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24 About Men

California Dreaming

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I GREW UP IN THE Kentucky knobs, a westward-flung, northwest-curling finger of the Appalachians: steep, Catholic-ridden ridges that form a ragged barrier between the ruling-class Presbyterians and gentlemen-farmer Episcopalians of the rolling Bluegrass (to the north and east) and the foot-washing Baptists and dirt-poor Pentacostals of the lumpy Pennyryle (to the south and west). Across nearly two centuries, we Catholics of the knobs made our livings from servicing vice, our own and our neighbors'. In spring and summer, when creeks ran full and clear in their limestone beds, distilleries ran round the clock. Men farmed tobacco during the day, worked the night shift making bourbon: Heaven Hill, Jim Beam, Antique, Maker's Mark. Women raised kids in daylight, worked the bottling plants at night. In fall, the creeks ran low, the distilleries shut down, and we turned to the tobacco harvest.

When your living is tied to sin, you tend toward a liberal view on the subject, a fact our Protestant neighbors appreciated. Over the years, the

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taverns of my town became ecumenical melting pots, places to practice vice, where, according to my father, you could tell a man's religion by his weapon, or lack of one. Catholics carried guns, Baptists carried knives, Episcopalians stayed in their cars and used the drive-up window, invented, at my family's tavern, to service the demands of their propriety.

The rugged hills kept civilization and the law at bay until the late 1950's, when the town hired its first policeman and its families bought their first televisions. Collectively we bought off the policeman. Television proved less tractable. With everyone (literally) watching, television brought California to the knobs, and with it the 1960's, the first decade to reach us more or less on schedule.

My family owned a black-and-white hand-me-down in a fake woodgrain case. On clear nights, the signal was lost to the universe, but on overcast nights it bounced off the clouds, into our wide valley. On those nights we picked up fuzzy versions of NBC and CBS, but this was enough: NBC carried Walt Disney, and even in this 200-year-old town of 800 people, buried in the Kentucky knobs, he had his impact. It would be

a cloudy Sunday evening, and the fields that stretched the east side of the Jackson Highway would be swarming with kids, playing fox and hounds and kick the can, and then it would be 7:30 and we would disappear all at once, to our houses, or to the houses of neighbors rich enough to own televisions, to watch "Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color" in black and white.

Courtesy of the "Wonderful World of Color" I came to think of television as synonymous with California. Walter Cronkite broadcast from New York, but the gray walls of his newsroom might be anywhere; there was no mistaking the whereabouts of Disneyland. I saw the streets of endless suburbia, lined with orange trees and washed eternally with sunshine. I saw images of a bucolic countryside where city boys speaking high English led adventurous lives with heroic pets, where smart city folks brought enlightenment and progress to ignorant farmers.

And more: I watched "The Beverly Hillbillies" and "Green Acres" and saw myself, or at least how television presented me to the world. I watched and then went outside, to see the knobs in a new light: swarming with mosquitoes and smartweed, peopled with yokels, demanding ever-

lasting labor to produce, not oranges and melons and the glamour of Hollywood, but demon booze and tobacco, that evil weed. I watched and compared and, through television, came to know both shame and envy.

California! I dreamed of it on my school bus, kids packed three to a seat and in the aisles. The route wound through hills populated by white people whose surnames relegated them from birth to peeling clapboard shacks with tin roofs. The kids from these hollers had no running water and around January the bus got rank; across February and March I cultivated the habit of taking a deep breath before climbing aboard. In the county seat, black children were crammed onto an already crowded bus, adding racial tension to the overburdened air. When I could I grabbed a window seat and looked out, dreaming of a place where there was no racism, no poverty, hot water for all and no sweat after a day's work; dreaming, in a word, of California.

One spring day in my senior year of high school, I came home to find my father at the table, a fifth of bourbon open, its cap in the trash. His employer, Seagram, had awarded me a scholarship, paying all expenses at any college in the United States. For the first time ever my father offered me a drink, and I knew, thanks to the company, that I was a man.

And I knew where I was going. Someone asked, and I knew the answer. I was California-bound, to see in living color the world I had known in black-and-white; heading for a place as far from and as different from the family and the old country as any American place could be.

My father's friends and the parish priest warned him against letting me go. "He'll come back a hippie," they said, taking care that I was in earshot. My father knew nothing of California but what we had seen on the news, and that must have worried him, but he was a man of honor, who believed that I had earned this choice. He did not stand in my way.

I left three months early, going in June to participate in the national debate tournament, held coincidentally at Stanford, the university I was to attend that fall. The day before I left, a high-school girlfriend took me out for a drive and to drink beer, and after two Falls Cities she said, "Watch out for the soup." "The soup?" I asked. "They put drugs in your soup," she said. "I saw it on Walter Cronkite," and probably she had. I didn't order soup, my first day in San Francisco, but this was because I was waiting for someone to offer me marijuana, which I had decided to accept. On my second day out, a blond debater from Beverly Hills sidled up to me and said, "You want to get stoned?", and I knew that yes, I had arrived. I was in California.

Speaking on labor relations, I lost out in the tournament's first round, the judge noting for my benefit that "steel" was pronounced with one syllable, "oil" with two. The speed of my defeat presaged the coming school year, when I returned to Stanford to have my country accent and ways mocked, much to my surprise and disillusionment. After all, I told myself, as children I and these Californians had participated in the same mass culture: the same Walt Disney, the same CBS Evening News. I had looked forward to counting myself as one of them — I rebelled, grew my hair, burned my bridges — only to find that they did not share my sense of our fellowship. Instead they saw me as I was, a Southern country boy, no matter how long my hair, no matter how I protested to the contrary. "But I'm not from the South; I'm from Kentucky!" I'd say. "We went with the North!" Only now can I hear how funny this must have sounded to these Californians.

When I think about it, which is too often, I compare this small green apple and this large navel orange: Kentucky and California. I compare their virtues: Kentucky, with its pastoral countryside and its abiding sense of belonging and of place; and California, overwhelming in its grandeur and vastness and beguiling acceptance of our limitless ways of being. I count myself lucky to come to an understanding, if a little late, of how worthy each is of being called home, and how important it is to take on the responsibility of defining and preserving the values that make it so. As a man and a writer, it is my dilemma and my good fortune to know both places and to belong (I can hope) to them both, living out a quandary as old as this pilgrim nation: neither Kentuckian nor Californian, here nor there, fox nor hound, divided east from west and always somewhere in between. ■