

Greetings from the Left Coast:

I was walking through the parking lot of the downtown shopping area in beautiful Occidental, California the other day. Occidental is a wonderful place on the road from Sebastopol to Bodega Bay. You may remember Bodega Bay from the Hitchcock film, *The Birds*. Occidental is a small town in the redwoods. It is a place to hike and camp and grow up and grow old and hide out and live how you want to live. It is full of mystery and full of characters. I believe the characters feel comfortable here. No one is going to hassle them and no one is going to find them, at least the ones who don't want to be found.

Anyway, as I was crossing the parking lot I spied a lady, my age or so, graying hair in long braids, walking her handsome German shepherd. I noticed that she was wearing a hat, sort of a Chinese peasant hat, like a pagoda. But as she approached it became apparent that her topping was neither hat nor pagoda. It was the uppermost projection from a large backpack that she had strapped on her shoulders. Well, not exactly a backpack. It was a birdcage.

As she passed, smiling, I stared open mouthed, at the beautiful blue and yellow plastic birdcage on her back containing a magnificent parrot. The bird was perched and noble, surveying the rest of us in a way that a prince would. Detached and a tad amused. The lady was happy, the parrot peaceful, the dog well-heeled and all was right with the world. As she passed I gave up the notion that this might be a dream and accepted, instead, that this was California. Things happen here that don't happen other places, at least other places that I visit.

This morning we were at a local farmers' market. One of the greatest things about California is that, on November 9th, there is still a farmers' market in progress. Fresh produce everywhere and even fresher people in attendance. A youngish dad passed by calling his daughters. I would guess they were three and four, or thereabouts. "Mango, Lhotse" he called. Ya gotta love it; only here. Mango is obvious, the lovely tropical fruit. Lhotse may not be. Lhotse is the name of a great mountain close to Mount Everest in Nepal. It is gigantic and forbidding. Both of the girls were about two foot nothing tall and cute as buttons. So Mango I get. Lhotse? I'm still thinking about that one.

And that's exactly what I'm talking about. There is vivacity here on the left coast. There is a chutzpa that needs to be expressed and is unabashed about its self expression. I am a classicist from the East who is all wound up in form and tradition, a guy who appreciates names like Tim and Molly. So when the locals opt for appellations suggestive of mountains and edibles I get all fidgety. But Eastern propriety matters not to Californians. That's why they moved here. The notion of being bound by convention or toeing a line laid down by one's ancestors does not play here. History is amusing, at best.

There are two delightful children living next door to where our daughter and grand daughter live. Angelica is eight and Alexi is four. They have plenty of shoes but they choose not to wear any of them. Their feet are made of leather, tanned leather at that. Alexi rides his green plastic trike down a steep driveway. I mean steep, like 30 degrees steep. The trike has no brakes and Alexi wears no shoes. That's right, you guessed it, when he gets up to twenty miles per hour or so he plants his feet on the asphalt to stop. I cringe as I watch, sure that the flesh will be ripped from the soles of his feet. Nope. He's not only fine, he's laughing. There's a point to spending all day barefoot. Alexi has discovered it.

I attended school with Ella last week. Second grade. It was November 5th, the day after the election. Their teacher, who has a sense of history, asked them what was special about this particular Wednesday in November. The kids' number one answer was that Wednesday is pizza day. Their number two answer was that it was class picture re-take day. Their number three answer was that we had elected a new, somewhat different, president. Much to his credit, their teacher agreed that all of the above were important. Then they all settled into a wonderful discussion about presidents and color and hope. I realized, with moistened eyes, how important teachers are. I found myself hoping that we'll find a way to pay them what they are worth.

Well, that's it for this report from Occidental, on the Left Coast. There will be more, I'm sure. The stories stand in line here just waiting for someone to tell them.