

JOURNEY OF TINY LIGHTS

SOUTHWESTERN TRAVELS IN THE USA

The diary of Jonathan Baker-Bates while travelling with Flora Franklin.
March 4th - April 8th 1994

4,691 MILES

PROLOGUE

Since graduating from Sheffield in 1991, I had become a freelance translator working from my parents' house in Northampton while they lived in Los Angeles. Flora was doing a postgraduate course at UCL, writing a dissertation on the philosophy of psychology. Although we had known each other for more than five years, we'd meet only occasionally, until events conspired to bring us closer together over a period of about a year before the trip. In January 1994, we both felt we needed a break from what we were doing, and the idea of a few weeks in America seemed like a good one at the time.

Journey of Tiny Lights 3

What happens, happens — we can only look for the tiny lights.

NOTE: The period of this diary covers only the time spent “on the road.” Several days before and after the trip spent with my parents in Los Angeles are unrecorded.

DAY ONE — FRIDAY MARCH 4

Wake early to prepare — most of the work done by Mum and Steve, who pack thoughtful electric kettle, chopping board and other things we'd have totally ignored if left to ourselves. Despite weighing up the options last night, we still haven't decided exactly where we're going until we eventually settle for Phoenix about an hour before getting into the car. It's either there or Flagstaff, but the existence of an apparently scenic drive North from Phoenix clinches it.

With all the necessary packing done, we get into our nearly-new silver Ford Tempo GL, and with Flora at the wheel, drive out of the entrance of my parents' idyllic LA residence in which we've been staying for the past five days. An American experience awaits us, and Mum takes pictures.

After a few minutes on the road, Flora decides she wants more tapes, so we stop off at a record shop on Highland. After a fruitless search for the Young Gods, we decide that we've probably enough tapes already. There must be over forty in the rucksack on the back seat. Put on the Chili Peppers and get out onto Interstate 10. Later on, I sing along loudly to "Jehovakill" and find I know just about all the words to every song on the album. This probably annoys Flora, who is generally pretty quiet. My singing hides the fact that I also feel strangely pensive.

After a couple of hours, we decide to stop for lunch at a typically sprawling shopping centre. The sun is hot on the black tarmac, and there are few people about. Find a Mexican restaurant which I seem vaguely to recognise from my previous journey from LA to Phoenix a year ago. Sure enough, the man at the counter says that he recognises me! This may say something about the number of customers he gets, as the place is deserted. We chat with him a little at cross purposes. When the food comes, we munch it while reading about (and later arguing about) Michael Jackson as alleged child molester in *People* magazine. Back on the road and it's me at the wheel. Find out how to use the cruise control. Yes! It's just like someone else is driving the car. Listen to more tapes, speak little.¹

Night falls and we arrive in Phoenix around 8:30. If there was a good reason why we decided to come here, we forget it as we try to find a motel room. It being a weekend at peak season, all rooms seem to be either full or too pricey. One place that smells heavily of garlic offers me a double for \$65. Expecting to average \$35-40 on this trip, we press on to find something cheaper and pull in at a suitably seedy-looking place on the outskirts. Nervous-looking Hispanics buzz around like flies as I get out of the car. I find the office and approach a Caucasian man sitting in the doorway and wearing a cowboy hat. "Do you have a room?" I ask. The man replies that he has "singles," but then looks at me and gets up. Leading me slowly to one side, he puts a fatherly hand on my shoulder, "You don't want to stay here, son — they're shootin' up." He directs me instead to The Desert Inn, a place he says much more suitable. I'm grateful for the advice, and feeling much like the inexperienced young pups we are, drive a little further down the road.

The receptionist at The Desert says he has two rooms left, and asks me if I want one for the whole night. A little puzzled at this question, I say I do, and pay the \$26 he's charging. As I get my money out, Flora manoeuvres the car behind me in the car-park. The receptionist becomes suddenly agitated: "She's taking off without you!" he warns. I reassure him that she's going nowhere, and realise that this place will be a bit different from what we'd expected of our first night on the road. Shit. Flora won't like it...

Sure enough, the room is terrible. After stepping over a large vomit-mark across the doorway, we survey what might be the only budget room left in the Phoenix. Yellow and smelly, with what Flora says are bloodstains on the bedside table. A nice touch is the golden wall-paper around the doorway into the bathroom, giving the place a slightly Asian feel. Flora *does* hate it, and although the sheets seem perfectly clean to me, is convinced she'll get some terrible disease.

We drive into town to find something to eat. "Hooters" is a "young-persons" restaurant open late. It's already past eleven. We order a couple of salads served by blondes in orange hot-pants and sit eating in silence. I watch a crash-video on a monitor above our heads and wonder what Flora

¹Photos 1 & 2

is thinking. Having eaten our dreary salads, we set off back to the motel and get hopelessly lost. After a while, I more or less give up any hope of finding the place and end up driving about aimlessly with Flora sitting motionless and mostly silent beside me.

Drive up to check out a couple of police cars pulled up by a gas station. Their lights are flashing; perhaps it's a shooting! As I stop the car, one of the officers approaches us and asks if he can help. I make some excuses and drive off.

After an increasingly boring run around town, I start to get very drowsy and doubt my ability to keep awake at the wheel for much longer. Eventually find the place and bed down at 1:30 am. Flora is nervous, jumping off at the slightest sound outside. Suspicious noises in the room above us. "They're fucking above," she declares. Watch TV. "Dear John," the US version. Outside, people never seem to quieten down. This is not going to be a good night.

DAY TWO — SATURDAY MARCH 5

The phone rings at 7:00am. I haven't slept well through the warm and noisy night, and people outside are shouting. A heavily-accented Hispanic voice on the other end of the line is asking me questions and calling me "sir." Something about a girl, the police, and is she still with me? I don't know what to say, and ask him to repeat himself. The voice abruptly changes its tone from cordial to angry: "That girl, she's dressed in black, she's hiding out and the cops are here — is she still with you?" I tell him that of course she is, and asks the voice if it wants to speak to her himself. It shouts that he wants me off the property immediately. I hand the receiver over to Flora, but the voice has hung up.

We get up, get dressed, and go to the office to see what this is all about. When we get there, several people are behind the desk, none of whom seems to acknowledge our presence. I ask about the phone call we've just had, and an Asian man hardly looks at Flora before saying she isn't the girl. He offers no apology, and considering the apparent urgency of the call, his now ultra-casual manner makes me suspicious. I suddenly think that this may be a ploy to get us away from our bags, and scamper back to the room, but everything is as it was. We go back to bed, but the noise of kids and cars outside keeps us awake.

Pack up and move out at 10:00. I think I've lost my wallet, and after a period of increasingly agitated searching, find I've put it in my bag for some reason. Police cars arrive as we drive out of the parking-lot. We're hidin' out.

On our travels to find the motel last night, a man working at a Circle K told us that the Grateful Dead are playing a few nights here (hence the accommodation problem). We try to decide whether we should see them or not. They're not our favourite band, but it might be fun. After a leisurely breakfast in a shopping mall, we ask about the Dead, accommodation, etc., at a tourist office. They seem to know little,

but we take some literature about the city and decide that we'll have to stay another night here as it's too late in the day to do justice to the trip to Flagstaff. We go to check out the Dead gig out of town on the freeway. At a Circle K by the exit, we spot a clutch of Dead Heads, and ask some of them about tickets. The venue is outdoors, but you can't get in until 4:00. It's now 2:00. We score some grass from one of the Heads (\$20), who asks if I'm from Birmingham. "I'm from outside London" is the best I can do. Feel a bit tired.

Buy some papers and decide to go and see the Indian Cultural Fayre advertised in the tourist literature we have. On the way, I stop for a hitcher. She's a woman of indeterminate age (late twenties/thirties?) and we clear a space for her in the sea of maps, tapes and other flotsam that has already piled up in the back seat (day two!) It turns out she only wants a lift down the road. She's relaxed to the point of catatonic, and I wonder if she's a smack addict. She speaks of her kids, and asks us what star signs we are before thanking us politely by our names in a dreamy voice and getting out a few lights down.

She tells us how to get into town, and we drive in to see the fair, which proves to be a nightmare to find. We get there in the end though, and find it populated mostly by middle-aged whites and Indians. Trundle around the museum and its various exhibits. Do a few “hands on” craft things, try on capes and look at the backs of our heads on a TV screen. Watch ring dancing amongst the numerous food and souvenir stalls pitched outside while munching fry bread (*sic.*) with beans: “traditional Indian food” that seems more Mexican to me. I still feel tired. We wander around a large tent packed with craft stalls. It’s like a sort of Covent Garden market for Indians. We think we should really be buying gifts, but the prospect of carting these around in the car for the rest of the trip puts us off. Besides, we’re not in the mood for shopping. In fact, I don’t really feel in the mood for anything.

We return to the car and try to decide what to do for the evening. After numerous phone calls to hotels (all full), it looks as if the only thing we can do is spend the night in the car. We drive back to the Dead gig and take a place in the car park outside the venue. Dead Heads cruise around asking for tickets by holding up their index fingers. With this many people looking for “scalps,” we haven’t a chance.

Park the car and realise that neither of us can roll, but Flora gives it a go and we manage a decent smoke. The day’s events, in combination with some worry about how the trip will progress, drops me into a bad Black Spirit. The grass is strong, and my head is visited by many demons. I’m out of it, but Flora says she feels simply “blank” and can offer no support, making it clear that she doesn’t want to know. That small part of me unaffected by the Darkness realises that this is the first time I have ever really felt angered by her.

After sitting bleakly in the car together, night falls and we get out and go to the main entrance too see what’s going on. Not having any tickets, we mill about in a crowd of Dead Heads until I become worried that we won’t be able to find the car. My fears are unfounded, however, and Flora’s homing instinct works like clockwork. Back inside, I mellow out and doze. A group of very unhinged kids play around outside, occasionally bumping into the car. They don’t realise we’re inside, and when they do it doesn’t seem to make much difference. I stare at the leering face of a girl as she looks at me though the window.

The gig ends and we wake up to the flashing lights of a security van telling us to move on. I drive out, but don’t know where we’re going. Flora is silent. I follow a stream of traffic that ends up at what appears to be a campsite. They’re charging \$20 per vehicle, but we have little choice but to go in. They say the police will hassle us if we try to sleep elsewhere. Spend an uncomfortable but uncomplicated night among the Dead Heads, drums and desert breezes.

DAY THREE — SUNDAY MARCH 6

Wake up at 8:30. The drums have been pounding all night it seems, but I don’t mind. The morning chill lifts with the sun and we find ourselves surrounded by cars, vans and their tents. One doormobile-like vehicle has what looks like almost an entire transit van welded to its roof, piggy-back style. You probably wouldn’t be allowed to do that in Britain. A banjo, frailed loosely, tinkles quietly from the car next door. I wonder how we are going to get out as we’re hemmed in on every side by vehicles and sleeping Dead Heads.

A boy with long blond hair and a dog is encamped on one side of us.¹ He offers to sell us a pipe. His name is Wayne, and he chats to us in-between throwing comments at his dog. Flora checks out the goods as I write the diary. Buy a couple of egg pittas for breakfast, and share these with Wayne and an unidentified Head who tells us to go to Sedona (on the way to Flagstaff). He thinks we’d like it there: “Lots of interesting rock formations and UFOs.” Wayne asks if we can give him a lift into town, and we drive out of the campsite after moving a few cars out of the way (Wayne helping to get a response from the dazed owners). He gives us directions to the Circle K, and

¹Photo 3

apologises for getting a little lost along the way. Drop him off there and buy coffees (weak!) before setting off for Sedona to see what the rock formations and New Age “vortexes” are like. Wave good-bye to Wayne, who seems cheery if a little stoned.

On the way, we stop off at Montezuma’s Castle, a Pueblo Indian ruin built into the side of a steep cliff. This is our first piece of tourism, and we dutifully walk the short course around its base with a group of middle-aged Germans. The sun is bright, but not very hot. I take touristy photos.¹

Drive on to Sedona and its deep red soil (which looks much redder through sunglasses). Stopping off for a couple of photos,² we examine a strange fluffy object half buried in tyre ruts in the soil by the roadside — it looks like a rabbit. I still feel tired. Flora is pensive but talkable. Sedona looks nice in the sun, and we pull in at the first likely motel in town (The Hotel Sedona), where a kindly old man addresses us as “good people” (“How does he know?” asks Flora) and tempts us with a plush water-softened number for \$58 plus tax. My immediate reaction is to ask if he has anything closer to half that price. He says we’d find it in Flagstaff, so I start to make my way back to the car — it’s clear, however, that Flora wants the room. This is a money thing, and it’s also an argument. After a brief exchange, I see the light (we’ve saved on the last couple of nights, after all), and we go back into the office and check in. The old man knew we’d return.

Move the stuff into the room, then check out the town with its numerous gift-shops and slightly forced tourist atmosphere. Buy some gifts and birthday cards for Adrian. Amble about. Flora wants to go riding, and I suppose I’d better go for a “jeep ride” or maybe a nature walk the next day while she’s in the saddle (one of her favourite things). Check out both and get some brochures. The jeep rides are “100% four-wheel” we are assured. We ask about horse riding, and are directed to a place called Kachina Stables. Set off to find these, but there are no signs on the way that we can see, and we get lost. Ask for directions at a campsite from two women at the reception desk who look like people in a Far Side cartoon. Find the ranch as night falls and talk to an amiable cowpoke who says even I can ride if

I want, as there is no “running” across the uneven terrain. We resolve to go riding tomorrow.

I’m hungry by this time, and we go off to find an Italian restaurant that the hotel has given us a discount coupon for. The place is half-full and dimly lit. Students posing as waiters who will only clear your table cruise around, unable to take our orders. Wait for ages for pre-meal drinks, then everything arrives at once. The waitress is keen to give us our pudding and coffee when we’re only half-way through the first course. “Why? Do you close early?” “Oh no, I’m just getting behind with my tables...” Can’t be bothered to argue. A guitarist in the corner plunkles gently, and I hope he doesn’t come over to us. Talk about reality and diary-writing, but fail to understand each other. Flora can’t finish her pizza, so we take home a doggy bag.

Back to the room and watch “Boomerang,” a feel-good movie with Eddie Murphy. Flora takes a bath as I write the diary. A large, black ant crawls over my stomach and I watch disappear into a fold of skin. It tickles me for a while. “Summersby” now on TV, watch that too. I can’t stay awake until the end. Dreamless sleep in a firm bed.

DAY FOUR — MONDAY MARCH 7

Up at the alarm clock for 9:00am. It feels cold after the relative heat of the night. Flora rings the stables to book a morning ride as I sit on the edge of the bed, waking up. The woman on the end of the phone tells her it’s raining, and the forecast is for 24-hour gloom. Amazed, I open the curtains. Sure enough, it’s drizzling away just like back home. Make coffees and try to decide what

¹Photo 4

²Photos 5, 6, 7, 8

we can do.

After drawing blanks on most ideas, we go to the tourist office to see what they recommend. Jeep rides are at least covered... but we don't feel very enthusiastic. The rain outside becomes stronger, and we wander out into the porch of the office clutching a brochures but not much inspiration. Get talking to a kindly middle-aged local man who tells us that this is the first real rain they've had in two months. Just when we arrive. He reckons it won't last until evening, though. We ask him where we can buy an umbrella, and he directs us to a shop in town.

On the way there we pass by some New Age shops, some of which advertise "readings" of various descriptions. We decide to get ourselves "read." I feel strangely uneasy about this, and have in any case been getting worried about the decidedly thick atmosphere developing between us. The shop doesn't have umbrellas so we drive around until we find a shopping centre out of town. I write badly-expressed post cards in a clothes shop while Flora takes a look at the variously hippie wares inside. What do you say when you're not exactly sure what's going on yourself? Find an umbrella in a super-market. Flora buys some horoscope rolls for each of us.

We haven't eaten breakfast because we haven't felt the need, but I'm suddenly hungry. We pass a "yoghurt shop" and I order a sandwich — Flora a bag of crisps. Read our horoscopes and fail to understand the more in-depth numerology information, although there's plenty of other stuff. My "secret message" for this month tells me that a friend will give me "some valuable psychological or financial advice." Flora refuses to tell me hers, and has now become almost totally unresponsive and distant. We sit alone in the white and blue yoghurt shop and eat in silence.

Decide eventually to go through with the readings and drive to a place called the New Age Centre. Wandering in amongst the crystals and UFOlogy books, we quietly ask the wonderfully New Age goblin behind the counter about their "readings." A woman sitting at a table behind us pipes up that she's the one who does them, and comes over to explain what's entailed and how long it takes. There are different sessions for different needs, but she recommends the half-hour stint as a good general starter to get into some useful spiritualism. It sounds more therapeutic than prophetic, which produces in me a kind of heightened nervousness mixed with relief. I feel weak. It's \$30 with an optional tape recording of the session.

I'm first up for the treatment, and the woman and I retire to a small booth around a corner. I feel sure we'll be heard from the shop, as we're separated from it only by a flimsy plastic partition door. I mumble something to her about this being my first time...

After some laying on of hands and a few incantations and breathing exercises, she gets out some Native American tarot cards and lays them out on the table. These give her general clues about the nature of my psyche, and we get down to some standard internal conflict resolution/healing strategies, concentrating particularly on unblocking a couple of dodgy chakras. She draws a chart and gives it to me. I have a mountain-lion in my action direction (a top animal for that purpose — and it's backed up by a gazelle!) The rabbit and the squirrel need attention, however. She says the whole picture is generally very polarised, and this is giving rise to some deep tensions and conflicts within me. You said it, sister.

I let her do most of the talking, and end the session with smiles and thank-yous. Change places with Flora and read the UFOlogy books while I wait. Feel apprehensive and suspect them of talking about me in there, but try to put this out of my mind.

Flora emerges after what seems like four-and-a-half hours. She isn't giving anything away. I tell her about my session and try to act cheerful. I kinda liked the experience, really... but it's clear she is now even less in a mood for idle chat than she was before. Not sure where to go now, but the rain has mostly subsided, leaving only a leaden sky above us. I decide we should find the Airport Mesa, as the Kindly Man at the tourist office mentioned there were some good views to be had. There's also a "vortex" there (whatever that is) that we could check out. After the now customary fumbling, we eventually reconcile the map to where we actually are, and set out in the right direction.

As we drive up to the mesa, Flora suddenly says "We have to talk." At once I know I wasn't imagining that there was a problem, and my heart jumps at the prospect of some real

communication. I drive the rest of the way with a million thoughts racing through my head. We arrive at a viewing platform looking out over the red Sedona valley with the town spread out below us. The clouds are clearing.

After a brief preamble, she tells me she wants to split up. She can't take being with someone else all the time, and would rather go it alone. Whether this is to do with me personally or is just a general thing is unclear. Perhaps it's a bit of both. We discuss the issue calmly and I tell myself to accept it. There is no point persuading her to stay with me if she feels she wants to be alone; it would only be a recipe for destruction.

A bus load of German tourists pulls up and spills its contents of camera-clutching occupants onto the moist tarmac beside us. The bus leaves its engine running and I gaze out over the valley. Sitting motionless in the front seat clutching a bottle of water, I feel we've dealt with this pretty well. Like mature adults, we've talked the issue through, and now we've cleared the air. In the general spirit of openness, Flora confesses that she knew all along where the motel was

that first night in Phoenix. She just didn't want to tell me and let me get lost on purpose. Ho ho ho! I want to smash her face in. A dark sadness forms a physical pain in my chest when the news sinks in. Try to imagine what the next month or so will be like on my own but cannot bear to do so. I came to America to be with somebody, and now they want to leave.

We drive off a little further to see if we can find a toilet, but discover only bushes on the road to the small airport ahead. Stop the car and Flora walks off to have a pee. On her return, I feel withered and hollow as we explore the practicalities of who would have the car (me, she says), where we might go, etc. Any possibility of staying together has now gone, and I try to see that at least we're parting now before the situation deteriorates. A pre-emptive move it is, then. Time passes and we speak in general terms. We shall have to split the belongings. Take refuge in details; emotional issues are out of reach. Sunlight weak through the clouds lights up the base of the red rock cliffs ahead of us and we decide to stay here another day to sort things out.

Drive back into town and book into the Star Motel. A slightly cheaper, but significantly grottier place than the Sedona, then set off to find food. Decide to go for a Mexican at a large and fancy-looking place we saw near the shopping centre. Flora says she'll pay for the meal. I don't have much of an appetite, and cannot finish my heavy vegetable chimichanga. We manage to chat about inconsequential stuff, and with Flora decidedly more cheery than she has been in the last few days, I begin to feel my spirits lifting slightly. We drift from exploring issues of physical hygiene, to BO and oral sex. The conversation is interrupted at intervals by a slinky New Age girl who seemingly cannot pass our table without asking us cheerfully how we are doing and do we want anything else. The coffee is weak and tastes terrible.

After the meal, we walk across the large dining hall to a bar area where a small group of karaoke enthusiasts are singing their hearts out. Flora hasn't studied the activity before, and we sit down to watch a few people deliver variable renditions of country music classics. I wonder why it is that country music is so many, many times bigger in the States than it is in Europe. Later on, a woman does a passable job on Joan Jett's "I Love Rock and Roll." I sing along, and Flora wants me to do a number too, but I'm really not in the mood. I imagine myself, in an ideal world, singing "When routine bites hard..." and laugh.

Back to the car and we discover that it's only 8:00. With nothing else in mind, we go back to the room for some TV. After a long time channel surfing, Flora finds a comedy about New York Jews getting married. I feel a little excluded from this and take a shower instead. Bed at 1:00am.

We are leaving each other tomorrow, and I sit up in bed telling myself this. Just before I fall asleep, I feel sure that Flora says something. She says she hasn't. Dream of a swirling sea and the nameless creatures in it.

DAY FIVE — TUESDAY MARCH 8

Wake with the alarm at 8:30. I start to move stuff out from the car so we can separate our belongings before the parting of ways. As Flora wakes up, it seems her mood from yesterday has changed. The practicalities are now more apparent, and after a short discussion during which I make it clear that I would very much like her to stay with me, she decides against going it alone. We're sticking together. We're sticking together. I feel happy about that, but realise that the

rest of the trip can never be the bowl of roses I had hoped it could be. I feel we've now become Reluctant Travellers, and this is only our fifth day on the road.

The weather is better but not yet up to standard: it's chilly with some sun and clouds. Decide on a third night here, and we go back to The Sedona and the same room as the one we had before. After checking in, it's off to eat breakfast and we find a place called The Atrium — a converted greenhouse next to a collection of posh craft shops in town. "Breakfast cous-cous" is on the menu and I have that while Flora goes for the oatmeal. The coffee is terrible again. What do they *do* to it here? The waitress is bubbly and enthusiastic with an almost valium slide to her, even after we're honest about the coffee. She lives locally and we ask her what she recommends we should do today. A jeep ride is suggested, and it only remains to decide which kind: "educational," with the emphasis on natural history, or New Age — all about the vortexes, petroglyphs 'n stuff. We trundle off after the meal to make a final decision.

Back in town, we tour the numerous jeep ride offices and can't think which to choose until I call in at a gift shop to ask how to get to one we've heard about but haven't yet seen. Two people are in the act of snogging each other, and one of them turns out to be a driver for the company in question. His name is Benny, and he reckons his firm is the best. This clinches it and we arrange to get on the next tour round the rocks.

Our jeep is brand new and we're the only people in it. The driver tells us about the various flora and fauna as we bump past them, and there's enough chat in between to keep things rolling nicely. Stop and get out every so often to admire the views. Eat a juniper berry. On the way back we chat mainly about life in the US, guns and South Africa where his parents are from. As we say good-bye back in town, it occurs to me that we should be tipping him (he says the job doesn't pay too well), but we don't. Feel bad about that.¹

Back to the room to re-group, then set out for lunch. After a good deal of random motion, we settle on another Mexican place, and I order chilli in a bread bowl. Only after I'm halfway through it does Flora point out that it's not vegetarian. The waiter bears an uncanny resemblance to Martin Sheen circa Badlands. We almost ask for his autograph, but chicken out.

After searching for tampons (Flora thinks her mood yesterday was pre-menstrually related) and a guidebook to New Mexico (we may be going there soon), we return to the room. Flora wants to wash her hair, so I decide to go off and drive around some of the small roads through the rocks and maybe watch the sunset later. I take the car up to the Airport Mesa again in search of the vortex there, although I realise I still haven't a clue what a vortex is or even looks like. There are no signs to it, so I eventually flag down some guitar-toting hippies and ask them where it is. They point in a general direction that I follow until I see a small carpark and a number of people walking up from it to a set of hills above.

There are three vortexes in Sedona; not objects as such, just areas said to be focal points of a mysterious natural energy. Vortexes occur in several other places around the world (one is at Stone Henge, England), but nowhere are there three in such close proximity to one another as in Sedona. This is why the place has such powerful significance for Native Americans, who for centuries have used "medicine wheels" to harness the healing power of the rocks.

I know all this because a rather normal-looking man called Mike is charging \$20 for a Vortex Tour from the carpark. I try to wheedle as much information from him as I can without actually paying for it. He says he has trouble understanding my accent and gives me his card should I want to contact him for a tour later on (the words "Good Happens" appear beneath his name). I walk up the hill and discover that it leads up to a set of ridges overlooking a canyon. There are numerous

¹Photos 9, 10 (Indian paintbrush plant), 11 (old trappers' hut)

ledges on which people are sitting, playing instruments or meditating, and although there are quite a few people here, it's too big to feel crowded. Pick my way around the rocks until I find myself a ledge on which to join in and open a few chakras or something. It's very peaceful, and the gently fading sun fires up the redness around me.¹ Take a small red rock as a souvenir. It shall be called The Sedona Rock.

After taking a few pictures of the view and of myself sitting by what I assume to be a latter-day medicine wheel² (basically a ring of stones), I drive on to see what else is around. My Life in the Bush of Ghosts provides a suitable soundtrack to the scenery, and I take the same road as the one we headed in on for the jeep tour. It winds around the base of the red cliffs above me, and I set the cruise control to 25mph. No other cars are about. The sunset is wonderful and I take in each stage of the fading light over the canyons and cliffs about me.³ Eventually darkness falls and I get back to find Flora has only just finished combing out her hair. We decide to go to Flagstaff tomorrow (maybe).

Flora still pre-menstrual, we stay in the room and go to bed without any supper.⁴ I try eating the doggy-bag pizza we brought back from the Italian the other night. After I've eaten it, Flora tells me I'll get food poisoning so I chase it up with a couple of glasses of vodka. Watch a film about two middle-aged Americans having an affair in London. He dies in the end of an unexpected heart attack, which makes Flora sad. People in the room next door to us have loud sex and I get bored. Look for the apocalyptic bits in the Gideons Bible for fun. So many adverts on American TV makes it almost unwatchable sometimes.

As she reads a book, I begin to wonder that the last couple of days may be a warning that we are headed for serious trouble. Flora's reasons for staying with me now are practical rather than anything else, and I worry that she'll feel trapped. The whole thing could be a disaster. She doesn't want to talk about it and tells me to shut up and go to sleep. I do.

DAY SIX — WEDNESDAY MARCH 9

Feel tired in the morning and doze until 9:30, then up while Flora goes through her morning routine while I watch an Oprah Winfrey-style discussion programme about "victims of regression therapy." Marvel at the amazing names Americans can have. There's a middle-aged male doctor on the programme whose first name is Jane. Breakfast at the Atrium again (same waitress, and the woman who sang karaoke to Joan Jett that night at the Mexican). Decide to strike out for Flagstaff and skip the horse riding, even though the weather's nice. It's only about 40 miles. Buy lunch ingredients of bread, cheese and fruit with good intentions of saving money before hitting the road out of town.

Pretty soon, we're stopped in our tracks by workmen clearing a rock-slide. Sit and listen to loud music in the queue. I reflect on the fact that Sedona is nice, but too touristy, middle-aged and expensive. Once the rocks are out of the way, we thunder on though increasingly winding roads across the mountains with spectacular wooded valleys below. It's like Canada with all these pine trees. Listen to Flora's "two most favourite songs ever" as I practice cornering techniques. Arrive in Flagstaff and start looking for a room under a bright blue sky. The air is cold. After considering numerous cheap motels out of town, we head in for a hostel-cum-hotel described

in the guidebook as being a good bet. It's called The Weatherford and was built in 1897. Ask a man at the desk there about a room, and he says he has one left in the hostel for \$20 (a private room for two), but they don't open up until 5:00, so we now have a few hours to kill. It seems that

¹Photos 12 (view of town from Airport Mesa), 13

²Photos 14, 15, 16

³Photo 17

⁴Photo 18

the American definition of a hostel isn't as strict as the European one. We don't need to be Association members, and it's practically the same as a hotel, save the check in/out times.

