

Real Property

by Sara Davidson

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“Who is the rich man?” asks the Talmud. The question has never seemed more relevant. The answer of the sages is: “He who is satisfied with what he has.”

I live in a house by the ocean with an outdoor Jacuzzi. I owned, until an embarrassing little accident, a pair of roller skates. I still own a volleyball, Frisbee, tennis racket, backpack, hiking boots, running shoes, a Mercedes 240 Diesel and a home burglar alarm system. But I cannot say that I am satisfied.

I live in Venice, California. Venice is the closest place to downtown Los Angeles where it is possible to live by the water. Because of the breezes, it is relatively free of smog. It is also the only place in Los Angeles where there is street life: you are guaranteed to see

people outside their cars.

A boardwalk, an asphalt path called Ocean Front Walk, runs the length of the beach. Alongside the boardwalk is a bike path, and beside it, the sand and sea. On the other side of the boardwalk are crumbling houses, new apartments and condominiums packed tightly together. A real estate boom of such proportions has swept through here in the last five years that anyone who bought the most miserable shack for

thirty thousand dollars could sell it a few years later for a quarter of a million. And the boom goes on.

Living in Venice is like living in a camp for semi-demented adults. At every hour, day and night, there are people playing volleyball, running, rolling on skates, riding bikes, skateboards, surfboards, flying kites, drinking milk, eating quiche lorraine. Old people sit under umbrellas playing checkers. Body builders work out in a sandy pen, and crowds line up three deep to perform on the paddle tennis courts. When do these people work? I used to wonder.

The residents of Venice fall into two groups: those who work, and those who don't. The latter includes senior citizens, drifters, drug addicts, hopeful moviemakers and aging hippies and surfers who have made a cult of idleness and pleasure. The other group includes lawyers, dentists, real estate brokers, accountants. Many are workaholics, attached to their jobs as they are to nothing else. They work nights and weekends, eat fast food while driving to and from their work and live alone, longing, in the silence before falling asleep, for connection.

Everyone comes together on the boardwalk. The natives own their own skates and the tourists rent them from places like "Cheapskates" and "United Skates of America." Those who have been at it a while can dance and twirl to music piped in their ears from radio headphones with antennae. The girls are dressed up in costumes like circus performers: sequined tube tops, feathers in their hair and leotards so skimpy that the nipples show and the cheeks of the buttocks hang out. The men wear shorts and vinyl racing jackets unzipped to the waist.

"Hey, that's radical," they call.

"Badass!"

Who are these people? Brown-skinned and lax, they sit around the floors of apartments, eating salads, walking out on balconies to smile and shake their towels. They are waging some kind of sexual competition through T-shirts and bumper stickers:

"I'm ripe—eat me."

"Sit on my face and I'll guess your weight."

“Skin divers do it deeper.”

“Body builders pump harder.”

“Plumbers have bigger tools.”

“Worm fishermen have stiffer rods.”

A high school cruising mentality prevails. A girl skates by wearing nothing but a body stocking and a silver g-string, but when two men stop and say, “That’s some outfit. Where’s the party?” her face turns to ice and she skates away.

Rolling, rolling. The wind is blowing, the palms are blowing and people are blowing every which way. I cannot walk on the boardwalk these days without feeling it in my stomach: something is wrong. There are too many people on wheels. The skaters will fall, the bikers will crash, they will fly out of control and there is nothing to hold onto.

I retreat to my house and remain indoors all weekend. This place is so odd, unique, and yet I see among the crowds on the boardwalk an exaggeration of common symptoms: the worship of wealth; the insatiable partying; the loss of commitment and ideals; the cult of the body; the wanderings of children in a sexual wilderness.

What does it mean, I ask myself, to be dressed as a strip tease artist on skates?

What does it mean to pay half a million dollars for a tacky, two-bedroom condo on the sand?

What does it mean that everyone I know is looking to make some kind of “killing”?

It means, I think, that we are in far deeper than we know.

In 1904, Abbot Kinney, who had made a fortune on Sweet Caporal cigarettes, traveled to Venice, Italy, and so loved what he saw that he conceived of building a replica in Southern California. Kinney raised the money to build canals, lagoons, bathhouses and bridges with fake Italian design, roller coasters and cottages with docks so people could visit each other by gondola. The idea caught on: “Venice of America” became a fashionable resort. Douglas

Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin and Paulette Goddard kept hideaways on Ocean Front Walk.

In time, the novelty wore off and the resort fell to seed. The canals turned stagnant and the unheated cottages became substandard housing for the poor. In the Sixties, Venice was the one place in Los Angeles where numbers of hippies and radicals lived. It was an outlaw gulch, a haven for draft resisters, struggling artists and drug addicts. At the same time, a real estate development was under way that threatened to permanently alter the character of Venice.

The new development was Marina del Rey, which means the King's Boat Basin. The Marina, just to the south of Venice, is a modern reworking of Abbot Kinney's dream. The Marina is the largest harbor for small pleasure boats in the world: a system of man-made channels and piers, on which there are restaurants, bars, discos, shops and acres of condominiums. The twenty-six streets leading to the oceanfront have nautical names from A to Z: Anchorage, Buccaneer, Catamaran, Driftwood, Eastwind, Fleet . . . When I first moved to Venice, I used to put myself to sleep by memorizing the streets in the Marina.

