetamines in the first place. The politicos were mostly puritans, shocked at the notion that illegal smiles were breaking out all over. The mid-sixties dopers were alienated, apathetic, hedonistic, self-involved and soporific, knew it and didn't give a flying fuck. It was a great relief for all of them to find each other. At last there was someone who understood.

As it happened, there were soon rather a lot of people who seemed to understand, including a goodly proportion of the undergraduates at every major campus. Blackie was introduced to dope by one of the few people he met to hold Karl Marx and Adam Smith in equal contempt, who taught him to score from this half-breed half-musician in Notting Hill. When his patron graduated (to the Atlas mountains of southern Morocco), Blackie began to do other people favors, and Whitey asked him not to bring too many of them around.

Fair enough, figured Blackie, who at least knew how to count. Might as well pick up a commission.

# 6

The north side of my town faced east and the east was facing south

Pete Townshend,
The 'oo, "Substitute," 1966

Santa Cruz in 1990 was widely believed to be a state of mind, which was quite a shock to those residents who didn't share it. The progressive majority may not have been an oxymoron but it wasn't overwhelming either. The silent minority lived and had its representatives on the City Council; they did not understand quite how much of their frustration was shared by the leftist politicians they loved to attack.

It was a classic confusion between up wing and down wing — both left and right were likely to libel the city's eponymous atmosphere as flaky. The difference was that the left thought the flakes agreed with them and just weren't willing to do anything and the right thought the left *were* the flakes and all too willing to act. The right could (and loudly would) complain that Santa Cruz was the first city in the world to propose becoming a nuclear-free zone, back in the '70s, while the left moaned (and grumbled and kvetched) that no one ever got around to doing anything about it.* Hey, the place was laid-back, alright?

The place was also diverse. It may have routinely voted Democratic (and in primaries, as liberal as possible) but the local paper, fondly known to many of its readers as the *Senile*, had in 1990 reached its 133rd year without ever endorsing a Democratic candidate for President. The conservatives griped about the homeless, the homeless griped about the progressives, the progressives griped about each other and everyone stood shoulder to shoulder in agreement that they lived in the most wonderful place in the universe.

The climate was, and remains (doubtless thanks to the ban on local nukes), temperate. The annual heat wave falls conveniently after Labor Day, when tourism is beginning to drop off and the locals have a sporting chance at parking within jogging distance of the beach. Every decade or so it freezes hard enough to test the plumbing and possibly dust the beaches white at dawn. To keep everyone on their toes, mother nature sends in a catastrophe once a generation or so, in the form of fires, storms, floods or quakes. This has been going on at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, when the modern community began to grow, and with luck the effect is one of pruning. The flood of '55, for example, led to the downtown Pacific Garden Mall and its vivid street scene, which was getting a little tatty by the time it fell apart under the quake of '89. Of course it hurt at the time, but do rose bushes like to be cut back?

Some liked to blame the University of California campus that was founded in '65 for the town's tangential relationship to reality as defined in the rest of the Untied Stakes of 'Merka, but that was partly prejudice. Certainly the City on the Hill helped things along but there must have been something in the air already. It wasn't the students, or even the professors, who ensured that this Left Coast burgh faced South; East Cliff Drive not only bordered the Pacific, it was even slightly north of West Cliff. To isolate this idiosyncratic geography, the great eternal plan raised mountains to the north and east and covered them with redwoods. This made it harder for tourists to come in, which business folk regretted, and easier to hold off the sprawling growth of Silicon Valley in the '70s and '80s, which all right-thinking people sought to avoid. If San José ever finally overwhelms Los Gatos, the citizenry of Santa Cruz will be found at the summit, laying down each other's comfort to keep the affluent hordes at bay.

Heaven knows what the eighteenth-century inhabitants thought of the place, since hell surely holds the Catholics who built the Mission in 1791 and proceeded to treat the indigenous population

*In 1992, the municipality did finally become the one hundred and ninety-first nuclear-free city.

as vermin. The market town that developed served north county agriculture over the next century, as Watsonville still serves the south, and achieved its next breakthrough as a weekend retreat for the increasingly prosperous masses of the city of San Francisco, a few hours by train to the north. By 1913 the municipal wharf and the Boardwalk were built and the first generation of pleasure seekers were aboard. The newspaper wars of the '30s helped popularize summer cabins in the redwoods up the San Lorenzo Valley, a few miles inland, as the *San Francisco Examiner* gave them away in contests. Explorers ventured to Hawaii and brought back longboards — ignorant blonds from southern California contest the claim but Santa Cruz is the original Surf City — which exploded in popularity in the '40s when the revered O'Neill invented the wetsuit and set up a store to finance his surfing jones. Meanwhile more of the city folks began to choose the seaside to loiter in through their declining years and part of the city began to doze.

