



DreamlaND

by Jonathan Kellerman

On the morning of January 14, 1959, David and Sylvia Kellerman and their three young children descended the steps of a TWA propeller plane and stepped onto the tarmac of Los Angeles International Airport.

The aircraft had taken off the previous midnight from La Guardia Airport in Queens, New York, where temperatures had dipped into the teens during a fierce snowstorm. The Kellerman kids, swaddled in heavy coats over pajamas and wearing hats with earflaps, elicited stares from the ground crew. The weather in Los Angeles was 79 degrees Fahrenheit. The sun was shining. Everything was green. Sylvia thought she'd landed in the Garden of Eden, and maybe she had.

A nine-year-old oldest child, I understood that this trip would be life-changing and I relished the adventure. As I inhaled an olfactory cocktail of jet fuel and freakishly warm winter air, and gaped at a backdrop of palm trees backing the landing field, I thought, "It really is like the movies! This is going to be great!"

It was.

My parents chose to move to LA without a serious plan. Hamstrung by a dismal financial situation that imposed a weekly budget of 35 dollars on our family of five, we were resettling 3,000 miles away as near-paupers. Dave and Sylvia's decision to uproot themselves from family and friends and to abandon the city where they'd both been born was a mixed bag of folly and bravery, narrowly rescued from outright disaster by the welcoming arms of the New American Frontier.

My father, a decorated World War II combat hero who'd seen action at the Battle of the Bulge and Utah Beach, had finally qualified, more than a decade after honorable discharge from the Army, for a G.I. Bill mortgage on a tiny brick tract-home in Bayside, New York. Soon after we moved in, the property was condemned so that an expressway could be built.

A pioneer of television whose prowess in electronics had earned him the sobriquet "The Wizard" from his commanding officer, David Kellerman had grown tired of filling corporate pockets with the fruits of his inventions and decided to start his own company. Printing stationery that made him out to be a sizable enterprise, he began hand-winding precision capacitors in the basement of the squat, soon-to-be demolished bungalow.

"As long as we're forced to relocate," he informed my mother, "let's go all the way to LA. That's where aerospace is really taking off."



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With more than 30 beaches along the Los Angeles county coastline, a surfer has his choice. Opposite page: Highways leading into a smog-filled downtown Los Angeles.



Our first home in the City of Angels was the Ranch Hotel, a past-its-prime motor inn on Pico Boulevard in West Los Angeles. Razed long ago, the motel's rutted parking lot is now occupied by the entry gates to the massive Fox Studios film lot. Which, I suppose, is a metaphor of sorts.

We lived there for a month or so, sharing two rooms, as my parents traipsed around trying to find a landlord who'd rent to a family with three rambunctious kids. No doubt they were depressed by the transience and shabbiness of our situation. I was thrilled; the place had a swimming pool!

Unfenced and 12 feet deep, the algae-flecked, vaguely kidney-shaped sump that occupied much of the motel's inner courtyard beckoned me like a tropical lagoon. For now that I lived in a city where frigid winters were quickly becoming a distant memory, enjoying a few laps in January was a giddy reality. I quickly taught myself to swim.

Eventually, Mom and Dad scored a two-bedroom rental in a fifties-era dingbat on the fringes of a working class neighborhood. But my home away from home was my bicycle seat.

For much of my LA childhood, I lived on two wheels, covering miles of the brash, wide-open place I now called home, whenever weather permitted — which was nearly every Sunday. Often, I'd pedal 10 miles northeast to Griffith Park, a six and a half square mile gem just north of the leafy Los Feliz district whose mansions had once housed Cecil B. DeMille and legions of his actors.

As is true today, the park hosted a world-class zoo and astronomic observatory, but most of the surrounding acreage was undeveloped. My

The downtown Los Angeles skyline is set against the snow-capped San Gabriel mountain range.



Griffith Observatory commands unparalleled views of Los Angeles atop Griffith Park. The observatory reopened after remodeling in 2006.

explorations revealed fern dells and gentle streams where minnows darted and crawfish lurked, gently sloping valleys that bore the tracks of coyotes, deer and mountain lions, and hilltop vistas above which red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons circled. This wasn't the man-made wonder akin to Central Park; this was untamed wilderness coexisting with stucco and concrete. That same juxtaposition endures into the 21st century: for all its traffic jams and choc-a-block development, much of Los Angeles remains curiously unspoiled, bracketed by mountains on three sides and graced by the Pacific Ocean on the fourth.

