

CALIFORNIA, HERE I AM

By

CHRISTOPHER WOOD

1.

“Crinkle winkle...Hut butt ...Ninja nipples.” My father reflects. “What do you think, a bit esoteric?”

“I don’t really associate ninjas with nipples,” I tell him. “Turtles, maybe.”

“Hmn.... I suppose you’re right. Pity, the phrase has a pleasing ring to it-” ‘VRRROOOOOM!!’ My father’s self-absorbed mumble is drowned in a staccato gunfire of revving engines. The lights change on Wilshire Boulevard and six lanes of neurotic metal narrowly fail to flatten a geriatric jogger in a fluffy pink track suit and matching knitted bonnet.

“Look at that woman,” groans my father, the creative muse temporarily distracted. “Looks like a cashmere sea anemone. Must have needed a fork-lift truck to get that make-up onto her face. She starts to sweat and it’ll slide off and break her foot.” His gaze swivels to the line of flags outside the hotel. “Is that Union Jack upside down?”

I confess that I do not know.

“Well you should know, the fortune I’ve spent on your education.” He sighs. “And that Canadian thing with the leaf. That’s not a flag, that’s a corn flakes packet. It’s even worse than the yellow kangaroo.”

I take a deep breath, which in the City of the Angels is probably highly injurious to my health. As in those time-exposed photographs of night time cityscapes with coloured worms of traffic, so one can visualise the heaving arteries of Los Angeles squirming with fuming entrails of mortal corruption like rusting wires crammed in a slimy flex. Sometimes I feel I can contain the rancid air within my hands, form it into balloon-like shapes, hear its plaintiff squeaks as it tries to wriggle from my fingers. I toss it aside and - plop! - it wrinkles out the crinkles and dives back into the murk.

“Buddha belly... Peanut pecker. Stoat parts...” My father reflects. “Do Americans have stoats? I don’t mean in the biblical sense.”

“I don’t know,” I say, and then add quickly before he can remind me that he has made a joke, “Racoons, maybe.”

“‘Racoon parts’.” My father weighs the phrase and finds it wanting. “Hardly trips off the tongue, does it?”

I treat the question as rhetorical and search the lines of motorised effluent beating east and west for a sign of the car which is supposed to be picking us up. A lot of white teeth in Porsches out today. Money has been put where the mouth is.

“Hi, Mr Lock.” Peter, the doorman, strokes each word towards us with equal stress and an ingratiating warmth dipped in pixie torpor. The Lotus-Eaters must have talked like this.

Peter is pulling a trolley full of matching luggage. Not the bloated reticules of the post bellum South but suitcases covered in a tufty fabric sprinkled with clusters of red roses. “Is this yours?”

“If it was, I’d travel separately.”

“Suite four-o-five?”

“It’s not ours,” I say firmly.

My father never seems to get the message. This is Southern California. Simple answers to simple questions. Anything too complicated and life grinds to a halt. No substitutions.

I think Peter is waiting to be discovered. He has tight blond curls that shine with irrepressible lustre and his skin glows with vitality. I keep thinking of catfood commercials. His scarlet jacket is (on purpose?) slightly too small and his honed, toned frame seems about to explode from it at any moment. He smiles a lot and listens intently to everything that is said to him, sometimes leaning forward and nodding to emphasise his absorption in your words. This guy could take direction, or perhaps more importantly, give the impression that he could take direction. Sooner or later, the producer with the life-changing part will walk past the potted palms and - bingo! I keep meaning to ask him if Peter is his real name.

Now he is staring at my father. Perhaps he suspects that the luggage really does belong to us and that we are waiting to bundle it into a car and roar away without paying our bill. Perhaps he is merely puzzled. My father puzzles a lot of people.

“You guys going out to lunch?”

“That’s the general idea,” says my father watching the pink, fluffy one disappearing towards Beverly Glen. She is not jogging but walking robotistically and swinging her arms as if trying to shake them free from her shoulders.

“Nice day for it.”

My father chews air. I can imagine the question that is forming itself in his mind: what would Peter consider a bad day to go out to lunch in the land of perpetual sunshine?