Once completed, the Marina became one of the fastest-appreciating real estate markets in Los Angeles. Everyone wanted to live by the sea and still be close to work. The Marina was especially popular with the newly divorced. It was a playland: almost every condo had a wet bar, a gas barbecue, a waterbed and a fireplace that sprang on at the push of a button. The tenants could use a community sauna, Jacuzzi, pool and gym. People filled their apartments with fish tanks and telescopes and oars and shells and hammocks and in the bathroom, stacks of flying magazines.

Those who could not afford the rents in the Marina began spilling over into Venice. Prices jumped overnight. Speculators bought up shacks, remodeled them and sold them for triple what they had paid. Plans were announced to "clean up the canals," and Venice became a "neighborhood in transition." The poor and the hippies who could not adjust were forced to move east.

I arrived in Venice in 1974, with my own dream. I wanted to do what Don Juan had advised Castaneda to do: erase personal history. I was a refugee from the East, from a tumultuous marriage and the revolutions of the Sixties. I

wanted to begin life again in a place with good weather, a place where I could work, and I wanted to find, if such a creature existed, an unscarred man.

It was not long before I met such a person in Venice. His name was Bruce; he was twenty-six, and chief of research at a botanical laboratory. He loved his work but he also loved to be outdoors, to dance and listen to rock 'n' roll. Even his handwriting was happy—he drew little circles over his i's. He cooked and kept his house clean. He had no sexual problems. He had made love with his last girlfriend every day, “at least once,” for four years, and he promised to do the same with me, “as long as we love each other.”

Being with Bruce was like a happy retrogression to teen-age years. We drove around in his car with the top down, ate hamburgers and milk shakes, watched Kung Fu movies and spent all weekend at the beach. There was a volleyball net by Bruce's house and every weekend the same crowd appeared. The men reminded me of fraternity boys who had never grown up. They had their own businesses now, things like parking lots and vending machines, but they still drank beer and made jokes about fags and big boobs, jokes at which Bruce, to my relief, did not laugh.

The people on the beach played two-man volleyball—a different game entirely from the social volleyball I had played through the years. This volleyball was hard-core stuff. There were two people on a side, they played fast and savagely and were constantly diving in the sand. Bruce showed me the basic hits—bump, set and spike—but as a beginner, I could not keep up with their games. I was walking on the beach by myself one day when I spotted one of the regulars. This man was unforgettable: he had a head shaped like a pineapple. He must have been working out with weights, for the muscles on his arms and legs popped out and he even had small breasts. I told him, hopefully, how much I wanted to learn to play volleyball and how nice it would be if I could find someone who would play with me...

“You got a problem,” he said in a dunce-like voice. “The good people want to play with other good people. What you should do is take a class.”

“A volleyball class?”

“Yeah.”

“Where am I supposed to find a volleyball class?”

“At the junior college.”

Oh. I found out that Santa Monica College indeed had a volleyball class, and for the rest of the summer, my life had a wonderful rhythm. I would wake up, put on a pair of orange shorts that said “S.M.C.,” drive to school and play volleyball. Then I would come home, work, go for a swim, work some more, run on the beach, work again, fix dinner with Bruce and go to sleep.

We were the only couple to reappear together at the volleyball net, week after week. The others were constantly shifting partners, and as one player said, five days with the same woman was “the same as five years.” I thought Bruce and I were an island of sanity on this beach, but as the summer progressed, I began to understand why he was not scarred. He had very little compassion for people in trouble. “There’s nothing in life that’s worth being unhappy about,” he used to say. “You choose to feel pain. You can choose, just as easily, not to feel it.”

“What if someone dies?” I said.

“I wouldn’t mind dying. And I wouldn’t be sad if you died.”

He did not want to hear about frustration. He did not want to know about writer’s block. He did not think I should feel jealous if he dated other women, and he did not believe a relationship should be work.

“I think we do too much talking,” he said.

“That’s funny. I think we don’t do enough.”

In the fall, I went to New York and in my absence, Bruce took est and fell in love with one of the women at the volleyball net. When I returned, he told me it was time for us to break up because there was “no more cheese in the relationship.”

I moved to a different part of the beach. A month later, I ran into Bruce with still another woman, whom he introduced as “the love of my life.” So much for that dream.

My mother sells real estate in Los Angeles. So do my aunt and three of my mother's closest friends. This business has always been appealing to women because there are no prerequisites, except passing a test; you can start at any point in life; you can set your own hours; and you have the potential to earn far more than was possible for women, until recently, in other fields.

My sister and I grew up with an aversion to the words "real estate." It meant my mother was never around on Sunday because she was "sitting on a house." It meant violent swings in her mood and our fortunes. Often, she would dash out of the house on a moment's notice to show property, canceling a date to take us to the movies. We never knew if she would return in a terrible mood or exultant, "I made my deal!"

At seventeen, I left Los Angeles and did not return until I was thirty. During the interim years, I grew to have contempt for people who spent money on houses and furniture, expensive cars and first-class airline tickets. I thought it was more interesting and adventurous to travel second class, if not to hitchhike. I visited and wrote about communes where "free land" was the ideology. It sounded right: no one should be able to own the land, any more than people could own the sky or the sea. One of my friends refused to buy a country house offered to him at a very low price, because, he said, "Owning property is theft, and in any case, it would put us in the camp of the ruling class." Another friend gave away her fifty-thousand-dollar inheritance. She believed that God would provide.

My sister, after college, became a gym teacher and lived communally in the San Fernando Valley. She ate only vegetables, practiced yoga, made God's-eyes out of yarn and sticks and rode long distances to march in peace demonstrations. She found, very quickly, that she didn't like teaching—being in a position of authority over children. So she quit her job, sold all her belongings and bought a one-way ticket to the South Seas.