The Weatherford seems pretty central, so we leave the car in the carpark and walk around for a bit. Flagstaff feels nice, with a cozy, youthful and nicely "lived in" feeling very unlike the fairly sterile Sedona. The famous Route 66 runs parallel to the railway line along which hooting trains contribute to the feel of the place as they pass through. Call in at a jewellers to see what can be done about my watch always stopping. They have a look inside it, but can find nothing wrong. I chat to the repairman about sightseeing, and we decide to book in for the next couple of nights if we can.

I'm in need of a haircut, so I make a 5:00 appointment at DV-8, a trendy-looking salon near the Weatherford. Walk further out to find the Chamber of Commerce and play on their Tourist Computer, which gives us interactive information about things to see and do in the area. Buy postcards and generally get the measure of the place before finding a thoroughly 50's American-style ice-cream parlour to have a coffee and kill the remaining time before the Weatherford opens.

Once checked in, we run off to catch my hair appointment and get talking to Dan the hairdresser, who banter cheerfully about life in Flagstaff. He's from Phoenix himself and is amused to hear of our experiences there. Flora toys with the idea of having her hair dyed, but is suspicious of the bullshit Dan gives her about the dyes they use ("They have the smallest molecules"). She goes off to the room while I'm being done.

Dan charges \$20, which must rank as one of the most expensive haircuts I've ever had, but what the hell. It's not short enough at the back, however, and in general I look like the Fonz. Can't be bothered to quibble, however, and go back to the hotel to find Flora talking to a German youth who tells her about bars, etc., in town. I join them and we chat for a while. He's been in the States for about three months and wants to go to Seattle to do what sounds to me like Grunge Tourism. He's seen the film "Singles" and wants to see the house that Matt Dillon lives in, etc. No doubt Kurt n' Courtney's residence will also be on his list. We go to get the stuff out of the car. As the sun sinks, it's pretty chilly. We could go skiing here tomorrow.

The hotel is large and smells of hot buttered toast. It's nicely faded, and our room is small, but cozy. We mellow out and write the diary before going off to find some supper. Notice that every time we touch anything made of metal, we spark. I turn the lights out and we admire little blue flashes coming from our finger tips.

Wander about town to find a suitable veggie-type restaurant. I ask a clutch of groovy kids standing on the pavement where we can find a suitable place, and they tell me that we're standing right in front of it. Sure enough, the place fits the bill very well with its green tables and trendy student clientele. A tall waitress takes our order and we go for the veggie burgers. As we wait for the food to arrive, we drift into a conversation that turns randomly to sexual relationships.

After a fairly neutral conversation so far, I suddenly blow my top when Flora mentions The Moustache.¹ I accuse her of letting her relationships with men rule her life, then realise too late that I've gone overboard. Flora immediately goes into a sulk, and I try desperately to repair the damage. I admit what's really on my mind is the thought that Flora won't be able to resist

the temptation to rekindle her passion for Moustache Man when we go to Reno, thereby landing me in a gooseberry situation. I can't *stand* gooseberry situations. This confession clears the air, and we perk up. Inexplicably, the conversation then changes to individuals and their environment (Hitler was a very bad man, but he wasn't the Third Reich, etc.) and I get well into the subject, failing to alter my I've-got-something-to-say tone when the waitress asks us if we want anything else. This knocks her back a bit, and Flora apologises on my behalf. Pay up and leave for a bar. As I pass the confectionery counter, I notice a sign saying that the restaurant's "Elvis Eclairs"

¹"The Moustache" is a man called Doug, with whom Flora had a fling when they went beaver trapping a year or so ago. He lives in Reno, and we plan to visit him there at some point during the trip.

have been withdrawn pending a licensing decision from the Gracelands Estate. They're only little cakes!

We check out "The Mad Italian" a place the German Grunge Tourist recommended to Flora. Sit and watch the pool players play, and try to work out the rules. Nasty lighting and the music isn't loud enough. Leave after finishing our drinks.

Find a nicer place with a live band (acoustic hippies play Grateful Dead covers). Play pinball and chat to a pool-playing youth next to us. A musician, he went to Europe (Germany, France, etc.) a few years ago. He explains the rules to the pool, and we toy with the idea of playing a game. Put some money on the table, but decide against it when we both start feeling sleepy at about midnight. The youth tells us where the best ski rental place is for tomorrow's sliding and we head off back to the room.

Back in our teeny room, a combination of squeaking bedsprings and the sound of restless hostelers outside keeps us from sleeping very well. Flora kicks in her sleep like a dying fly in the early hours. I have lots of situation dreams I can hardly remember.

DAY SEVEN — THURSDAY MARCH 10

Get up at 8:30 feeling knackered, early-bird hostelers keeping us awake from about 6:00am as they queue for showers. Flora goes off to wash in the bathroom up the hall, while I use the sink in the room. I suppose nobody will mind if I take a pee in it too.

Weather cloudy! We have to check out by 9:00, so I get the bags out and make it to the desk by 9:05, only to find that there's nobody there. An English girl has just arrived off the train and is hoping to check in. As we wait to see if anybody will turn up, we chat a little, but I'm too groggy to say much. She's travelling on her own, I think. Flora turns up and is too tired to say anything. Somebody from the hotel eventually appears and we arrange to check into one of their normal hotel rooms for tonight as it's only about \$10 difference. Say "see you later" to the English girl, then leave for breakfast.

Find a traditional American diner (on Route 66!) and I order a hearty cheese omelette and a pancake (size huge). Flora sticks with oatmeal. It's all pretty cheap and served by a taciturn old waitress who operates like she's been serving here for a hundred years. Choose a couple of Smoky Robinson tunes I've never heard of on the juke box selector at the table. But how will we know when they get played? Take in the scene as various yokels pass in and out. Policemen munch pancakes at a table behind us. Flora is too sleepy to make conversation (Slightly hung over? She blames strong vodka pineapples.) and I demolish my order, washing it down with a mug of hot chocolate while telling her half-remembered stories about ancient English kings.

Move off for the skiing. The weather has improved over breakfast and the sun is now out in a big blue sky. Hire some equipment from a friendly ski shop along the way to the mountains then miss the signs to the slopes, driving for miles in the wrong direction by mistake.

Turn round and eventually make the turning, hitting the slopes at 1:00.

I fall over a few times and get wet. Flora is an expert. At 4:00 we find the pistes are closing, so we pack up after wiping volcanic mud off everything. I feel refreshed and nicely tired. Back to the new hotel room, which is better than the last (a proper window this time) and with our own little shower. Settle in to write the diary, then doze until 7:00 until hunger overtakes me. Get ready to go out to the veggie place we ate at yesterday, and I find myself looking at Flora's arse.

On the way there, we stop in at a newsagent and buy a copy of the Sunday Times (\$5.25). They give us a very large bag of popcorn for free. As we munch away, a dazed looking youth walks in and asks at the counter to borrow a pen and something to write on. There's a generally cheery atmosphere to the place with youths milling about on the street outside. Look forward to the meal having had no need for lunch after that monster mammoth breakfast.

Read the paper and feel very touristy doing so. All the UK news seems distant and pretty boring, in fact we conclude that there's no news in this paper at all. I gaze at somebody I think is the most attractive woman I've seen so far on the trip. She looks at me, but I can see her line is engaged. The dazed-looking youth from the newsagent sits down at the table in front of us and reads a tabloid paper of some kind. For some reason I feel very majestic for a while before the food arrives. Flora has huge doorsteps of cornbread with her rather bland chilli.

Towards the end of the meal, we get chatting to the dazed youth, who says his name is Sean. Sean's a real space-cadet: he tells us he's on his way to Sedona to check out his chakras and get spiritually prepared for the coming climate changes that will put large parts of the US underwater. He comes from Texas. We talk at length of our experiences of Sedona, vortexes and the like. Flora is sceptical about all his New Age theories, and they spar light-heartedly. I say I've got an open mind about this stuff and he feels like I'm on his side. Sean is 19 and on his own, sleeping in his car. He reminds me of Paul from Sheffield. Flora feels maternal: his mix of innocence, positivity and New Age bullshit is endearing, as is his dirty little baseball cap with a UFO on it. Take a picture of him as he strikes an appropriate pose.¹

Leave the restaurant for a bar, settling on "Joe's Place" for a game of pinball or ten. Still can't understand how the scoring works — Flora gets five million at one point. Talk about skiing and why we do or do not enjoy things. Flora accuses me of not being sensual enough.

Back to the hotel and check out the bar there. A female guitarist strums away at one end and we meet Dan the hairdresser, who tells me he's off to the UK in a few months time to visit his aunt and asks if I'd stop by his shop and give him my address. Flora meanwhile talks to a man about Indians and the New Age obsession with Sedona, of which he is dismissive. He himself is part Mexican, part Indian... and part Finnish.

Back in the room we try to decide where to go next. One more night in Flagstaff? Perhaps we should stay at the Grand Canyon before going from there to Monument Valley and Canyon De Chelly? Probably the latter, Flora decides.

I'm knackered and fall asleep after filling in the diary. The train station seems only yards away from our window, and every train that passes through during the night feels it necessary to sound its horn loud and long. There's one about every hour or so. Flora bounces away in her sleep as last night.

DAY EIGHT — FRIDAY MARCH 11

Wake at 8:30 to the by now familiar sound of a train. Flora is sleepy and even more uncommunicative than yesterday morning. I get dressed and sit on the bed getting bored while she gets ready. No TV to keep me occupied this time. Eventually move out and check out, then back to the veggie place for food. I feel pretty groggy too, and we say next to nothing to each other as I munch curried eggs while Flora makes tiny inroads into a wholemeal blueberry pancake. I write a few postcards and survey the scene. Recognise a pastel-faced youth who was wearing his sunglasses last night. He and a slightly gothick-looking woman are commuting between the restaurant and the street in order to smoke cigarettes without getting too cold in the process.

I try to broach the subject of where we should head today as it's already 11:00. Flora announces that she wants to go to Taos, which she has been reading about in the guidebook for the last couple of days. Moreover, she says that she's not in the mood for any sightseeing on this trip. What? No Grand Canyon? No Painted Desert or Monument Valley?

No. Flora wants to go skiing in Taos.

I'm pretty surprised at this, and wonder why it is she's bothered to come to one of the most scenic

¹Photo 19

places on earth, only to do what she could just as well do in Europe (give or take some powder snow). But I suppose if that's what she wants to do, she'd better do it. In any case, it's plain I can't persuade her otherwise and it seems the issue is settled before we can discuss it further. I suppose they'll be something I can do there as well, although I could always leave her there to rot amongst the day-glow ski-dudes.

As we leave the restaurant, we say hello to the pastel-faced kid. He immediately gives me a fly he has made from a fork ("Here, have a fly"). I like it a lot. It shall be called The Flagstaff Fork Fly. The kid's name is Jay Dee, and Birkendee is his friend. He tells us he works in Sedona as a waiter and is here getting money from his mum in Flagstaff. It seems Jay Dee is a cynic who regards the West coast, and most of the US itself, as a hell-hole (he reserves a little respect for the East, though). Aged 18, he reminds me of a kind of person who inhabited the upper sixth at school: a mixture of cynical wit and arrogance with a heart-warmingly bitter view of life. He scores another point for not liking dogs, which annoys Flora. He's a cat man like me. We chat until it's too cold to stand around any more. He bids us good-bye and says Taos will probably be as grim as Flagstaff... ha.

So it's destination Taos. Drive out on Route 40 for the 300 mile-plus journey to Albuquerque.¹ We sink into our usual mode of speaking very little and listening to tapes. Stop for a DIY lunch at an Indian craft shop off the freeway selling petrified rock by the pound. The scenery is peaceful with flat desert scrubland on all sides, interspersed with old lava flows. The cruise control comes into its own and I steer mostly with my knees, watching the scenery and the occasional car roll by.

The horizon never gets any closer, and I try hard not to get involved in a debate going on between several parts of me about what it is I think I'm doing here. I can't help seeing Taos as being a monumental waste of time, and probably money. But here I am, going there just because Flora wants to and without even kicking up any real objections. I tell myself it's because I can't think of anywhere better to go, and leave it at that.

We arrive in Albuquerque to a Pink Floyd soundtrack and check into the Rio Grande Inn, a vast, soulless motel off the freeway. Flora watches TV and I unwind after the drive. It's 7:00. I drift in and out of sleep as I lie on the bed. We have said nothing for a very long time and I feel the silence weighing heavily. After a time, I feel we should make a move, and we discover that there's a restaurant in the motel. It's almost empty with ridiculous Spanish galleon lights on the walls with matching chandeliers which look odd as the rest of the decor is plain. Flora says she likes the lights and seems serious about this. They're made of dark brown plastic with distressed "iron" fittings. Oh well. Munch our way through some more Mexican food and manage a few words of conversation while we do so.

Back to the room and watch the last half hour of Groundhog Day which we chuckle to quietly. I have a headache and go to bed early while Flora stays awake and watches a trashy action movie. I wish her goodnight and tell her I'll see her tomorrow. Hope it'll be a better day than this one was.

DAY NINE — SATURDAY MARCH 12

Wake rested at 9:30. I feel more resigned to Flora's silence and stay in bed while she gets ready. She leaves for breakfast before me and I take my time brushing my teeth, feeling slightly reluctant to join her for another uncommunicative meal. The weather is cold and rainy outside as we eat our pancakes and oatmeal in the dreary hotel restaurant.

Check out and Flora says she wants to ring England (although who she doesn't say). I hope this will change her mood for the better, and wait in the lobby out of earshot. The call seems to last for ever, and I find it hard not to get agitated as I wonder what she's talking about: her mother is telling her to come home... she's in tears on an international call... she's ringing the police... and a

¹Photo 20

thousand other ideas make an appearance in my head. Make a partially successful attempt to see the funny side of it and go to the car to get Adrian's address and write him a post card to kill time. Flora finally appears and I act cool. She says she was ringing her mother, but seems unaffected by the conversation. Her ailing dog is still alive, but is now no longer walking. I assume she will tell me what she really talked about later. Drive on to Santa Fé. The weather lifts slightly, but it's still fairly drizzly. Listen to dance music as the rain turns to snow further on. Say very little, as usual.

As we approach the city, we somehow manage to miss the right exit and end up trying to orientate ourselves with the barely adequate map in the guidebook. Why is America so badly signed? Eventually find the centre and park the car on one of the narrow streets there. We get out and have a look at what's going on. Middle-aged tourists mill about in fairly large numbers as a light snow falls. Santa Fé is certainly a cozy little place with its adobe buildings and numerous "art galleries."

Look for a place to have lunch, although I'm not hungry, and find a hotel cafe with a weird oil-painting on the wall of an Anglo-Saxon female nude wearing a large Indian head-dress. Excruciatingly tacky muzak plays in the background, and the place is decked out like a posh Wild West saloon-cum-whorehouse. I order a mint tea, Flora bread and soup.

Flora suddenly asks me how I am. I take this to mean how I've been dealing with the past 48-hour silence. We talk and begin to explore why things haven't been going very well so far. The causes aren't clear, but we know we're both feeling slightly depressed and uninspired. We wonder why. It may be because we're not emotionally involved enough to get excited about anything very much. I explain that I'm willing to accept the way Flora feels, and in any case, I

want to be with her. If that means putting up with some despondency, then OK. The atmosphere lifts to a greater extent, even though we haven't really solved anything. Simply talking about it has done enough. Resolve to see what Taos is like. If Flora wants to stay and ski for a week or so, I might leave her at it and see some sights on my own for a while. We're both OK with this.

We then go off into the art gallery jungle that waits for us outside, and Flora is in search of a gift for her niece's bat mitzvah. This gives us some purpose to our browsing and I feel much better as we wander through galleries full of an amazing mix of styles and tastes, bound loosely together by a Native American theme to most things. Chat to the occasional shop assistant. Settle on a jewellers called the Ray Tracey Gallery (no image-processing pun intended) and look at silver bear pendants with inlaid lapis "heart lines." The assistant tells us that the Indians used to use the lines to aim for the heart so as to get a humane kill. I confess that I thought it meant something to do with what goes in must come out: the line is in the form of an arrow going from the animal's mouth to its anus, and the bear does look like it's crouching. Mirth. It's the first time they've heard of *that* theory. Flora eventually decides to buy one after we spot the one with the best-looking heart line.

Wander further into more shops, now in search of a chain to put the bear on. After admiring more art,¹ we buy a lemonade "cooler" and sit on a bench and chat about how sad it is that a once great culture is now only really there for tourists, as well as why I don't like a large bronze statue of Indians hunting a herd of buffalo. Flora thinks it's great. I conclude I can't really relate to hunting wild animals and therefore can't appreciate it. Flora thinks I'm stupid. I find representational art a difficulty. I probably am stupid since I can't stand classical music either.

We chat on about various things, and spot a tall blond man in cowboy gear. He is badly in need of a new perm as the top half has now grown out, leaving the bottom still curly. We snigger at him as he wanders round the shop next to us. I say the word "perm!" a little too loudly, and he suddenly gives me an evil look. Dissolve into more giggles. The shops start to shut and we move on after talking to an Indian gallery assistant about bars in Santa Fé. He asks us what sort of music we like. I think for a moment about an appropriate reply, but decide that would be too difficult, so I decide to give it to him straight: we like The Sisters, Killing Joke and The Orb. He considers my response, thinks for a moment, then recommends a place called Tommy's. On the way out, Flora

¹Photo 21

spots some chains and chokers at a little jewellery stand. After some deliberation, she eventually goes for a nice silver number. Mission accomplished.

Drive off to motel land and find a place owned by Asians. They have one room left, and a cute little girl (judging by the nail polish) hands us our key. She tells Flora her name is Petika (maybe). The room is clean and smells of pine wood and is nicely decked out in botched DIY style. The TV is good, and Flora watches it as I write the diary. Once hunger settles in, we decide to go to a Chinese restaurant I saw down the road.

When we get there the place is deserted. Don't people in Santa Fé like Chinese? Perhaps it's the snow. The waitress is a tall, Indian-looking and very beautiful girl who looks like Tanita Tikarem. She wears a silver choker with a pendant on it — I think it might be a bear like the one Flora has bought, but we can't see. The place looks brand new. It's just been re-opened after a fire, apparently.

As we ask about items on the menu, it turns out that Tanita knows very little, if anything, about the food. Her studied dippiness (without any giggling, which adds to the effect) makes us laugh out loud. At one point she says that something "may be the one in bread batter ... but it maybe not." Not surprisingly, we take a while to order, but when the food does come it's pretty good. Communications are now just about back to normal as we chat about religion, bat mitzvahs (they seem to be just like confirmations, only with a big party afterwards), and the secrets of good parenting.

We ask Tanita about clubs in the area, but again she knows little (below drinking age, probably). She asks the barman and he recommends Jimmy's too. Jimmy obviously holds all the cards when it comes to The Sisters and Killing Joke. I fancy a pudding, and ask what they have. She says they've got ice cream and something else which may be a fruit, but she doesn't know because she's never seen it and nobody has ever ordered any ("because they're usually too full"). Hysterics. We ask if these things may in fact be lychees, as it seems they have them on the menu (although Tanita can't pronounce it). We order some, but she returns to tell us they don't have any left. Hooray! Coffee or tea? No dice, as they are about to close (it's all of 10:00!). The restaurant still empty, we settle up and wave good-bye.

Find this place called Jimmy's, but it looks a bit boring and has a \$3 cover. Move further up to find a more interesting looking place with bikes parked outside and pool tables in the basement. These are all being played by hyper serious-looking people, and Flora want me to play a game with one of them. I explain that I'm crap and anyway don't know the rules, but she wants me to play and points to a group of slim-hipped dudes across the way. She says it's a man's thing.

Yes, it's certainly a man's thing, so with no idea of the system in operation, I sidle over and ask one of the group if I can play the loser. Wrong question. The "owner" of the table looks at me coldly through a haze of tobacco-smoke and tells me I'll play the winner. I put down 50 cents, and chat nervously at the bar with a sunflower-seed chewing Mexican while I wait my turn. From what he says it looks like I've jumped a queue for the table, but it's OK if the "owner" wants to play me. Pretty soon I'm up and Flora looks on as I humiliate myself with some of the worst pool anyone has ever seen. It crosses my mind that they may think I'm a hustler, and this makes me nervous before I decide that no hustler would play this badly. Perhaps they'll think I'm some sort of performance artist instead. I put myself out of my own misery by swiftly potting the black well before time. The dude unsmilingly shakes my hand. I'm glad he saw the funny side of it.

Move upstairs and get chatting with a couple sitting at a table. Flora amazes everyone by spotting that he has a Boston accent. They're on their way out, and we spend the rest of the evening trying to look for people to chat up. I'm bugged if I can find any decent-looking women, however. A mysterious-looking black-clad man with a Navajo bound pony tail comes in and sits alone by the bar. We stare at him and giggle. Wonder if he's embarrassed. Flora fancies him but won't do anything about it. Maybe he thinks we're married. They probably all think we're married. They couldn't be more wrong.

It's past 12:00 and we decide to leave. Flora is worried about my drink-driving, and gives me the full-on parental routine on the way home. As we pull safely into the motel car-park, she wonders if we shouldn't now go to a club... Decisions, decisions. Decide against: we're too close to home.

To bed and we chat in the darkness after watching the last of Prince of Tides with Barbara Striesand. Goodnight!

DAY TEN — SUNDAY MARCH 13

Wake at 9:30 and I shower while Flora sleeps. Shave off the experimental beard I've been growing — it was red for some reason, and Flora says it wasn't happening. She gets into her morning routine at a snail's pace, so I sit it out and write the diary. 11:00 and check-out time fast approaches. With Flora in the shower, the 'phone rings. The management want us to check out in the next five minutes, so I apologise like a madman with stopped-watch excuses, and decide to move my stuff into the car to show willing, although I know that Flora's good for another half hour at least. Now the cleaner is knocking at the door. I give her a similar routine, although I doubt she understands me. She shuffles off to clean some other rooms instead. With my stuff in the car, I deposit the key at the desk and return to find Flora emerging radiant from the shower. She looks beautiful.

Pack up her stuff and leave for breakfast. It's well past 12:00. The restaurants and cafes are full to overflowing, but we find a place and persuade them to give Flora an order of *huevos rancheros*, even though they're now officially serving lunch. I have a pricey sandwich, and we sit for ages downing multiple coffees. I start to feel a serious caffeine high coming on and try to fight off the edginess. Eventually, we make a move and take in more of the sea of galleries, settling this time on The National Collection of Contemporary Indian Art, where native American artists (or is it American Indian artists?) have been exploring their roots but expressing this like the White Man. I enjoy myself a lot, caught between the serenity of the gallery and my caffeine-fuelled brain. I could think for days. We whisper about the various exhibits, which are a real mixed bag — from A-level to amazing — and pretty soon I lose track of time as my imagination is thrown from one end of the universe to the other.

Find the museum bookshop and spend about an hour or so looking at books, buying post cards and various gifties. There's an immense amount of stuff by or about Native Americans, and Flora spends over \$150. I buy pinõn incense and burners, a clutch of postcards and a copy of Native American Magazine. Eventually leave, and after trying unsuccessfully to find a copy of a certain book in hardback, wander out into the Plaza and chat with two youths sitting on a bench in the sun. People are out in droves, and motorcyclists pose about in the almost gridlocked traffic through the narrow streets around us.¹ The youths are amusing: one Mexican and the other Caucasian, they're in a band together and have lived here for several years. The Mexican is the vocalist. He does all the talking, while his friend is "the talent" and says very little. We chat of motorbikes and drugs. They are pessimistic about renting the former, but cheerful about the latter.

Try to find the car — where did we leave it? As we wander in what we think is the right direction, Flora stops in at various clothes shops to check out the wares. She needs a new sofa for her flat, and since one of the dress-shops just happens to have a nice little burgundy-coloured one by the window, she asks if she can buy it. We get the number of the owner — he may be able to ship it over for her! We're in big-spender mode.

Our booty is weighing us down, and we're thankful to find the car. Decide to spend another night here and check back into the same motel (The Western Scene). It's \$5.00 cheaper today, which makes a pathetic miser like me very happy. We even get the same room. Flop onto the bed and write the diary while Flora reads more about Taos: her favourite town she's never been to. I feel tired and get a nose-bleed. Wonder about going back to the Chinese restaurant and asking Tanita if she wants to come out with us this evening. Flora accuses me of having a crush on the girl. I feel gravity's pull.

¹Photos 22, 23

Out to find supper. All restaurants are full and we mooch discontented and shivering from one to the other, settling on the place where we had breakfast this morning. The menu is difficult and full of meat. I order a "veggie pattie." It scores 1/10: burnt and tasteless. Flora's mushroom spaghetti has a lump of chicken floating in it! An outrage! Discuss Flora's ideas about moving to America. Would she live in Santa Fé? How about Taos? Probably the latter, but she'll have to see. I suggest talking to a few realty agents there, but she laughs and thinks it's a stupid idea. Why? If she's serious about moving to the US, she might as well get some idea about houses, prices, etc. She still thinks it's a stupid idea.

I'm suddenly feeling very tired and odd. Weak and dizzy, it may be the legacy of all that coffee this morning. Flora says she wants to go to the bar we went to last night again, but I don't feel up to any booze right now so we reach a compromise: I'll have one drink to settle her in, then she can get a taxi back to the room afterwards if she wants. When we get to the place its pretty dead (9:00). Wander about briefly, then both decide to go back to the room. I feel guilty. Flora wants to party; I want to go to sleep. This is no way to carry on.

Back to the room and we watch a recording of Prime Minister's Question Time on C-SPAN. They show the whole thing in its entirety with no commentary or explanation, and it makes for weird viewing. I wonder what the Americans make of it. Next we sit through some bible stories, then tune to MTV to see REM's original video for "Can't Get There From Here," which is wonderfully amateur. They're just prating about in a car! To think, my life once used to be music, ah. Sleep eventually.

DAY ELEVEN — MONDAY MARCH 14

Wake at 10:30, the weather is sunny. I've had a dream that I've had a long, serious talk with Miranda¹ about something, but can't remember what it is. Feel rested. Watch more MTV while waiting for Flora to get ready. MTV: the pinnacle of US audio/visual achievement. It really is the most watchable thing on American television.

No hassles or phone calls this morning, we check out well past 11:00 and head off in the bright sunlight for brunch. Find a cozy-looking place called Pascal's and join the queue with wealthy-looking middle-aged tourists and earthy locals. Everyone greets everyone else like long-lost cousins. I have the *huevos rancheros* and Flora an omelette. This is the best Mexican food I've had: the eggs are on a blue corn tortilla with black beans in a rich, spicy tomato sauce. It's delicious. Flora's omelette is similarly exotic, with pine nuts and sun-dried tomatoes. She doesn't like eggs though, and wonders why she ordered it. I stare at a vastly fat man at the table ahead of us and Flora tells me not to look so amazed. I reckon you could fit three of me in his jeans. He has a tiny little daughter with him. Feel contented after such good food and we order coffee, which tastes disgusting. What a pity. The Americans have coffee to avoid.

Leave Pascale's to trundle round the shops a bit more. The sun shines strongly through a clear blue sky above us and we look for a post office to buy stamps. Realise we've yet to see the cathedral behind the plaza, but it looks strangely uninviting. We're not in the mood for religious sight-seeing, and set off for Taos instead. It's about 2:30.

A chronic lack of signs to anywhere in the centre of town gets us rapidly lost (you'd think they'd give you a clue about the freeway) and we ask a passing tourist, who gives us a map by which we manage to get out, switching Joy Division for the B-52's (who then quickly annoy us). The scenery is varied: some desert scrub, some forests, then some more desert. Listen to the Sisters. Stop for a photo over a vast, flat valley with a deep canyon carved into it.² Mountains loom in the distance. I climb onto a picnic-shelter roof

¹Flora's friend. I met her once several years ago.

²Photo 24 (panorama)

to get a better view, cutting my hand as I do so. Blood runs down my thumb before I notice the damage.

Onto Taos and stop in at Tourist Information. Mostly booked are the hotels, but we see that there is a hostel (The Abominable Snow Mansion) with 95 beds, so that should be OK. We drive into town and cruise about, half-lost. Interesting-looking shops surround us and we find a plaza much like Santa Fé's. I feel mellow, wonder what Flora will think of the hostel, as she says she hasn't stayed in one before.