He says nothing so Peter looks at me. His face is not a catalogue of emotional responses but I think I recognise mild disgust tinged with sympathy. Doubtless, like the rest of the hotel staff, he suspects that I am my father’s catamite and not his son. My father being English is bad enough. Californians consider themselves well-informed about the sexual proclivities of the male of the island race. That my father is a writer only tosses more fuel on the flames and if it is generally known that he had a home in France - the country of Gide, Cocteau, Genet and umpteen other uncos sporting floppy berets and hooped matelot jumpers - then the evidence would be irrefutable. When not trawling the studios for writing assignments they have a pretty damn good idea what he gets up to.

Peter’s thoughtful face suggests that he is wondering whether, if a future career depended on it, he would be prepared to submit himself to what I presumably undergo for a free lunch.

As if to resolve any lingering doubts about the nature of our relationship, my father extends his arm across my shoulders and draws me to him.

"Gnome nuts," he says cheerfully.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry I was so late." Constance spies a gap and her modest Japanese import bolts across Wilshire. There is a blare of horns and a screech of tyres. I glimpse braking drivers' mouths deformed into glistening gashes as they hurl obscenities.

"No worries," says my father, trying on an Australian accent for size.

"I had to drop someone off."

"Ermine," says my father. "I think they call them ermine. Or is it ermines? Remind to look it up when we get back."

Constance looks at me. I have a permanent role as interpreter to the outside world.

"We were talking about stoats," I say.

"Fart-breath?" says my father without conviction. "Americans are never very comfortable with farts, are they? I can never detect the fine line between what they consider gross and funny and what is merely gross and taboo."

"How's the script going?" asks Constance.

I like Constance. She is slender to the point of anorexia and wears a scent that reminds me of embalming fluid but most of the time she seems to divine the convoluted thought processes that gnaw at my father's utterances. It takes a weight off my shoulders.

"I'm trying to come up with an original but authentic-sounding teen-speak. You know, something that kids can relate to." Constance looks patient and interested, something she is very good at and an indispensable combination for anybody wishing to carve out a place in my father's life. "Sorry, Constance, I forgot you're a studio executive. You only go to screenings of Iranian movies without subtitles, don't you?" He sighs. "If you ever joined the great unwashed in an actual movie theatre you'd realise that these days people get bored before the end of a sentence. You have to hold their attention with little clusters of insults - usually connected with your sexual organs and their size - or lack of size and general repulsiveness. Chuck in a few permutations of the word 'fuck' and you've got a sporting chance of keeping the audience awake to the next car chase."

"That's so sad, isn't it?" says Constance dutifully as she narrowly fails to rear end a marauding jeep outside the Veterans Administration Cemetery.

"Yes, it is." My father thinks about it and laughs sadly, like a seal barking on a lonely rock.

I leave them to their middle-aged foreplay and prepare to enjoy myself. Handmaiden to my father's whims, Constance will shake off Wilshire and loop down to Santa Monica via San Vicente. This is about as good as Los Angeles gets for me. I love the poincianas along the grassy central divide with their bright red flowers like expensive Christmas tree decorations, the breaking waves of bougainvillea with the gables of distinguished houses glimpsed behind. There is a comforting hint of arboreal anarchy in this cheerful riot of colour that makes me think of homes rather than 'real estate'. Maybe it is because there are no manicured lawns with security patrol signs sprouting from the flowers. 'Armed response'. Step on the grass and someone will drive up and blow your head off. I don't want to think about that. Like I don't really want to be a member of the Brentwood Club. I just want to imagine how nice it must be in there behind the high fence.

I'm more at home out here with the ordinary folk. The joggers and the plodders. Thin men, fat men, very fat men, Greek gods sporting dumbbells. Beautiful girls prancing across the sward, more tick-tock, arm-pumping matrons in day-glo leotards, faces screwed up tighter than the spring in a toy locomotives. Glow, perspire, sweat, drip. No pain, no gain.

Tinkle, tinkle, little cyclist. It makes me feel healthier to be in the presence of athletic endeavour.

Tenth Street. Now begins the countdown to the sea. Ninth, seventh, fourth. Ahead are the palm tree on Ocean Avenue with the palisades and the Pacific beyond. It gets me every time, that first glimpse of the ocean. Just as it did when I was a child. I could be living here. If - as they say in the movies - things had turned out differently.