In 1978, my sister began selling real estate in Hawaii. Her guru was a Chinese broker who gave her a life plan: use the commissions you make on sales to acquire one piece of property a year for ten years; then sell half the properties, pay off the mortgages on the rest, retire and live off the

income. In her study at home, in what used to be a sewing and pottery room, was a sign:

Y.C.S.A.S.O.Y.A.

“What does that mean?” I said.

“You can’t sell anything sitting on your ass.”

We spent half of our vacation time driving around Oahu, looking at homes. The irony was so overpowering that we did not speak about it.

My own interest in real estate had begun the year I moved to Venice. In the previous twelve months, I had moved nine times. I was recently divorced, writing a book and free to live anywhere. I tried Bridgehampton, Santa Fe, Berkeley, Mill Valley, the Hollywood Hills, until the cycle of searching for perfect places, packing, moving, unpacking, installing phones and setting up bank accounts became so cumulatively unbearable that I didn’t care where I landed, so long as I didn’t have to move again.

The way to ensure such rootedness, I thought, was to buy a house of my own. For a year, I walked up and down the lanes of Venice. I, who had always disparaged the acquisition of property, was spending days with a broker named Milt, who was twenty-six, had a coarse mustache and little higher education but a winner’s instinct for beach real estate.

Everything we looked at was old, dark, cramped, in terrible condition and ridiculously expensive. The same houses, if not so close to the beach, would have been considered uninhabitable. I was about to give up when I went to see a two-story Victorian house, and the minute I stepped in the living room, my heart began to race. Sunlight was pouring in through a wall of many-paned windows. The house had a Franklin stove, hardwood floors that needed refinishing, a large kitchen that needed remodeling, two primitive bathrooms and three eccentric bedrooms. I looked at Milt and said, “I want it.”

“Keep your pants on,” he said.

We made an offer, which was rejected. We made another offer—also rejected. “We got no deal,” Milt said. “I won’t let you pay a dollar more. It’s not worth it.” For the next two days I was miserable. Every time I drove past the house I felt a stab of longing and regret. It was a year since I had broken up with Bruce, and I was involved with a ballet dancer named Tommy, who had little money himself but whose father owned casinos and land in Las Vegas. When Tommy saw what was happening, he sat me down and said: “Pay the owner what he wants. Next year, it’ll be worth even more.”

I instructed Milt to make a third offer, which was accepted. “I bought a house!” I told friends, but everyone except Tommy thought I was crazy.

My lawyer said, “I’d never pay so much for that piece of junk.”

My mother said, “You lost your senses. You got so excited, you couldn’t see.” She began to call me every few hours with new objections. “How will you fit your bed in the bedroom? Why should you have to pay for the termite repairs? The seller should pay.”

By the time the escrow papers arrived, my enthusiasm had reversed itself and I was in a panic. I was sinking my life savings into an old, broken down house half eaten by bugs, and I would have to rent out the upstairs to meet the payments. What if the real estate market fell through? What if the house needed massive repairs? How would it hold up in an earthquake? What if I couldn’t find a tenant and couldn’t pay the mortgage? Hadn’t my parents seen their friends dispossessed in the Great Depression?

At night I lay in bed and shook. Tommy said I was having “buyer’s remorse.” So there was a name for it. I found that comforting. I knew the panic was unrealistic but I was helpless to stop it. More was at stake than the purchase of a house. It was a statement about myself.”

“He used to be a radical leader. Now he’s an actor in soap operas.”

“She tried to burn down the Bank of America at Isla Vista.
Now she’s a vice president at Universal.”

It is a cliché, a joke, something we are past feeling anguished about, but the fact is that a considerable number of people have passed through a door and come out wearing different clothes, and this transformation has taken place almost without comment. People who, in the flowering of the Sixties, gave their children names like Blackberry and Veda-Rama have changed them to Suzy and John. The parents are “getting our money trip together.” If they are successful, they are buying homes, Calvin Klein suits and Porsches and sending their kids to private schools to avoid busing.

Not all have come through the door, of course. There are still groups of New Age people in places like Berkeley, Oregon, Hawaii and Vermont. They are still dedicated to social change, still wearing beards and flowing shawls, still holding symposiums where they talk about holistic health care, living closer to the earth and creating communities where people can love each other and share and cooperate. But their numbers are dwindling and few young recruits come along.

Those who have crossed the line cannot help but feel some irony and bafflement about “the people we’ve become.” They retain an awareness, however faintly it is pulsing, that the acquisition of material wealth does not necessarily bring satisfaction, but that awareness is fading rapidly into unconsciousness.

On a Sunday in May, 1979, I am walking on the boardwalk in Venice with a friend, Andy, who is, in fact, a former radical student now an actor in soap operas. Andy lives next door with his girlfriend, Sue, who works as an accountant while Andy tries to find parts in television. In 1969, Andy had stood in the front lines, arms locked together with others who were occupying University Hall at Harvard. Today, he could pose for a life insurance ad, but ten years ago, he wore a mustache, a torn leather jacket and a headband over thick black hair that fell to his shoulder blades.

On that night in 1969, when police broke down the doors of University Hall with a battering ram, Andy was clubbed and

carried off in a paddy wagon. The next day, head wrapped in bandages, he joined the strike that shut down the school. In June, his parents took time off from their jobs in Cocoa, Florida, to drive up North to see their son graduate from Harvard. But ten minutes into the ceremony, Andy walked out with about three hundred others, to protest the racist imperialist policies of Harvard University.