Another favorite bike ride took me southeast to Exposition Park, near the august campus of the University of Southern California, where I spent solitary hours at the Museum of Natural History, staring awestruck at rooms full of precious gems, boastful displays of gargantuan, award-winning California citrus, pickled sea specimens floating in formaldehyde, and dioramas of massive, shaggy, glassy-eyed mammals. After a quick stop for an ice cream dispensed by the peddler inevitably stationed near the manicured rose gardens rimming the museum grounds, I wheeled home sated physically and emotionally.

LA's gentle climate and lack of obvious boundaries provided a freedom I could never have imagined growing up on the East Coast, and I believe that combination fed my early interest in psychology as well



Above: A cyclist pedals down the bike path adjacent to the boardwalk in the Venice Beach area of Los Angeles. Venice Beach has long been popular with tourists for its carnival-like atmosphere. Below: Children play in the water along the pier in Santa Monica, a city in western Los Angeles County and a prime piece of California coastline.



as my subsequent career writing fiction: there seemed no better way to capture the images, smells, sounds and personalities that came at me like flash-frame movie shots than to study and record the myriad ways people functioned in this wondrous place.

That same dare-to-dream boundlessness fed Dad's aspirations and within a few years, his 15-hour workdays began to pay off and we were living in our very own home, a modest English-style cottage in the Pico-Robertson neighborhood. Ten years after arriving in LA, Dad became downright successful, amassing 18 patents and achieving prominence as a significant contributor to the space race. He passed away six years ago but Mom, nearly 90 years old, still lives at the same address (though she remodeled back in the sixties and transformed the house into "something modern"). And all three Kellerman sibs continue to call Los Angeles their primary home.

My sister, brother and I, like so many others, love the sprawling, inchoate alternative-universe that took us in 50 years ago. Earflaps and all.

There's a scene in Steve Martin's comic movie *Bowfinger* where the actress Heather Graham, cast as the ingénue Daisy, steps off a bus at LA's Union Station. Bright-eyed and preternaturally perky, she looks around and chirps something along the lines of, "Okay, I'm here. Now where do I go to become a movie star?"

That Olympian level of delusion serves its purpose in the film, eliciting all-knowing laughter from the audience. But Daisy's ludicrously assertive innocence isn't that far removed from Los Angeles's daily reality: this is the place dreamers, as well as those plagued by nightmares, come to reinvent themselves.

Go West, young man, but eventually you'll hit the ocean and have nowhere else to go.

So hatch yourself a scheme.

LA encourages a steady influx of starry-eyed seekers. It's a company town where the primary product is illusion and who knows when "The Next Big Star" will step off the bus?

The visionaries who created the concept of motion picture as commercial enterprise at the turn of the 20th century were lured to Los Angeles by miles of open land that could be made to mimic anything from Texas to Tahiti, a do-your-own-thing zeitgeist, and, of course, benevolent meteorology. The roots planted by Sennet, Goldwyn, the Warners, and the like have since grown deep and stout. Many of the aerospace companies that lured my father have vanished and manufacturers in the city's hub struggle to compete with low-wage regions around the globe. But the enterprise that calls itself "The Industry" without a trace of irony, and the ancillary businesses it has spawned — costume rental outfits, stunt specialists, special effects and film editing labs, talent agencies — have expanded exponentially.



Kinetic sculpture is a centerpiece in the California Science Center, Exposition Park, in Los Angeles.



The university of Southern California campus, Los Angeles.



To a far greater extent than when I moved here half a century ago, the movie business dominates LA's cultural, sociological and political landscape. Fashion designers who might strive to catch the attention of society women in Chicago, Dallas and Kansas City fix their sights on the red carpet in Los Angeles. If your off-the-shoulder, backless, sequin-studded masterpiece graces the tucked, taut, artfully camouflaged body of an A-list actress on Oscar Night, you can bet on a quick sales spike for your line throughout much of the fashion-conscious world. Similarly, LA night spots and eateries are often graded less by the quality of their cuisine than by celebrity head count.