Constance eases out onto Ocean - only mild hooting - and the traffic closes in around us. More joggers flit through the palms and the glorious bright Californian light crashes off the facades of the buildings along the seafront. The ocean is probably full of coughing fish but today it looks magical, dressed with silver sails and distant haze - haze, please God, not smog. Now the pier comes into view, already mentally booked for the obligatory post-prandial stroll. Beside me, people are selling junk art, gazing out to sea or stretched out on the grass behind the beach. A lot of them look lonely. This is a good place to come when you don't want to be lonely by yourself.

"I can never remember-" begins Constance.

"Over there. Where is says Valet Parking."

The restaurant we are going to has an awning that projects over the sidewalk and a wall with plants along the top of it so that you are protected from the hoi-polloi as you fork your Louisiana crab cakes.

Constance pulls across the traffic and a stream of curses and parks more or less in the middle of the road. More screeching brakes and a faint whiff of burnt rubber. The Hispanic car jock at the entrance to the underground garage gesticulates frantically.

"If you can't get any closer, maybe we can find a cab." My father is nervously patting the bonnet of the car that has stopped two inches from Constance's wing mirror in a 'nice doggy, please don't bite' manner.

"Oh dear." Constance does something with her foot and the car leaps forward onto the sidewalk like an electrocuted frog.

The car jock rips open my door. "Enjoy y'meal." Difficult to avoid the feeling that the words could have been uttered with more sincerity.

"I'll do my best." My father graciously accepts the parking ticket and gallantly extends an arm to Constance. They precede me towards the restaurant. Behind us, I hear the screech of tortured rubber as our car meets the first bend of the ramp.

We walk through an archway of shrubbery and meet two sets of perfect white teeth detonated by our arrival into welcoming smiles. Behind them, and of only marginally lesser impact, are sparkling eyes, cute button noses, lightly tanned skin and ultra-healthy blond hair, the standard facial accoutrements of the Southern Californian greeting girl.

"Hi! And how are you guys today?" exults the taller of the duo. She manages to make it sound like she twisted and turned all night wondering what the next twenty-four hours held in store for us.

"I'm expiring from terminal ennui," says my father.

"Great!" The fair one drops her head preparatory to studying a list of names. "Have you guys made a reservation?"

"Lock. Twelve-thirty. On the terrace."

"Gotcha!" She strikes out the name with satisfaction. "Your table's not quite ready yet. Would you care for a drink at the bar while you wait?"

My father sighs, and for a moment I fear that he is going to read her a lecture about the whole point of booking being that the table is ready when you get there. Luckily he looks from Constance to me and reads the silent pleading in our eyes. Satisfied that at least he

has someone in his power he grudgingly agrees to go to the bar. The greeters look after him without warmth. My father has not responded with the obligatory spontaneous enthusiasm that would have made them feel appreciated and at ease.

“What do you want?”

“Oh dear,” says Constance. “What are *you* going to have?”

She turns to me as I try to mount a bar stool gracefully. I shunt it two feet backwards and have to snatch behind me to stop it from falling. In the background I hear a tiny tinkle of suntanned laughter.

“I’ll have a margarita, up, with salt.” My father, impatient, is explaining his needs to the barman. “Shaken not blended. Spare me the explosion in the detergent factory.”

The barman stares at my father coldly, digesting his words, breaking them down into sections that impart relevant information. He reaches for a glass.

“In a tumbler.”

The barman slowly inclines his head and reaches for another glass. This guy is what Peter at the hotel could aspire to on his ruthless slog to the summit. He is groomed to the max. Every pore open to sunshine down to the corium, no gleaming lash out of place. He wears the restaurant tie and a spotless white shirt and a dazzling white starched apron and he looks so - so white. He does not so much mix my father’s drink as beatify the ingredients that go into it.

“Your table is ready now. You requested the patio?”

Greeter Two is looming with three menus on boards. I know that my father would rather suffer a vasectomy with a rusty tuning fork than allow the word ‘patio’ to pass his lips but he merely grunts and tosses a bill onto the counter.

“That’s eight dollars, sir.”

Constance finds another five dollar bill immediately and we are led out to the patio, or the terrace, or the bit under the awning. Diners glance up immediately to see if we are famous. Their faces give us the answer.

“Enjoy.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Greeter Two willows away towards the desk.

I have noticed that ‘Thank you’ is a flummox phrase in Southern California. The locals reveal themselves uneasy in its presence, uncertain how to deal with it. It has no established role in the rituals of everyday life. Its appearance is almost a source of embarrassment. ‘Uh huh’, is a fairly common response. ‘Urhh’ is more frequent.