In the years that followed, Andy founded an alternative high school in the Roxbury ghetto, lived in a therapeutic community for chronic schizophrenics, worked on an organic farm, ran an assembly district for George McGovern and joined a commune of twelve who were sailing around the world.

Somewhere down the line he took an acting workshop, and decided to settle in Los Angeles. By stages, his appearance and then his values began to change. When I met him, in 1976, he was getting ready to break down and buy a suit—a custom-made suit from a tailor on Rodeo Drive, not from Good Will. He had decided he wanted to star in movies that would “alter the culture.” He had also decided he wanted to be richly rewarded by the culture.

“Sometimes I lie in bed and think about how I’ve changed,” Andy says. “I wouldn’t want to live in, or even walk through a ghetto today. And I’ve become a racist about Arabs. Their oil money flooding in here is driving up the prices of everything—houses, gas. Did we think we wouldn’t have to worry about such things?”

I feel myself sinking. “I suppose our commitment wasn’t that sincere.”

Andy disagrees. “Mine was. I gave up years of my life working to make society better. Those were years I could have been earning money and advancing in a career.”

We notice a commotion on the mall in front of the Venice Pavilion. The usual crowds are skating and wheeling, but in the center, twenty people are standing in a circle, holding signs. “Stop Nuclear Power.” The leader of the group is on skates and has bloody knees. He starts a chant, “Hell no, we won’t glow,” but the voices barely carry over the roller disco music.

A lone TV cameraman is photographing the group. Some of the spectators are laughing and calling insults. “Smoke a joint, guys, and mellow out.” I feel embarrassed, the demonstrators look so silly and ineffectual, and yet I know that this is how things begin.

Andy says, “What is the point, who are they reaching here?”

We turn and walk away in troubled silence.

I am invited to speak at colleges about the “Sixties in America” and the “Changing Roles of Women.” I am not invited to places like Harvard and Yale. I go to Florida State University and Spokane Falls Community College. The staff in charge of scheduling speakers at these colleges are usually “Sixties people” who want to keep the flame alive. The main reason I accept the engagements is that they give me a chance to spend time with students. I have often thought that the spirit of an era is most clearly expressed by those in college at the time.

This particular generation, who were students in the Seventies, never managed to acquire an identity. No one figure, like the Beatles, Elvis Presley or Sinatra, emerged to galvanize and articulate their sensibility. No one was king, and no one was hanged in effigy. The students seemed too bland, even, to merit a name. At best, they were thought of as “the careerists,” an ambitious, uninspired flock who trotted as quickly as they could down paths they hoped would lead to good jobs and success.

A speaker’s visit to a college has a set choreography. I am met at the airport by two or three nervous undergraduates, who want to make a contact with the outside world. On the ride in, I cannot bear the twitchy silence, so I ask about their school. “What do students here talk about and think about?”

The question throws them—they are not used to anyone caring. One young woman in Florida says, after a moment of blankness, “Just themselves.”

During the lecture, I try to paint a picture of what it was like to be young in the Sixties. If the speech works, the students sit rapt. They were born in 1960, or later, and the decade

sounds as fantastical and remote to them as the Roaring Twenties did to me. After the speech, we go to a local restaurant, and the same students who were tongue-tied before are now impatient to give their opinions. Some feel frustrated at having been born too late. “We waited for our turn, and it never came,” an eighteen-year-old in Boston said. She was angry at my generation for failing her. “How can you blame us for not running with the ball?” she said. “It’s you who disappeared, left nothing behind and went into real estate.”

A larger proportion of the students I met, however, responded with some variation of: “Yuk. Who’d want to do that?” A premed student at Wisconsin said, “I could never take off my clothes in public and pop pills, like you did at Woodstock.” His friends agreed. “All that running in the street sounds ridiculous.”

They said they were raised in a time of chaos and want order restored. They want assignments, reading lists, grades. What impressed me was that going to college these days is not a lot of fun. For one thing, it’s hard financially. Everything is expensive—tuition, rent. Many have to work full time and, to conserve money, live at home.

From the moment they enroll as freshmen, they are pressured to make a career choice. They are told they must sacrifice their personal interests for “marketability.” They must learn to think about what will “look good on the resume.” To change majors in midstream is disastrous—“You won’t graduate in four years.”

For women, there no longer seems to be the option of biding one’s time until marriage. A student in California told me, “What I’d really like to do when I graduate is get married and have kids, but my sorority sisters would give me so much heat! They say you have to work or you have no identity.” She gave a shrug. “So I’m applying to law school.”

Of all the visits to colleges, the one I remember as most poignant and unsettling took place at a private co-ed school in Oregon. After the lecture, I went to a pizza restaurant with three women students and two women professors. The students sat on one side of the booth, the working women on the other. The three of us on one side were in our thirties, unattached and without children. One professor taught English, the other psychology. We were aware, and not

entirely comfortable with the knowledge, that the students were looking at us, hoping to assay their own future.

The three students were attractive, graceful, obviously talented and hard-working. But they were worried they would not be able to find jobs. Pam, who had long red hair which she kept pushing behind her ears, said, "I'm afraid of not being able to make enough money to survive. I'm afraid of starving."

I tried to reassure her. "Nobody I know has ever come close to starving—not even free-lance writers."

"I realize that," Pam said. "But somehow it scares me. I've had to live on popcorn and pancakes because I've run out of grocery money."

The students talked about how much they wanted to be successful: to be paid well, rise to an important position in a corporation and have influence, prestige, power.

"Does love figure in this picture?" I asked.

Pam rested her chin in her hand. "I can't imagine that I would ever meet a man I would want to spend my life with. I think you would grow in different directions."