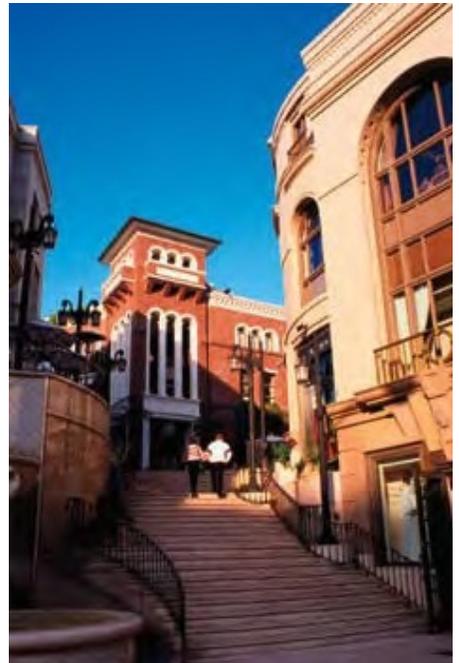
This is more than a sociological quirk; obsession with celluloid fame feeds the city coffers handsomely by attracting hordes of thousands of tourists, adventurers, even locals, whose fantasies revolve around catching a glimpse of their idols in the flesh. LA's the city that popularized exhibitionism as a commodity and, from a commercial standpoint, the results have been spectacular, serving to internationalize the entire region natives call SoCal.

Go anywhere in the civilized world and everyone's heard of Hollywood. The same goes for Beverly Hills and Malibu.

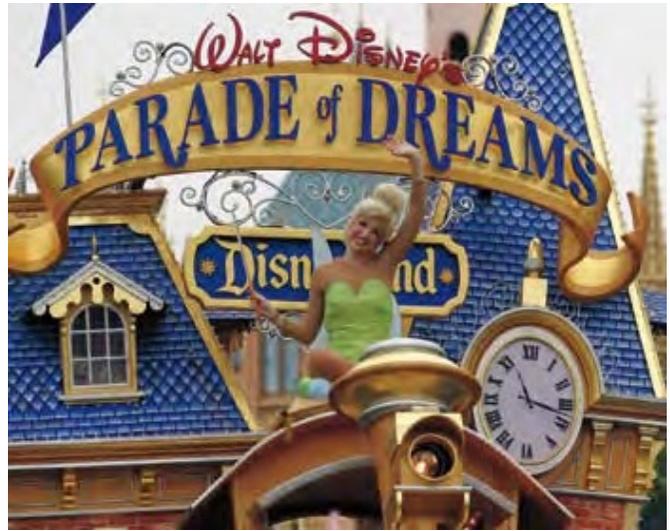
Interestingly, the latter two outcroppings of luxe are actually independent cities engulfed by Los Angeles's seemingly endless geographical corpus. And with the exception of a few over-the-top theaters, Hollywood is a decidedly un-glitzy place, low on glamour and high on cut-rate hucksterism (think bargain-basement Times Square). But the concept of Hollywood expands beyond mere geography, maintaining a firm grip on our collective unconscious as it continues to lure and entrance.

When the sun shines 300 days a year, everything sparkles.

Some great cities achieve their charm by way of exquisite planning. Paris is the exemplar of that brand of gorgeous.



Top left: "Oscar" statues and the traditional red carpet lead the way into the entrance of the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles where the Academy Awards are held each year. Top: Ornate buildings abound in the Beverly Hills section of Los Angeles. Above: Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills caters to special tastes and high-end shopping.



Los Angeles's beauty is a wonder of serendipity, the often jarring outcome of parvenus and social climbers indulging their ambitions unfettered by tradition, logic or taste.

Pick a random street in any high-priced neighborhood in LA and you'll find overscaled, neo-Colonial manses standing cheek to jowl with similarly proportioned neo-Italianate manses sidling up against extravagantly half-timbered neo-Tudor manses butting the razor-edged contours of neo-ultra-contemporary manses.

Travel from the eastern border of Beverly Hills at Sunset and Doheny to the northern rim of Malibu and you'll have traversed 40 uninterrupted miles of seven-figure real estate, much of it constructed during the last decade.

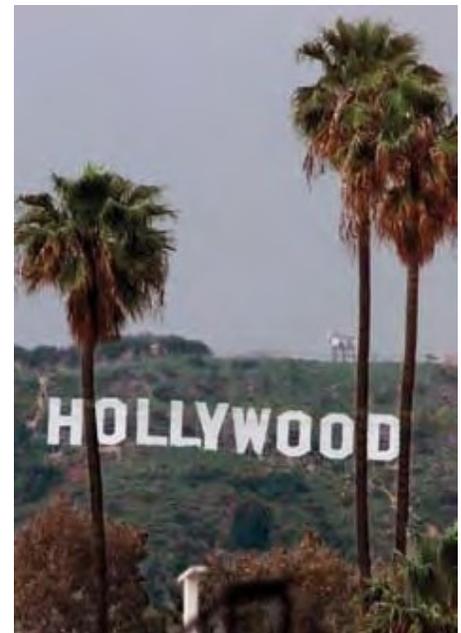
We're all about "New" and "Fresh" and "Groundbreaking" and "Drop-Dead Gorgeous" and if that means razing a few fusty old landmarks, so be it.