“You didn’t order any drinks.” My father’s tone is accusing. He looks more relaxed now. Enconced. The right table in the right place. Child opposite. Drink and mistress to hand.

“A glass of wine would be lovely,” says Constance. I agree with enthusiasm.

“Why not?” My father’s eye is already roaming over the wine list like a shepherd checking a well-loved flock. “What do you think? The Edna Valley or shall we try something else. I had a Grgich-”

“Hi! I’m Michael. I’d like to tell you about today’s specials.”

Michael is presumably addressing someone swimming towards Santa Catalina Island. As he reels off a list of dishes that sound like colour schemes dreamed up by a lunatic interior decorator on acid, his gaze is fixed on a point somewhere far beyond the end of the pier. I don’t have to look at my father to know that a small, black cloud is forming over his head.

“...with a blueberry and béchamel sauce. That’s a special favourite of mine.” Michael lights upon us beneath him and salutes the discovery with a benign smile. “Do you folks have any questions?”

“No,” I say hurriedly.

“Great. I’ll give you a few moments to think about it.” He disappears in a crackle of starch.

“Impertinence! Fellow should be dragged to the oubliettes and thrashed with oak staves.” My father grinds his teeth. “Why should I give a tinker’s toss what his name is? And why do they always have to interrupt you just when you’re saying something really important?” He racks his brains before staring at me accusingly. “You’ve probably forgotten what I was talking about.”

“You were going to order some wine.”

“Oh yes.” He drains his margarita. Salt from its rim has rhinestoned his beard. Mildly repulsive but there will be worse to come. “And why should I give a damn if he likes that filthy pudding? If he told me he liked sodomising frogs, would I start sprinting for the nearest swamp?”

The turbaned woman at the next table turns her head.

“It’s no big deal,” I grunt.

“‘No big deal,’” he mimics. “You sound just like your mother.

“That figures, doesn’t it?” I say. “Given the choice, I don’t have to sound like you all the time.”

“It’s tomorrow you’re seeing Jim, isn’t it?” Kind Constance gallops to the rescue.

“Yes. Ten thirty.” Jim Zaiferts is a Senior Vice President at the studio she works for. Or is he just a Vice President? Or an Executive President? It probably doesn’t matter very much when you are applying for a job as a reader or - come on, let’s glamorise it a little - Script Analyst.

“I think you’re going to like Jim. He’s...” Constane hesitates and her long bony figures enclose air and start to sculpt a crude human form imbued with qualities both manifold and manifest.

“Yeah,” I say. Of course, it doesn’t really matter a hill of beans what I think about Jim Zaiferts. The important thing is that he should feel orgasmically good about me.

I wonder how old he is. The way the movie business is going I am probably a bit long in the tooth for this job. I haven’t liked to ask but I’d wager that Zaiferts is under thirty. In his mid-twenties maybe. Separated from me by three years, a desk and one hundred thousand dollars. Youth is king and queen in Hollywood, and being over forty a disease worse than the Big C. My father is now what they call ‘a veteran’ - if they bother to call at all. Ho ho. I ponder. How old is he? Fifty-two? Fifty-three? When you get to that age the odd year or two can’t make much difference.

Now he is looking chastened. Maybe it is because of our little brush. Maybe he is thinking about my mother.

“Toad-tool.” He looks at us for a reaction. “Toadstool?? Get it?” Constance’s smile is that of a freshly qualified psychiatric nurse struggling to survive her first week on the ward. My father sighs and shakes his head. “What do you want to eat?”

Around an hour and a half later things have deteriorated predictably. The chardonnay is nose down in the ice bucket and my father and Constance are on their second Cointreau and double espresso. ‘Decaffeinated’ is an anagram of ‘snivelling wimp’ as far as my father is concerned. Constance’s hands pump up and down, occasionally thumping the table and her jaws bounce open like a gin trap as she mouths utterances like “No!!” and “Out-rageous!!” in response to my father’s increasingly crazed ramblings. She looks like a happy seal. My father’s face glistens with sweat and food that has got displaced in his beard. His napkin is a gouache, his glass like a vessel used to test a sample of the Ganges at Benares.