The three on my side of the table exchanged looks of surprise. Among us, we had been through five marriages and five divorces, and we still believed it would be possible to find a mate who would endure.

"What about children?" I asked the young women.

Rebecca, a brunette who wore oversized horn-rimmed glasses, said, "I'm afraid that if I have a child, my ambition will disappear. Somehow, magically, I'll be transformed into a woman like my mother—a housewife, trying at forty to figure out what she's doing with her life."

Lucy, the third student, said, "I'm not willing to give up years of my career for the sake of children. Men won't do it."

Once again, the three on my side were surprised. Deanne, the psychology professor, said, "I used to feel that way, but as I've gotten older, I realize the price I've paid for my independence. I feel deprived that I don't have a family. I see

a whole generation of women I know getting stuck without children, and it's sad."

Pam twirled a strand of hair around her finger. "We may not feel that way." As the hours passed, I learned that all three students live alone—something the three of us would never have considered when we were in college. I asked about the young men they know. Pam: "The guys at this school have a lot of charm, but they're jocks. The women are more intellectual."

"Those types are not exactly made for each other," I said.

The young women laughed. "Yeah. The three of us are celibate."

"Don't you get lonely?" Deanne said.

Pam shook her head. "We have too much work."

The window of my study in Venice looks out on a building of single apartments. The average tenant stays six months, and I can tell where he or she is in the cycle by the state of the front yard. If there is a new resident in the building, the yard is full of young plants. They are carefully watered and begin to flower and then overnight everything turns brown. Weeds spring up, until the ground is so dry that nothing will grow on it and people throw beer cans and trash on the lot. The old tenants leave without saying good-bye, and new ones arrive and begin to clean up. I watch them installing stereos, hanging wind chimes and putting out lawn furniture. Home at last: the good life by the beach.

One of the tenants this year was a man of thirty, Don, who taught phys. ed. in junior high school. After weeks of nodding to each other across the lane, we struck up an acquaintance. Sometimes we would sit on the beach together, or have a quick dinner on the Venice pier. Don was exceedingly attractive in a California way: blond hair, blue eyes, a pleasingly symmetrical if not terribly interesting face, and a body kept in wondrous shape. Every so often, preteen girls who had followed him home from school would tiptoe up to his door, ring the bell and, squealing with laughter, run away.

I liked to hear Don talk about teaching. He said the seventh-graders need to be disciplined, “or else it’s Lord of the Flies. The kids are confused and can’t keep things organized. They’re always losing stuff. After a seventh-grade period, we have to go through the locker room and collect their junk in boxes.” The eighth-graders, he said, are gaining confidence and want to test their limits. “They need to be smashed down.” The ninth-graders “know what they can get away with, and you can actually teach them stuff.”

A few months went by that I didn’t see Don, until he appeared one Sunday night with a bottle of tequila. “I’m glad you were home,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’ve been alone all week. I went skiing by myself. Every night I just sat and read, or daydreamed. I drove back today, and I thought I’d stop at Death Valley and take pictures of wild flowers, but there weren’t any. So I came on in.” He was staring at his lap. “I didn’t want to be alone.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Do you?” He looked surprised.

I nodded.

“I’m in pain. Do you believe me?”

I realized, from the question, that people do not tend to take very seriously the pain of a blond gym teacher. “Yes,” I said. “You want a close relationship with someone and you can’t have it.”

He let out a sigh.

I said, “It’s been six months or so since I was close with anyone.”

Don said, “It’s been three or four years for me. And I have this fantasy—of having a home, a wife and kids. It’s very strong. But it’s not happening.”

I said it seems puzzling: he’s so attractive, warm and good humored. He meets and dates so many women.

He shrugged. “I could say the same about you.”

Being unattached these days can be such a maddening business. You will have what feels to be the most intimate encounter: there is dazzling promise, blunt truth spoken, laughter and wonderful communication and you will never see the person again. Sometimes it lasts a few weeks, then one or the other calls in sick. I have observed the pattern in myself: infatuation turns suddenly and without warning to aversion. A friend said it comes over her in waves. "I hate the way he walks, the way he chews. I can't wait to be alone, but in a few days I'll get lonely again." It is nothing short of a disease, and those who have it tend to gravitate toward others with the same affliction.

On a weekend in July, I sat out by the lifeguard tower with Don, the gym teacher, and two of his friends. All three had been married and divorced, and every week, they would get together and recount their little disaster stories.

David, who is a doctor, described spending the night with a woman who turned out to have silicone breasts. "When she lay down on her back, the breasts didn't move. They felt like silly putty. It stopped me cold, man. It was like making love to a goddamned lamp or something."

The others howled with laughter.

Don reported that a teacher he'd been dating had just told him she wouldn't be seeing him as often. She was starting a new job and giving first priority to her career. Don said, "I grew up thinking my wife would cook while I was out running the school district. It's sad to think I probably won't have kids now."

"What makes you so sure?" I said.

"Who's going to raise them?"

I said there must be women who would want to stay home with children, at least part of the time. But Don disagreed. "Women who are interested in raising kids are dogshit." I looked at the other men. Was this serious? Allan, a lawyer with an Afro, did not seem to be listening.

"Hey Al," Don said. "Where are ya?"

Allan said he had been thinking about a woman he'd met at a dinner party. "At first I didn't think much of her, but as the evening progressed, she became more beautiful. She had a real nice smile, which turns me on. There was a gentleness about her. I liked her voice, and I liked what she was doing. I've been thinking about her all day."

"You gonna call her?" Don said.

