

California Kaleidoscope Part II

By Ilene Rosenberg

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The next day we visit Manhattan Beach, another town of beautiful, healthy and wealthy people. On the way there, my daughter, who rarely makes concessions to the "in" fashion, whips out her cell phone and dials her friend. "Hi Sean, we're passing your apartment now. I'm looking for a place to park. We'll see you soon." To me it said: "I'm so L.A. it's sickening."

Indeed, as I look out across the beach, a plane trailing a banner for Verizonwireless.com flies across the sky. Buy one cell phone and get two free. What a marketing strategy! Give people three times the opportunity to use their cell phones and make it sound like a deal. No wonder Verizon employees went on strike. And lo, two feet away on the walkway is a woman with cell phone in hand, waving wildly to someone she cannot see. "I'm here, where are YOU?" I try to follow her with my eyes as she walks toward her "cell-mate" just to see at what point she puts away her phone and actually starts talking to the person, but she is soon lost among the crowd on the beach. Los Angeles is a state of mind actually, and can be found anywhere — even in Middletown.

Looking up and down the beach along the cement walkway the locals call the Strand, I see an endless stream of people on bikes and rollerblades. On the Strand and on the beach, all the people look to be between the ages of 19 and 28. No bulging

middle-aged people seem to exist here; no balding men, no skinny seven-year-olds. This place is for the young and buffed. Bronzed, bikini-clad women and well-toned men play beach volleyball on the numerous courts along the beach. Looking like they are having a terrific time: teams cheer, high-five, pat each other. I get caught up in the infectious mood of the place.

To get anywhere in the crowd my aggressive New York survival tactics come into play: "Coming through, coming through." Still, I feel slightly anemic compared to all this glowing health, and wonder if my hair is showing telltale signs of gray. I vow to buy a new pair of Nikes and begin a serious exercise regimen when I get home. Not that it would help; I am a generation beyond cool, no matter what I do. But I was like these people once, I remind myself. In this particular time and place, these young Californians appear confident they are the center of the universe. From a certain point of view, given their youth, money and good looks in a society that values those qualities above all else, maybe, for a short time, they are right.

Far be it for me to rain on their parade. They'll figure it out soon enough on their own. The problem is their lifestyle, in California it's always about lifestyle, is faced with a very real threat, the shadow of which hovers nearby. "You see that gray building in the distance?" Jenna asks. "That's the Palos Verdes shelf out there,

where all the DDT in the United States was dumped when it was banned."

"I thought we didn't have to worry about DDT anymore," I remark.

"Well, not directly," my daughter, the biochemistry major, informs me. "But the trouble is the DDT just sits there. It doesn't decompose, or evaporate, or get absorbed back into the ocean. Fish get it into their system and somehow they are able to live with it. But seals that eat the fish store DDT in their fat cells. Then, during the winter months when seals can't find enough to eat, their fat cells break down and the DDT kills them."

"Poor seals." I love seals, with their mild and playful nature. "But what about people?" I ask.

"People can handle DDT in small doses. They'd have to eat megadoses of fish for it to harm them. It's all the other pollutants though that add up. In one waterway near Los Angeles there are nine industrial pollutants present, as well as the pesticide, Chlordane, which does a lot of molecular damage."

California is bulging at its seams. The proliferation of cars and industry, the state's population explosion and the clash of ethnic groups test the fabric of life on all fronts. California has played a very important role in the American psyche. It has represented a dream for many people searching for a better life, a new frontier, a chance to make a fresh start. But the dream has clashed with reality from the

days of the Gold Rush to the present. The only dream of California left for Americans is in the fantasy produced by Hollywood, a fantasy that gets more outrageous every day.

Even the people of Manhattan Beach, as good-looking as they are, cannot compete with the image of reality portrayed by the Hollywood studios. The image, one of physical perfection, is an unattainable fantasy. Liposuction, surgical staples, breast implants, and collagen lip injections are just some of the desperate measures people undergo to attain that fantasy. Compared to the image, I find real people a welcome relief. Real people, warts and all, are what I saw in California, Manhattan Beach included.

Californians are threatened on many fronts, one of which is physically — from the environment — another is psychologically — from all the media hype. California's beautiful beaches, parks and coastline are part of an environment that cries out for preservation. The young, energetic people of California can save it and remain authentic human beings, but they need to make the effort. The rest of the nation should join in the effort as well. On the plane ride home, I opted not to watch the movie being shown, *The Next Best Thing*, with Madonna and Rupert Everett. I preferred savoring my impressions of the real California, as I saw it. Maybe sometime, in the middle of winter when I have nothing to do, I'll rent the movie. After all, as the film's title suggests, it is "the next best thing."

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