No need to perform an autopsy; the ingredients of his meal jostle in its depths: a plankton of Caesar salad and soft-shell crab. Not eye candy, but it pales beside the oil slick of black leaking down his coffee cup. In contrast, Constance has flecked her china with nimbus smudges of puce lipstick. There is no justice. They are committing gastronomic murder and I am the one who is suffering.

Constance reaches across the table and playfully pushes my father in the chest. Oh dear. I can read the signs. Desperate for something else to look at, I gaze out onto the street. I am worried about tomorrow. Not just about the interview with Zaiferts but about the whole direction I am taking. Do I really want to work in the movie industry? Am I doing it because of my father or because I don't want to not do it because of my father?

Maybe my mother has something to do with it. It is difficult to separate yourself from your parents, even when they separate themselves from each other. If I don't do this what am I going to do? The people I was at university with are already standing in line to be cabinet ministers. Funny that: how I automatically think 'standing in line' rather than 'queuing up'. I guess I'm becoming a kind of chameleon, changing my colour/colour according to which of my parents I am feeling closer to. My mother is one of the few people you will ever meet who came from Nebraska.

A chair scrapes back and I turn hopefully. The woman with the turban is standing up. She takes a long, severe look at my father which I field before he can ask her where she parked her elephant. Her disgusted eyes sift through the detritus of our meal and she shakes her head. A disapproving 'tch' and she swings her Versace bag over her skinny shoulder and marches out ahead of her husband whilst he directs jerky papal benediction gestures at the staff as he struggles to keep up with her. He has to be her husband. I didn't hear them exchange a word throughout their meal. It's funny the couples that stay together.

"How are you guys doing here?" Michael's affable inquiry reeks of sincerity. In fact, it means 'fuck off, I want to go home'. To my relief, my father asks for the check. It comes fast and whilst my father empties a McDonald's carton of food from his dangling specs I check out the scene on Ocean. Quite a crowd out there now. Kids with skateboards. An old man on roller blades. Some blacks with a throbbing ghetto-blaster the size of a coffin. Two Lance Armstrong look-alikes with razor thin racing bikes, lurex tights, bulbous space-baddie helmets and skin-tight advertising board tunics - the Tour de France seen as a life-style. A bush-bearded mutterer fossicking in the trash bins. All human life is here. Enriched by the bonus of a very beautiful girl. She appears suddenly as her bicycle squeaks to a halt outside the restaurant. What eyes. Like a startled falcon's - or something redolent of strength tinged with vulnerability. She starts to get off and her long skirt snags on the saddle. I glimpse exquisite white thigh as our gaze meets through the wisteria. She blushes and thrusts her skirt down before wheeling her bike briskly out of sight. I feel strange. Turned over like a spadeful of earth. 'Laura, on the train that is passing through'. The girl makes me think of Lucy. Makes me think that I have not thought of Lucy for a couple of days. Something else to ponder.

Constance is huddled over a small card that tells her what fifteen percent of the bill is. My father groans, writes in the sum she tells him, achieves a laborious addition, signs the top slip and starts to extract carbons and tear them up. He deposits the tiny pieces in a coffee cup and stares at his smudged fingers for several seconds.

"A man comes home and finds traces of carbon on his wife's nipples. He knows that she's had lunch with a lover."

"Doesn't sound like a mainstream Hollywood movie to me," says Constance.

“The French would appreciate it,” says my father. “I can see Emmanuelle Béart in the bath, screaming. Except they don’t tear up their carbons. Shit! People always have to make things difficult, don’t they?”

I nod and stand up. He is absolutely right.

I am glad to be outside but sad that there is no sign of the beautiful girl and her bike. I had constructed a modest fantasy in which her supple body would be bent over a punctured tyre. I would arrive to detect the tiny fizz of escaping bubbles, apply a patch like a soothing Band-aid, reveal controlled brute strength as I levered the taut rubber over the rim. It’s strange. I can’t even remember what she looked like. Lightish hair. Tawny, I think. But it’s no big deal. I’m always suspicious of writers who can reel off every detail of the beloved two seconds after she is encountered. If the first impression is overwhelming that should be enough for the moment. The nuances can be assimilated later.

Constance is now clinging to my father’s arm. Unfettered child of nature, free spirit, drunk, he wishes to plunge across the street against the ‘Don’t Walk’ sign. They look like a couple of middle-aged juvenile delinquents ready to tip over a trash can at the drop of a tab.