Allan thought a moment. To my surprise, he said, "No."

"Why wouldn't you call her?" I said.

He tipped his head from side to side. "Just because I like someone doesn't mean I want to get into a scene."

I had a fleeting urge to have at him. What is wrong with these men? But David and Don seemed to empathize with their friend. David, the doctor, said, "You can't satisfy the women out there. No point trying. Anything you do will be criticized."

Once, while I was doing research for a film, I spent a day with David on his rounds at the hospital. He has a sensitive face, blue eyes and dark hair that looks black against the white doctor's coat. David treats very sick people—many are terminally ill—with kindness and concern. He is always over-scheduled and yet remains cheerful. Every case requires him to make decisions that will prolong or curtail life. He works grueling shifts with no relief, and often goes home and falls asleep in his clothes with the lights on.

In his free time, he is adept at one-night stands. When we sat by the lifeguard tower, he described his operating procedure at singles bars. "The first thing is the preening—you've got to do everything you can to make yourself look great. Because it's real competitive. Make sure you smell good. Blow your hair dry. Your clothes should be casual but stylish."

"How long does it take you to get ready?" I said.

"About an hour. That includes shaving. I have to put in my contact lenses. Take a shower. Powder my balls."

"Come on."

“I have to—Johnson’s baby powder— otherwise I get a rash from my bikini underwear.”

When he leaves the house, he takes a leather shaving kit in which he has packed:

razor

contact lens solution

K-Y Jelly

aspirin

rubber (“in case the bubblehead forgot to take her pill”)

address book

“You always go to her place, if you can. Then you control when you leave. You don’t get stuck with her all weekend.” He said the first moves in the bar are most important. “You have to feel the woman out, learn what her fantasies are. The best approach is to ask a lot of personal questions, without giving her a chance to know that much about you. Let her talk about her problems and nod understandingly. Because really, people love to talk about themselves.”

Don said, “What if she starts to get upset about her problems?”

David: “At this point, it’s a good idea to commiserate; either share, or manufacture some sort of similar experience.”

“You’re good at this, aren’t you?” I said.

David: “I’m pretty good at being very understanding.”

“Do you ever make it clear you just want to fuck?”

“Not really, no.”

“Why?”

“It’s never worked for me. My basic assumption is that women don’t want one-night stands. They want an emotional

experience. So I make her feel like she's the most fascinating and unique person I've ever met."

"What if she is a fascinating person," I said. "What do you do then?"

"Either fall in love. Or run."

Don and Allan started hooting and slapping their legs. "Run like hell!"

Now you rich people listen to me,
Weep and wail over the miseries
That are coming, coming up on you . . .
Your life here on earth has been filled
With luxury and pleasure,
You have made yourself fat
For the day of slaughter.

—"Warning Warning," by Max Romeo

The only music I follow with any excitement these days is reggae from Jamaica. I cannot abide the monotony of disco, and I'm tired of listening to albums from the Sixties. Reggae music is alive; it has melody, wit, a hypnotic jungle beat and lyrics that burn with righteous fire.

Most reggae singers are Rastafarians—members of a mystic religion; they smoke ganja, worship Haile Selassie and believe that they are the lost Children of Israel who will one day return to Zion. On that day, the rich will eat each other alive and the blessed will survive. The Rastafarians sing about Jerusalem lost, and the temptations of dwelling in Babylon. The imagery seems relevant to me, and became even more relevant after I visited the actual Jerusalem in 1976.

In recent years, I have traveled to Israel so often that people have begun to think me odd. I keep returning for many reasons, one of which is that I find in Israel a sense of belonging to a family—the ancient family of Jews. To achieve this feeling in America, I would probably have to join a synagogue and come to some decision about observing the Orthodox laws. But in Israel, all one has to do is be present. Hebrew is spoken. Everywhere one is reminded of the biblical past. The week has a rhythm emanating from the Torah given to Moses at Sinai. On Friday afternoon, a quiet descends on the cities. Buses stop running, shops close. No newspaper comes out. Nobody works. Everyone, even the most irreligious person, has to be aware that the Sabbath has arrived and that this day will be different.

Life in Israel is in diametric contrast to life in Southern California. Israelis who are my age have fought and survived two wars. They still serve in the reserves. They know how to handle a gun, fix a jeep, find water in the desert and apply first aid to someone with a chest wound. Most of them were married in their early twenties, had at least two children and stayed married. To remain single after a certain age would make them an oddity.

In 1978, I spent a summer at Mishkenot Sha-ananim, a magnificent residence for artists and writers run by the city of Jerusalem. For two months, I did not hear a single remark about diet or jogging. I found great conversation—Israelis love to talk and laugh—about ideas, politics, history, “the conflict,” music, art, books. But there was an absence of personal revelation.

I spent one Sabbath with a couple who lived in a farmhouse outside Jerusalem. The husband was German and the wife a sabra. Every Saturday, their closest friends would come by with their children to swim and eat a potluck meal. The day I was there, four couples sat around the table in the garden, eating roast chicken. I asked our hosts, the German and the Israeli, how they had met. The husband told a story, and I noticed that all other conversation at the table stopped. When the husband had finished, one of his friends said, “We never knew about that.” For years, they had been going on trips and celebrating holidays and taking care of each other’s children, and they had never asked one another how their marriages began.

Israel is beset with internal problems and in no way a paradise, but life there has an intensity and meaning, derived from having a common enemy and a sense of purpose in history. The most radical critics of the government will have no qualms about serving as officers in the reserves. There is no contradiction in being a leftwing pacifist and a soldier, because if people fight, it is to protect their homes and friends.

