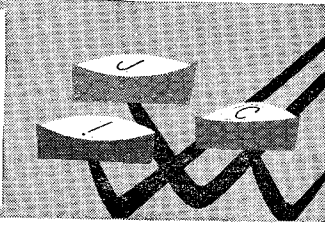


Manner of Speaking



Foamrubbersville: Los Angeles obviously believes in its own existence but it is hard for the visitor to share the native faith. The faith itself is as nebulous as it is intense—as all enduring faith should be—but one really needs to be born to it, for conversion comes hard. Like its central shrine, which is, of course, Hollywood, Los Angeles does finally flicker as if with life, but only as the projection of a canned illusion, its animation available for a price only in certain selected darknesses. But no matter how carefully the illusion is prepared, it remains blatantly imperfect.

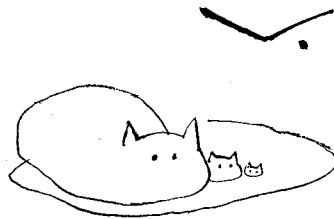
In the perfect illusion, one is lost. To leave the dark cave of the projected dream and to come face to face with the world again is a shock. The soul has been wholly swallowed into the fantasy.

But in Los Angeles the illusion is forever calling attention to itself—like the sweaty sincerity of Phil Silvers emceeing a charity show, or like the relentless in-jokes of the all-star performers. In Los Angeles the citizens, all of whom come from Iowa, are either actors or cameramen, and the cameramen never hesitate to walk into the scene, or to toss in a shot of the director at lunch, or to look into their own lenses as if they were staring the wrong way down a telescope for a diminished and removed glimpse of reality.

In Los Angeles everyone wants to tell you what dream he is having at the moment, and to explain the necessary camera angles, with the result that everyone instantly stops dreaming and becomes technical about the real presence of his own—and everyone else's—unreality.

Judith and I were touring the cardboard cutouts after a few days at Caltech, where I had been lecturing, and gawking at another and separate dream called Pasadena, a collage of white Protestant American money on a background of irrigated desert. Each palace there rises from its own rain forest, but turn off the valves of the water mains for a month and the desert will leap back as if it never had been away—as if it had awakened from a dream of its own. Bud Orenstein, who once, in a dream called the USAAF, had co-piloted the ship on which I had been excess-baggage gunner, and who is now writing insurance on whatever is collectible from dream-breakage, was acting, along with his wife, Florence, as our liaison with unreality. And as an early check on our

various dream-states, we all took off on a tour of Universal City, setting off in a gay tram while an engaging young man named Tom Mack spied us through the shadow-factory. It was, let me say, an enthusiastic and informed spiel, and I hereby award Tom Mack my imaginary gold button as Chief of Guides for his two-and-a-half-hour tour of Universal's sound stages, TV locales, Western towns, European villages, Norman castles, suburban streets, and the whole false-fronted array of dreamland, all capped by a gusty frontier brawl staged for us by a company of stunt men who fell from roofs onto foam rubber rocks,



bashed one another with bloodless abandon, and managed a real sense of general mayhem. All the watcher need do is shut one eye to kill off his depth perception (thereby entering the world of the camera lens), and instantly the punches will really be landing and the clubs will really be cracking heads.

I am not sure, in fact, but what one should go through all of Los Angeles with one psychic eye closed. The only possible mistake is in trying to perceive depth there.

But the Universal City tour was little more than a briefing. To make sure we had touched the heartland of the depthless, we announced a school holiday for the Orenstein kids, Peggy and Jimmy, and all of us took off for Disneyland.

Reader, as Dante did not say, it has to be seen to be disbelieved: imagination cannot doubt it sufficiently. As Dante almost but not quite did say:

I never saw so bright,
so blank, so prettified a nothingness.
Its very memory marzipans my
sight.

But—to continue in a pastiche of greatness—“since it came to good, I will recount the gist of what I found revealed there by gaud’s grace.”