Arrive to find the hostel is almost full. It's college Spring break season, and everyone and his dog is coming for the skiing. Just when we decide to arrive... Oh well, the place is clean, cheery and full of Texan and Southern teenagers. \$20 per night including breakfast makes this the second-cheapest night since the Dead. The 7:00am wakeup-time will make a contrast to our usual mode of post-9:30 starts. After collecting our sheets and towels from a man with a T-shirt that says "Spawn or Die," we sit in the lobby and write post-cards while après-ski teenagers play pool. Feel old and out of place in our very un-ski-like clothing.

Move off for eating and take the road out to the ski valley which winds away in the dark as we listen to more Sisters tapes. When we get there we check out the St. Bernard Hotel, recommended to us by a bearded youth at the hostel who seemed to know what he was talking about. They tell us they've finished serving dinner, however, and a waitress directs us to another couple of places that may still be serving. These prove very expensive so we settle on "Tim's," a bar with food upstairs that looks more likely. Sit down on the pine benches and look at the Scandinavian decor while somebody plays with the lights' dimmer switch. Most of the food has meat in it, but Flora orders a Mexican thing (yawn). I go for a hamburger, which puts me in a bad mood. Tell myself I never wanted to come here, but try to keep all that out of my head. We talk about sharing secrets that people have sworn us never to reveal. I don't have many, although Flora, it seems, has loads. Decide that even if revealing such secrets to someone to whom it could not possibly matter betrays a trust nevertheless, so we decide not to reveal anything to each other.

As we share a cheesecake for pudding, I let slip a little of what's on my mind and murmur the words, "Sharing a cheesecake in a lobotomised ski resort in America." This precipitates an argument about whether skiers are any more or less brainless than other type of sportsman. After a period of pointless squabble, Flora closes the subject with the now customary accusations of my lack of sensuality. I only just manage to conceal a sudden explosion of rage directed at her, the pine furniture, and the vacant snow-hounds sitting around us.

Migrate downstairs to the bar below and join a crowd of Spring break Texans dressed in day-glow. The beer is good — a sweetish European-style ale on draft. Sit down to drink and take in the scene. Flora mistakes for drunkenness my frantic efforts to ward off despondency and begins to worry about us crashing on the way home. I add not being able to get drunk to the list of my frustrations.

The bar stops serving at 10:00. This, they tell us, is the usual behaviour in Taos. The whole place is dead by 11:00. Great, bloody great! We talk to a couple of students who tell us that the slopes are congested but the lifts are OK (How so? Do some people walk up?) The conditions are described as "corn snow" — not too good, apparently. Toy with the idea of coming back next week, but they tell us that spring breaks will still be going on, and as the end of the ski season approaches, the snow may be even worse by that time, so it looks like we're here to stay. I daren't ask Flora how long though. She must know how I feel about this, the nadir of the trip for me, but I don't want

to spoil it for her so keep quiet.

Flora full of dread about my drinking, we wind our way back to the hostel as she shouts out the speed restrictions as if I've lost the power of sight. I don't feel like going back to the hostel and purposefully overshoot it, although she doesn't notice. Listen to the same Sisters tracks several times. I think Flora's drunker than I am. Reach a T-junction and she realises we must have gone too far. We crawl back again, this time with her urging me to speed up as she now wants to go to the loo. I keep it at 25.

Back at the hostel we punch in the security code at the door and find the place is fast asleep. 11:00pm. Flora doesn't want to use the toilet in her dormitory and insists on using the one in my room without flushing. It's pitch black and I can't see where my bed is. Have to stand motionless amongst the sleeping ski-dudes until my eyes get used to the dark. It seems to take for ever until a passing car's headlights illuminate the scene. Fumble with the bedclothes and eventually hit the sack.

Two hours later and I'm still awake. The heater on the wall is full on and I can't see the thermostat to turn it down. My head full of thoughts, I decide not to go skiing tomorrow: the crowds, the fact that we can't get back to the room before 4:00pm, the hassle of it all. Skiing in Flagstaff for a few hours was about all I could take without getting mighty bored, and I envisage a nightmare scenario of me, bored, hot and tired, freaking out while Flora swans around the professional slopes for days on end. My anger and hatred for this awful place, combined with the snoring, farting students around me, prevent me from getting any sleep until about 6:00am, when I doze off for what seems like five minutes before the others start to take their morning showers.

DAY TWELVE — TUESDAY MARCH 15

Flora comes in at about 7:00. She's had a terrible night as well. I get up and feel shattered. I'm a zombie in the small dining room where they're serving a breakfast of scrambled eggs and hash browns. Sit next to a thin middle-aged skier and a girl called Thea (also from NY), who is over here to work for the Winter. Thea is nice, and seems to be about the only woman in the place, which I think is odd as they told us the whole hostel was booked solid. So have all the remaining forty-odd women left for the slopes already? Mystery. We talk about clothes and European-American differences. She thinks Europeans look better than Americans in "American clothes." The Thin Skier tells us of his experience in an avalanche while skiing in New England recently. He's a hard-core schusser and can talk of little else for very long. Drink enough coffee to wake the dead (and it works), then wait for Flora in the lobby, tinkling on the badly-maintained piano there. All others seem to have departed for the slopes. Flora appears eventually and we depart too.

Pick up a hitcher girl on the way who is working at a restaurant in the ski valley while studying adobe building techniques. We chat about building methods and she tells us that there are lots of alternative building projects going on around here — people making houses out of old car tires and tin cans, apparently.

Check out the ski rental recommended to us at the hostel. No joy as they don't have Flora's length. The hitcher girl says that she knows some places were having to use equipment from the lost and found last weekend. Join a huge traffic jam waiting to get into the valley. Busses are few and very expensive here, so everyone goes by car. Madness. Drop the girl off at the main entrance, and do the same for

Flora later on, agreeing to meet at the hostel later this afternoon. I wish her luck as she hurries off to get some skis before they sell out.

I drive back past the hostel and into town, not really knowing what to do now. Scream along to Julian Cope's "Fear Loves this Place" and marvel at how that tune always makes me want to cry. Perhaps it will one day. The weather is idyllic, and I like the fact that while the mountains are nice and snowy, the valley here is dry as a bone. My spirits lift to a light, silvery haze as I drive into town.

See a couple of interesting-looking metalwork sculptures by the road, and get out to have a look. When I get close to them, I see that they're part of a sculpture park attached to a small gallery set back from the road. The sculptures are mostly of strange animals and other things made out of rusty metal and found objects: a crashed aeroplane, boulders with silver lightning coming out of the bottom and other surreal stuff. The whole place feels dream-like in the strong sunlight, blue sky and snowy mountains across the flat valley behind me. I find a guide to each work in a small

box by the door to the gallery, which opens at 11:00. Stand in front of the “Alter of Neglected Concerns” whose rusty tendrils tower over me. The silence is broken by the occasional car along the road. It’s 10:00 and I’m feeling mighty sleepy. Return to the car to write the diary and doze. It’s hot. Eat an apple.

It’s too hot to doze so I move off further into town to see some of the art galleries there. The influence of Santa Fé is strong here, and the day begins to merge into one long parade of art as I go from gallery to gallery getting a bad case of visual indigestion. Also like Santa Fé, it’s a big mix of stuff. Stop in at a metalwork gallery and find the owner/artist working outside his studio. He likes my jacket, which I notice has patterns similar to some of the stuff he’s working on. He asks if he can take a picture of it, and I pose in front of a white wall at the back of the studio. We get talking as I look around his creations. He tells me that winter is a dead season with very few people coming to look at the galleries. “Skiers like to ski, not to think,” he says. I ask him about the “heart line” on the bears he makes, and wonder what he thinks of my initial interpretation of its meaning. He says that in his opinion it’s closer to that intended, although he prefers to think of it as symbolic of the “breath of life” rather than anything quite so directly to do with pooping. It’s buffalo that have heart lines as described to us in the jewellers at Santa Fé, apparently.

Further into town and the galleries become more conservative, the majority being representational art and godawful chocolate-box nudes. Still, I give it all a fair gaze. Eat the Flagstaff cornbread left over from Flora’s evening meal at the veggie restaurant there and play REM. It’s 4:00 and I think of setting off back to the hostel. Pick up a hippy hitcher girl on the way (“What a rad car you have!”) who tells me she hates America and wants to go abroad — Turkey preferably. I drop her off before my turn and feel lonely as I wave good-bye. Should have driven her all the way.

Back in the hostel to find Flora has yet to get back. This gives me yet more free time to write the diary and then doze on my bunk for a while. She appears at 6:00 after getting a lift with the Thin Skier and some others. The Skier looks amazingly brown. I tell her about what I’ve been up to, and she says she’s had a good time, teaming up in the afternoon with a physicist who’s living in a snow-hole on the mountains.¹ A good way of bypassing the accommodation problem. After chatting to people in the lobby, we move off to find a pizza place (The Outback) recommended by other hostelers, and find it crowded but cozy and

servicing vast portions (one slice is enough) with salad. As we wait for the food to come, we use coloured crayons provided at the table to doodle on the white paper table-cloth in front of us. This is a good American restaurant idea that we’ve encountered before, and it’s great for a bit of expressive therapy. Why don’t they have it Britain? I draw my characteristic geometric, symmetrical patterns (which end up looking vaguely Mayan somehow), while Flora does Picasso-esque free-form scribbles. I decide that coming from a 25 year-old accomplished artist, this must be deeply expressive, as it looks a hell of a lot like what I got up to with crayons at the age of four. Reflect on the fact that if doodles say anything about your character, we must be diametric opposites. The food comes and it’s delicious, but we can’t eat it all and decline the reckless offer of pudding from the waiter.

Flora is back in her non-communicatory mode, and I’m beginning to wonder if this will be the norm for most of the trip. I hope not. I ask her if she feels like going out tonight, but she’s too tired. I decide to drop her off at the hostel then go out for a brew on my own at a bar I saw earlier this afternoon. On the way back we say nothing. I sing along softly to Fables of the Reconstruction, and there are thousands of stars out to twinkle gently in the night sky.

I turn back into town after dropping of a sleepy Flora. The pub is tiny, but not too crowded, with a strange mix of middle-aged and student types. As I open the door, a fat, bearded man with a bright tie-dyed tee-shirt says “howdy.” He sounds like Louis Armstrong. I buy a pint of the recommended brew and take up a position near two bluegrass musicians playing guitar and mandolin. Like the last bar we went to, this place is for men. I overhear a Sloany female English accent behind me, which seems to belong to the only woman in the place. Get talking to two pissed students, but they’re too far gone to make much sense over the music.

¹Photo 25

10:30 and they close up, so I decide to go off for a drive and maybe star-gaze a while. Get to the top of the road leading out of town and stop the car to watch for shooting stars while listening to The Orb's *Adventures in the Ultraworld*. See a couple pass overhead in that big sky. Full of stars. I know we're not alone, Mr Spielberg. Get out of the car and sit listening to the silence for a bit until it gets too cold. The moon hangs as if suspended by its crescent points above me. Drive back to the hostel and find that my sheets have gone.

DAY THIRTEEN — WEDNESDAY MARCH 16

Manage to sleep much better than last night, although I'm awake at 6:00 to the noise of people showering on the floor above. Wander into the dining room and get caught up in a conversation with a hippie who's staying here while learning how to build self-sufficient houses called "earth ships." These sound like the things the Hitcher Girl was talking about: "rammed earth structures." They've been building them in the Rio Grande valley for over twenty years, he tells me, and goes into great detail about the various cunning mechanisms they employ to recycle waste and generate power. The ultimate in green house design. He tells me where they are, and I decide to have a look at them today.

Flora arrives better rested this morning. We go to the desk after eating a meagre breakfast of French toast and coffee to arrange accommodation for the next couple of nights. A large party of kids is arriving today, so we're going to have to stay in the building next door. I hope to God I'm going to be able to keep myself occupied now that we're committed to another two days in this place. Still don't feel the urge to ski.

The new rooms smell of skunk (there was one in the basement yesterday, the owner tells us). Drop Flora off at the ski valley and arrange to meet as yesterday. Drive back into town to see what I can do today and pick up a hitcher on his way to work. He's about my age and has lived here for 23 years. We manage to communicate fairly well although he tells me he's an "automobile detailer." I can't be bothered to ask what that is. Drop him off at a large shopping centre at the other end of town and head off to the Rio Grande valley to see these Earth Ships.

It's a nice drive across the flat scrubland with the mountains in the distance to my right. The sky is cloudy, but with enough breaks in it to let a good amount of sunlight through. The dead-straight road leads me to the Rio Grande George: a vast crack in an otherwise billiard-table landscape. Park the car by the large silver bridge that spans the gorge and walk out to the centre with a few other tourists and their video cameras. The gorge is vast, and I find it difficult to appreciate the size of the thing below me. The Rio Grande itself looks like a tiny trickle at the bottom. The bridge wobbles as trucks pass over it and I feel dizzy. Hungry now, I get back to the car and eat peanut butter sandwiches while writing the diary. Feel dozy and read the *Sunday Times* until midday.

Wake up suddenly in a sweat. The clouds have cleared and the sun is beating down at full power. Set off across the bridge to find the Earth Ships and see likely-looking building works a couple of hundred yards back from the road. The tires-and-earth construction is visible, but most of the building is underground, its solar panels twinkling in the sunlight. I stop outside and observe a few people working on the roof. They seem contented enough without me bothering them, so drive on and take in more scenery. Play *The Good Son* and sing my heart out with Nick.

The desert scrub eventually gives way to forest land and rolling hills. This is the Carson National Forest, it says. Patches of snow cover the ground between the trees and the air gets noticeably cooler. I stop the car to admire the view across a frozen valley below me. With no other cars on the road, all I can hear is the gentle breeze in my ears. Have a pee.

Back in the car, I get the guidebook out and read about the main attraction here: the Taos Pueblo, an Indian community continuously inhabited for the past 700 years. You can go and have a look at real Indians doing real Indian things like making rugs and eating peyote. This sounds like a suitably clear-cut bit of tourism, so I set off back across the valley towards the town and the pueblo just outside it. Pity I forgot to bring the camera.

I've gone a lot further out than I imagined, and drive for some three quarters of an hour while listening to one of Derek's tapes. The Future Sound of London's "Papua New Guinea" takes me to another level entirely as the desert scrub rolls by. Arrive back in Taos and follow signs for the Pueblo. At a roadblock on the way, a wizened old Indian motions me to stop. I wind down the window, giving him a deafening blast of Jah Wobble as I do so. He tells me I can't go any further, but won't tell me why. No white people allowed, it seems. As I turn around, I see that the convoy of off-roaders being let through behind me are all being driven by Indians.

Drive off to the Tourist Centre to see if I can find out more about why my sightseeing plans have been blown to pieces. "The Taos Pueblo is closed between March 4th-30th for religious reasons." Hooray. Try to think of what I'm going to do now. Looks like the only alternative is more galleries. I suppose there might be a few left I haven't seen.

Park up by the plaza and wander round it's mixed bag of shops. Spend some time in a cozy little place crammed full of weird Mexican-American curios. Military paraphernalia is piled up next to strangely gory religious icons (dismembered bodies a speciality) and stuffed animals. I'm the only customer in the shop. The owner is talking to somebody in a very loud voice over the phone about the meaning of various words in a language that I think may be Yiddish.

Most of the other shops are tacky souvenir emporiums, although one place in the main plaza holds my interest for quite a while. It's crammed to bursting with "antiques" arranged neatly in sections, mostly in glass cabinets. The owner is a man with a heavy East-European accent who looks like Albert Einstein and he potters about slowly in the flow of tourists. I seem to be the only person who wants to stay more than about two minutes, which is odd considering the amazing amount of stuff on show. War memorabilia takes up a large part, as do medical instruments (the gynaecological section is utterly, utterly terrifying) and magic lanterns (including a "very rare" 19th century pornographic cinescope collection.) The sedate contents of the shop are in contrast to the light-hearted notes scattered around the place. Next to some inexplicable object is the legend "Don't ask me!" and in a small room dedicated to religious icons and related equipment, the words, "And the Lord said, 'Spend!'" sit next to a particularly lavish alter-cross. Once the now familiar feeling of visual indigestion begins to set in, I leave, placing a dollar in a pot marked "This is not a museum."

Walk out of the plaza and further into town to find the Kit Carson Museum in a olde worlde cabin.¹ The museum tells the story of Taos's founding father who came here in the last century to carve a European niche in the heart of Indian country. Bit boring really.

It's nearly 4:00 and I go back to the "brew pub" I visited last night. Order a Mesa Pale Ale and sit on a veranda in the fading sunlight. Look at the map and formulate possible route plans after Taos. Reflect on the fact that if I don't go skiing tomorrow I won't have else anything to do. Feel dejected. I haven't spoken to anyone today.

Drive back to the hostel at about 5:30 to collect sheets and wait for Flora. Nobody else in the room. Write the diary. Read Billy's "Fiery the Angels Fell" book, but it fails to hold my attention. A copy of Living Marxism doesn't fare much better, so I just lie on my bunk and look at the springs above me. Pretty soon I realise that I'm bored. I'm very bored, and I'm not used to the feeling. Try to deal with the unpleasant sensation of my head having nothing to do, so I try to analyse the boredom, coming to the conclusion that it's based on frustration as I can't go and do anything until Flora gets back. But what would I do anyway? Get bored with thinking about being bored.

An hour or so of blankness later, I get up and go outside to sit on the wooden deck overlooking the road. Watch skiers arriving back from the slopes, but there's no sign of Flora yet. Darkness falls. Mr Earthship gets back from a hard day's pounding, and we chat some more about building. It's 7:00 and the owner of the hostel brings in some leftover bread and brownies that the kids have been eating next door. I'm not hungry, and sit talking to loud-mouthed skiers who fall about laughing as one of them recounts his experiences of sleepwalking the other night. As I sit on the edge of my bed listening to this, I suddenly begin to worry about Flora, and can't get it out of my head. The worry gradually turns into a sort of panic as I try not to become convinced that she's

¹The guidebook says this is in fact original.

taken this opportunity to leave me in a shit-hole miles from anywhere with a bunch of ski morons for company. 8:00 comes and goes, as do most of the skiers, who take showers before leaving to have supper. Hunger setting in now, I have to refuse offers to come with them and feel unbelievably miserable. Unhinged self-destructive

thoughts enter my head. Why am I thinking about suicide? Am I insane? This makes me feel even worse, and I lie on my bed almost paralysed with depression.

Somebody comes in to tell me that they've had a call from a ski rental shop to say that Flora's left her credit card there. The messenger also says that she's rung the hostel to tell me that she's OK. That's it: the message is she's "O.K."

This makes me feel a little better; at least I can have supper now. A blond skier called Lief come in. He hasn't eaten yet, and we arrange to go out. He's planning on meeting up with some friends from college in Texas for "some margaritas n' stuff" later on, and tells me I can come too if I want. This sounds fine to me, and we wait for them to arrive. Too many people for one car, Lief and I take mine and we follow the others into the ski valley. They seem to know what they're doing, but I discover that although Lief doesn't know them very well, he thinks they probably haven't been here before, so they could be as clueless about where to eat as we are. I point out that places around here close early.

Lief is tired, but we chat about things. His parents are "Swedish hippies," but he's as American as they come. A vegetarian though. He likes British comedy: "A Fish Called Wanda! That's funny man, that's real funny..." We arrive at the ski valley and join the main group to look for somewhere to eat. The rest of them have broken out cans of beer and are already fairly buzzing.

We soon realise there isn't anywhere to eat, but we're all mighty hungry by now, and it's cold out here. As we make our way back to the car, a small flat-bed drives by and we try to jump a lift on it. Fail, but have a good time trying. "Kiss my butt!" "I'd give *you* a lift." This is a boys' night out and I feel much better for some action and the familiar company of drunks.

Booze getting increasingly in the way of our thoughts, we have no choice but to drive into town. There must be something open there. There isn't, however, and after scrambling around various places, we're forced to get a sandwich at a "Sub-Shop" — bog-standard submarines for \$2.00. "Bummer man, this town sucks so bad." The place doesn't serve margaritas either. More beers later, we decide to move on to Ramona's, the only place in Taos that stays open to 2:00am.

Ramona's is huge with an amazingly mixed crowd of disco-fiends, grunge-rockers and stock-brokers. A live band plays black pop classics and funk dance tunes, but *look* more like Nirvana. People dance incredibly enthusiastically, with several wigga-types flailing their arms around like there's no tomorrow.

After getting the drinks in and wandering about the cavernous interior, we hook up with a group of Texan women just arrived from Fort Worth and Dallas. We chat them up, they chat us up, and I feel a sense of freedom that I haven't felt for what seems like ages. Go off for a dance, but after about three or four numbers the band leave for a rest. The sound system is pretty bland, so I sit down and talk to Amy, the best looking but also the dippiest of the crew. Amy tells me of her ambitions to have two kids and five dogs. "The dogs would have to sleep in bed with us, and if my husband doesn't like that, he can divorce me. He has to love my dogs." To break the spell, I ask her if the dogs wouldn't fart in the night. She can't understand my accent and I have to spell it out. F-A-R-T! A waitress in a body-stocking and fairy wings walks past.

Pretty soon we're out in the car-park milling about aimlessly. One of Lief's group says he's got "a sweet place" so I decide to take charge and organise everyone back to there via the hostel, where I can pick up the stash. After a while, the message sinks in, and we lurch

forward in convoy, various unknown people now tagging along at the mention of drugs. This is more like it....!

Their place is certainly sweet — it seems they have a whole hotel to themselves! We sit down on plush sofas to watch a Dumbo video on the huge TV in the corner of the upstairs lounge. I fire up the pipe, but it seems that Lief's friends aren't into the idea, so I get together with a clutch of

willing participants to “smoke pot.” Susan and I get particularly wrapped. She laughs at my bad attack of cotton mouth and I laugh at her Texan accent. She looks a bit like Lady Miss Kier from Dee-Lite, although she can’t remember the band.

As the evening winds down, people begin to pair off and accept invitations to admire the bedrooms down the hall. Susan and I find ourselves giggling in one of these, and tumble around in the dark until that sudden feeling of stepping into space at the moment when our laughter stops takes me by surprise. The familiar yet always forgotten sensation of bliss washes over me when our bodies meet, and the dope carries me off into another world of warmth and perfume.

DAY FOURTEEN — THURSDAY MARCH 17

Wake up at about 6:00 after what feels like very little sleep. Better get out before we’re detected. Susan says little and I can’t think of anything much to say to her either. Feel strangely hollow, the experiences of last night seem unreal. I want to thank her, but only manage a small kiss. Get dressed and we arrange to meet up later on at the slopes as she joins her friends in their van.

The hostel is only a short walk from the hotel and I creep back into the dormitory, getting into my bed to wait for breakfast. No sign of Lief yet. I suddenly remember Flora and wonder if she’s in the girls’ room next door. God I feel knackered.

Join the others going into breakfast and find myself in a crowd of pre-teenage kids, all shouting and screaming as if gripped by some alien hysteria. Lief comes in as I try to eat my breakfast, thankful that I’m not hung over. He asks where Flora was last night, and I tell him she must have teamed up with somebody else. “Oh man, you’re pissed huh? You blew her out and she does the same!” I explain that in fact I’m not angry as our relationship isn’t like that. He looks confused.

Set off for the slopes at 9:00. As I look for a parking space I suddenly see Flora, and call out to her. She runs over to apologise. I feel a huge sense of relief but try not to show it. She’s been with Einstein, the physicist, but doesn’t sound as if she enjoyed it. No time to talk, I need to hire some skis. They’re off to have some breakfast, and so we say we’ll meet at 12:30 for lunch.

After renting my skis, I set off for the place I’d arranged to meet the girls. They’re already there, and I say good-morning to Susan, who seems to have woken up now. We prat about in a jolly bum-pinching kind of way, but they’re even worse skiers than I am and want to stay on the nursery slopes. Amy spends most of the time on her arse. I’m in no position to give them any lessons as I don’t know what you’re supposed to do anyway — I just ski. Soon get tired of the relentless giggling and falling about and say good-bye to leave them snowploughing. Maybe I’ll see them later...

On the lifts I make idle chat with various Texans and end up telling the same story to everyone I meet. The sky is cloudy today, and the wind rushes in gusts over the crests of the slopes. It’s cold.

It gets to 12:00 and I set off to the other side of the mountain to meet Flora and Mr Einstein at the Kachina Lift Restaurant. They seem strangely distant from each other and Flora hints at problems. He makes as if to leave, saying good-bye and thanks for the skiing, but I want

to know what he’s like and invite him to stay for a bite to eat, joking that we can all talk about black holes. This seems to be OK, and we sit down on one of the benches in the cavernous dining area. Make small talk as we drink coke and eat a bit of his packed lunch (a huge block of Monterey Jack and salami.) They tell me that they slept in his car last night after getting too drunk to dig a snow hole. He seems restless, and after Flora asks for his address, says good-bye.

Flora tells me he’s gone skiing to run away from a difficult love-affair with a neurotic woman, and a combination of pity, booze and a lack of self control led to tawdry scenes in the car last night. These then ended in tears; Flora feeling cheap and used, while he feels guilty and confused. It all sounds terrible. I tell her of my experiences of the past 24 hours and we sit analysing our feelings for an hour or so over lunch. Decide we’ve had enough of Taos. Flora feels emotional but calm. I

feel exhausted.

Go to the loo and see that I've put so much sunblock on my face that I look like a pierrot. We ski down to the carpark to give back our equipment and have a drink at Tim's (\$1.50 for a crappy cranberry juice), then drive back to the hostel in silence as I play claming music. Shower and relax. Write the diary.

Talk to Pauline, a new arrival in the girls' dormitory as Mr Earthship (real name Rick) gives exactly the same "rammed earth thermal mass structure" lecture as he gave me yesterday, only this time to some other people in the men's dormitory. Pauline is a tall Swiss potter (Wow! About as tall as I am!) who has arrived in Taos to research Indian ceramic-making techniques in her huge white Oldsmobile that she bought a couple of weeks ago. She's been in the States for about a month and says she's learnt virtually all of her English in that time. This is pretty amazing as her English is extremely good and she says she only had a few lessons when she was at school.

The three of us go off to The Outback for dinner and spend the evening talking about ceramics, travel and related topics. Two Englishmen and an American sit at the table opposite us and we try hard to ignore them.

Feel wasted and in dire need of some proper sleep. I've lost my glasses somewhere in the car so my night vision is a bit blurred. This makes Flora even more concerned about my driving, being also convinced that I'm blind drunk after my Tecate during the meal. The two girls smoke and chat while I drive back for our final night in the Snow Mansion — hooray!

Back in the room, we talk to some boys about why Flora and I wear black "all the time." I deny this, and point to the grey top I'm wearing to prove it. Discuss music, and it turns out that we've all got fairly similar tastes, growing up through the same stages as well. I feel part of a global brotherly music community — we were all into reggae at the same time! Flora gets quickly bored of all this and disappears to bed without saying goodnight. I break off soon after and the rest of them go to a "beach party." As I drift off to sleep, I think of Susan and regret not getting her address.

DAY FIFTEEN — FRIDAY MARCH 18

A decent night's sleep! Wake to the sound of Texas brats screeching at eachother in the room next door. The walls do nothing to stop the sound. I doze until 7:45, then roll out of bed to catch breakfast, only to find that it's over. There's some coffee left in one of the jugs, so I down that and go back across the road to see if Flora's up yet. Find her with her eyes open but her mind asleep. She smiles at me and complains wearily of the kids next door — she's much nearer to

them than I was. Other girls stir; all the boys have hit the slopes. It's 8:00.

I move my stuff into the car and wait around for Flora to get ready. She emerges and says she wants to go to the cafe around the corner which is supposed to be nice. We say good-bye to Rick Earthship on his way to work. When we tell him we'll be headed for Colorado, he warns us of the terrible dangers of getting caught in Spring snowstorms up in the mountains ("You could die, man.") If we plan to go to Mesa Verde, we should get some snow chains and check the forecasts. I thank him for his advice, but with the sun beaming down on another idyllic Taos day outside, it's hard to think of any extreme weather at this point. Maybe we'll die.

Lief is worried that his car may not have enough petrol to get the gas station, and asks me if I can give him a siphon. I say that'll be OK, provided he can find a suitable tube. The chances of this are slim, so he decides to make a dash for it. "If you see me by the roadside, you'll know what's happened." We say good-bye.