Israelis are reminded, almost daily, that human life is transient and relationships are not replaceable. Having a family becomes a matter of critical importance. I never ceased to be moved by the sight of muscular Israeli men playing with their children. One I knew, Gidon, was a commando in the navy and drove heavy machinery on his kibbutz. He had spent a year in New York, and told me he was puzzled by the attitude of people there. "All the men and women are interested only in their own careers," he said. "They don't want children." Gidon, who is twenty-eight, has two daughters and a newborn son. "Who says children take away your freedom? I have my family, and my work, and tell me, what is a career"—he held up his baby son—"compared to this?"

Have a good tomorrow, Buy real estate today.

—a billboard in Marina del Rey

Six months after I moved into my house in Venice—the house for which everyone thought I had paid too much—realtors began to knock on the door and ask if I wanted to sell. The longer I stayed, the more they offered. After a year, the price of the house had doubled and after two years, I had earned more money just by living there than I had in my entire writing career.

It was phenomenal. The money was insurance for the future and I wanted more. I began looking in the Marina Peninsula at condominiums on the sand. My house was a short walk from the beach, but as Bruce Jay Friedman wrote about such homes: "It's either on the beach or it isn't . . . The fella who is 'a short jog away' is in the same boat as someone who has to be brought in by Concorde."

What I saw on the Marina Peninsula was shocking. The condominiums had been built with no concern for aesthetics or quality. They were like shoe boxes, long and narrow, with thin walls and sprayed acoustic ceilings aptly called “cottage cheese.” The selling feature, of course, was that the front windows opened onto the surf. If you faced the ocean and forgot about the apartment, it was fine; but the apartments themselves were abysmal.

The price of one of these two-bedroom boxes was four hundred thousand dollars and up—the price you would pay for a nine-room house with a pool and tennis court in another part of the city. The realtors insisted, however, that the prices, outrageous as they were, would only go up. “Beach property is better than gold. They can mine more gold, but they’re never going to make any more oceanfront.”

I saw nothing that I would not have been embarrassed to own, and in any case I came to the conclusion that I could not afford to move. That is the Catch-22 about real estate: your house has gone up, but if you sell it, where are you going to live? If you buy another house, it will cost far more than what you received for your old house, the interest rate will be higher and you’ll be stuck with a whopping overhead. So people tend to stay where they are and remodel. But they cannot stand being left out of the game, so they refinance their homes and use the cash to purchase income units, or join limited partnerships or get together with three friends and buy a house for speculation.

What has resulted is a feeding frenzy. Policemen, plumbers, film directors—everyone is making more in real estate than in the profession he was trained for. When a new “for sale” sign is posted on Pacific Avenue, cars screech to a halt. I am no less guilty than the others: I am tempted to quit work, cancel dates and run out if a broker calls to tell me about a “great deal.” What is fueling this madness is anxiety about the future, and the wish for tangible security. Marriages may not last, political movements come and go, even money loses its value but the land gains. A woman I know, who recently quit her job as a public defender to become a realtor, put it this way: “I’m looking for something in real estate: freedom.” The only problem with this kind of freedom, of course, is that you can never have enough.

“I think there’s going to have to be a reorientation of what people value in their lives.”

—Jimmy Carter, Camp David Summit, 1979

“I just made a major purchase,” Andy told me on the phone. “Roller skates.”

“You didn’t.”

“Ninety-five dollars.” He laughed sheepishly. “Now I can float along with the rest of the flakes.”

Once Andy had succumbed, it was only weeks before I followed. I had seen beginning skaters hobbling along the bike path and falling into trash cans, but I figured they had never skated before. When I was eight, I had lived with a skate key around my neck, and had been particularly skilled at taking the steep driveways on our block. But a long time had elapsed since I was eight.

I rented a pair, laced them on, stood up and rolled away. Just like that. I could not do tricks but I could move right along. I thought I had discovered a new and delightful way to keep in shape, and promptly bought myself some Road Skates.

The next Saturday, Andy and I left our homes in the morning and rolled a mile down the bike path. Despite the claims we had heard that skating is good for the legs, I did not find it strenuous. Andy agreed, “I’m not even sweating.” The sensation was more of dawdling: mindless, effortless. It was pleasant, with the surf shooting in the air and gulls flapping overhead. We decided to skate back to Venice and have lunch at the Meatless Mess Hall.

The crowds on Ocean Front Walk were thicker than I had ever seen. People were skating down slalom tracks made of beer cans. A man crashed into a tree. A girl on a bike hit a boy on a skateboard. Bums and shopping-cart people were rummaging through the trash cans. A woman in a powder blue Mercedes had ignored the “Motor Vehicles Prohibited” signs and pulled onto the boardwalk. The license plate on her car said, “Moist 1.” A policeman was giving her a ticket. He wore his beach uniform: shorts, a holster with a .38 and a T-shirt that said “L.A.P.D.”

I saw two women I knew from the movie business, Sandy, a producer, and Lois, the token female vice president at a studio. Both are paid more than sixty thousand dollars a year. Sandy was wearing shorts, platform shoes and a blouse so low-cut that her breasts were spilling out. She said to me, “How’s your life. Are you in love?”

“No, are you?”

“Are you kidding? I can’t even get laid.”

Lois said, “Forget it, you can’t get laid in this town. I go to parties and take home phone numbers of women. I may have a guy for you, though, Sandy. He’s an old friend.”

“Yeah?”

“He’s not that smart.”

Sandy: “Can he move it in and out?”

Lois made a so-so gesture.