Constance must be getting on for fifty. She was a famous English actress who came to Hollywood and stopped being famous. She married an actor and became an American citizen before discovering that her husband was gay. This might have daunted some people but Constance was a game kid and, fortunately perhaps, bisexual. She tried to fight fire with Fire Island and my father hints at scenes of unbridled lust and titillating debauchery. Drugs, orgies, a gallant Constance gamely sharing the nuptial couch with her husband and a series of other men, none of whom, apparently, particularly interested in her. The marriage collapsed with her acting career and she became an agent and then a studio executive. She has the power to say ‘no’ to projects but not ‘yes’ and is valued because having been born a foreigner she is judged to have particular insights into overseas material which are useful but which can always be overruled because, having been born a foreigner, she can never really understand what Americans like.

I join the jostling throng heading down the causeway towards the pier. The sidewalk is a narrow ledge against the wall, as if someone remembered that people might want to walk rather than drive onto the pier only as an afterthought. Taking precedence beside me is a long line of slowly moving automobiles. Some of them I haven’t see since I was a kid. Huge, semi-inflated balloons of dented metal with bits missing and rust at the corners. These families have come to the seaside from Downtown, Boyle Heights and East L.A. Places where dollar bills are counted in singles.

My father and Constance are skirting the milling crowd in front of the sideshows. There is a ritual to the after lunch Sunday walk. A brisk stroll to the end of the pier where the crusty fishermen are observed and the sea inspected. Then a slow return that takes in the break dancers, the escapologists, the half-naked man who dives onto a bed of broken glass, a couple of sideshows, the big wheel and the carousel.

The Santa Monica State Beach is peppered with a dust of families stretching away towards the Babylonian haze of Malibu. Kids dash in and out of the water like it might bite them. People loll and luxuriate in the sunshine. Smooch, schmooze, snooze.

How easy it is when all the clouds live over England. I remember the day trips to the seaside resort of Cromer. Looking out of the window all the time to see if it had stopped raining. Digging in against a damp breakwater to seek protection from the wind. Christ, that wind. All the way from Scandinavia. Swifter than the Norsemen but no less cruel. And the obligatory dip. If the undertow didn’t get you then pneumonia would. Once my father had to save me from drowning. The day the rubber ring blew half way to Sheringham. Was there

ever a sea more grey and cold? I can still run my fingers down my arm and feel the goose pimples. You had to build sand castles to keep the blood pumping through your body. And the sandwiches - 'because of the sand which is in them', the beach cricket with my mother faking a pitcher's wind-up, the tiny scuttling crabs, the starfish you weren't allowed to take home, popping seaweed, rock pools, saucy postcards, the final plod up the cobbled slipway with the sand itching between your toes. Happy days.

Now I am tailing my father past the Buccaneer's Inn - 'Cocktails - No Thongs'. As a child I used to think that Thongs were Chinese gangsters probably forbidden to mix with pink ladies. Here, where the steps go down to the beach, you can have your photo taken next to the cut-out of a famous person. Clint Eastwood, Marilyn Monroe, Antonio Banderas - probably here for the Hispanic contingent from East L.A. There is also President Bush as 'Top Gun'. Do I crave a permanent memorial of myself pressing the flesh with Dubya? Hmn. Let me think about it.

Leaning against a shed are two battered cut-outs of Laurel and Hardy, presumably en route to the scrap heap. This saddens me. One of my most enduring childhood memories is watching television with my father. Or rather, watching my father shaking with body-threatening laughter as Oliver Hardy sprawled in a fireplace and bricks released by Stan on the roof fell noisily on his head. I had never heard my father make noises like that before. Was he all right? Was something terrible happening? There seemed to be no relation between my father's reaction and what I saw happening on the screen. It was pretty scary.

I catch up with my father at the end of the pier. He is staring into infinity and gripping the rail in his 'Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?' pose. Constance is peering into the fishermen's bait buckets and making tiny 'ugh' noises. Two pipes on the bosun's whistle and they could be setting sail for China.

"Funny to think that the Don got here before us," says my father to no one in particular.

I make a non-committal noise that I have perfected over the years and become absorbed in a circling seagull. The pier used to be longer but a storm carried a large piece of it away. Now it is being 'redeveloped'. This will probably mean one hundred and fifty identical boutiques selling plastic mugs with your name on them whilst Micky Mouse drifts about in the background with a pooper-scooper. Sad. Come back squalor, all is forgiven. Nostalgia has no future in California.