Coffee and cinnamon buns at the cute little cafe around the corner. We sit outside in the sunlight as various dogs play around us. Thea is there and takes a seat with us. We talk about dogs and

US politics and take a couple of photos.¹ Thea takes one of us before she has to leave for work. I wonder if it's the only picture so far to feature both of us together.² We say good-bye and Flora tells me she feels tearful. I feel sad too. The cloudless blue sky stretches a million miles above our heads, and we sit at our table next to the sun-dried tomatoes by the doorway. Look at the map. Despite telling myself I'm glad to leave, I feel reluctant to do so. Wish I'd been with Flora more. Decide to head for Mesa Verde and walk to the car park where I find a dried chilli on the ground. A souvenir. It shall be called The Taos Car-park Chilli.

Drive off into town after posing for photos with the vast hostel dog of unidentified breed.³ Stop in at the sculpture park along the way and wander round.⁴ I begin to worry about getting sunburnt, but can't be bothered to put any cream on. I'll be OK. By a large wooden statue called "Pollen Count" Flora sits on one of the "spores" scattered around its base, and we talk about buying this stuff. How much control would the artist have once the sculpture has been sold?

It turns 11:00 and the gallery at the park opens up. The middle-aged couple who run the place let us in and we tour the diverse collection of sculpture and other forms of art on show. I reckon some are pretty good. The couple encourage us to go upstairs to look at the water-colours ("They're a delight."). Water-colours don't generally float my boat, and these are no exception, but we give them a good viewing nonetheless. In the end we reckon they fail because they're too big. One is about 3' x 4' and should really be an oil painting.

The artist whose work this is just happens to be giving a class in the studio next door to the pictures. We're invited in and wander around, politely looking at the musings of the small group of middle-aged women who are in there. The room has a grand view of the mountains across a large paddock in which horses are roaming. This, they tell us, marks the start of the Taos Indian reservation.

Leave the studio to talk further with the owner. Her husband hammers a nail into a wall so loudly that Flora can hardly make herself heard as she asks about a bronze figure called "Mantis." Take a picture of it and murmur about how much we like its lines. It looks a bit evil. Something about the legs I like. \$8,000, we're told.⁵

Chat some more and I do my "I can't understand representational art" speech, but it gets nowhere. Remark on the woman's husband's T-shirt with the words "Good art won't go with your sofa" written on it. The woman warns us of the terrible dangers of New Mexico, where widespread poverty and lawlessness have made passage after dark a treacherous business. She tells us that if we're not careful, armed bandits will

stop our car and shoot us dead for the smallest reward. I think to myself that middle-aged white American women must be the most paranoid humans alive.

Set off for Mesa Verde with Flora in a cheerful mood while I play tapes. The scenery changes gradually from flat desert to scrubland to the Carson National Forest, then back into desert as we cross the boarder into Colorado and start to climb into the mountains.⁶ After a while it starts to snow, then rain. The rain beats down for the rest of the way and I take over the driving after a stop for some fuel. Flora makes strange peeping noises every so often, but doesn't tell me why.

Arrive in the town of Durango as darkness falls and drive down the Motel Mile (more like three) and see a likely place for \$33. I miss the hassle of the hostel as we check into another soulless motel room. Flora is tired and clearly needs some rest, but swings from being dozy to bright and bouncy for no apparent reason. I wash some socks and underwear in the shared bathroom across the hall from the room while she makes more strange noises before lapsing back into

¹Photos 26, 27

²Photo 28

³Photos 29, 30

⁴Photo 31

⁵Photo 32

⁶Photos 33, 34

sleepiness and silence. I look at the map to see what our agenda for tomorrow should be, but can't decide. The rain pouring down outside robs me of any inspiration, particularly after the sunny start we had this morning. We're back on the road and it's gloomy again.

To dinner at a bakery/brewery mentioned in the guidebook that also serves vegetarian food, although Flora says she isn't hungry. The walls of the restaurant have some of the worst art I have ever seen. Day-glow green and pink ice-cream revulsion. The artist's photo and CV are displayed next to them, inviting hate mail from all who see her work. With Flora now cheery, we eat chilli in large bread bowls and have a good time. I have a pint of a dark ale that tastes like cocoa.

Back to the room to write the diary. Flora comes out with little babbles of nonsense and she says she's tired and we laugh a lot. Watch a 1950's episode of Superman on Nickelodeon until I feel tired too. The bed is uncomfortable and sags in the middle.

DAY SIXTEEN — SATURDAY MARCH 19

Wake up with my heart pounding like an Olympic sprinter after Flora shouts something in her sleep. Sit up and ask if she's OK, but she doesn't reply. It's 9:00, and I switch on to MTV when the alarm goes to watch their Blind Date Spring Break Special featuring a cast of gormless teenagers bouncing around on an outdoor stage somewhere in California. The weather outside is cloudy, but the rain seems to have gone for now.

Check out and forage for breakfast, looking for Shelby's New York Cafe, a place recommended by the guidebook. After fruitless searching and asking around, it looks like the guidebook is out of date and Shelby's has been renamed to The Rendezvous. It's a nice place anyhow, and I plough through a huge stack of pancakes as is my wont most mornings here in America. Flora likes the camp waiter who serves us and works out a suitable tip for him. This tip business is becoming an obsession. Thea told us that 15% is normal with 20% if you like them. No tip at all means you think they should be in jail, or something. Should have brought a calculator.

Leave the cafe and do some aimless rambling through gift shops along the street. Flora gets her poison ring straightened at a jewellers in a shopping mall and I go for a pee. When I return I find her sitting on a bench near the entrance to the mall with her back to me. For no good reason I can think of, I sit down silently behind her and wait until she notices me. I stare at the back of her head for a good while before she sees I'm there.

We go off to find a record shop to buy some tapes. Flora says she wants some Stooges, which I suppose is fine by me, although I've never been much of a fan. However, for some depraved and twisted reason, she also wants some Chris De Burgh. This is a major blow. The prospect of having to listen to "Lady In Red" as we drive across America is of course terrifying, and I do my best to persuade her not to buy any. The Lord God Almighty is on my side, however, and He, in His infinite mercy, has removed all recordings of Chris De Burgh from the shop. So we get some Stooges in and go back to the car after asking the shop assistant if there are any groovy clubs in the area. "Here? in Durango? No way!"

The Stooges send me to sleep pretty fast as we drive the fifty or so miles to Mesa Verde. Wake up when she puts on a James album instead. I look out of the window to see the low scrub-forest across the mountains around us. The weather is cloudy but bright as we enter the park itself and pay the \$5 entrance fee at the gate. The elevation gets up to 7,000 feet, according to a sign by the road, and we kill the music for a while to take in the scene. Stop at a viewing platform that looks out across a gigantic plain, but it's really too overcast to see much. I feel good about things and the air is cold.

Arrive at the visitors' centre and head for the restaurant as Flora feels hungry for salad. I have a beer because I'm feeling happy. Suitably fuelled, we check out guided tours and find that we're just in time for the 3:00 jaunt around one of the ruins below. We join about fifteen others to be

herded around by a typically calm and bearded ranger. After a while, it seems that the other visitors are a lot more informed about what's going on than we are. I remember reading that a slide show precedes each tour, and as we must have arrived too late to watch this, we're largely ignorant of what "kivas" and things are. Whisper embarrassed ignorance to each other as the rest of the group ask knowledgeable questions.¹

The tour comes to an end and we are left to our own devices, milling around the ruins and the surrounding area. We don't stay for long, however, as Flora decides to sprint up the path back to the visitors' centre in an effort to dispel the pall of sleepiness that she says has been hanging over her for the past couple of days.

Have a look around the centre's museum and try to understand the explanations to the dioramas, which assume a fair amount of prior knowledge of American archaeology. Laugh. Reflect on the fact that a lot of this "ancient civilisation" of basket-weavers and rock painters in fact post dates Plato. Watch the slide show we missed earlier, but it doesn't reveal much. Perhaps our group just happened to have lots of boffins. As we leave the auditorium, I examine an old piano by the door that has certainly seen some action: the ivory is almost completely worn off the middle keys while the black notes have dips in them.

It's looking more and more like rain outside as we tour the rest of the rather tired museum exhibits and gift shop. Things close up at 5:00 and we are forced to leave, running to the car as large raindrops start to fall. Decide to drive the "ruins trail" and see what we can see of the other 150 or so pueblo remains across the park. The rain now pouring down, it's hard to see much of the various places we discover, but Flora gets out a couple of times to take a picture or two.² Try to imagine what it must have been like to be the first Western explorers to discover these strange buildings built into the rock faces below. Even in the dim light of the rain clouds they look mysterious and ancient, almost like the remains of civilisation on another planet. Lightning spikes the clouds above them and adds to the eeriness of the scene.

Drive out of the park and towards the town of Cortez to find lodgings. I concentrate on my cornering. Arrive in Cortez and find a suitable place for \$29. It's a nice room whose design somehow reminds me of the style of the ruins at Mesa Verde. I need to do some serious clothes washing, and see that they have a washing room. But closer inspection reveals that they don't have a washing machine in it. Ask the teenage youth at the office where we can find a laundrette. He gives convoluted and confused directions, and we drive off to get lost even more rapidly than usual. Eventually find a large, brightly-lit but deserted place that has no washing powder for sale so we content ourselves with games of Pac Man and Galaxian instead. I never could get the hang of Galaxian, although it must have been around for over fifteen years now.

Decide to postpone our laundry project for another day, and drive off into town not knowing where we should go. The decision is soon made for us by the convenient appearance of a cinema showing "Wayne's World II." I pull up outside and we buy tickets for the 7:30 showing. It's now 7:20. Perfect! We like the film and I laugh a lot at jokes I only half understand ("Cassandra — she'd give a dog a bone!") This puts us in a good mood afterwards and we motor off to find some food.

It's 9:00 and it seems that all available restaurants have closed. Sleepy American Town Syndrome has caught us unawares again. We eventually find an Italian place called Nero's just up the street from our motel, and have no choice but to eat here. I don't like the lighting so can't relax and find the food tasteless and greasy, although Flora says she doesn't mind the place particularly. Nasty amaretto pudding thing tastes three weeks old. The waiter tells us the place has been going for twelve years with a respected Italian super-chef in residence. And monkeys might fly out of my butt.

Back to the room to read the Winona Ryder interview in Rolling Stone magazine. Write the diary. Flora says she's cold so I put the heating on. After while she says she's still cold. Einstein had a cold; I hope she hasn't caught it.

¹Photos 35, 36

²Photos 37, 38

DAY SEVENTEEN — SUNDAY MARCH 20

The alarm clock goes off at 8:30, but we doze until 10:00, both of us inexplicably groggy. Perhaps the amaretto pudding was made with moose tranquilliser. Manage to get out by 11:00 and try for breakfast at a restaurant we saw last night. Persuade them to give us their morning menu even though it's now lunchtime for them. Outside, the rain pours down and things look bleak.

As we tuck into the customary breakfast stodge, I make a disparaging comment about an enormously fat woman seated on another table. Flora thinks she heard me and gets embarrassed. We discuss obesity, and Flora reveals that whenever she sees a fat person she takes it as a warning that she herself could become like that if she doesn't watch it. Now I think she's stupid. Miraculously, we've remembered to bring the map with us from the car, and we have a look at it to see where we should head for next. Mexican Hat looks like the best bet for staying within a reasonable distance from Monument Valley and other places of interest, but we'll see what other villages are like on the way.

By the time we move off, the rain has stopped, leaving the streets of Cortez black and shiny as we head off for Monument Valley. The scenery gets progressively spectacular, with red-soiled plains like Sedona, only much larger this time. The weather is fine, if a little cloudy. After an extensive search, Flora eventually finds the Janis Joplin tape she wanted to listen to, and we put that on followed by some Primal Scream. This thing's all about rock 'n roll, yeuhsee.

Signs along the way point to Four Corners National Monument, and not knowing what to expect, we decide to see what that's all about. We turn a corner and follow a road that leads to a circle of rickety stalls surrounding a set of flagpoles stuck into a concrete plinth. Suddenly, we realise what this place is: the "Four Corners" are the corners of the four states that come together here! Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. Most of the shacks are empty save for a few Indian craft stalls manned by silent natives, and the place is almost deserted apart from a few tourists. We wander around looking at the flat, red scenery about us. There's a strong wind blowing that rattles the ropes on the empty flagpoles, and the whole place feels like some sort of ghost town. I take a picture of a windswept Flora¹ and buy a couple of "dream catchers" for presents. Flora makes use of the oddly-perfumed portaloos that hide behind the stalls. The sunshine has yet to dry out the ground beneath our feet, and we step in sticky mud patches, caking our shoes nicely with brick-red souvenirs before we get back in the car.

On the road to Mexican Hat, we're amazed to see the piggy-back van that was parked near us at the Grateful Dead gig in Phoenix. Take a picture of it and trail behind for a while before overtaking.² It's a small world.

Stop off for a photo call and take a picture of a strange-looking rock formation about half a mile away. After doing so, we realise that this is in fact the "Mexican Hat" of the town's name.³ The rock is shaped just like an upturned sombrero. There's an interesting-looking dirt track leading up to it, so after a peanut-butter sandwich or two, we decide to take the Ford for some off-roading, and drive slowly across the bumpy terrain.

The path takes us behind the hill on which the Hat is sitting, where we find a majestic green river winding through a small valley. Stop the car and go down to the bank, which turns out to be about a foot wide. Admire the view, eat an orange, and take more pictures.⁴ I feel happy here, and Flora reckons that this place is more impressive than Mesa Verde in its way. I agree, but we think this is likely to be something to do with the fact that it isn't raining. Snoop around the base of the hill

¹Photo 39

²Photo 40

³Photo 41

⁴Photos 42, 43

some more as we listen to Primal Scream (“Higher than the sun...”) and feel peaceful. Flora keeps the car in second gear all the time, but I can’t see that it makes any difference. Automatic gearboxes are strange.

Rejoin the road and drive on through the big scenery around us, covered by an equally huge sky framing the squared-off buttes in the distance.¹ Mexican Hat is a small, unimpressive town, and it’s only 4:00, so we decide to move on to see what Keyenta, the next village, is like. The scenery gets even more spectacular on the way, but we’ve now run out of film so we’ll just have to try and remember it instead.

With the light beginning to fade, we find a posh-looking lodge surrounded by sheer red cliffs. There is a tourist information office next to it, so we go inside and ask about tours, horse-riding and any other touristy activity we can take part in. Buy some postcards of the majestic scenery around us, although most of these are ruined by stupid writing saying things like “Monument Valley” or “Stupid Writing.” Move on to Keyenta, which is bigger than Mexican Hat although it only has two motels. We decide to check into the first one we see. It’s a fairly posh place, and I reckon it’s the second most expensive room so far.

After moving the stuff in from the car, I look in the dresser draws and find a clutch of guides to Las Vegas “escorts.” As I leaf through pictures of naked nubile describing themselves coyly as “dancers,” Flora latches onto the idea of hiring a male prostitute when we get to Vegas; she wants the experience of “a really experienced man.” The guides, however, are vague as to what these people actually do. They can’t *really* be dancers, can they? Prostitution in Clark County is illegal, the brochures point out, but there are licensed brothels

elsewhere in Nevada itself. All very confusing. Flora is undeterred, however, and says I can get a woman if I like — she even offers to contribute to the cost!

With lurid thoughts of steamy Las Vegas in our minds, we set off to try and find a laundrette. There is a suitable “coin-op” down the road. On the way, I notice that virtually all the houses in the town are either mobiles or prefabs, making the place feel like one huge caravan site. The laundrette is full of Navajo women and their children, and I feel conspicuous in being just about the only male in there. Buy some powder from a taciturn old woman behind the counter, and tip our stuff in to be washed. Luckily, the machines are very easy to operate. Flora has no white clothes.

Return to the motel and ask when restaurants start closing. Like Cortez, 9:00 is the culinary deadline. It’s 7:00 now, so the clock is ticking on our chances of supper. Return to the laundrette to write postcards although I feel uninspired to do so. Flora tells me I should write to Louise and Charlotte, which I do, although I can’t think of what to say. The inanity of my card to Louise is particularly awful. Laugh. Flora writes her bit at the bottom, promising a “proper” communication later. I take out the diary and fill in the day’s events, accusing Flora of not being interested in it (She never writes entries herself — something to do with being forced to write them while on holiday as a kid.) But she gives in to curiosity, and grabs it out of my hands, scanning for the good bits but appears to find none. I tell her it’s all pretty boring anyway.

With the laundry done, we buy a couple of plastic bags from the old woman and decide not to use the tumble driers but instead lay it all out in the room to dry. It should be OK by tomorrow. Off to find supper, but without a map, we don’t really know where to go. I begin to get hungry and irrational. There doesn’t seem to be anywhere to eat, and I careen the car around mercilessly to work the frustration off, Flora screaming at me to calm down. I am calm, I scream back, I *am* calm. Settle eventually on the restaurant of the Holiday Inn, which is passable, if also brightly lit and soulless. The menu is full of meat, but we manage to order custom-made “Navajo sandwiches” with refried beans and guacamole on the side. I could use a drink, and we attempt to order beer and bloody Marys, but are told by the waitress that this being a Navajo reservation, alcohol is illegal. So it’s iced-tea and water, then.

A group of middle-aged French tourists sit next to us and talk about the menu at great length.

¹Photos 44, 45

Meanwhile, *our* conversation turns again to sex and prostitution, inspired by the idea to indulge once we get to Las Vegas. We wonder about prices (it must be over \$100 for anything decent, we decide), although I could keep the cost down by not paying extra for the hallowed blow-job, since I've always thought them overrated. On a more esoteric level, I wonder if I would be able to enjoy sex if I had to pay for it, as paying the person would make me feel that they're only doing it for the money, and not for any enjoyment. But then again, there's no telling how I'll react when confronted by a hot babe.

No sales tax at the reservation, and the dreaded service charge is already included in the bill, so paying up for the meal is a simple process. We walk out of the dining room and into the gift-shop where Flora thinks she should buy some gifts, but can't think what. Various authentic-looking Indian weaponry takes her fancy, but carting five-foot spears around in the car seems impractical.

Outside in the car-park, Flora hears the sound of a cat meowing painfully and goes to investigate while I wait in the car by the service entrance to the hotel. Watch a couple of large dogs roaming about in the dark. After a while, she comes running back looking guilty and tells me to drive away quick. It emerges that she found a cat in a shed and let it out. She now worries that it may have been put in there by its owner to protect it from the dogs, snakes and coyotes that doubtless stalk the desert. We worry all the way back to the motel, but there's nothing we can do.

DAY EIGHTEEN — MONDAY MARCH 21

Up at 10:20 and make some coffee. Flora is oddly cheerful in a curtsy kind of way and wriggles about a lot. Watch what appears to be a reconstruction of the Nancy Kerrigan trial wrapped inside a chat show. The judge and jury seem real, but there's a studio audience in the room and a moustachioed anchor-man steers the proceedings around advert breaks. Strange.

Flora decides she wants to wash her hair. This, I know, will take several hours, so I take it easy, write the diary and generally potter about. Time passes by and she announces that her hair is very tangled; it'll need a good deal of combing out, which will probably extend the operation another hour or two. I write postcards and eat butter cookies from the hitherto unopened tin that Steve included in the road bag.

It gets to about midday and Flora's hair is nearing its completion. She says she's not too motivated to do much this afternoon, and in any case needs to write postcards, so I suggest I leave her somewhere after we have lunch, then go off on my own to explore. After I try unsuccessfully to ring Barclaycard about the state of my account, Flora rings the tourist office to ask about horse riding. When she eventually gets through (American 'phones are confusing), they don't give her much information other than the fact that she can turn up at any time.

Lunch at 2:00 back at the Holiday Inn (where did all the time go?) and eat a version of something we had last night. Mexican food tastes nice, but everything seems very similar after a while. Talk mutedly about return dates, ticket extensions, etc. I feel hollow, nervous now — don't want to face the thought of going back to Britain. Flora says she wants to get back on or around April 7th. OK. She seems cold and distant again and this makes me feel low. The connection between my state of mind and the way Flora behaves is something that I've got to break out of, but I can't shift a deepening sense of depression. I want to be with her, but perhaps leaving her this afternoon will help.

The atmosphere lifts slightly and we talk about why the reservation calls itself the Navajo Nation, when nationhood implies sovereignty. How much independence does it have? The guidebook is vague. Perhaps I should ask the waitress... or perhaps not.

Back to the room and ring STA about extending the tickets. This involves ringing San Francisco, then faxing copies of the paperwork to them from the office of the motel. Run back and forth between the two and eventually get the information we need (we'll have to get the actual extensions confirmed in person). Leave Flora writing post cards and watching the run-up to the

Oscar ceremonies. Let's hope Daniel gets a prize.

Head off in the car to God knows where. I suddenly feel in desperate need of a drink, and remember the bottle of vodka that Steve packed. Buy some grapefruit juice at a Circle K in town and drive off into the valley in search of a place to break Navajo law. The weather is perfect with a huge blue sky dotted with little fluffy clouds that sit motionless in the distance. The red rock formations look wonderful in the afternoon sun, which is now pleasantly warm. Drive up to a small

turn-off while listening to The Orb. The road leads into a vast, flat desert plain higher than the valley below and on which Navajo houses are scattered. The red rocks are hidden from view. The road turns into a dirt track, but there seems to be nowhere suitable to have a drink, so I turn round and rejoin the road as it winds gently down into the valley. Pretty soon, I see another track leading off into a hilly patch above. The track is a dead end that looks out over the valley. The view is about as good as I can hope for, so I break out the vodka and pour myself a big one.

Vodka and grapefruiting myself into a good mood, I marvel at how something as simple as a drink can hit that spot so well. Stand in front of the car, my ears straining to hear the vast silence that surrounds me in the slightly yellowing sunlight. Watch a clear white moon hover in an opalescent sky as the shadows lengthen around me. My mind floats out and into the void and I can feel my heart slowly beating. Pissed.

Go back to the car as the temperature starts to drop and write these diary entries. It's about 5:30. Think of Flora writing post cards. She seems to write so much in them. Mine are shallow and corny, giving nothing away. I dive into my heart and feel that this trip has been pale and emotionally broken. Perhaps I was expecting too much. Remind myself that we're only halfway through and that it could get better, indeed might even be improving right now: the pain in my chest that has been a feature of the past week or so has lifted without me noticing.

Drive on further into the valley and follow another dusty side track that seems to lead nowhere. Turn back with the sun in my eyes making huge grey cameos of the rocks ahead of me. No cars. Get back on the road into town. Seem to drive forever with vodka in my brains. REM: singing my throat out. It's 6:30 when I get back to the motel and find Flora sitting writing postcards exactly as I left her. Feel tired and slump on the bed. She doesn't ask about where I've been, and although I try to tell her, she isn't listening. The Oscars are on the TV.

After a while, Flora says she wants some soup, so we drive to the Circle K and look for some. The best they can do is pot noodles (although they deny they have these when I ask them) so we buy a couple, a grapefruit for Flora and a can of V8 for each of us. Back to the room and have these for supper. As I read the extensive list of ingredients on the side of the noodles while boiling the kettle, I see that the noodles have chicken fat in them, despite being labelled as "green vegetable" flavour. No noodles for Flora then. Should have read the labels in the shop.

The Oscars get close to the main awards and we watch these while eating our meagre supper. Flora comes out of her shell and I drink more vodka and juice. Get fairly invisible rooting for Holly Hunter, Daniel and the rest. Holly is way cool and her hair is even cooler. As if to mock my own inability to grow facial hair, every other male has either a beard or a moustache. Laugh. Daniel goes away empty-handed, but Spielberg gets his first ever Oscar as director — history today! Christian Slater looks stupid in a dinner jacket and black polo shirt. Inexplicably, most of the women wear nighties.

Chat and laugh for the rest of the evening in front of the TV. Feel much better, lighter. Flora says she can't sleep because she's been in the room all day. Talk about boys and girls and joke about things. Wind down after turning out the lights. The last thing Flora says before we go to sleep is, "If we hadn't decided to go to America, I wouldn't have tried smack." A strange statement that I don't understand, but think it best not to ask her to elaborate. Sleep.

Wake at 9:00 to the alarm. Cloudy at first, but this gives way to sun later. Make some coffee. Breakfast at the Holiday Inn with the usual oatmeal for Flora and large blueberry stack for me.

Drive into Monument Valley and the visitors' centre there. It's windy and the dust from the car park flies up into our faces. As we climb the steps to the centre, the two classic buttes that you see in all the Monument Valley pictures (and Marlboro advertisements) come into view. They look like a massive painted backdrop out there. Point these out to Flora, who seems unimpressed.

Go inside to enquire about tours (although there are hoards of jeep tour operators in the car park outside), but the centre seems fairly dead in the off-season. Buy a packet of pinon nuts ("Picked by Navajo Indians by hand") to see what they're like and find out that riding trips take place a few hundred yards down the road. Look in the visitors book and read some of the comments. There are quite a few Japanese entries, and along with the standard exclamations of awe and wonder, I see one person has written ¹ while someone else says ². On the English-speaking side, the person before us (from Montana) has written "The torn and shredded US flag should not be flown." So in the interests of balance I write, "We loved the torn and shredded US flag."

Bumble across the dirt road to the stables, where about ten horses are corralled, and ask an Indian if Flora can go for a ride. He looks pensive and says nothing at first other than asking how good she is at riding. Eventually, it turns out that he was thinking. A party has just left, and that if she's quick she can catch them up. A young Indian will be her guide, and they lasso a suitable animal (named Ace), wild-west style. With Ace saddled up and with a rusty bit in his mouth, Flora is ready to roll, and is off over the horizon almost before I can scramble to the car to get the camera. Manage a couple of shots as she waves good-bye, the famous buttes in the distance behind her.³

I'm left alone now, and the wind whirls around as if it wants to claim me for itself. It's strangely peaceful, however, despite the gusts. The smell of horses reminds me of somewhere else. Get back in the car and take the "valley drive" self-guided tour around the main valley floor. It's certainly spectacular, but there are a hell of a lot of cars and tourists along the way. The RVs nearly run me off the narrow track. I balance the camera on rocks,⁴ sprinting off to take my place on the skyline. The wind whips up the dust so much I have to stay in the car most of the time. Discover a heard of goats amongst the juniper trees, herded, it seems, by a couple of dogs who trot up to the car and look at me sadly. Feed them the last of some taco chips from the bag. Take their picture and move off.⁵

The crowds thin a bit as I get further in, but after about an hour or so the road takes me back to where I started. Every view has been so amazing, I've got the inevitable visual indigestion by the time I drive up to the ridge by the visitors' centre and head back to the stables. My watch has stopped again, but I think I may be a bit early for the rendezvous with Flora, so stop off on the way on a large plateau overlooking the valley and admire it again from the car. Sit listening to the Underground Lovers and begin to feel a rhythmic vibration. Just as I think it's getting particularly windy all of a sudden, I see the bottom of a helicopter landing what seems like only a few yards away. A couple of people get out.

Find Flora back at the stables. She's been here some time, but that's OK because she's with horses. Take pictures of them and the guides, then say good-bye and drive off a little way into the valley to take a picture of Flora.⁶

Drive on from Monument Valley to the Grand Canyon. The road is long and straight and tumbleweeds roll across our path. We hit several of these, and a massive one (tumbleweed hit No.12) sticks to our bumper. I want to carry on with it flapping over the bonnet like we're being

¹Roughly translatable as "Not very satisfactory" or "It's nothing special."

²"I got a hard-on."

³Photo 46

⁴Photos 47, 48, 49

⁵Photo 50

⁶Photos 51, 52, 53

attack by some alien creature from the planet Gordlebratt 9, but Flora pulls over and tells me to take it off.

Take a break at Tuba City for a snack at a plastic pizza joint in a shopping centre. The food takes ages to arrive, but it doesn't really bother us as we sit watching the assorted school kids playing *Mortal Kombat* and other video games. Heavy metal plays over the wire. All the girls seem to be fat, and the boys all dressed baggy with baseball caps over their close-cropped hair. Outside, the sand and dust blows fiercely. I'm hungry, but pizza and a diet coke do well enough for now.

On across the desert as I crack pinon nuts with my teeth and share them with Flora. We hit a real sand storm and the scene looks like Mars as the sun beams shine low and golden in the sky ahead of us. Yellow clouds of sand look like thick fog, but it all thins out just as I think I should take a picture. Start to climb gently into the juniper-forested landscape around the edge of the Grand Canyon and stop at a viewpoint to take our first glimpse of the thing. There certainly are a lot of people about, and we mill around the small viewing area looking out over the vastness below. The air is misty in the evening sun, but this makes for wonderful silhouettes of the canyon face. Take a couple of pictures and get cold.¹ I feel a little dazed from the driving and we say little to each other. Get back in the car and drive on to Grand Canyon Village. Juniper trees rule.