It was in the Santa Cruz mountains that Garcia lost a finger fooling with an ax. A little later, his band the Warlocks, soon to Gratefully Die, supplied the soundtrack for the first of Kesey's Acid Tests, held in Santa Cruz county, just outside Soquel. (Ah, what Annie would have given to have known of *that* ahead of time!) And when the Haight got too heavy, the hippie diaspora (and yes, Annie was part of those muddled masses yearning to get it together in the country) sent its contingent south. Marin and Humboldt deservedly took pride of place but the smallholders of Santa Cruz brought their share of weed to market (and no, not Annie, a consumer rather than an entrepreneur).

By the early '70s this disparate conglomeration of surfers and pensioners, students and ex-hippie craftspeople, united only by their relatively relaxed approach to the necessities of life — if you want intensity, head north or south or east, young folk, there ain't enough here — was feeling the pressure of population growth. As Colorado discovered, and the Keys and every other magical spot, everyone wants to be the last one in. The old money, as usual, wanted to milk the opportunity for all it was worth, on the standard theory that what's good for business is good for the town, meaning of course the money. When the philistines tried to build a convention center on the headland overlooking the wharf, they provoked a reaction that actually overturned the city's political structure. Slow growth became the slogan of the day.

Social structures, stores and services naturally began to flourish in counterpoint. Organic food stores sprouted like weeds, put down roots and eventually turned into laid-back supermarkets. Therapists of every hue felt the space was right to practice and some of them even got good. The Resource Center for Nonviolence grew to gladden the hearts of Gandhians everywhere and act as lightning rod for an ever-changing cast of pissed-off opponents. In its own way, less funded and more focused, so eventually did the Lesbian and Gay (and later, after a screaming fight, Bisexual) Community Center. Seven independent movie screens competed with six in the city limits alone that were owned by the majors. Trad culture was represented every year by Shakespeare, Tandy Beal and the Cabrillo Music Festival, pop by the bands at the Catalyst and the free-floating pickup basketball game behind the Louden Nelson Community Center. This last was about the only place in town that was not apparently lily-white, aside from the Spanish-speaking ghetto in the shadow of the boardwalk.

And then there was the Booktent. Bookshop Santa Cruz was the soul of the town, a meeting place and landmark, with its rocking horse, its store cat and its floating staff of part-time artists and full-time bibliophiles. When the building fell in the earthquake, so many volunteers turned up to help salvage the stock and move it into the temporary pavilion that would hold the store for the next three years that people were being turned away by eight in the morning.

Even one per cent per annum does accumulate, however, and as the '80s moved into their eleventh year and the city had to figure out how to rebuild one more time, the pro-capitalist forces were trying to regroup. The spaces around and within the city were gradually being filled and a conflict loomed on the Greenbelt that had been voted in, but not bought, years before. Much of the tax base had collapsed (no pun), the Feds were too tightfisted to

pay for rebuilding (no surprise), and the business interests were pushing again for growth at all costs (no shit). They slammed their opponents as anti-business, as socialist, as leftist, and as usual they missed the point. Since they valued and fought to preserve their own economic power, they automatically tagged anything they disliked as 'bad for business' and put that forward as an unassailable argument. Wrong, twice.

What cranked the engines of the painted and pierced, leather and cotton, shaved and shaggy, artsy-fartsy peacenik dammit *different* mob that confronted the self-righteous in and out of the council chamber were issues of a whole other nature. They wanted a civilian police review commission, as if it wasn't obvious that the cops were there to protect decent citizens and their property by any means necessary and they were doing a damned good job of it. They wanted to tell our President who art in Washington how he should conduct his foreign policy, which was nothing to do with the business of our town. They wanted to stop huge chain stores from expanding into residential neighborhoods where there was good money to be made, just because it would be mildly inconvenient to some of the folks who had to live there. Worst of all, they wanted some kind of anti-discrimination law that would make every business in town hire only fat junkies with green hair and pierced noses, thereby alienating ordinary people, among whom for some obscure reason were counted anorexic alcoholics with blue rinses and pierced ears. My mutilation is always better than yours.

A good Marxist who called for confiscatory taxes and socialized housing, now there was an enemy with issues the conservatives could understand and fight, and expect the same in return. This kooky stuff about inalienable rights, it was all too mushy to take seriously. What did they think the point was, the pursuit of happiness?

Oh come on, don't be so literal minded.

Really, that's absurd.

Silly.

But that was what put the town on the national, sometimes even the global, map.

What made Santa Cruz so, well, *Santa Cruz*, was the insistence of a goodly portion of the residents on the value of serious folly and the over-riding importance of the personal.

Stay cool, dude.