"Right," says my father briskly. It is the voice of Scott having reached the South Pole. 'We've done our best, chaps. Pity about Amundsen. Now its time to go back and die heroically'. His paternalistic eye sweeps over the natives, no doubt pitying them - poor devils - for no longer having a queen to worship, and he takes a last deep breath, probably inspired by my grandmother: "ozone, dear," she would hiss whenever we got without sniffing distance of the sea.

Constance takes my arm but, sensing an involuntary tension, immediately releases it. My father is already striding down the pier and we follow him in single file.

A large crowd is watching a fire eater. At least, I think he is a fire eater. It seems increasingly possible that he might be an unhinged vagrant. He staggers, swigs from a bottle, splutters through a flame. Nothing. Either this is a very clever routine or the man is in imminent danger of grisly self-immolation. The crowd seems to be waiting patiently for the latter. Constance, sensitive soul, draws us away.

We move on to the rubber frogs. The idea is to hit a crude metal catapult with a wooden mallet so that your frog soars clumsily into the air and thwacks down on a rubber lily in a little pond. It becomes obvious immediately that the game would make a very effective

sobriety test. My father's first carefully-rehearsed tap barely lifts the frog off its platform. His second lands it on the roof of a booth thirty yards away.

"Let me have a go," I say hurriedly. I manage to land one frog almost on a lily leaf and Constance thinks I'm wonderful.

My father is sulking, looking around for the rifle range and revenge but it seems to have disappeared. Perhaps the city fathers have taken advantage of the redevelopment to sweep it aside. Possibly a prudent measure. Things can get out of hand at the seaside. Near Venice Beach, my father saw a man drive a car backwards and forwards over another man until you could hear and see the bones breaking through his flesh.

There being nothing more virile for my father and I to compete at than hurling fluffy balls at empty matchboxes, we trudge on towards the carousel.

I am sad to notice that the pottery has closed. Sad but not surprised. The average meringue case bore more resemblance to a work of art than their Madonna heads, doves and puppy dogs, but therein lay their charm. They were so downright, outrageously awful that they shone out like beacons of originality amidst the rest of the tacky, derivative rubbish. I press my nose to the grubby window. Nothing. Empty shelves and a few sheets of dust-covered wrapping paper. Now I will never own a clay bulldog with a seam running down its nose.

The line for the wheel is daunting and Constance and my father are already waiting by the entrance to the merry-go-round. It is kind of them but there is no danger of me getting lost. At the end of the pier walk there is only one place to go. I can hear the hurdy-gurdy already, glimpse the rhythmic up-and-down of the painted horses, see the good little children clinging on through the glass. You only see good little children on a carousel.

My father has bought the tickets and we join the expectant line behind the barrier. Slowly, slowly, so very slowly, the merry-go-round glides to a halt. The horse you want is always on the other side. But no matter. You are a big boy now and you can walk with unforced dignity and accept a mount on the outside. One of the ones that does not go up and down. Your little friends and their assertive parents have pushed ahead to grab the best stuff. My father turns in the saddle and levels two fingers at me. His thumb cocks an imaginary hammer. Bang! Bang! Billy the Kidalong's mouth jumps open and his hands clutch at his heart. You got me, pop! The music cranks into laboured sound and we are under way. Constance rides side-saddle. She looks attractive, and happy. Everybody looks happy. This is such good therapy. Something about the honky-tonk music, the cosy shared experience, the expressions on the kids' faces, the expressions on the parents' faces as they watch the expressions on the kids' faces. Everybody thinking - like in a good dream - 'I am having the best time. This is so great'.

And, of course, this is the carousel in 'The Sting'. The movie with Paul Newman and Robert Redford and the catchy piano music by Scott Joplin. I could be sitting on Paul Newman's horse - only he would have had one that went up and down. 'I-want-to-be-happy-but-I-can't-be-happy' the honky-tonk music still crashes out but it's beginning to ring a little hollow and the good feelings are ebbing away, not too fast but just around the edges.

It must be because I'm thinking about tomorrow. Once the meeting with Zaiferts is over I'll feel better.

But then, I always feel sad on Sunday afternoons.