I get increasingly worried that we'll get stranded without a room as there are so many cars about. The Village is more a complex of hotels and lodges, and we drive around looking for somewhere suitable. Check out a hotel that's described in the guidebook as one of the cheapest, but are told that the whole park is booked solid. There may be some vacancies at the Yaavapai Lodge, however. Their price is \$89.00. We drive there in silence. I can't bring my mind to bear on the inevitability of having to pay almost three times more than average for one night here. Why? Is this place is in some sort of peak season?

We get to the lodge and have an argument. The man at the desk says the nearest place for alternative lodgings is Flagstaff: 80 miles away. It's 8:00, and I think seriously of driving there. Flora of course is perfectly happy to pay up. I see that driving to Flagstaff, then driving back again to meet Flora (it's perfectly simple for her: she's not budging) would be mad, so I agree to shell out. It's only money, but the Canyon better be good. The man at the desk finds all this very amusing for some reason.

The room itself is simply average and we get supper at a nearby hotel. The place is crowded and we have to give our name to the register and wait to be called for a table. I give ours as "Diesel;" the first word that pops into my head. Have a drink at the bar and write postcards while we wait. Two English girls chat at a table near to us. "Diesel party of two!" We leave to claim our place in the large dining hall. Meat is firmly on the menu as is usual in such places, although a sympathetic waiter is on our side, confiding with us that certain items are to be avoided. We go for the vegetarian omelettes, although Flora doesn't like hers. Order a pudding which is a hot apple and ice-cream thing with an amazing name that we instantly forget. It's good, it's very good, and we demolish it promptly. I get over my gloom about the crowds and the price of the room, and we chat a little about things. Decide to move on to Vegas tomorrow evening.

Flora likes the waiter, another balding camp actor-type, and fusses over the tip even more than usual (what's 15% of \$17.80?) while I fill in a customer response card, telling them to get rid of the overhead lighting. Flora thinks I'm odd about this, but it really does affect me. Between my lighting obsession and her worries about tips, we're becoming neurotic about restaurants. We must have eaten in a hell of a lot so far. Jewish women behind us talk in loud voices about marriage (Jews, I decide, are obsessed with marriage) and contraception: "It gives me a different *kind* of PMT altogether..."

The near total absence of any signs gets us completely lost on the way back to the hotel, but I sound a lot more bothered than I really am. Sounding much worse than I feel is something I wish I could control. Think it gets to Flora. Find the place eventually and write the diary while Flora takes a bath. No TV thank God.

¹Photo 54

DAY TWENTY — WEDNESDAY MARCH 23

The alarm clock goes off at 8:00 for an early start. I get dressed and wait for Flora to get up. Look at various pamphlets that we picked up at the lodge last night. Horse riding trips start at \$50 and mule rides to the bottom of the Canyon go for \$100 plus. Most of these more exotic tours are way beyond my budget, so I reckon it's a walk around the rim for me. (Around the rim!)

A podgy room cleaner knocks on the door at about 9:00. He looks like something out of a 1950's cartoon with his little hat on, and even has a comic voice to match. He apologises and says he'll come back later. This seems a fairly obvious ploy to get us all out of bed — I can hear him saying exactly the same thing in the same cutely apologetic tones to the occupants of the other rooms further down the corridor. As I wait for Flora, I read an article in the Face about the Internet and laugh at an extract from "alt.conspiracy" where someone reckons that the Korean student who tried to assassinate Prince Charles in Australia was knocked off course by a thought control ray hidden in the Prince's cufflink. Flora asks if I'm crying. I wish I was sometimes. But that's all she says, and I resign myself to another day of non-communication.

Have breakfast in the hotel's cafeteria. It's just like school as we slide our trays past plastic-wrapped offerings on chunky crockery. Young Japanese students are out in force. Flora says she wants to be left alone to write more postcards, so we go to the visitors' centre by the South Rim and arrange to meet back here at 2:00. It's about 11:00 now and we go our separate ways. I walk the short path through the juniper trees to the rim and turn right, walking with hundreds of mostly European tourists. Every so often I leave the small tarmac trail and walk out onto a ledge looking down into the canyon. It's huge. There's no fence at the edge, and I get a weird kick out of trying to control my feelings of vertigo as my toes poke out over sheer drops of hundreds of feet. Strangely enough, it's OK if I look down, but when I look out across the void in front of me so that I can't see my feet, I feel dizzy.

Chipmunks scuttle about in the rocks and eagles and other birds soar over the canyon as I walk slowly on.¹ It all starts to look the same wherever you are after a while, and after stopping in at a small visitors' centre/museum along the way, I turn back. Flora's mood is at the back of my mind all the time, and I find I can't concentrate on the scenery. If only it was something tangible; something I could understand.

There's a geology lecture at 2:30, but it's outdoors and I fancy a spell inside after all this fresh air and sunlight. Meet Flora back at the centre. She says little and doesn't ask where I've been. As for herself, she's been writing postcards somewhere. Go for a bite to eat at the hotel cafe again and discuss what we should do next. Both of us are feeling uninspired (again) and we sit in silence for long periods of time. The crowds of tourists depress me. It makes the whole place seem so sterile somehow with all these cars and RVs. Decide to set off for Vegas.

The drive is long and uneventful, and I find Flora's silence hard to bear. She plays a Galaxy 500 tape that makes me sleepy so I hand over the driving to her while I take a nap. Pretty soon I'm fast asleep as the 500's jangle on into infinity (or should that be infirmity?). Wake up as Flora pulls into a sleepy-looking gas station on Route 66 to go to the loo. I ask if she wants me to drive but she says she likes it better when I'm asleep. That's fine by me, and I try to doze off again but fail. The Galaxy 500 tape goes round for a second time and I struggle hard not to rip it out and chuck the bloody thing out of the window. Few bands have absolutely no redeeming features, but these people get mighty close. Stop hitting that *fucking* ride!

Eventually, the tape comes to an end and we continue the journey in silence. After refuelling, I take over the driving and try to make some conversation, but Flora is unresponsive. Say nothing to each other for over three hours. Darkness falls as we thunder on, and I find myself thinking aloud. I have to struggle to get the words out of my mouth, and when I do, they sound helpless

¹Photos 55, 56

and thin over the engine noise. The monotony of the road and Flora's terrible silence drives me almost to tears at one point. This is very hard for me.

We come to the Hoover Dam and I stop the car to stretch my legs and admire the place, lit up in yellow lights below us like something out of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or a lunar base in some science-fiction film. Flora is unmoved. I stand on a low concrete wall to get a better look at the eerie scene below me, and clutch the car keys in my pocket. What would happen if I just walked away from here? "Last seen at the Hoover Dam with a bad hairstyle and white jeans." Right now, I shouldn't think Flora would give a damn.

Drive on to the City That Never Sleeps and we gain an hour as we cross the boarder at the dam. Reach the outskirts at 7:30 and drive into the valley where the great city twinkles. Tinsel Town. I feel excited already. Drive on to the centre and hunt for a room. Try several places, some of which are so dingy we can't even find their offices and have to give up. All seem pricey (\$40 and up), which is strange as we'd heard you could stay here for next to nothing. The guidebook recommends the El Cortez, which looks big and posh but is in fact one of the cheapest around. The glitz of the place has made Flora start to talk, and she comments on the acres of sad-looking pensioners stuffing coins into slots as we check into the Cortez.

But now her stomach hurts. Perhaps it was those pinon nuts, she thinks. With Flora unwell, we set off to find some food (she says she can eat). I'm starving. There doesn't seem to be anywhere suitable, so we stop in at a Mexican place (perhaps not the best for delicate insides). It feels unpretentious and there seem to be lots of Hispanics about. At least the food should be authentic. I order a margarita and some cheese tamales, Flora a salad. Although mine *looks* terrible, it tastes great, and the margarita is good too. Flora, however, isn't having much of her fairly artless salad, which swims in a sea of guacamole. She looks in pain, and I find I'm worried about her for a different reason now. Pay up quickly and leave to find some medicine.

As we drive about trying to orientate ourselves, we pull up at some lights and Flora puts her head out of the window to ask a group of boys in the car next to us where the Strip is. One of them is filming out of the opposite window with a video camera. They give us directions and we drive on to the next lights. The same car pulls up beside us again and they wind down their window; "If you're going to drive up the Strip, you'll need to turn your lights on!" The streets here are so bright, I'd forgotten to switch them on. We thank them and make a right to get onto the famous road down the centre of Las Vegas.

The traffic is amazing: near gridlock, and we crawl up the Strip at a snail's pace. At least there's plenty of time to admire the illuminations and the newly built attractions in front of Treasure Island and the Dunes. Flora has more pains, but there's no sign of a chemist around here. As we reach the end of the road, I turn around and we head back to the hotel, stopping along the way at "The World's Largest Gift Shop" to buy some Milk of Magnesia. Park in the hotel's carpark and lug the bags into the room. Exhausted. Watch some TV and seep.

DAY TWENTY-ONE — THURSDAY MARCH 24

Wake up after a noisy night and shouts from a neighbouring room at about 8:00. Lie awake and listen to the sound of the maid knocking on doors further down the corridor. When she eventually makes it to our room she comes straight in without knocking, then quickly retreats as I sit up in bed. Flora wakes up soon afterwards and I ask her how her stomach is. She replies with the words "what's the point?" before telling me that her stomach seems OK. Cryptic. I think it's raining outside. Hope Flora is talking to me today; something tells me she is.

Decide to stay in this place for another night and try to ring the front desk. Wait for ages for them to pick up the phone before they tell us to come down there in person. This we do, eventually, after waiting for Flora's morning routine to end. A friendly concierge books us in for tomorrow.

After going downstairs to the cavernous casino, we find the hotel restaurant, but a lengthy queue

of unsavory-looking blue rinses puts us off. The guidebook says Circus Circus is the best place for cheap food, so we head for there. Join the queue and collect our tickets for the all-you-can-eat cafeteria extravaganza (\$2.99). I fill my pink plastic plate with mounds of standard-issue gut block. Flora is still worried about her stomach and doesn't eaten much while I stuff myself stupid. Our waiter is called E.T. (according to his name plate) and looks about 60 years old. "What can I do you for?" he asks, waiting for our reply. I take a while to work out what he means, but Flora beats me to it and realises he wants to know what we're drinking. I ask for a milk, Flora needs coffee. He's a cutey and we like him.

We sit in the studied tackiness of the dining hall drinking endless coffees and chatting about what we can do here. Read the guidebook and Flora makes frequent trips to the loo. I see a sign advertising lessons in poker, roulette and other games. We get keen on the idea of learning how to play one of these (who knows, we might even lose lots of money!), but see that lessons are given from 9:00am to 12:00. It's almost 1:00. Not sure where we should go, but reckon Caesar's Palace should be seen.

Leave the dining room and get caught up in the place. The ranks of slots never end, and we wander through them aimlessly. The main area is enclosed by an apparently fully-functional circus big top, kitted out for trapeze artists and the rest. Decide we should see one of the "free circus acts" performing every fifteen minutes here, and take our seats in front of a small stage under a safety net. While we wait, two video screens on either side of the stage show constant images of indulgence: roulette, swimming, exotic food, slinky women... After a

while, the performance gets underway and a hairy-chested unicyclist accompanied by his leggy assistant bounce around in front of us doing various unicycle-related stunts as jaded musicians hammer out the customary boom-bash-tarrah. Meanwhile, the video screens keep playing.

Little interested in the gambling downstairs, we walk up to the second level where various fair-ground games can be played for prizes. After several unsuccessful attempts at grabbing teddies with robot claws, we move on to a stall where the object is to get a ball into an angled wicker basket. It looks deceptively simple, and it is! I'm a winahhhh! Feel ecstatically happy and receive my prize — a small grey elephant. Don't feel like pushing my luck, so we go for a drink at a revolving bar overlooking the casino. Although the bar must be moving at about 1mph, Flora says it makes her feels sick. Flora is the Queen of Motion Sickness.

I decide to name my elephant "Nostromo" for no particular reason, and Flora gets into alternately cuddling then beating him up. We think this must say something very revealing about her psyche, but can't think what. I realise I'm feeling good and I'm having fun. This is what it was meant to be like.

Go back out to the car and find that we're parked in the hotel's registration car-park: "15 minutes maximum stay." We must have been here for over four hours. Nobody seems to mind, however, and we drive off to Caesar's Palace where there are more slots¹ and this time some shopping in the Roman mall. The clothes shops are all too middle-aged for Flora, but there are plenty of other places to wander about in. Look at a demonstration of fluffy animals that seem real if you stick your hand up their bottom. We try one for ourselves and do passable imitations of inquisitive ferrets. At a jewelry/art shop, Flora finds a bracelet she likes the look of. It's \$3,100 so she tries it on. I think it looks a bit too big, but the South American smoothie behind the counter enthuses about it wonderfully ("It's you!" he says, with a flawless grin). She'll have to wait until we win a jackpot.

Chat for a while with the Smoothie and look at the laughably overpriced art on display. Admire a bronze male nude with lovingly-crafted genitals for \$10,000. Further on, we examine a plastic plant tucked away in a corner near Cleopatra's Barge and decide that it's definitely cannabis. Strange. Take pictures of Flora posing by statues around a fountain and she of me standing by the full-sized replica of Michelangelo's David.² Stop in for a margarita and a fruit juice at a small bar in the mall which turns out to be pretty awful. Write rude comments on the customer response

¹Photo 57

²Photos 58, 59

card that comes in with the bill.

We decide to leave Caesar's and walk down the Strip to see the volcanic eruption outside the Mirage Hotel. The flames and smoke are much smaller than I remember they were last year, and Flora mentions this to a woman standing near us who agrees that they were much bigger a few months ago. We go inside the hotel to complain, but the bell boy is adamant that nothing has changed. Maybe they do the full monty on the hour, in which case we can wait another ten minutes to find out. Flora pops into the loo, but once inside decides to do her make up, so we miss the on-the-hour show too....

We like the Mirage better than Caesar's, mainly because it's got lots of plants and feels like you're in a jungle. Wedge ourselves into a bar where a cheesy Latin American band with frilly sleeves are tootling away with big grins on their faces. Get a "show guide" and leaf through it to see if there are any strip clubs we can go to. Everything looks pretty anodyne, although some of the shows at 10:30 are advertised as topless. Flora asks if I'd like to see one of these, but after thinking about it, the idea of topless dancers doesn't really bake my cake: at the end of the day it's only a parade of tits

wobbling about in time to tacky music.

Getting hungry, and I like the sound of "Oh No Tokyo," an appallingly-named sushi restaurant mentioned in the show guide. According to the map, it's only just up the road, so we set off on foot. Get lost, so we ask some valet parkers where it is. It turns out we'll have to walk about five miles, and in any case, they say there's a better Japanese place nearer by (only three miles!). So we trudge back to the car to see if we can find "Hamada's." When we get there it's pure Vegas chic, with a Chinesey exterior and kimono-clad waitresses inside speaking Japanese with American accents. We ask to see the menu, but everything has fish in it, and while Flora reckons there'll be something she can eat, I decide against the idea.

See what else we can find and spot a good ol' British Tandoori restaurant. It's a big place on two levels, but it's deserted. Ethnic restaurant number two to get shafted by the punters, it seems. We go upstairs and sit underneath a large Mogul tent ceiling. Order some veggie dishes and chow down. The waiters, most of whom seem to be from Bradford, say that they get a lot of English people here.

We chat merrily and get onto the subject of when we think we were first sexually aware. I can't really remember, but hazard a guess at age six or seven, although it could have been significantly earlier. The trouble is, I can't easily pin down my early memories of sexual experiences on what age I was when I had them, largely because I only labelled such experiences as "sexual" later on. But it seems that Flora was always aware of what was going on in her trousers, and reckons she's been conscious of her sexuality more or less from *birth*, which I suppose is possible, although she won't say exactly how she knows this.

The subject abruptly changes to discussing the idea of getting one of these "dancers" who come up to your room and offer "services." I've picked up some more leaflets on the Strip, and these combined with the stuff from Keyenta should provide us with a good selection of telephone numbers to ring. Flora says she's not in the mood for sex with her stomach the way it is. Simply falling asleep in the arms of some rented beefcake will be enough for this evening, she says. We leave the restaurant undecided about going through with the idea, and drive downtown to see if we can find any groovy strip clubs while we make up our minds. It's 11:00 already.

See a "topless cocktail lounge," but that's about it. Maybe we're in the wrong area, so we decide to go back to the room and try some numbers. I peruse the photos of luscious bodies and can't decide which one I should call, so Flora chooses one for me at random. I ring her number and get the low-down: "Totally nude and in your own room — \$100 per hour." The woman on the other end isn't "her," but I'm assured "she" can be with me in thirty minutes for a "no-obligation consultation" before we get down to anything. I agree to this, and she takes my details, calling me "sweetie" and "honey cakes" as she does so.

After she calls back to check the number, we wait, both of us getting progressively more up tight. It seems that Flora hadn't expected me to go through with this, and begins to imagine all sorts of

nightmare scenarios involving Mafia bosses, hitmen and organised crime. Anyway, what is she going to do while I'm enjoying the "dancing"? She makes me as apprehensive as she is, but I can't deny I'm pretty excited too. Look at the woman's picture and wonder whether it'll actually be her who turns up. I could be butt-naked with the woman of my dreams within the hour! Las Vegas! But it's a pity that Flora didn't choose one with a full-length photo. This one just has the woman's face and one of her breasts in the picture. We turn on the TV to diffuse the tension, but

it hardly works. The minutes tick by and Flora checks the clock every so often. The slightest sound outside gives us the wobbles.

Suddenly there's a knock at the door. Flora bounces up and down on the bed and tells me to look out of the window to check for guns n' Mafiosi before I open it. I do, but can't see anyone. The woman is unaccompanied and seems nothing like the girl in the photo to me: she *is* blonde, but short, in her thirties and, well... round. I feel an immediate anticlimax to all the frenzied expectation, and immediately start to worry about how I'm going to pull out of the deal without causing any damage.

She sits down on the bed and immediately rings her office to tell them that she's here. It looks like Flora's presence is a problem; I'd told them I'd be the only person present. I try to explain that Flora won't of course be here for the business, but then she says it'll be \$150 for the first hour. I enquire about the dancing, and she says there's a limit to how long you can dance for... anything else will be extra as tips. So in other words \$150 is a call-out charge. I tell her they said \$100 to me, and we ring the office again. They stick with \$150, so I stonewall, handing the receiver back to her. After a brief conversation with the office, during which she mysteriously says "No, no, absolutely not," we agree that it can't work out and she flounces off. I couldn't have got it on with her anyway.

Flora thinks she was angry that we'd got her out here for nothing, but I think she must be used to it. I'm now keen for Flora to get a bloke up here, but she points out it's really too late at night for her to fulfil her side of the bargain, even if she was in the mood, so we bed down. A lethal cocktail of sex-charged adrenaline running around my brain prevents me from getting to sleep for a long time. Wish I'd got something now.

DAY TWENTY-TWO — FRIDAY MARCH 25

Sleep badly and wake up groggy as the maid comes through the door at 8:30 again ("Oh, sorry!"). I'm sure it's raining outside; splashes as cars drive by in the street below. Doze until 10:00.

Flora wants to order a room-service breakfast. I saw a menu yesterday, but can't find it now. Remember we have to ring Hertz about extending the car rental, which expires today. Flora rings them and immediately hits problems. Hertz in London told her she could extend the rental without going back to get a new car in LA. It now seems that we can't do that, and will have to return the car for a new one at the place where we originally rented it. So it looks like we have no choice; we have to go back to LA... today. Curse the London office for telling Flora a sackful of lies, but there's nothing we can do in the face of Hertz intransigence. Looks like we won't be able to avoid missing the 3:30pm return deadline today, so will have to pay an hourly penalty. Decide to have breakfast, then hit the road to LA. It's about a five hour drive, so we should be there by early evening.

We don't fancy another all-you-can-eat, so drive off to find the Golden Nugget Casino, recommended in the guidebook as worthwhile — it serves breakfast all day. We find the restaurant eventually after getting lost in the casino area, but it's a nice place: the tasteful green decor is not at all Vegas, and the atmosphere puts us both at ease after this morning's hassle. As if by magic, the menu is tailor-made for Flora, who orders their "health breakfast" of granola, poached eggs on spinach (her favourite vegetable), wholemeal toast and fresh fruit with OJ. The perfect breakfast! Lounge about until about 2:00 then decide we should get going. As we leave, I spot the fattest man I think I've ever seen in the flesh, sitting a couple of tables

away from us. He's even bigger than the whale of Santa Fé.

The journey to LA is uneventful. Flora drives most of the way on the understanding that I'll take over once night falls. Marvel at the lack of signs on the freeways. America has a problem with this, and unless you have a very detailed map (which we don't), you're bugged. Why aren't there any signs to LAX? It starts to rain.

After the obligatory stop-and-ask-an-inarticulate-American routine, we discover the Hertz return centre and check the car back in. We've driven 3,274 miles in it. Go to the office to book another car until April 8th. The bureaucracy is a strain, and we are both pretty weary after the drive. They give us a choice of colours and I go for red. This seems to concern Flora greatly; she says she doesn't like red, but I reckon the alternative (blue-green) is worse. Strange that we should start arguing about this now.

The barney blows over as fast as it arrived, and we move the stuff out of the old car and into the new. It's a good mess, with tapes hidden in all sorts of crevices — thankful that we brought a torch. Nearly forget the Fork Fly, Sedona Rock and Taos Chilli in the door compartment. The new car is actually the old one turned inside out: a red exterior with silvery-grey insides.

Set off for Mum and Dad's place and find it after much guesswork. The folks are out, but Steve is there to greet us. Make ourselves some supper and sit in the kitchen reflecting on the fact that we never thought we'd be in LA when we woke up this morning. Feel peaceful here at Castle Bates.

Read some mail that has arrived for me while we've been away. Naoko has written me a letter after we saw her at Venice Beach before we left, and I feel guilty that I haven't written her more post cards. Britain shoves its ugly head through my holiday window in the form of a Council Tax demand for £670.00. Money. This quarter's telephone bill is £99. More money.

Fix some drinks and relax in the study until Mum and Dad come back from their party. Talk to them enthusiastically about our trip so far (although I forget to tell them about our experiences with the hooker last night). They agree it would have been "miserable" if we'd split up in Taos. I feel glad we've come back here to touch base — I haven't been in contact much since we left. Decide to carry on from here up the coast and from there to Reno, etc. Now we know when we're due to return, dates become easier to handle.

DAY TWENTY-THREE — SATURDAY MARCH 26

I get up at about 9:00 after a deep sleep broken only by helicopters and barking dogs in the early hours next door. Dress and find Dad sitting in the study. Not much to say — he seems pensive. Have some breakfast.

Upstairs, Flora is still asleep and I spy on her from the bedroom doorway. She's lying on her back with her mouth open and looks thirty years older. Decide not to wake her. It's 10:00. Mum is out in the garden and the weather is sunny but cool.

Play about on the parents' computer and read bits from classic works of literature on CD-ROM. Albert Finney reads me a passage from "Paradise Lost," and I get caught up in technology's spell. Back to the room and find Flora washing. Mum wants me to sort out various computer things, so we plug away at these until I worry that Flora might be getting bored. I check up on her and she says she isn't.

Have lunch with Mum and Dad and try to decide where exactly we should head for next. We decide on Ojai (pronounced *oh-hai*) near Santa Barbara because it's small and sounds nice. Pack up the car in a hurry as it's 2:00 and I want to get going. Once we get out of the metropolis of LA, the scenery by the coast is relaxing and

refreshingly small-scale. Very unlike the frontier Big Country we've been through recently. I feel happy.

Ojai looks nice; countryfied but also slightly suburban. The weather is good. Check into a scruffy motel (the El Camino Lodge) and the fat, elderly woman at the desk tells Flora she has wonderful hair. They only have one room left "but it isn't one of the best." There's been a family living in it for

a couple of months recently, she says. We agree to have a look at it first and find it's predictably scruffy. Flora doesn't like the smell and says it reminds her of aeroplanes so she feels sick. I don't mind it, in fact I quite like the smell of aeroplanes as I associate it with going to exotic places.

Back in the office, I ask the woman if she'll take \$35.00 rather than the \$40.00 she was asking. After not much hesitation, she succumbs to my ruthless bargaining powers. Wonder if I could have got it down to \$30.00. Unload the car while Flora complains about the smell some more, opening up all the doors and windows, although I doubt that will do anything. I have a go at making the TV work, and with the aid of Miranda's penknife to strip the coax and screw it into position, manage to get a pretty good picture.

Decide to have a look at Santa Barbara. Flora thinks we should have stayed there instead when the guidebook tells her there are rooms for \$35. With such a posh reputation, we'd assumed it would be too expensive. Feel miffed that we didn't look at the book this morning. The book also mentions an indie-rock club there that sounds interesting. Drive the 35 miles to Santa Barbara along the 101 freeway, although we try, and fail, to take a more scenic route.^[JJ1]

Once we arrive we make a random motion through the largely unsigned roads until we find ourselves driving up what looks like a main street of some kind. State Street — it's even on the map! Park at one end and wander down to see what's happening. This place feels nice, with lots of shops, restaurants and youth on the streets. Bit like Flagstaff only sleeker, not too touristy either. I remember that Wayne from the Dead gig in Phoenix said that he liked to hang around in Santa Barbara.

After checking out the cinema (Green Papayas anyone?), we wander further down to look at some junk shops. I reckon most of the stuff belongs to dead people, as it all seems to be the sort of thing your grandparents might have had. Look at some trinkets in a cabinet and spot a US army Zippo lighter from Vietnam with the words "Live by chance, Love by choice, Kill by profession" engraved on it. Flora likes this a lot and thinks maybe she should buy it to give to someone. The shopkeeper tells her it'll be about \$70. I think that's pretty steep for a 1960's petrol Zippo. You can get them new for about \$20. Flora says she'll think about it, and as we leave the shop, she's still thinking.

Plod up the street looking for a place to eat. After much looking and getting lost on crappy directions, we discover a suitable veggie place around the corner from where we parked the car. Put our name on the waiting list (Diesel again) and sit down to read the Santa Barbara Independent. See ads for a couple of interesting-looking clubs, although we're not sure what "house techno funk" would be like. Eat gado-gado and salad. The loo has a blackboard in it on which someone has written, "If God put me on this earth to accomplish a special task, then I'm so far behind I might never die!" I contribute that John Cooper-Clark haiku¹ because it's the only thing I can think of on the spur of the moment.

Read a ridiculously scathing review of Schindler's List in the SB Independent (calls it "a cartoon"), then set off to find some groovy clubs. Driving down State Street, I notice a familiar figure — it's

Wayne! With his rucksack, guitar case and dog-on-a-string, I see him coming out of a restaurant. We flag him down, and he recognises us from Phoenix. He suggests we park the car somewhere and "burn one." Directing us to a suitable place down the road, he meets us there a few moments later. Anchoring the dog outside the car looking lonely, we get inside after a brief chat and light up. Not being able to wind the windows down, we hardly need to pass the thing around. Wayne's in a lively mood, and rambles enthusiastically about where we should go up the coast, etc. After a while, the conversation changes to his philosophy of life, and he describes his existence as an itinerant musician/rebel living on the edge of society but not from it. He prides himself on his independence from the state, and says he has only three needs and three wants in life: the needs are food, clothing and shelter, the wants being music, marijuana and women. "The only reason why those two come first is that they don't fuck with my head as much as women do." Fair enough. The topic having turned to women, he begins to come on to Flora in a cheeky way that I find pretty amusing considering he must assume we're a couple. "I'm totally unique, I'm totally

¹To express yourself / In seventeen syllables / Is very diffic.

unlike *him...*” he says, jerking his thumb in my direction.

He admits he’s pretty stoned, but knows what he’s talking about. Living on the streets obviously makes you pretty defensive, and he’s convinced that the authorities are just looking for an excuse to put him in jail or otherwise oppress him. “Pretty soon they’ll be putting people like me in concentration camps, man! But you know what? I’m ready to die. I can handle it, death doesn’t frighten me, man, no way.” His eyes stare like daggers. “I’m not ready to die...” says Flora, weakly.