We had done the monorail, the fake highway ride, and whatever you call that spin-the-airplane wheel. Now Jimmy and Peggy were all abuzz for the submarine ride. By that time we had put in

nearly two hours in Mr. Disney’s over-frosted cake, and the thought of looking out of an underwater window at something as real as a fish was sweetly promising. Into the endless line we went and—eventually—down into the tube-on-rails of the imitation submarine to stare out at the water, ready to see the grottos of the sea. I was expecting some sort of Marineland, and even the recorded voice of a fake submarine captain calling off garbled diving instructions and accompanied by a gush of bubbles across the windows was not enough to sicken my hope.

Down into the illusion we went, the water shining around us. And there were the creatures of that toy-store sea. There were fish, all right—and electric eels, and sea monsters, and even mermaids, plus the ruins of Atlantis, and a trip to the North Pole—but every creature in that water shop was made of foam rubber and powered by electric motors. There wasn’t the grace of a single live fin in the whole sterile pond.

Not since I sneaked into the movies to see Tom Mix and found myself watching Rudolph Valentino in an obvious advertisement for pomade have I felt such a letdown from the adventure of hope.

“Bud,” I said when we were back from the seven seas, “let’s sneak out and buy some goldfish and dump them into that pond.”

“Son,” my guide said to me, “this water is chemically treated to protect the gizmos and to keep the windows clear. A real fish can’t live in it.”

And so I had my parable. *The true dream of the angels is to create that artifice in which the real cannot survive.* Philosopher Disney has exemplified Hollywood’s own *summa*. And not even by precept, I found myself thinking at first, but simply by his act of being himself; as naturally as a salmon migrates, beyond all theory of geography, oceanography, and its own seasons; with the instinct of the simple soul, its revelation in its own essence. I was ready to see him as the incarnate myth of all that is naturally depthless. A purity of uncalculating mindlessness.

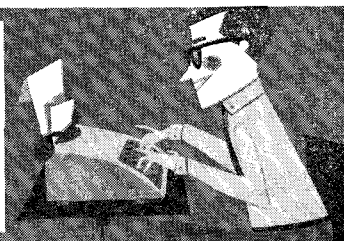
Then, passing a plaque on Disneyland’s Main Street, I read:

Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America . . . with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world.

And suddenly there was no essence, and I saw instead the shyster in the back room of the illusion, diluting his own witch’s brew with tap water, while all his gnomes worked frantically to design a gaudier and gaudier label for the mess. And I wondered why anyone would leave even Iowa for this.

—JOHN CIARDI.

Top of My Head



Personal, But Not Too

THE TWO newspaper features widely read in our home are the weather and horoscope columns. Not by me. My wife reads them to me every morning as I leave for the office. I've managed to live with these daily recitals only because of her attendant dialogue, which I will give you a sample of herewith.

"Thundershowers," she says.

"So?" I say, gazing out through a sun-spattered window.

"So, take a raincoat."

I reach into the closet and drag out a raincoat.

"Not that one. I just had it cleaned and pressed. Wear the one I got you for Father's Day."

She did. In 1961. A tissue-paper-thin, shapeless gabardine that even Shylock would not have spat upon. Much less a thundershower.

That night I return carrying the raincoat over my arm.

"What happened to the thundershowers?"

"The wind veered," she says.

"Veered?"

"The wind veered. They announced it on the radio a few minutes after you left. They hadn't expected it to veer but it veered."

Veered is the word for the day.

With the horoscope column it becomes a little more complicated. Every morning she reads my horoscope to me. She also reads me her horoscope for the day. It seems our horoscopes are seldom compatible and this is a source of great worry to her. She feels certain our marital status is in jeopardy. She has felt this way for about thirty-five years.

It seems I'm a Capricorn. And from the way she has our compatibility figured out she must be a Montague. And you know how they got along. Any day now I expect her to suggest the hemlock bit.

One day I suggested that I had not hidden my birthdate from her. It was, in fact, her first question after we had been introduced.

"I know," she said, "but I thought in time I could overcome it. Being a Libra I'm well balanced."

Actually she's neither. But I don't fight that kind of talk. Being a Capricorn, I never let it get my goat. Instead I try reason, logic, and other unfair tactics, as I do in all our misunderstandings.