LA's two places, really.

There's Los Angeles the City, gargantuan in its own right as it oozes over 1,200 square kilometers — half the area of Luxembourg — and houses close to 4 million residents. Then there's Greater Los Angeles, a virtual nation to itself that encompasses all of LA County and several of its immediate neighbors, including Orange County, home to...Disneyland.

Now we're talking 17 million people in a region nearly four times the size of Luxembourg.

Given the sheer enormity of our territory, we are, and will always be, the megalopolis locked in co-dependence with the automobile. LA's the first place where shopping centers were designed so that motorists could park their vehicles and enter through the rear. Chatter about mass transit never ceases but the privately owned chromium horse will never relinquish its status as Los Angeles's primary people mover. Our dimensions are too generous, our schedules too idiosyncratic, and, bottom line, we like to ride alone.



Top left: The new solar-powered Santa Monica Ferris Wheel stands over the Pacific Park amusement area on the Santa Monica pier. Top right: The Disney character Tinkerbell waves during a parade at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, which celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first Disney theme park in 2005. Above: Perched high atop Mount Lee, the tallest peak in Los Angeles, the Hollywood sign, constructed in 1923, is a tourist attraction and an enduring symbol of the glamour of Los Angeles's entertainment industry.

We are a strange approximation of city, decidedly urban at the core. Yet in many parts of LA a half-hour drive can whisk you from metropolis to wilderness. Our skies are clearer than ever and we remain a green place, amplified to brilliant emerald when the sun is especially kind. The Santa Monica mountain range frolics through Los Angeles, looming above the arroyos and valleys that its eruption created eons ago. Know your side-streets and silence can be found with surprising ease.

Then there's the matter of our faithful western neighbor, "The Big Blue Infinity": a hundred-mile slice of glorious, unpredictable, misnamed Pacific Ocean.

Think of all that water as a baptismal font for the religion that is LA.

Drive west into Santa Monica — another adjunctive city swallowed up by Greater LA. — and stop when you can go no further. Find somewhere to park, get out of the car, grab yourself a view spot atop the Palisades just west of Ocean Avenue. Take in the Ferris wheel rotating atop the reassuringly tacky Santa Monica pier. Breathe in the rich, briny air, shield your eyes with one hand and look out to golden sun and thousands of azure miles. If you've chanced upon a particularly clear day, you may catch a glimpse of the Channel Islands 80 miles to the north, materializing like filmy mirages through the maritime haze.

Stay there for a while and imagine your own limitless world.

A few weeks ago, I sat on an out-of-the-way beach in western Malibu and watched a 5,000-pound bull elephant seal frolic at the tideline for several minutes before waddling into the currents and vanishing. The largest of all pinnipeds occupy a breeding ground 140 miles north of LA, off the coast of San Simeon of Hearst-Castle fame, and they customarily hunt for food 2,000 feet below the surface. Logic precludes Elephant Seal visits to the sands of Malibu.

In LA, everyone comes to re-invent themselves.

Surfing says it all. The sport originated in Hawaii but morphed into a cultural phenomenon in Southern California by way of an Orange County genius named Brian Wilson, who'd never actually ridden a board.

"If everybody had an ocean, across the USA..."

They don't, so they come to LA.

And keep coming.

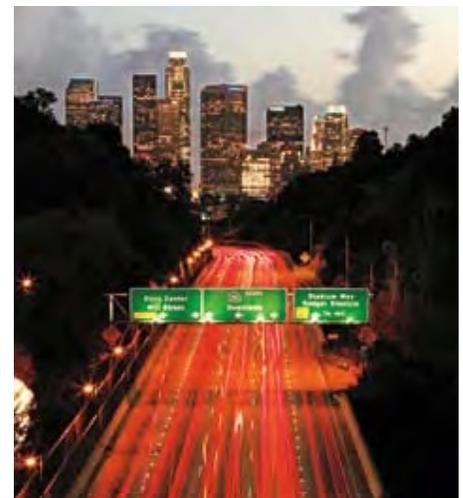
Where do I go to become a star?

The product is illusion, the fuel is the dream.

May it stay that way forever.



Top: A gazebo frames a glowing sunset in Palisades Park, Santa Monica, in Los Angeles. Above: An array of seasonal bounty is for sale in the grand Central Market in Los Angeles.



Traffic runs along the southbound freeway to downtown Los Angeles in the early evening.