The joint now finished with, we decide to make a move, and ask him about suitable places to go around here. He recommends a “punk” place a few blocks away, and in our none too lucid state of mind, we repeat the directions to each other like a mantra so as not to forget them. Say good-bye to him at the corner of the street and walk off in the general direction of the place, chanting like a pair of Tibetan monks.

I tell Flora I liked Wayne. He’s the same age as me, but living a life I can hardly relate to — a noble man with pure ideals and a simple view of life, uncluttered by the oppression of the twentieth century.... Flora says she thought he was going to kill us. It seems that the fact that she said little in the car was not a sign of wrapped attention, but abject terror. She thought his speech about being ready to die was a prelude to him producing a shotgun and blowing us all away. I decide the dope must be making her paranoid, and assure her that he’s as gentle as a lamb. Just a little intense is all.

By this time we’re well lost, but manage to find the club eventually. Hang around outside the entrance and look in at the studenty types inside listening to nondescript grunge. Decide it’s not for us and wander off back to the car. Maybe we can find something better if we drive about. Step off the curb outside the club and begin to cross the street, but a passing police van pulls up next to us. “Cross at the corner, please.” What? We’re only about five yards away from it!

Suddenly, Flora is convinced that a black youth we’ve passed is now following us. She pinches my arm and makes me speed up without attracting attention. After a few seconds of frantic pacing, I sneak a look behind us and see that there’s nobody there. I tease her about being stoned again and we giggle a lot. Get back into the car and cruise about looking for other places until parking behind a likely-looking venue that Flora spotted earlier. I struggle with my money belt at the door to find my passport as ID, almost having to

strip to the waist in the process. Inside, there’s a long queue for the loos. I see a service door leading out into a darkened yard and ask a youth standing near me if I can take a leak out there. Shock, horror, “No way dude! You’ll get cited for sure!” Americans follow the rules, it seems.

As Flora waits her turn in the slow-moving women’s queue, I take a look around the small but not too crowded bar. An interesting mix of people: “alternative” trendies and students mix with weirdoes and the middle-aged. One moustachioed man at the bar is wearing a blazer, bow tie and a boater. He keeps a horrible cheesy grin on his face that makes me wince. Buy drinks and sit at a table in a corner. Flora says she feels “like a stuffed blanket.” Chat sporadically about Wayne and explore our completely different impressions of him. I finish my bottle of Anchor Steam and find an almost full one sitting across from us on the table, so I drink that too, filtering out the cigarette ash between my teeth. Sit blankly and say little for the rest of the evening until we decide to leave.

Although I’m now in a state of quite advanced refreshment, we manage to find the 101 pretty easily via a sign that says only “freeway,” and drive back to Ojai. Back in the room, Flora decides she hates the smell so badly that she can’t bring herself to walk on the carpet in bare feet for fear of contamination. There are ants in the bathroom too, she says. I think to myself that there are also probably birds in the trees, but that doesn’t seem to worry her. The TV advertises sex lines and we think about ringing one. Too tired. It’s 3:00am already. Argue about who should turn out the lights, the TV and the fridge, which hums away loudly. I refuse, pointing out that I always do these things. It’s Flora’s turn, but she won’t do it, and does her I’m A Sleepy Doe-Eyed Girlie routine. I can’t be bothered to argue.

10:30 and the phone rings: "There was a 'phone call for you, but they hung up." Well, we're awake now. I feel clear-headed and rested; not groggy as I'd expected to be. Flora too is surprisingly animated for so early in the morning. Says she hates the shower.

Check out and drive into Ojai. The weather is wonderful, and bikers abound. Eat in a pleasant pinewood restaurant still serving breakfast and chat about where we should go and what route to follow before having to be back in LA to return the car. After much indecision, we think it best to book a room in Yosemite now, as at least we know it'll be the last place we go before LA. I spend ages at a payphone inside the restaurant, feeding it with about \$5 worth of quarters before I manage to book just about the last available room in the area (the park itself is full) for April 6th.

Off to Santa Barbara, this time managing to avoid the freeway for the winding scenic route through the hills. Orange groves line the road as we drive out of town, and we stop in at one of these, finding an empty hut in a clearing a few yards down from the gate. It looks like some sort of office. Nobody seems to be about so we get out to pick some of the fruit, which looks extra inviting against the dark green leaves. They're pretty acidic, but sweet enough to eat. I pose for a photo.¹

Further up the road, we see signs for a "Renaissance Festival." We'd seen this advertised in the Santa Barbara Independent, and recall Flora's brother's descriptions of a similar festival when he was in this part of the world in the 1970's. Weird Americans obsessed with things European! Silly costumes! Hash cakes! We join a short queue of cars and pay a \$5 entrance fee to the car-park, followed by another \$5 for the festival itself.

The event is being staged on the banks of a large boating lake on which a small mock Spanish galleon sails with the aid of two large outboard motors. It fires off incredibly loud cannon blasts (we can feel the shock-waves) at a group of suitably-dressed people who run up and down the shore, falling down dead every time the cannon fires.² After watching this bizarre sight for a while, I wonder whether they're the ones who've got the hash cakes. The "festival" itself isn't so much as festival as a market with a collection of stalls selling a mixture of Dungeons And Dragons equipment (mainly utterly brutal knives and swords), new-age jewellery and hippy crafts. Most people seem to be dressed in clothes from a period between 1400 and 1850. Flora buys a hair garland made from dried flowers and tiny black roses. She looks pretty, and with her long black dress making her look like a medieval sorceress anyway, blends in pretty well.

Cruise about and take in the scene as the sun beats down. A woman on a stall selling jewellery has a live snake around her waist. It looks very smooth and brown. "Queen Elizabeth" and her entourage cruise about too and seem to be taking it all pretty seriously, speaking in a sort of Shakespearean English and laughing a lot. Take a few pictures and Flora thinks the Queen is in fact a man.³ Buy a straw sun-hat but soon find it won't stay on Flora's head. Have a beer, cruise some more and inspect the terrifyingly functional knives, swords and other weapons on sale.

It turns 4:30, so we head off into Santa Barbara and park down by the beach. Crowds of strollers and roller-bladers mill about as artists display the customary bad art for loony prices. We walk up the pier and look at gift-shops. Even seaside piers in the States aren't pedestrian precincts, so we have to dodge cars until we get to the car park three-quarters of the way up. Flora's been teasing me about my hair, which is in it's Ted Danson phase while I'm growing it long again. I wonder if I can find a hat.

Look out at the sea over the rails, watching seagulls drift around us as a bubble machine blows clouds of bubbles around us. Decide to stay here for the night as it looks interesting. After driving about and looking briefly at a Motel 6, we find the State Street Hotel: a nice-looking place by the beach which is mysteriously cheap at \$40, and that includes a free breakfast. We have a look at the room, and I toy with the idea of trying on some bargaining, but decide against it. Bounce up and down on the rather short beds and check out the shared bathrooms and toilet up the corridor. Flora shows me how to use the paper loo-seat covers provided in a special dispenser in the toilet.

¹Photo 60

²Photo 61

³Photos 62, 63, 64

I can't recall seeing such things before, and it looks a great idea. The tutorial goes straight to my bowels, so I settle in for a practical.

Get the stuff out of the car and relax in the room to write the diary while Flora watches TV ("Peggy Sue Got Married"). She sings softly to herself every so often. The film gets boring and we move off to find supper. Ask where we should go at the desk, but soon realise we can't remember what the woman there tells us. Walk off in the general direction she describes, anyway. Flora says she wants to eat mussels, but aren't they animals? We reckon they're probably not.

Most of the places we find down by the harbour are viciously expensive, and there doesn't look like there will be much else, so after walking a hell of way from the car, we turn back and get mobile. The full moon is wonderfully large and bright, floating above the smooth black water in the harbour, it's reflection twinkles idyllically beneath it, but Flora isn't interested.

We eventually find a place and join the queue for a table (registering under the name of "Snark"). It's cavernous interior is hung with old sea-fishing equipment, and it's probably about as expensive as the other places, but they sell mussels, so what the hell. Flora orders one pound of these in garlic and white wine sauce. I go for the calamari and clam chowder. It's OK, but nothing amazing. Still, we chat a little and I eavesdrop on the double date at the table next

door. Their conversation seems amazingly boring. After a while, we're both stuffed. Flora feels bloated and fat, but won't believe me when I tell her she isn't overweight. My watch says it's 9:30, and we seem to be the only people left. The place was packed out when we arrived at 8:00 — where has everyone gone?

Flora says she feels tired and stuffed and isn't in the mood for night life, so we head back to the room. I get her a copy of *Harpers and Queen* to read from the lobby, and write the diary. Watch "Jaws" on TV later on. Sleep.

DAY TWENTY-FIVE — MONDAY MARCH 28

The woman at the desk told Flora that a train passes through at 7:30 at night, then at 11:00 in the morning. In fact, there seems to be a train about once every couple of hours. The crossing bells clang tunelessly for ages before, during and after each train passes by on the railroad that runs only a few yards behind the hotel. Consequently, neither of us get much sleep.

While Flora gets into her morning routine, I get onto the telephone in the foyer in order to cancel our flights prior to re-booking them with STA for a later date. Again, the operation seems to cost about \$5 in the end as I try to find out what Virgin's number actually is.

Ask the woman at the desk if we're too late for our free breakfast. It's 11:30, and not surprisingly, breakfast is off. I try and sweet-talk her into providing something, and mention the trains, the lack of sleep, and other things off the top of my head involving recent tragic accidents to baby kittens until she gives in and says she'll see what she can do. After while, she returns with a basket of sticky apple buns which I take triumphantly up to the room.

Get Flora out just in time before the cleaning women start to hassle me, and go downstairs to eat the buns and drink weak coffee from a percolator by the front desk. Read magazines put out neatly on the table until we both feel sufficiently awake to get out and do something. We'll have to find a fax to send STA copies of our tickets again, but the hotel "can only receive."¹ They tell us where a Staples office stationers is, and we manage to get effortlessly lost even though it is in fact only a short distance away from the hotel. Once at Staples, we do the business with the tickets, booking our return flight for Tuesday 12th April.

Flora's been reading the guidebook, and reckons we should go to Lompoc next. It's got beaches and maybe hot springs on the way. Before we set off, however, we think we should have another look around the shops on State Street. I want to buy a hat, so we use this as an excuse to tour the

¹Ho ho — This is a Gary Numan lyric from "Cars."

boutiques. Find an alternative T-shirt shop that sells usable caps, and I ponder the inevitable baseball-or-alternative cap dilemma, eventually deciding for the floppy rasta tam sub-option. Flora says it looks OK, but I have my doubts. Maybe I'll get used to it.

Drive on to Lompoc wearing my new acquisition. The journey takes us past rolling hills with cows on one side, and beaches close by on the other. Stop off at El Refugio State Beach to see what's there, the book calling it "one of the prettiest beaches in the State." It's OK, but nothing special. The sand is grey and there's a lot of old seaweed lying about. The tide must come in very far. A small beach tent made of palm fronds stands looking out to sea, and we sit on a picnic bench under the shade of the trees and survey the scene. A group of surfers splash about on the modest waves. I find a mussel on the sand and try to prize it open with Miranda's penknife.

Flora wants to be left alone, so we decide to split up and meet back at the picnic bench in a couple of hours. She walks off down to a rocky outcrop further down the beach while I take a parallel route across the dunes above her. Get to the top of a sandy cliff looking

down on the sea and rocks below. The whole place is covered in sage bushes, and the smell wafts around me pleasantly in the sea breeze. An oil-taker glides across the horizon. As I stand on the edge of the cliff, I can see the stratified rocks jutting out of the sand at 45° angles. Their brown and yellow layers make them look like huge Liquorice Allsorts. Suddenly, I see Flora walking below me, and step quickly back from the edge, hoping she didn't see me.

I remember Flora telling me that Americans don't pee outside, and there are two men wandering around in the sage some distance behind me. With only my top half visible, I pretend I'm looking out to sea. Return to the edge and look cautiously about for signs of Flora. She seems to have gone, so I decide to climb down the sandy cliff face to the Allsort rocks. The journey is steeper than it looks, and I very nearly fall: that feeling of trying to stop yourself, then realising that there's probably nothing you can do but minimise the impact. Just as I swing my rucksack out in front of me in an attempt to use it to break my fall, I suddenly find my footing. Looking at those angled rocks, it could have been a nasty fall, but at least it would have made the insurance payments worth it...

As I pick my way across the crags, a small boy comes up to me and asks if I want to see "all the weird things" he's found. He takes me further up the beach to see large purple sea-urchins and strange slimy balls hiding under rocks. He shows me that if you put your finger into these balls they squirt out little jets of water. Hmmm. I tell him that some people eat sea-urchins, then hope he doesn't try it. The ones I've had in Japan are much smaller and these probably aren't the edible kind — but what's one less American kid anyway?

Walk back after the boy's father meets us and tells him it's time to go. Find Flora sitting at the picnic bench looking sunny in her straw hat with the Renaissance garland attached to it. On the way back to the car, we buy cans of V8 and a bag of pretzels at a general store for campers, then hit the road for Lompoc.

Deciding against going to the hot-springs, we take a detour to see if we can find ex-President Reagan's ranch up in the hills. The guidebook says it's there somewhere. The road takes us pretty high as it winds up through olive trees and past numerous ranch-like places with no names at the gates. We get to what we think is the summit, and try and guess which place it could be. I don't suppose they'd be advertising the fact, so we turn around and wend our way back down. The view is nice, and the sun filtering through the trees over the road is relaxing.

Arrive in Lompoc and check in at a cheap motel there. The owner says he's French (Flora says she can hear his accent, but he sounds pretty American to me) and that he's had it with living in the States. Too much crime and guns, he says, so he's thinking of going back to Europe. England maybe. He says that most people stay at his motel for months on end. One family has been here for over four years. He takes us to the room which I admit smells vaguely of urine and heavy living. Flora opens the windows wide. Watch a TV program on the life of Jesus and I write the diary.

I start to feel weak with hunger, having only had a couple of buns and some pretzels today, but Flora isn't hungry. We watch until the end of the documentary on Jesus (which I think is blatant

Christian propaganda), then decide to make a move. Find a barbecue restaurant in town that looks OK, although the barren lighting makes me feel uncomfortable, putting me in a difficult mood. Not surprisingly, the menu isn't very sympathetic to vegetarian tastes. We're directed to a spinach salad, which sounds nice until Flora sees it comes covered in bacon dressing. She manages to order a portion of potato skins, but

this too arrives covered in bacon bits, although the waitress soon fixes that. I have a teriyaki chicken burger. A little kid at the table in front of us twists round in his chair and stares at us for most of his meal. He has a nice line in sneering expressions which makes us laugh. I suddenly realise I'm still wearing my hat, and feel stupid. We talk about why things must have reasons. Why can't humans do things simply because they have fun doing them, rather than everything having to be linked in some way to genetically-constructed survival instincts or deep-rooted socialisation patterns n' stuff?

Back to the room and I'm feeling strangely discontent and frustrated in some way. Maybe it's the room, or Flora, or both. Drink much vodka and grapefruit although Flora doesn't want to join me. Watch the last half of "JFK." She stares at the screen blankly, the story only seeming to hold half her attention.

After JFK finishes, I'm feeling fairly invisible. Flora sits on her bed and reads the guidebook. After a while, she summons me to come and think about the course of the next few days. Reno looks increasingly like a big detour from San Francisco just to see a man with a moustache. We could extend the car hire, or we could miss Reno out entirely so as to have a good look at Yosemite. Either way, it doesn't look like we can do justice to all the things along the Big Sur that are on offer. Decide that we should at least ring the Moustache tomorrow to find out if he's going to be in when we plan to be in town. Go to bed unsure of how we'll cover the next ten days, but I think to myself that I quite like the idea of drift. Maybe it's the vodka.

DAY TWENTY-SIX — TUESDAY MARCH 29

Flora has a restless night while I sleep soundly, eventually being woken up when she shouts something from the bathroom. My immediate reaction is to think that something is wrong, and I leap out of bed half asleep, my heart pounding. It seems she's just having trouble with the shower.

By the time she emerges, I'm packed up and ready to go. Open the door to another bright and airy morning, although the TV weather forecast predicts haze and fog for later. Drive off to find a place to eat, and settle on a twee but boring plastic restaurant with an elderly waitress who for some reason Flora thinks is mad. I can't see anything strange, and I think she's just having a paranoia flashback. The menu has a "seniors" section for customers over 55. Strange. Sometimes I feel as if we've eaten and slept our way across America; here we are in yet another restaurant drinking "unlimited refill" OJ with pancakes and oatmeal. Again.

We have to cover some ground today, and the guidebook recommends Cambia, from where we can see Hearst Castle, the legendary mansion of William Randolph Hearst, the real-life Citizen Kane. Set out on the 101^[JJ2] along the coast and admire the shoreline on the way. Stop off for a pee at a hotel overlooking the clear blue sea as it crashes against rocks below. The sun is hot and there is no sign of the predicted fog. It's pretty windy. Making good time, we decide we can probably see Hearst Castle today, and head off for the visitor's centre there.

When we arrive, we find we're just in time to catch the final afternoon tour. There are five to choose from, and we opt for No.1, which for \$14 gives a good general introduction to the place, apparently. A bus takes us up into the hills where The Ranch is ("Hearst Castle," we are told, is a nickname for The Ranch at San Simeon), and we look out over almost Scottish scenery, complete with cattle and some deer. There are about fifteen people in our group, a couple of whom are English, says Flora. I notice an otherwise

respectable-looking woman wearing a T-shirt which says "Will work for sex" on it. Our guide is a level-headed Hispanic who seems to think we're a fairly serious bunch as we greet with silence

his frequent call of “Any questions?” The weather, meanwhile, is perfect and shows off the place wonderfully. The guide says that only a few days ago they had gales and 60mph winds here. We stand by the outdoor swimming pool surrounded by mock Roman ruins (which contain some original friezes). The clear blue water looks incredibly inviting, and I stare into it wanting to dive in, and remember the excitement I used to feel when seeing deep swimming pools as a child. There’s something protective and welcoming about deep water that I like a lot.¹

The rest of the house is similarly amazing, and I can’t get over the surreal feeling the whole place has.² I’d like to ask some questions, but feel too mesmerised to break the spell. It takes me a while to come to terms with how impressed I am with the idea of a man who could obtain more or less whatever he wanted to create his ideal home. Part of me also struggles to decide whether it’s all in bad taste: a 3000 year-old Egyptian statue is cemented into place to form the centrepiece of a fountain; antique mantelpieces are cut to size so as to fit the existing fireplace. All this seems incredible, but then again, why not? Perhaps it’s better than these things being in a museum.

The following is a diary entry by Flora: “*Hello, my name is Flora and I liked Hearst Castle very much.*”

The tour ends in the blue and gold-tiled building housing the indoor swimming pool, and as we leave to board the bus, the guide asks if I’m from England. When I say I am, he asks me what happened to the Stone Roses. I’m not sure if he’s just making conversation, or whether he really wants to know the latest state of play about their battle with their record label. It’s an obscure business I only happen to know about from reading *Select* a couple of months ago. Decide he’s not serious, and laugh it off by saying they went back to Manchester.

Feel hungry when we get back to the visitors’ centre and buy french-fries and mineral water. Flora glugs a root-beer. Wander round the gift shop but post cards are the only thing I can think of getting. The place begins to close down and we head out to the car-park, but can’t remember where we parked the car. I have no recollection of even arriving at the place, so can’t even remember what general area it would be in. After some extensive pacing about, we begin to get worried that it’s been stolen, but eventually find it next to an identical Hertz-rented Ford.

Drive off to Cambria and look for motels. It’s a dinky little town now geared up for expansion and it seems that one in every three shops is a realty office. The place is also full of hotels, and after checking out a nice, but expensive, option, we decide to keep costs down and check into a place called The Cambria Palms Motel, which advertises “English Hospitality” next to a Union Jack on it’s sign by the road. Quite what this means is unclear, as we can’t detect any difference between this place and any other.

After writing postcards and writing the diary until about 7:00, Flora declares that she’s hungry, so we have a look in the motel’s area guide to the numerous restaurants available. A nice-sounding vegetarian place called Robin’s gets our vote, and we head for that. On the way out, we try unsuccessfully to lock the door to the room, and have to call out the woman from the office to show us how. “Just press this button...” Oh.

Robin’s is a place decked out like Laura Ashley meets Little House on the Prairie with a clientele of middle-class yuppie types (mostly blond woman in their early thirties). The menu is pricey, but sounds good. We both fancy the curry, but I don’t like the idea of eating the same dish as Flora as we can’t have bits of eachother’s, so I order the pasta instead. It turns out to be good enough, but nothing much better than I could do myself. Flora’s curry is bitchin, however, and even gets instructions from the waitress on how to eat it! She declares it the best meal she’s had so far. It’s also the most expensive at over \$40 — but that’s with all the fixins of salad, main course, drinks and pudding.

As we leave, we check out the covered patio area, looking through the glass doors at a large party of revellers under gas space-heaters. One of them waves at us to join them, which we do, and get talking to a fairly drunk man at one end of the table. He thinks we have Manchester

¹Photo 65

²Photos 66, 67

accents. I make fun of the gas heaters and crack a joke about global warming. Get the impression that we've being used by this man as a bit of desperate entertainment to liven up a flagging birthday party. The rest of the group seem fairly sombre.

We leave them and see a payphone in the foyer. I encourage Flora to ring the Moustache, although she's reluctant. I point out that she *has* written to him to say we'd be coming, and she'd feel bad if she didn't contacted him. After much discussion and agonising, she agrees it would be a mistake not to get in touch at least, and after the customary struggle with the American phone system, manages to get through to him. He says he'll be in on Wednesday, and asks if I'm her boyfriend before declaring he'd be glad to put us up. Fucking cast-iron wanker. Looks like I'm for the gooseberry treatment then.

The call makes Flora feel better, if a little shaken up, so we drive to find a bar in which to wind down. Find a saloon mentioned in the guidebook, and play frenzied games of Pacman and Galaxian over a few beers. Later, we play pool on a small-sized table and I manage to beat Flora hollow. A pissed couple at the table next to us take the mickey out of our atrocious playing, and we later get chatting to the woman after her game. She's majorly drunk, but can just about string a sentence together, and is keen to tell us all about a lovely little cottage (with cats) that we can hire if we want. She lives in Canbria and describes it as "heaven" after living in various cities across the States.

Play more Pacman until our quarters run out, then trundle off back to the motel. When we get there we stay in the car and look at the door to our room, feeling philosophical. Well, well, a motel for the night! Fancy that! I try to tell Flora that I didn't enjoy Taos very much, but Taos was Flora's favourite place. We go into the room and watch more TV, this time it's a chat show about people in love-triangles. Boring. Flora gets back into babbling, saying she feels a bit silly. Eventually, we slide into bed. Just as I'm about to drop off, Flora asks me if I dream about Emma Balfour.¹ She won't believe me when I say that I don't, and thinks it's "dirty." I wonder why she's asking? Just because I say I like the look of the woman doesn't mean I'm some sort of pervert. Idolatry is simply an exercise in fantasy, and in any case, continuity is so much more important than lust...

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN — WEDNESDAY MARCH 30

Up by 9:00 and we both take showers. Today looks like another Trappist offering from Flora, who says next to nothing all morning. Breakfast of eggs in various forms is served by a super-cheerful waitress whom we just about manage to respond to. Flora rings Charlie to tell her when we're getting back.

Today we plan to go to Monterey, and the coastal road is similar to yesterday's, only this time climbing higher and higher until the sea is far below us. Eventually, we start to meander around the sides of mountains, and listen to a Led Zeppelin tape containing all the classics as I concentrate on my cornering. Listen afterwards to Iggy Pop's "The Fool" album, and I marvel at how he sounds like Gary Numan with David Bowie's backing band circa "Changes One." Maybe it's because he sings "China Girl." The silence is too thick to break with observations on such trivia, so I keep my thoughts to myself.

Drive on saying little until we reach Monterey where the wind is up, but the sky is blue and the sun shines on. Flora asks me why I didn't stop at the Big Sur. I don't know really, but perhaps the prospect of standing in silence looking at the waves didn't grab me, and with no indications otherwise from her, I drove on. We stop in the carpark by Fisherman's Wharf. The masts of boats bob around in the harbour, their rigging clanking hollow in the wind. Go for a pee in the Monterey Maritime Museum, and we're just in time to see a film about the city's Spanish/Mexican history. The corny acting makes me cringe, but it does the job of giving us the low-down on what's been going on for the past 100 years before we arrived, although I don't understand the first bit about Indians dressing up as deer and leaving salamis everywhere.

¹Face model and my woman-of-the-moment.

Wander down the crowded wharf, which is selling all kinds of seafood and souvenirs. After walking up to a viewing platform above a restaurant and looking out over the marina, I suggest we go down and take one of the rowing boats that are moored below. We could row around amongst the yachts for a while. Flora thinks this is a stupid idea and says she wants a drink. Walking straight past a drinking fountain, we go to the restaurant's bar where she orders a virgin Mary. I don't want anything, and munch the free popcorn provided. Pretty soon I'm bored, and tell her that we should be finding a room as it's about 4:00.

Drive off into town and find a cheap place covered in ivy with white lilies growing outside the rooms. We have a look at one, but it smells badly of disinfectant and doesn't seem too good. Flora says she'd prefer the hostel described in the guidebook. The prospect of a hostel, with its inevitable contents of cheery foreign backpackers, seems preferable to another silent night in a motel, and I encourage the idea, although I feel she's fairly half-hearted about it. Put the room on hold and try to ring the hostel from a call-box by the road, but it's not answering.

Drive off to have a look at what else is about and find a slightly better place, which although it smells of disinfectant too, has better feels to it. It's my turn to pay for the room, so I go to the car to get my wallet. After some rummaging, I find it's not in the car. It's also nowhere else, so I conclude I must have left it by the phone box at the last motel. Telling the office to hold everything, we leap into the car like Batman and Robin and I drive like hell, although I'm sure it's too late to do anything. We get lost, do a number of tire-polishing U-turns and other manoeuvres at high speed before getting back to the place covered in ivy. Rocketting out of the car, I steam off in the direction of the office, but hear a shout from behind me. They've just found my wallet by the phone, and have handed it in to the reception desk. Phew. Everything's there. A miracle! Relieved, we drive back to the other motel and check in. The Asian woman behind the counter asks if I found it, and I'm pleased to tell her I have.

Once in the room we sit in silence. I notice that the pictures on the walls are in fact completed jigsaw puzzles. Write the diary while Flora lies on the bed for a while, then gets up to ring a horse sanctuary we plan to visit tomorrow. The place doesn't seem to be used to visitors, and it seems that mid-week will be too difficult for them to do anything for us, thereby blowing out one of the main reasons we came to Monterey. I then ring Mum to touch base and tell her about our

return date and the wallet incident we've just had. Although Flora wouldn't mind sitting here for longer, I soon get restless and grumpy and want to leave the room for somewhere more stimulating.

With Flora driving, we try to find The Monterey Brewing Co. by the old docks, but it turns out that it's another figment of the out-of-date guidebook. Another bar in the same vicinity will do, and it's happy hour with shots of peach schnapps for a dollar and beer chasers for \$1.50. With Flora not wanting to say anything, I feel my only alternative is to get wrecked, and order good quantities of liquor while she writes post cards. I sit opposite her doing some serious drinking, getting progressively more morose and staring at the table-top as the jukebox plays hits from the 1950's. The euphoric effect of four beers and five shots of schnapps kicks in after a time, however, but I find I'm cold and shivering for some reason. Flora says she's fine, eventually finishing her cards so at last we can go and find some food. It's 7:30, and we ask a pissed barfly where we can eat vegetarian around here. He knows a place where you can eat "towfoo, man" but says you wouldn't catch *him* eating that stuff.

We find the place he speaks of. It smells of hippies and American vegetables. Flora complains about the blandness of the food, but I'm too drunk to care. Just need some fuel. Try to read a Rolling Stone interview with the lead singer of the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, but give up. Hold the words "Sir Psychosexy" in my head as the rest of the meal passes me by.

On the way back we stop at some lights and I look at a woman behind the wheel of the car next to us. My expression must say more than I intend and she motions for me to wind the window down, then asks where we want to go. We're not lost, but I say Cannery Row — hooray! After a while, we're there. I'm feeling perky, but manage to decide against burning one as well. Flora is as sober as an embalmed nun and sits on the bed to watch a weepy about Bette Midler caring for her cancer-stricken best friend. *That's* entertainment! Drink vodka and grapefruit to put me to sleep.