Most of the time I quietly quote Julius Caesar:

"Men at some time are masters of their fates," I say softly. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings."

"Oh yeh? And you know what happened to Julius Caesar. Shot down like a dog."

Sometimes in the heat of the discussion she corrects herself and says Sid Caesar.

For several weeks at a stretch my horoscope seemed to say the same thing: "Don't sign anything today." This warning was repeated to me every morning as I left for the office. All that got me were some second notices on bills for which I had not signed checks.

For some years now she has developed a correlativity between her horoscope and Chinese fortune cookies—the thirteenth symbol in her zodiac—the sign of the Subgum. Any night she may be

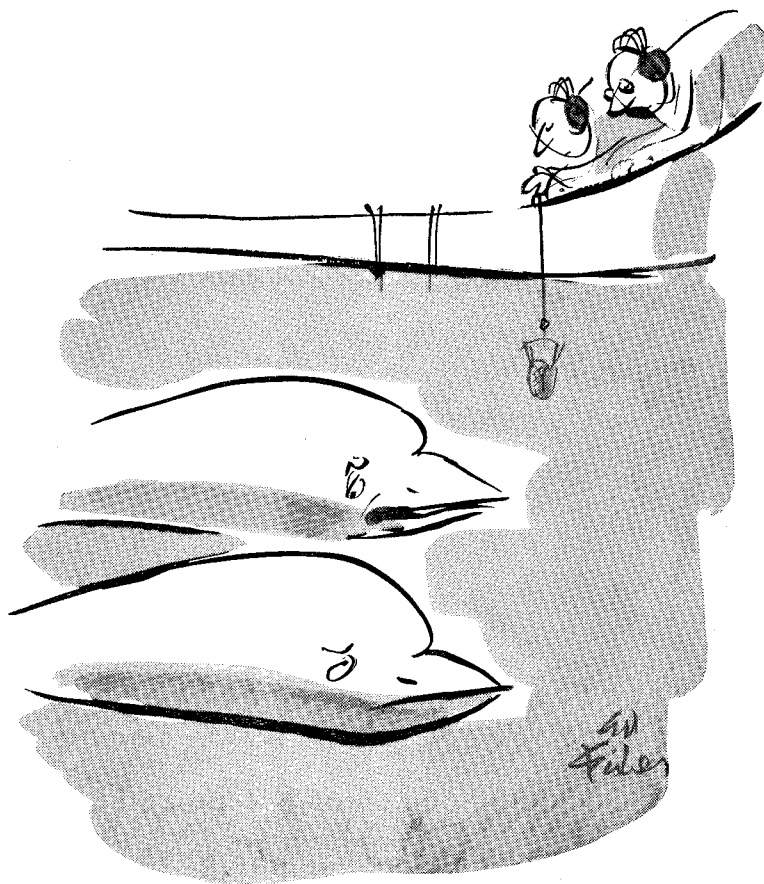
found in one of these dens carefully selecting a lucky fortune cookie after a close and lengthy inspection, when anyone knows you can't tell one Chinese cookie from another. There is often a contradiction between the prediction of the horoscope and the cookie. At such a time she chooses the more pleasant.

But it's when plans are being formulated for traveling South on a winter's vacation that the horoscope gets its biggest play. Certain days are advantageous to think about traveling, certain days to pack for traveling, and finally one certain day actually to travel. For this last step of the trip she adds to the horoscope *The Old Farmer's Almanac*.

Since plane reservations cannot be made horoscopically—and don't think she hasn't phoned to try—she must deuce at least a week in advance a certain propitious trend in her horoscope, which she measures up against the *Farmer's Almanac* for clear flying weather. Somehow she finally manages to match them—you give a little, you take a little—and off we go to the airport.

Once on the plane and we have fastened our seat belts, she is relaxed and content in the indisputable knowledge that her star will see her through. And once the door is banged shut and the engines begin their terrifying din, I notice she supplements it all with a softly murmured prayer. And why not? He did put the stars there, didn't He?

—GOODMAN ACE.



"Pssst—they're listening again. Keep talking gobbledygook!"