“Fuck it,” Sandy said. “If this goes on much longer, I’ll die of vaginal atrophy. Give me his number.”

We said good-by, laughing, and I looked around for Andy. He was talking with a tall redhead, whom he introduced as Carl—“We used to be roommates at Harvard.”

Carl was saying, “I’m playing the game of the Seventies: corporate executive.”

Andy laughed. Carl explained that he had formed a production company and just finished shooting a movie for television.

“Great,” Andy said, sounding not all that happy.

Carl: “I’m going to Cannes next week.”

“That is fantastic,” Andy said, but the word “Cannes” had struck him like a body blow.

Carl said, “Look, I spent ten years starving. Now I want to get even.”

Andy: “I know the feeling.”

Carl said, “Hey, let’s have lunch. Keep in touch.”

“Sure,” Andy said. “And, uh . . . congratulations on your success.”

As we began to skate away, I could tell Andy was upset. He was racing, making quick turns and plowing through people who were idly talking. I let him move ahead. Just before the Meatless Mess Hall, I saw a bump in the asphalt. I thought I could take it the way you take a wave in water skiing. I rolled up the rise but at the top, my skates continued flying upward instead of down the other side. Before I could think, my feet were in the air and my back hit the concrete, four feet down, smack! I blacked out for a second, and when I came to, I could feel the impact in my chest, head, teeth.

“Are you all right?” someone was asking.

“I don’t know.” I had no wind. I was afraid to move, afraid I had crippled myself. Was this dumb, I thought. What a price you’re going to pay. Andy had to half-carry me home and drive me to the emergency room, but the x-rays showed nothing broken. I had bruised and badly swollen tissue, but with ice packs, followed by heat, I was told, I would recover.

For the next two weeks, I minced around painfully, unable to stand upright. I began to notice people on the boardwalk wearing casts on their arms and legs. One retired surfer on our block took a terrible spill and dislocated his shoulder. Still he went skating, wearing a brace. “Why?” I said. “Anytime you fall, you hit concrete.” He shrugged. “What else is there to do?”

Every day, there was at least one call for an ambulance and somebody was carried off on a stretcher. Then in June, an eighty-six-year-old woman, Ann Gerber, was killed on the boardwalk when she was run over by a twenty-five-year-old bicyclist, who explained later, “She got in my way.”

An emergency meeting was called of the Los Angeles City Council. On the boardwalk, it was war on wheels: shouting and pushing erupted between skaters and bicyclists and joggers and senior citizens over who had the right of way. The skaters had the numbers, and were gaining each day. People were skating to the bank, to the Laundromat, to restaurants, to walk their dogs.

The City Council voted to ban skating on parts of the boardwalk, but people disobeyed.

“No skating on the boardwalk!”

“Up yours, ya jerk!”

A ninety-two-year-old woman struck a skater with her cane when he cut in front of her. “I’m living here twenty-five years,” she shouted. “You should be ashamed.”

I was driving home from the doctor’s. I stopped at the light on Venice Boulevard and Pacific Avenue. A girl was waiting for the bus—an Oriental girl wearing a leopard skin bikini and thin high heels. She was carrying two electric guitars. Where could she be going on the bus? The light changed. As I started to move, a man who had a beard on one side of his face and was clean-shaven on the other, stepped off the curb. I hit the brakes. I nearly ran him over. You’re going to have to be more alert, I thought. There are crazy people, and wouldn’t it be terrible to hit someone. I saw a picture in my mind of the man lying under my car. If it had happened, if he was actually under the car, I thought, what should I do? Drive forward, or backward, or leave it there and try to jack it up? My thoughts drifted on, and soon it was time to pull into my carport.

The space is narrow, so I made a wide arc, glided through the turn and was coming to a stop when, clunkety clunk, I felt the car roll over something that sounded like a metal trash can. What was it? Why hadn’t I seen it?

I stepped out of the car and got down on my knees. A man was lying under the car. A wino, flat on his back, dressed in a green plaid shirt and a woolen cap and brown shoes. I screamed. Should I drive forward, or backward . . . His legs were behind the rear wheels, extending out across the driveway. I had to have driven over his legs. I looked for blood.

“Are you all right?” My voice was high, like a shriek. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” he said fuzzily. He seemed to have been in a drunken sleep.

“You must be hurt.”

“No I’m not.”

“But my car . . .”

“Nahhh,” he said in the slurred, combative manner of drunks. “If I was hurt, I’d know it.”

He was struggling to raise himself. “I wanted to sit down here . . . think about shit.”

Suddenly he jumped to his feet. I jumped back and screamed.

Andy, who had heard the commotion from next door, came running over.

The wino said, “What do you know goddamnit! I been in Venice longer ‘n you. This is my home.”

Andy said, sounding friendly, “You like it here, huh?”

“Yeah. I got shit on my mind, I wanna sit down, nobody’s gonna stop me.”

I said, “I’m just glad you weren’t hurt. It scared the ... life out of me.”

The drunk swayed in my direction. “Awww, I’m sorry, miss, I didn’t mean to bother you.”

An urge to laugh came over me. This made the drunk laugh too.

“What’s your name?” he said.

Pause. “Sharon,” I lied.

“Okay, Sherry. Take it easy.” He pulled his cap down and started to walk away, without apparent limp or pain.

“How could this be?” I said to Andy.

“I don’t know.”

“I must have driven over him.”

“You did. I saw it from my window.”

The drunk reached the corner, turned and disappeared. As I stood there, I realized that I was thirty-five and I was still waiting, expecting I would soon wake up from all of this.