Flora burbles some more.

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT — THURSDAY MARCH 31

Wake up with a massive cramp in my left calf. The pain pushes me to within an inch of my life, and it looks like I've got no alternative but to scream. As I fill my lungs for something I feel sure will give the Monterey Homicide Division something to worry about, the pain subsides and I slam my face in the pillow, panting like a leopard.

Flora is already in the shower and I feel a bit hung over from last night. The weather is wonderful outside as I look through the curtains. Feel guilty about changing the notice by the door to read "Check out by 3:00pm" instead of 11:00, but leave it there none the less. Leave the keys in the office while the woman behind the counter is distracted, then split before she can charge us for the phone bill. She collars us as we drive out though.

Breakfast at a cozy little omelette-obsessed place in town. Flora has oatmeal, but I go for the spinach and Jack number with the grits (the grits!). Flora is talking today, and seems fairly cheerful. Set out to find a new notebook in which to write the diary, and Flora needs a new showercap, so we stop in at a combined stationers/chemist down the road. There are about five different caps to choose from and I'm glad I'm not a woman: getting the wrong one could so easily spell disaster.

The woman behind the counter compliments Flora on her hair. Huh, she probably thinks it's a perm. Read a few magazines from the stand by the exit, then go off to find a post office for stamps, which when we get there has a huge queue. One man complains mildly. The stamp

machine eats Flora's money and she has to fill out a form to get a refund.

Afterwards, we decide to have a look at central Monterey and walk down the main street. Flora suddenly realises she hasn't been shopping recently, so we duck into a few clothes shops. She tries on a few hats, and finds an interesting purple and grey item in 1930's style. Both the shop assistant and I agree that it suits her. I find she looks strangely beautiful in it, like someone in a painting, and alluring in a way I can't quite understand. Flora can't make up her mind, although in the end she buys it just in case. The shop assistant tells us that she loves hats and has many at home, "Although I only wear them around the house." Hmm. We move off and I'm keen to take a picture of Flora now. We walk up the pedestrian precinct leading to Fisherman's Wharf where we first arrived, and look for suitable backgrounds. She doesn't treat it very seriously though, and ends up looking goofy when she should be smouldering instead. She takes one of me looking English in the sun with my jumper wrapped around my waist¹. Feel breezy, my hangover, such as it was, is long gone.

That's Monterey done with, so we head off for Santa Cruz, which has a good write-up in the guidebook: the home of Neil Young and lots of surfers. The lack of signs as we approach the place make us unsure if we're there or not, so we stop the car and ask a passing surf-dude where we are. He tells us we're in Santa Cruz. I then ask him what year it is, and he cracks a smile before Flora tells me to shut up. A local public-service (no adverts!) radio station sounds like it's just found my record-collection: Beefheart, The Fall, The Dead Kennedys — amazing! This gives the place a positive introduction for sure. We stop in a car-park by some beaches and get out to watch numerous surfers riding the waves below us. Take a few photos of them from the road,² then walk down to the sand to find bearded hippies and grunge-types lounging around. There are cartoon-like carvings in the sandstone rocks behind us. Dogs roam around, chasing sticks and splashing in the surf, which crashes right up to the edge of the beach. It's very noisy and the wind gusts away briskly. Flora says people are making comments about our clothes: we're not exactly

¹Photos 68, 69

²Photos 70, 71

blending into the Robinson Crusoe look here. Sit on some rocks and take in the scene.¹ Flora seems calm.

It's getting late, so we set off to find some place to stay. It all seems pretty pricey, and the guidebook is fairly inaccurate about what's on offer, but we find a place near the broad-walk and funfair called The Aladdin. We soon find out why, as the place is decked out all Persian with funny beds. Drop a quarter into the Magic Fingers and have a go. The first Magic Fingers experience of the trip, but it's not as funny as I remember it was when I was little. You could probably say that about most things, though.

Set out to have a look at the broad-walk. It seems the funfair is closed after dark, and the only thing open is a vast amusement arcade. We play a couple of rounds of pinball, then move on to see if we can find a bar. There doesn't seem to be anything around here, so we walk back in the direction of the hotel, asking some beach bums where the nightlife is along the way, but they've only just arrived and so can't tell us anything. Get into the car and drive off to find suitable territory. Park by a bowling alley and pop in to have a look at the working-class types do their thing. Flora seems fascinated, and we buy a drink at the bar in the foyer.

Get bored and move on to find a place to eat. Settle on a Mexican with cold strip-lighting and reflect on the fact that we may have eaten in over fifty restaurants so far. The food is typically Mexican: nice tasting, but pretty hard on the eye. Mine looks for all the world as if the waiter has just thrown up on the plate. Flora decides that this is the last Mexican meal she wants to eat on this trip. Talk about

racism and read a listings magazine. Don't feel too inspired by what's on. "The Iguanas" are playing at a club somewhere. I've never heard of them, but Flora thinks their famous.

We wander off after the meal in a state of indecision. Look in a few shop windows and spy on a Gothick shop assistant in an alternative T-shirt place. He has his back to us and appears to be fondling what looks like a small, white Doric pillar. After a while, he senses he's being watched, turns around, then goes back to fondling the pillar. We find a cinema. We could watch a film, but are warned off by the young lip-pierced girl behind the counter, who advises us that there's nothing worth watching tonight. She directs us instead to what she has heard is a good bar (she's not old enough to drink though). On the way, we pass a tramp to whom I give some change. Flora asks him what he's reading and he replies it's the Bible, "The only book I read." We chat briefly. He seems so normal: not pissed at all as such people generally are in Europe. Spooky.

Check out the Iguanas gig at Club Catalyst, but decide the student crowd isn't for us. Walk on to find the Red Room, which was recommended by the cinema girl. It doesn't have a sign outside it, but the doorman assures us that we're here, so we pay the cover and go inside. We're told there will be a band playing on one side of the place with a DJ on the other. Strange. Buy some drinks and sit down to wait for the entertainment to begin, although it's already past 10:30. I attempt to strike up a conversation with some leather-jacketed boys sitting next to us. They turn out to be Germans and can only just speak English, and don't appear to know when the band and DJ will be on either.

I ask at the bar about this and am told it all starts up at 11:00. Sure enough, an R&B band with lots of horns cranks up in the room next door, while a sound system plays slow techno-dance numbers in our half. We sit by the dividing door and get an earful of both. Take turns scouting about to see what's fresh at the other end, and see if anybody is dancing. The atmosphere seems fairly flat, however, so we sit and watch people pass by. I wonder why it is that most of the bars we have been in are long and thin.

After a time, we tire of this arrangement, and leave to go back to the hotel. Watch HBO (that Eddie Murphy movie again) and yet *another* whacky-people-in-bizarre-relationships chat show. They all seem to have different hosts: this one is called "Candice." Sleep.

¹Photos 72, 73

DAY TWENTY-NINE — FRIDAY APRIL 1

Wake refreshed at 10:00 and lie in bed as Flora reads something. It's another sunny day, and after getting through our morning routine, walk down the steep slope of the car-park to the street and the trendy-looking restaurant next door to see if it's serving any breakfast. They've only just opened, but will be doing lunch so that's no good. We ask a heavily tattooed youth (the owner?) where we should go, and he gets out a map to give us directions to "one of the most popular breakfast bars in Santa Cruz." Sounds good, and we drive off to find it.

Arrive there *without* getting lost and it's a small place. We book ourselves in for a table, and wait out on the street in the sunshine. After about ten minutes, we go inside and I order a tofu Greek thing with cornbread, which is nice. Flora has a bowl of granola with too many peanuts in it. Chat about love, and Flora asks if I've ever been there. I doubt that I have, although there have been times when I've thought I was. I don't know. I'd like to experience it for real sometime. Write post-cards.

Afterwards, Flora wants to sit on the beach and vegetate, so we drive back to the place where we watched the surfers yesterday. It's a nightmare trying to find a place to park, but we eventually find one, although it's not strictly a parking space as such. Ask some hippies in a van about tickets. They say we might get one, but they won't tow us. That's good enough for us, and we set off for the beach, taking our place amongst the dogs and beach-bums. It's pretty windy today and the surf crashes noisily on the sand. Only a couple of surfers brave the waves.¹

Flora reads *The Remains of the Day*. I can't be bothered to do anything and just lie on my stomach beside her, burrowing my toes into the warm sand and staring at my fingers. A hippie with bright red hair and matching bushy beard lopes about talking to people. I take a picture of him for Miranda while Flora sits in the background.²

After about an hour or so, I get bored of playing with the sand under my nose and decide to roam off somewhere. Just then, a particularly large wave breaks in front of us and water rushes up to where we're sitting. Manage to grab our stuff just in time, and only the camera case gets a soaking. Others around us aren't so lucky. Retreat further to the rocks.

Leave Flora to see what's going on elsewhere. After watching some surfers around the corner from where we are, I walk back up to the car too see if it's got a ticket yet — it hasn't. Return to Flora, who says she's having a nice time writing her post cards (each card seems to take about half an hour). One of the hippies in the van from the car-park has sat down in front of us. She has a string of Chinese characters tattooed down her spine, but I can't quite make them out from where we are — something about heaven.

Post cards written, we eventually make a move. The red-headed hippie jokes that he's thinking of doing the same before he has to swim out. The tide is getting slowly higher. He asks where we're from and is surprised to find out that we're English. He'd thought our accents were German. Funny, I was once mistaken for a German in Italy. Flora says it's because of my Schwarzenegger hair-style and cheekbones. Cut my foot as we walk across the beach. Damn. Flora realises I may not have had as good a time as she's had lounging around. I tell her it's OK, and think to myself I'd rather it was like this than the other way around.

Back at the car-park and we find we've got a ticket. Well what the hell. Notice that the other cars are full of bong-smoking kids. Should have burnt one while we had the chance. Decide to see what else is around, and tour a small natural history museum with its stuffed animal dioramas and bee-hive complete with stethoscope to hear the buzzing.

Set off for San Francisco. The journey is nice, and we pass many more beaches that look less crowded and more attractive than the one we were on. Oh well, maybe next time. Listen to a Peel

¹Photos 74, 75, 76, 77, 78

²Photo 79

tape. After a while, we arrive in the metropolis and immediately get confused, trying desperately to get a fix on where we are on the map. Can't work it out and I get manic. Take a turning onto a fly-over and end up crossing the bay to God-knows-where. As we come off the bridge, we turn in at a naval base and ask a sailor at a checkpoint where we are. He says we're not on our map, but we need to cross back over to get downtown.

After wrestling with the one-ways, we eventually find Geary Street and the Hotel Geary mentioned in the guidebook. There's a cheaper-looking place next door to it though, and I ask in there about a room. We go in and have a look at what they're offering. It's a shared bathroom/toilet, but looks OK to us. We'll take it. Seems to be pretty

central too... The man at the desk reminds Flora of Geoff Bridges in psycho-killer mode. He *is* a little spooky.

Move into the room and feel happy about it. It's fairly clean and strangely quiet, silent even, considering the din of San Fran outside. It's 9:15 and I'm hungry, so we have a look at the vegetarian(!) Chinese restaurant next door. Walk in, but they've just stopped serving. Take the car to find the restaurant area the guidebook talks of. It's hard to get about with all these one ways and crossings without traffic lights on them. Find a place to park and look into a couple of Italian eateries, but they're closed too. Jesus, for a major city, things sure do wind down early. Wander into a New Age shop with loud music. Flora recognises this as being Melanie. I've never heard of her (a 60's star, apparently), but she sings a version of "Combine Harvester" by the Wurzels circa 1979 that I recognise. Have a look at the crystal jewellery. The woman behind the counter proudly shows Flora her "medicine ring," but Flora's got one too, and it's much nicer — Victorian silver, and I see the woman's face collapse with envy. The pendants on sale are nice, but pricey. I wonder how you know what you're getting when you buy silver in the US as they don't have any hall-marking system.

The woman tells us about a great Italian place called "Bocce" that stays open until 1:00am and serves cheap food. It's only just up the road, so we walk there. The menu *is* cheap at \$5.50 and \$6.50 a dish, but the *wine* is on another planet. It occurs to us that nowhere have we seen cheap wine in the States, and this is a good example — bottles start at \$15.00 and go up to about \$50.00. Strange.

The food is only so-so, and Flora is disappointed with her rather tasteless pizza, but we have a good time shouting over the live jazz band and reading "what's on" listings for clubs. Can't find a specific "clubs" section, but suspect "DJs" might have something to do with it. Talk about love again and what we think it is. Like me, Flora can't decide if she's ever been in love with anyone. The idea seems too elusive, too complicated and unattainable. But maybe that's because we're over-analysing it. Flora thinks it's something to do with "containment," a psychological term to do with a form of mutual understanding applied to relationships between mothers and their children. Hmm. After all this, I reckon that simple cuddles and smiles are good enough for me.

The restaurant closes up at 1:00, but we're too tired for clubs even if we could find any. My foot hurts and I'm hobbling. On the way back to the car, Flora becomes sure that every black guy we see is out to mug us. Paranoid again, although even I get nervous when somebody runs past us then stops in our path between us and the car. He's probably cracked out of his head though, and proves harmless.

Can't find a place to park by the hotel, so we cruise around looking for places until we eventually find a doubtful-looking spot miles away (Has it got any yellow paint on the curb? Can't see.) Can't be bothered to carry on, so leave it and hope. It's 1:30am and we're in San Francisco.

DAY THIRTY — SATURDAY APRIL 2

Oversleep and wake up at 11:00 feeling groggy. Damn. No sign of the cleaners, so we're OK. Flora says she's had hardly had any sleep, and complains that the sheets were itchy and a man

was singing outside. I remember her making frustrated noises, but was too tired to ask her what was wrong. Wish she'd woken me up so I could have done something. Now she feels crotchety, can't find the clothes she wants to wear, and says she doesn't like this hotel any more and life is awful.

Walk up the street to find breakfast in a cheap cafe nearby. Order what we think are blueberry pancakes from the little Chinese waiter, but find they're boring old buttermilk ones when they arrive. Flora unimpressed, asks the waiter where the blueberries are. He says we should have asked for them. Fair enough.

Read the guidebook. What shall we do?¹ Few ideas really grab us, although Haight Ashbury sounds interesting with its one-time status as the capital of hippydom in the 1960's. Set off to find the car, and hope it hasn't been towed away after being parked illegally for six hours already. By some miracle, we find it with almost no effort at all, and it's still there, ticketless. Flora says she feels tired.

After negotiating the one ways and finding a parking space (dodgy: it's a "passenger zone" but who cares?), we walk up the Haight and have a look at various bars and cafes. Find one called "The Midtown" with stereotypical Bohemian clientele hanging about. The inside is dark and dingy, which accentuates the slightly dull weather outside. I order a Sierra Nevada (Sod Budweiser, this is the stuff!), but Flora doesn't want to drink with period pains now on her list of complaints. Read listings and look at the films section. The guidebook says films are San Francisco's most popular form of entertainment after eating, and there are lots of cheap cinemas around. Narrow the options down to "What's Eating Gilbert Grape" with Johnny Depp (this gets my vote), or "Benny's Video," a grim thriller. Either way, we think it's best to see an American film while we're here. Could catch a 4:30 showing as it's now 3:00.

Lounge about some more and watch the Bohemians being Bohemian while Flora groans in pain every so often. Finish my beer and we walk up the street past hippy buskers playing congas. A crack-head runs about screaming, and I'm limping because my foot hurts. Look around a voodoo/occult shop with it's babies' skeletons and Tibetan monk's skull (much more expensive than the one Flora has). Search for a gift for Charlotte, but find none.

All this walking about makes me keen to rest my foot in a cinema, so we get back to the car to find out where to go. Flora says she wants to see "Benny's Video" although I was hoping we'd go for the Johnny Depp one. Drive off to "The Roxie," an establishment specialising in underground and alternative material, according to the book. Tickets aren't too cheap, though, although the place has a studied scruffiness as befits it's art house leanings. Chat to an Australian woman behind the counter at the refreshment stand while Flora goes back to the car for something. The woman says she's an artist who enjoys San Francisco because people in Sydney "treated her like a freak." She looks perfectly normal to me. Flora returns and says she was hassled by Hispanics on the way. The woman gives us her card and invites us to give her a call sometime.

The film is *German*. For some reason, we were under the impression it was going to be American art house. Only Germans and Scandinavians are called Benny, I suppose. It's bleak video images and nihilistic storyline about a teenage boy who kills a girl for fun depresses me. Flora quite enjoys it.

Afterwards, I feel a bit disorientated, and Flora is cross with me not knowing where we are. Drive off back to Haight to find a bar or somewhere to eat. Park on the wrong side of the street where we see a space and people make comments. Trundle around some shops and Flora tries on some outfits in a psychedelic dress shop packed with more clothes than I've seen in a long time. All feather stoles and day-glow Rue Paul stuff. I sit on a stool in the corner feeling out of place as various lycra-clad woman strut about and tell each other about men being stupid.

Look for food as I'm feeling hungry, and find a cozy little Cajun place with only five tables in it. Flora has the "veggie melt" and me the crab cakes. There are *five* types of chilli sauce on the table to choose from. I do A-B comparisons on my crab cakes, but reckon that Tabasco is the

¹Photo 80

best in the end. Not sure if I've had Cajun food before. I like the spiciness.

Flora feels tired and not too good. She hasn't spoken for a while. I suggest we go and find a club to liven things up, so we pay up and leave. Temporarily lose the car, and walk up and down the street, getting distracted by an old banjo player sitting cross-legged on the pavement. He's the first person I've seen close up frailing. When we finally find the car, it turns out he was sitting directly in front of it — we were just looking in the wrong direction at the time.

Out on the roads we get terrifyingly confused by the one-ways. Just as we get to an intersection we need to turn on, it always seems we can't go in that direction. Either that or we can't work out where we are on the map. At one point I direct us to 11th Avenue only to realise that it's 11th *Street* we're after — right the other side of town. I get tearful with the frustration of having to deal with all this, but Flora keeps her cool and we get there eventually. It takes us almost an hour.

Manage to park the car without too much difficulty, and walk towards the clubs, which are spread out over a large area. Put our heads into various places, but nothing really floats our boat until we meet a travelling candy-seller outside Club DNA who tells us about the Alley Cat Bar & Grill, which has a club called "So What?" playing Gothick and industrial music. Sounds promising, so we head off in that direction.

Walk briskly in silence for about ten minutes. A white middle-aged man at a callbox holds the receiver to his ear and looks me in the eye as we pass by him and says, "Wrong way!" for no apparent reason. We haven't yet found the place, but there are other bars along the way that grab Flora's attention. She stops to look into an obviously hard-core gay bar before a man with a bicycle appears from a doorway next to us and tells her that it must be "one of the seediest gay joints in town." You're telling me. Walk on, and much to my surprise, Flora goes into *another* gay dive. This time we're here to stay, apparently, and buy drinks at the bar. Stand around as moustachioed leather-clad men with tight-fitting T-shirts and bulging packets give me the eye. I admire the assorted homoerotic and gay news bulletins on the walls around me, and wonder what the chances against picking up any women here are...

Get bored of watching the pool game, and ask the barman where "So What?" is. He's never heard of it. Leave and ask a doorman outside another club the same question. It's just over the road, he says.

Despite it's crappy name, "So What?" looks interesting, and after paying the cover by cashing travellers' cheques at the bar ("Oooh, travellers' cheques for booze!"), we get stamped and walk inside. Again, the place is long and thin (I'm getting used to this now), and suitably dark and mysterious. We remark on the exceptionally civilised atmosphere of the place: the music is soft, and people sit around politely sipping cocktails. Flora heads for the loo, and I buy drinks and take in the scene. Not too many people are here yet as it's only about 10:00. Black, barely visible death-art on the walls makes it feel a bit like being on the set of *Aliens*. Discover the dance floor tucked away at the back through a set of doors. Nobody is dancing.

The crowd is suitably Gothick: black lipstick being the norm for both sexes, which I take to be a good sign. A plump, speedy-looking kid paces up and down occasionally, beads of sweat cutting pink streaks through the white makeup on his brow. Flora eventually returns and we take seats at one of the tables next to a trio of lively women in leather. Don't say much to each other. The sound system plays Alice, and we wonder if the music we hear at the bar is the same as what they are playing on the floor. It seems to be different, but they coincide after a while. The place begins to fill up and I admire the increasingly outrageous costumes. One bloke looks like Lord Byron, and hob-nobs with the women behind us, who seem to be regulars.

Flora hears something she wants to dance to and flits off, leaving me with some beer to finish before I can join her. Sit it out for a bit and get further into the feel of the place before getting up. As I do so, somebody points out that I've left my bag behind. It's Flora's rucksack. I thought we'd checked everything in at the cloakroom? With no money to do this (I've been sponging off Flora all evening), the prospect of dancing with a rucksack on my back takes the wind out of my sails, and I stomp off to shout at Flora about it.

The music isn't really what we're used to: nothing really rocks. Sit down again and vegetate some

more. I feel blank; Flora having earlier woken up a little, now starts to feel tired again. I'd like more to drink, but have to drive. Decide to leave as it comes to about 1:00 and say good-bye to the door people. Feel that I'd like to come back to this place in a better mood sometime.

Flora is convinced that I'm drunk, but I'm just prattling about. I can be drunk if she wants me to be, but promise that if I feel unsafe...we can sleep in the car! After a relatively easy drive back, we bed down. I take Nostromo with me.

DAY THIRTY-ONE — SUNDAY APRIL 3

Wake late at 11:00, although in fact it's 12:00 as the clocks have changed without us knowing. Flora has been bitten by bedbugs during the night — she says she's particularly sensitive to bedbugs. What with this and the nasty sheets, she wants to check out and into the Hotel Geary next door. I suppose that would be better, although I've got no particular complaints about this place.

Go to the office to find Geoff Bridges to say we want to leave (hope doing so almost two hours after the official check-out time will be OK), but he's not there. Decide to check in at the Geary anyway; maybe Geoff will be in when we get back.

The Hotel Geary is run by keen vegetarian Chinese Buddhists. The vegetarian restaurant we tried to eat at last night is connected to them, and Buddhist literature lies about in the foyer along with related pamphlets about why mankind needs to go veggie. After having a look at the room, we check in for two nights. This time Flora says she likes the smell (a first!), which she thinks is like "old wood." With no such wood in evidence, I think it's more like old mattresses, myself. Nevertheless, with Flora seemingly content with the situation, I feel happy.

Next door, we manage to raise Geoff, who emerges bleary-eyed and half dressed to say he'll be right there. We wait for ages for him to return. When he does, he says he had his dying mother on the phone... and monkeys might fly out of my butt. Still, he checks us out with no problems, and I tell Flora I want to eat at the veggie Chinese. She agrees, providing they serve coffee.

The menu is vast and mouth-watering. We order some ramen-like noodles and chahan and it hits my spot like nothing else. They say they use no MSG, but unlike the rather flat taste I've experienced before with non-MSG'd Chinese food, this stuff tastes great! I wonder if it's the best Chinese food I've ever had. It's also about the cheapest at \$4 to \$5 a dish. Chat to the friendly waiter. We're the only non-Chinese in

there and he gives us his full attention, as does a fairly odd waitress who refills our teacups regularly. Read a pamphlet on why man should be vegetarian: it seems based on various pseudo-medical theories and mystic Chinese medicine. Bit dodgy, we decide. The waiter shows us a Chinese cookbook that they produce for lots of money.

Back in the hotel lobby with me in a good mood, we look at the guidebook once again to see what we should do today. It's 3:30 and I re-adjust my watch. Decide to go to Nob Hill to see what posh San Fran looks like, and put the Cathedral and the Golden Gate on our list while we're at it.

Drive there and after playing the merry parking game, decide to stop in for a coffee at the Hotel . It's the poshest place in town, says the book. Flora remarks on the fact that flying international flags outside a building gives it instant status. The Hotel is a big flag-flyer. Inside, we admire the palatial lobby with its fake marble pillars that look more like they're made of Stilton. For all this, the place is actually quite seedy up close and has seen better days. Flora points an accusing finger at Formica (*Formica!*)-topped tables. Find a cafe hiding in the wings, and order capps and me an Easter carrot cake. Not sure exactly when Easter is this year, but it must be close. Wonder whether eating this is ill-advised seeing as we've only just had a meal, but Flora when wants a coffee ice-cream float with extra cream, she must have it. She's bouncy and cheerful today, and the sun streams in through the window, feeling warm on my shoulders. I feel good, and as I wait for my carrot cake to arrive, I suddenly think how much I miss the feeling of waking up with a woman in the morning sun. Romantic schlock it may be, but that doesn't stop me wanting some.

Here comes the perma-smile waitress. The float is gigantic and sweet with a huge blob of whipped cream on top. She provides two long-handled spoons, and Flora sets to work, already declaring that she won't be able to finish it. I help her after eating my cake, but we barely manage to finish half. There goes our dinner...

Have a look around the hotel, and walk down a long corridor towards a roof-top garden next to a dining hall. A group ahead of us is looking into the hall, and we hear one of them say, "Stunning; what a stunning room." We have a look after they've gone — it's bog-standard. Just got a big chandelier in the middle is all. After travelling up and down in some lifts and admiring the view from the top, I want to ride the elevator that goes up the outside of the building, but the idea makes Flora travel sick. Meet her back in the lobby.

Leave the hotel and cross the street to see the Cathedral: a suitably large building made entirely from undisguised grey concrete. This makes it feel pretty phoney, and besides, the place seems to be mutedly Roman Catholic, so we're both entitled to treat it with disdain. There is a "prayer board" next to a crucifix at one end ("genuine 16th century European") on which visitors are invited to pin little pieces of paper with their supplications written on them. Most of these are blandly thanking God for Johnny's successful operation ("I think the doctor might have had *something* to do with it", says Flora), world peace, etc. I can't think of anything to contribute that isn't rude, so write that we'd like "some world peace and an end to right-wing hate, please," to which Flora adds "...and left-wing hate" along with a PS to please make everyone be nice to animals. Er, with a university degree each that's all we can think of. Round the corner to the alter and admire the large circular stained-glass window at the other end. Flora takes a picture.¹

Move on to our next target: Golden Gate Park, which has all sorts of attractions, says the guidebook, including museums and a herd of buffalo(!) The place certainly is big, but as it's almost 6:00 we're too late for the museums, which is annoying because they have an exhibition of Italian art and something on the Dead Sea Scrolls. More annoying is the fact that they're also shut on Mondays. Damn. Walk about amongst the rollerbladers, and as the sun sinks lower, we decide to watch it set from the Golden Gate bridge itself.

Head off back to the car past an excruciatingly awful saxophonist who appears to be playing something like scales. Drive to the Golden Gate past heavy traffic coming the other way. The skyscrapers framed against the yellowing skyline over the bay, and the lead-grey waters below us look oddly majestic. Wonder why they don't paint the Golden Gate gold instead of the anonymous brick-red colour it is now. As we leave the bridge, we take a right turn to a viewing platform and join hoards of Far-Eastern tourists. Take a few pictures of each other with the bridge and city in the background.²

Where are we going now? We don't know, but drive around the narrow, winding streets through well-to-do residences behind the marinas. Find a vaguely posh-looking shopping district by the docks, and drive through it to find a naval base with some old wooden ships docked next to it. Drive up to these, but nothing seems to be going on and we're not very interested in old ships, so turn back and join the growing traffic jam across the bridge. There's a \$3.00 toll this way.

Return to Nob Hill without much of an agenda. I need some shampoo and Flora some cotton buds, so we pull in at a supermarket. With the car now conveniently parked in the supermarket car-park, we decide to see another film. *Gilbert Grape* this time maybe. The next show is at 9:45, but we can't decide between *Grape* or "*Sirens*," so Flora asks some youths behind the popcorn counter which they think is better. Their considered opinion is that *Gilbert Grape* is "a deeper movie."

Walk up the road to a bar advertising "shuffleboard." This turns out to be a game ideal for long, thin American bars: a long, thin table on which two teams play something a bit like curling. Buy some drinks (neither of us feel hungry after all that ice-cream this afternoon) and play some pinball, with little success. Have a look at the shuffleboard game and Flora talks to a contestant at one end while I read the rules at the other. Pretty soon we all get chatting, and in between turns,

¹Which doesn't come out.

²Photos 81, 82

during which they usually have cause to scream their heads off, they explain the rules and ask us what we're up to, etc. They're wonderfully friendly and even buy us drinks at one point: a thick dark brown schnapps that tastes like cough medicine. They say it's called something like "barfmeister" and are surprised we've never heard of it. After they recommend lots of things to do in San Francisco, it's time for us to catch our film, so we say good-bye as one of them advises us to drink neat tequila while we're in the states, "just for the experience."

The film is a nice tragi-comedy with Johnny Depp and that woman who played the teenage daughter in the remake of *Cape Fear*. Don't really understand what the campers are doing — why can't they just stay in one place? Still, I like it.

Emerge at about 12:00 and feel blank. Flora has gone silent again, and we make our way back to the car without saying much. I drive with no destination in mind, but eventually decide to find a place to eat, even though I'm not very hungry. Feel slightly edgy and annoyed for reasons I'm unsure of. Most places have closed long ago, but we find a posh Italian and order a light meal of entrees. Say little, and after eating, return to the Geary and park in the first available space without much thought. It's 2:30am and a cute little Chinese woman in faded orange robes and shaved head acts as night porter at the hotel, opening up the doors for us.

DAY THIRTY-TWO — MONDAY APRIL 4

Wake even later, at 11:30 this time, and pick up signs from Flora that this will be a silent day. Look at the guidebook for breakfast venues, and "Spaghetti Western" on Haight Street sounds interesting. Walk to the car and discover it's been given a ticket. A \$25 fine due to "street cleaning" every Monday.

The weather is sunny and warm and we eat the customary omelette for me and cereal for Flora. Nothing special, but the coffee is supernaturally good by American standards. The best so far this trip — it just goes to show that you never can predict when you're going to get it.

With Flora uncommunicative, I decide we'd better do something boring like re-schedule the air tickets, so we drive downtown to find STA Travel on Grant Avenue in the centre of town and park at a meter. I've been wearing my jumper but feel hot now so take it off, throwing the car keys on the front seat as I do so. Discard my jumper on the front seat as well, then forget about the keys and close the door.

There, I've done it. The one thing we hoped would never happen now has — I've locked the keys in the car. Great! Bloody great! A wave of rage hits the top of my skull and I nearly put my fist through the window. We're locked out, Flora's gone Trappist and the meter's running.

The first thing is to get more quarters for the meter... Flora bows out to do the honours with the tickets while I sort this mess out. The flower stall nearby won't give me any change, and neither will the posh shops along the street, until I sweet-talk a shopgirl in a deserted boutique to give me some ("OK, but don't tell anybody.") Feed the meter, then pour money into a broken telephone around the corner. Get none of it back and look for another — there's one across the street from the car. The man at Hertz tells me all about his holiday in England ("No, can't say that I've been to Penzance..."), before eventually saying that we can go to a Hertz office a few blocks away to get a new key. A miracle! Only a few blocks away! I hang around by the car and wait for Flora to come back. She materialises and we stride off to the depot. When we get there they give us a key without further ado. Sorted.

With the tickets re-booked, we drive back to Haight and decide to do some gift shopping. Feel uninspired by the vaguely ethnic and New Age gift shops, so Flora defaults to clothes. Admire the wears in shops like Back Seat Betty's, etc. but Flora buys nothing, although that's not for want of looking. Cross the street and settle on a shop selling a strange mix of cheapo plastic novelties, odd Christian religious items and occult paraphernalia. I buy post-cards (One says, "You only live once, so get plenty of rest." This strikes a chord under the circumstances.) and two bags of largely unknown contents called "trysts:" the list of ingredients says they each contain a couple of tapes and "fun things to play with for hours." File under "Presents: Haight Ashbury, Foolish."

Return to the car to find it wearing two more tickets. Hooray! One is for parking on the wrong side of the road — the man in the bar last night was right when he said that there are rules everywhere and a ticket for everything. As we scratch our heads, a hippie carrying a large medicine staff puts his head out of a shop window and leers at us. “Are you British? Ha ha haaa!” Americans laugh in the face of tickets, and at this rate, we haven’t got much choice either.

Not sure where we should go next, but I need to do some clothes washing, so we set off back to the hotel. Flora isn’t in the mood for map reading, or anything else that involves speaking to me, so we get very lost very soon. It takes about half an hour to get back on course

and only find Geary Street after we manage to stray miles away in the wrong direction. This has not been a very good day so far.

When we finally get to the hotel, we *cannot* find a place to park. Try at the “public garage” next door (which for some reason looks like a mosque from the outside), but it’s full and costs a packet. Round and round the blocks we go until it’s after 6:00. We can park legally after 7:00, so we dump it in the first place we come to.

Back to the room and sort out stuff for washing. Flora does hers by hand while I flit off to the coin-op just across the road, and after begging for quarters, load up and return to the room, which now suddenly smells of jelly-babies. Flora is using my new apple-flavoured shampoo to wash her clothes.

Write the diary for a bit, then return to the coin-op. Although the place is typically grotty, with the poor and downtrodden mooching about inside, there is for some reason lots of high-quality reading material lying about. I pick up this month’s copy of *The New Yorker* (there’s also *Newsweek* and the *Wall Street Journal* on chairs by the soap vending machine), and read it while I wait for the cycle to end.

Back to the hotel and Flora is in the foyer reading her book. I stay in the room and write post-cards, glad to be away from her icy coldness, although I think she probably feels the same way about me. After a time, however, the phone rings. It’s Flora from the lobby; “Do you want to eat?” Actually, I do, and we file into the veggie Chinese (“The Ten Thousand Buddhas”). The enthusiastic waiter from yesterday takes our orders, but he’s topped by a massively enthusiastic woman who brings us the food. She *might* be speaking English, but we only get some of the sign language. Something about good Chinese food, fat Americans and cheese. Talk some more to the waiter, who tells us he’s from Malaysia and that San Fran is the furthest North he can go without dying of cold. We ask why the restaurant declares that it doesn’t use garlic, and he tells us that garlic is a “very stimulating vegetable” containing enzymes that are bad for you if you don’t eat meat. Hmmm.

We eat ourselves rigid, although this time it doesn’t seem so good. The stuffed rolls have a strange fatty taste that Flora doesn’t like, so I end up eating most of hers. The waiter persuades us to try “peanut pudding” for afters (a sort of peanut semolina), but we barely manage half of the huge bowl of it that appears.

Decide to go to a comedy club, and have a look at a listings paper in the foyer. Can only find one place that bothers to provide an address or telephone number, so we go for that: “open mike night” at The Chameleon. Get massively lost for a second time, and almost give up trying until we eventually get on the right road. The place is small, but breaks the mould by having an almost square floorplan. A stage is set up at one end and “the mike” is ready and open.

Order drinks at the bar but find they serve no spirits (it’s wine for Flora, then), and when I ask about the comedy, they tell me they have none of that either. The term “open mike” generally means poetry, we’re told, although this, presumably, will be grunge poetry by the looks of things. Pay for the drinks with travellers’ cheques, much to the consternation of the barman.

Take our seat near the front of the stage and pretty soon the show begins, introduced by a long-haired, capbackwards and bearded MC. It’s a lively crowd with plenty of hecklers, and I get into the atmosphere straight away. First up is “Dick Ranger” with an intense poem about sexual relationships that’s beaty, funny, and very good. After him come about eight or ten other poets and musicians of similarly high standard, including one chain-smoking woman. All are pretty

young — 25-35 maybe, save for a couple in their 40's. A mad guitarist (Ed

Boner — penis reference No.2 of the evening) sings about how he's our mother, and reminds me of an act I saw on The Tube years ago: suicide angst-ridden "poetry" to acoustic guitar-abusing "music." A real treat. A surreal poem about bats also lifts my skirt.

The whole evening is kept bubbling by the geeky MC, and lots of fun is had by all. It all ends too soon, however, and afterwards we buy more drinks and go down to the basement to play some pinball. After only a few games, the pool table miraculously becomes free, so we rack 'em up. As I break (badly — forgot to chalk it), one of the performers, whom I recognise as being the fairly boring guitar player you couldn't hear, comes in and gives us pointers. We need the advice. I manage to whip Flora until I sink the cue ball attempting to pot black. The guitarist then plays her, but she beats him as well because he does the same thing.

As we play, he tells us his name is Omar and that his ambition is to have a hit single, which he thinks should make him a million. He'll then retire on the money by investing it in a farm or something. "You won't catch me frittering it away on drugs or whatever like some other guys." All well and good, but he's almost 40 now and has been busking around San Fran for about ten years. Well, good luck to him, I say. Suggest he should go to Britain and play a few festivals to get noticed. I'm not sure if Americans understand about festivals. He knows about Woodstock, of course, and may have heard of Lollapalooza here a couple of years ago, but the idea of lots of big-name bands playing to beer-drenched campers in a field every year seems alien to him.

Say good-bye at about 12:00 as the place closes up. Omar walks briskly off into the distance while we walk off to the car in silence. Manage to get back to the hotel without much hassle this time. Stop at some lights along the way and see a clutch of homeless people sleeping in a doorway. They're all singing their hearts out to a cheesy Boys To Men tune played on a small tape recorder. Back at the hotel, the little Buddhist lets us in. I feel tired, and wonder what Flora thought of it all.

DAY THIRTY-THREE — TUESDAY MARCH 5

Wake marginally earlier this morning at 10:00 to the sound of Flora's bottom. That veggie Chinese hasn't agreed with her, and I find I'm similarly affected later on.

The weather isn't very inspiring, and I hope it's not going to be another day of silence, but it looks like it. We decide to see Alcatraz, and set off in the direction of the wharf, stopping for some breakfast on the way. There seem to be few likely places, and as per usual we can't find a parking space, so put it in a multi-story and pay \$3.00 for an hour. Nobody seems to be serving breakfast, so we plump for a semi self-service joint populated by yuppie-looking types and order enormous portions of soup and salad.

The sky outside is overcast and the weather looks grim. Make our way to the wharf where ferries depart for Alcatraz. The place is packed with tourists, and Flora joins the queue for a boat while I join the queue for tickets, but it turns out that they have none: "Alcatraz is sold out for today." Decide to buy tickets for 10:45 tomorrow instead.

Leave in silent gloom as it starts to rain. Head off for Golden Gate Park again to have a look at the museums that were closed yesterday. When we get there, Flora says she wants to be alone, so we agree to meet up at 5:00. It's 2:30, and we go our separate ways. I can't help wondering whether I've said something, or done something, to offend her. Conclude I probably have, but can't be bothered to work it out

and decide I don't care anyway. Make a bee-line for the Museum of Science and the planetarium that throbs at its heart.

It turns out that you have to buy tickets for the museum in order to get tickets for the planetarium, but I flash my ISIC card and get a student reduction. Wander round the fairly standard fare on

offer. Natural history dioramas mostly, including one of beach-life living in seaweed magnified 1000 times. Sand-mites the size of dogs. All those huge greeblies eating marine detritus and I think of my foot... Enjoy the earthquake simulator, and experience a replica of the 1986 San Fran Quake.

Join the queue for the next show at the planetarium, and notice a collection of hippies sitting on the floor next to me under a display shelf. When it's time to go, they join the rest of the queue and file in with the straight-laced families that form the majority of the audience. The show is an odd mix of science and science fiction ranged around a Star Trek theme. We zoom through "worm holes" (which the introduction reminds us are of doubtful existence, although they were postulated by Einstein) to various astral bodies, but it's all a bit kiddie for me, and I begin to feel sleepy sitting in the reclining chairs there in the dark. Afterwards, I find that the whole museum has a fixation with Star Trek, having a Star Trek gift shop and a theatre showing continuous Trekkie movies all day. Wander around the museum some more until it's time to go back.

Meet Flora back at the car. She's reading her book, and I sit looking at a copy of the San Francisco Weekly. Read a long article about prostitution that makes out that being a hooker here is actually quite fun. Hmm. Once I've read the other articles, small ads and the rest, I put the paper down and stare out of the window to look at passing joggers, skaters and traffic. We sit like this in complete silence for almost *two hours*. I find I don't care, however, and become interested to see just how long we can do it for. Eventually, Flora gets restless, and asks what we're doing. Ha. I win.

We've still got some time to kill before making our way to "The Green," a famous veggie restaurant at which Flora has booked a table for 7:30. We find we can drive into, and around, most of the park (only in America, where traffic is welcomed in parks...), so trundle about to find a "scenic drive." I feel listless and tired, and nearly drive into a duckpond by mistake. There's a boating lake that I regret not having checked out. I like boating. After winding around the lake, we find the park's buffalo herd sitting in a large fenced field by the road. We stop the car and get out to have a look. They're a bit far a way, and I toy with the idea of climbing the fence and petting them, but don't like the look of that barbed wire. Maybe I'm getting too old for that kind of thing. This disappoints Flora, who says she wants to see me chased around the park by angry buffalo.

Set out for the waterfront and "The Green." See a vast beach in the distance and decide to stop the car and have a look at the surf, which in the almost gale-force wind is certainly surfing. Sand blows across our feet as we walk to where the sea crashes on the shore. Watch some wind-surfers battle against nature and I examine the thousands of little dead crabs strewn across the beach. The wind and the noise makes me feel strangely elated, and I bounce up and down a little in the wind, admiring the deserted expanse of sand around us and glad to be out of that car. It seems we've spent as much time in there as anywhere else in San Francisco.

Time to get going to the restaurant, and we get lost, so ask our way at a gas station. Arrive 15 minutes late full of good ideas for excuses, but they don't seem to mind. It's certainly is a nice place. Large, yet cozy with plenty of people. One side of the building looks

out over the harbour, which looks calm in the evening light with the Golden Gate in the distance. We sit by a window and have a look at the simple menu and it's complex prices, particularly for the wine, which runs from about £30 to £500 a bottle. I wonder if people *really* pay this kind of money. It must be the most expensive wine list in the world! \$500? Ask the waiter who says they do. Wow.

As we wait for the food to arrive, I suddenly realise that I'm a day behind. We're leaving for Reno to stay with the Moustache *tomorrow!* This wouldn't matter if it wasn't for the fact that we've booked a room at Yosemite for tomorrow too, which we'd planned to cancel after working out that it would clash with Reno several days ago. Needless to say, we've forgotten to cancel the booking. I hurry to the restaurant's call box and start feeding it quarters. Get through to the hotel and try to persuade them to give me back my money, but they refuse, saying that I'm too late. I tell 'em I'll ring back. Return to the table and Flora suggests that the only thing we can do, seeing as \$60 on a room is a lot to flush down the drain, is for her to go to Reno and for me to go to Yosemite tomorrow. Shit. I feel bad about this, and I've got a headache too. Decide to sort out bus

and train times first thing tomorrow. We can then meet up on Thursday at Yosemite.

The prospect of going to Reno on her own cheers Flora up to the extent that I begin to suspect she forgot to remind me about cancelling the booking on purpose. Oh well, it's probably for the best. I can't help feeling gloomy, however.

The meal is good. I have brochettes with an interesting sauce, and Flora a curry, which she says is nothing special. She orders a \$4 glass of wine from the wonderfully tolerant waiter who isn't at all put off by our wine questions and generally adolescent ignorance. I'm feeling sleepy, and frankly, would rather just go to bed, but this is our last night in San Fran, so we'd better go to a bar. The shuffleboarders recommended various places on Haight, so we decide to check these out. Perhaps a tequila will cheer me up.

Once there, we have a look at "Noc Noc," a small place decked out with hyper-alternative industrial/cyber decor. TV screens at angles fire static from the walls while weird didgery-doo break-beat ambient music rumbles away. Bohemians sit on bean-bags and look cool. The trouble is, they don't serve spirits, and Flora needs vodka. I'm also in no mood for more beer, so we leave to try our chances somewhere else. We know The Midtown serves spirits, but check out "The Mad Dog in the Fog" further up the street. On our way, we hear a shout. It's Omar again! He's just on his way out of the Mad Dog after failing to be included in a talent night they've had. We've missed the action there, he says. He's full of beans, and we chat for a while on the street until he decides to do a bit of busking after we find that the Mad Dog also serves no spirits. After listening politely to one of his songs, we walk back to The Midtown, inviting him for a beer when he's finished.

Order vodka and tequila and take seats near the pool table. Omar joins us shortly afterwards, and gets carded by the doorman even though he's nearly 40 years old! We buy him a Guinness and he rambles on at great length about his life, his music and something about painting somebody's house. He smiles away and bats his eyelids frequently. A likeable guy, but he can certainly talk. We sit there trying to listen to all this, but pretty soon our eyes glaze over and I'm struggling not to yawn. Realise I've lost the thread completely, and I'm glad he's not asking questions. After a particularly long diatribe about living in the desert, he suddenly leans across to Flora and asks if he's talking too much. She wakes up and says of course not, she was all ears, then reaches for my watch and pulls an oh-my-is-that-the-time stunt on the

situation. I explain that we're off early to Alcatraz tomorrow morning, and we manage to extricate ourselves harmlessly. He hugs us both good-bye, and tells us to watch out for his band "Signable" when they make it big. Poor old Omar, he's 37 years old and makes me feel a bit depressed. The same sort of character as Wayne — I wonder how many of these people are out there. As we walk to the car, Flora does a good impression of his goofy, ape-like smile and fluttering eyelids.

Back to the hotel and Flora is in efficiency mode, packing for her trip to Reno. Set the alarm for 9:00. My headache beats away, but sleep overtakes me soon enough.

DAY THIRTY-FOUR — WEDNESDAY APRIL 6

Up with the alarm, but Flora decides to have a bath, so we won't be out of here before 10:00. There are no trains to Reno from here, so she books a bus that leaves at 1:30 this afternoon. It'll take her about five hours to get there. Maybe it'll be like the Wrigly's chewing gum advert on TV...

I go to the car and bring it round to the front of the hotel. With her bus leaving at 1:30, there won't be enough time for Flora to see Alcatraz, and by this time I'm resigned to missing the boat myself as there's only about fifteen minutes until it leaves. Flora thinks I should try anyway; they might be able to re-book my ticket. We say good-bye as I get into the car, and Flora goes back into the hotel. I hope The Moustache shows her a good time after all this.

The weather is cold and cloudy with a hint of drizzle in the air. I manage to guide myself to the

docks, arriving about ten minutes late. Join the immense queue for tickets to see if I can get on another ferry, and am told by the staff to ask the woman at the quay-side if I can get on the 11:45. This I do, and she says it'll be OK.

With about fifteen minutes to go, I buy a coffee and sticky bun and have these while standing in the queue. Board the boat, and as we walk down the gangplank a keen-looking Chinese man takes our pictures. I stand on the top deck and lean on the rails for the ten-minute journey to the island. It's windy but not too cold, and I look at the dark green water with the spray in my hair. Feel lonely as a group of middle-aged German tourists yabber away next to me.

Gaze at the forbidding sight of the island as we get closer to it. It's been kept more or less as it was when in use. We dock and join the crowds waiting to get back on board at the quay. A chirpy Ranger (Alcatraz island has been designated a National Park) greets us and gives us some "orientation." We need to walk up the steep path to the prison building above us. He warns us not to touch anything on pain of dire consequences, including jail. Boats leave at a quarter to and quarter past the hour. We are also lucky to have a special treat today: a former inmate is on the island signing copies of his biography.

Left to our own devices now, we fan out and walk up the dilapidated road to the jail house. The view of the city is grey and distant. Seagulls hover all around us and the smell of the sea seems very strong. Some graffiti on a wall by the quay reads "Indians welcome" in big red letters. A reference to the Indian occupation here at some point, I remember. At the jail house, we receive a Walkman for our "personal guided tour" of the place. I plug in and tune in, joining the throng of tourists wandering about already listening to their tapes. Keep wanting to jump the gun, and get a bit lost as the commentary refers to things I've overshot: "Look to you left and you will see Al Capone's bedroll ..." But I'm the dining room.

The tour is good and I get into the atmosphere of the place. All the sound effects are recorded in the jail house itself, so if you stand in the right place, the ambience really makes it seem as if the sound is real. After the tour is over, I walk about the building a bit more, then outside and join the seagulls in the soft drizzle. Come across some fig trees, and reach out and pick one of the figs. As I do so, the terrible warnings of the Ranger echo in my ears. Years in prison or possible deportation for molesting a fig. It isn't even ripe. Hope nobody saw me. At the gift shop I have a look at the ex-inmate signing books. He's an old man now, but I can't get near for the crowds of tourists that surround him asking what it was like to be without any women for fourteen years. It won't be long now before I'll be able to tell 'em myself.

Better get back on the 1:45 boat if I'm to get to Yosemite by supper time. Take a picture for a tourist at the quay-side as he poses by the "Alcatraz" sign. Think I might have chopped his head off. Board the boat and talk briefly to a couple of girls on the top deck. They shiver and say the wind is cold, but don't want to go below decks as it'll make them seasick. They think the prison was "spooky."

Back at the docks, the way off the boat takes us past racks of photos. This is what the Chinaman was doing — everyone gets their picture taken boarding the boat to Alcatraz. I look for mine, and see my unmistakably pale form looking hunched and dejected. I'm framed by a jolly nautical surround with the words "San Francisco!" written beneath me. I think of buying one, but \$15 seems a lot to pay for a silly picture.

Have lunch at the restaurant by the car-park to get my ticket validated. As I study the map, I eavesdrop on a Japanese student's description of their trip to Italy. According to them, they went to see Romeo's house and Juliet's grave, and were dismayed to see graffiti written on the latter... Juliet's grave? All this goes unchallenged by the other person, and I feel like interjecting, but decide against it.

Outside, it's has turned from drizzle into light rain, and I get in the car to find the Bay Bridge and eventually the road for the 100-mile drive to Yosemite. The traffic is terrible, but I find my way out onto the relevant freeway without getting too lost. Become adept at reading the map while pinning it to the steering with my thumbs.

The urban scenery gradually fades away into green and pleasant countryside. Feel I haven't seen

any fauna for ages, despite the park. Sparse oak forest scatters over rolling hills with grazing cattle in between as I drive on to The Orb and Joy Division. Eventually, I arrive at the town of Mariposa on a junction off the 140, and pull in at the "EC Yosemite Hotel" where we made the reservation. Book in and tell them that I'll be a party of one tonight.

The room is posh and very large with two vast beds and a spray of dried flowers in one corner. This makes me feel a little less solitary for some reason, and I pace around making full use of all the space. The smell is slightly odd though, and I wonder what Flora would have thought. Think of her now in Reno with The Moustache. Lie on the floor and look at the ceiling. Tell myself she's probably enjoying the change of scene.

Write the diary then drive off to find somewhere to eat. Mariposa is a small town with a couple of dingy restaurants, but I don't feel hungry. Decide to eat Flora's left-over pot-noodle and supplement this with a crusty cheese roll bought at a gas station near the hotel. Buy a bottle of mango juice (no grapefruit on sale). Eat back at the room and mix the juice with the last of the vodka while watching a TV documentary about US-British complicity in the prosecution of the holocaust. All very scandalous, but I can't pay much attention to it

somehow. Get into bed at about 11:00 and burn one. Find one of Flora's hairs in my jumper and put it on the bedside table before falling rapidly to sleep.

I'm standing in a deep green forest with the sun shining brightly through the branches above me. The sky seems strange, but I can't quite work out why. Perhaps it's purple, or maybe it's not really sky at all. I doubt the sky, and begin to wonder about the ground too. It looks at me with some hostility, but I feel that it will be nice enough if I respect it. So I respect the ground.

Look up when I see something move. It's Flora. She's hiding behind a tree and about to come out from behind it, but she won't come out. Try as I might, I can't see her come out. I become frustrated and want very much to see her. When I stop trying, she emerges from behind the tree and stands in front of me. She's carrying a dead bird. It has beautiful purple and metallic blue plumage. She strokes it's head and it comes to life, flying away. I want to know how she does this, but she won't say anything and I realise she can't hear me. Now I notice Camilla Baldwin standing next to me. She's naked and her hair is wet. She wants to know what I've done with the baby. Where's the baby? I pretend I know what I've done with it and offer her a plausible excuse, but in fact I don't know anything about any baby. She's crying now. I feel guilty. Why can't I tell the truth?

DAY THIRTY-FIVE — THURSDAY APRIL 7

Wake to strange scraping noises outside the door. I think to myself that it may be a racoon, but then realise I haven't a clue whether you get racoons here or not. I've had a restless night and now I've got a slight cough. Think it may be something in the room that's irritating my throat, or maybe it was that mango juice.

Flora rings at 9:15 to discuss plans. She says there are no busses from Reno to Yosemite, only a long-haul to Fresno, and even that's miles away from here. She can get a flight to LA for about \$70, so we agree that she should stay in Reno one more day and I'll meet her at the UFO mushroom building at LAX tomorrow at 4:00pm. I ask her how she is, and she replies that the trip went OK but she's feeling a bit hung over from last night. The Moustache has gone trapping.

The weather outside it sunny and warm. I check out at 10:00, taking Flora's hair with me to leave at Yosemite. At least some part of her will go there. Find a small restaurant and read the guidebook over a bell-pepper omelette. The place is deserted apart from two young mothers with what seems like ten kids between them, sitting at a table across the room. Although the sun shines brightly, it's oddly dingy inside.

Try to plan what I should do, but the book is too vague on the details. I'll have to just see what gives when I get into the park. Back in the car, I go through my bags looking for travellers' cheques and find the psychic readings tapes from Sedona. I can't resist the temptation to listen to Flora's. I haven't even listened to mine yet. With a sense of trepidation that sets my heart racing, I load the tape and have to rewind it a short way to the beginning. Perhaps Flora has been listening to it already.

The sound quality is so bad I can't really make out much of what's being said. She says she felt things weren't going right even before we got on the road. Had I suspected that? Perhaps. But when exactly did she feel this, and why the hell didn't she say anything to me about it? I hear her say something to the woman about not being able to tell me what's on her mind. Well what a surprise! Communication has not been a prominent activity on this trip. After a while I get bored of this voyeuristic bullshit. It seems clear that Flora decided things

weren't going to work out right from the start — certainly a self-fulfilling prophesy. Wish I'd never listened to the bloody tape, and drive off angrily towards Yosemite.

It's about a half-hour drive, with the scenery becoming more and more scenic as I approach the park. Bold grey granite cliffs rise up around me, and the car feels tiny amongst the huge boulders between the trees. Pay the \$5 entrance fee and the road takes me right through and out the other

side of an extra large boulder.

Stop off at Bridal Veil Falls and walk into the woods at the base of the granite face over which a plume of white-water gushes down, supercharged by the mid-morning sun. People are milling about along the paths through the woods, and I join them, but find little but streams and more woods. Turn back to the car, and admire the billiard-table flatness of the meadow on the other side of the road. Everything is so stark: smooth, flat meadows edged with neat pine forest, and all hemmed in by sheer grey cliffs as far as the eye can see.

Drive on to Yosemite Village, and stop to look at another spectacular waterfall, this time far in the distance. Halfway down the main flow, a smaller stream of water emerges from the rock to form two white strands, which occasionally mix into one with the wind. The falls are so far away they look like they're moving in slow motion. I wonder why this is, and think it might be something to do with the chaology of the turbulence... self-similarity and stuff. One for the Notes & Queries, perhaps.

There's a river running parallel to the base of the cliffs, and I walk up to it along wide duckboards built over the meadow to protect baby mice from being trampled (well, that's what the sign says anyway). The water is smooth and crystal clear. There's nobody about, and I walk over to the edge and stand on the white sand of a small beach to survey the scene. It's paradise, I decide, and walk on into a grove of small trees further along to the bank. Pause for a while, and after taking a leak (un-green?), turn back to re-board the death chariot.

Continue towards the village, which is much the same idea as that at the Grand Canyon, only with fewer hotels. The car-parks are nearly full, and there are hoards of people around. After trundling about for a while, I manage to park in the shadow of a small boulder in the carpark of the "Ahwahnee Hotel." Perfect. Empty the rucksack of tapes, and pack up with some provisions before striking out through the trees.

As I wind my way over the thick matting of pine needles, I realise I don't know where I'm going, and can't really orientate myself on the map, but what the hell, I'll just go for a random movement. There's a relaxed atmosphere to the place as cyclists glide by on cycle tracks that run through the valley. The squirrels are obviously well used to humans: you can come to within feet of them until they give a little sniff before disappearing behind a rock or something.

I walk to the Merced River and it's emerald clear water, then cross a bridge and continue in a large circle around the campsites. After a long walk which threatens to become monotonous, I find myself by the Ahwahnee Hotel again. It's an impressive building made from the same grey granite as the surrounding cliffs, and framed majestically up against the pine trees with flat meadowland leading up to it. Children play about. The guidebook says the Ahwahnee was built in the 1930's as a posh place for visitors to stay. Inside, it's uncomplicated, slightly art-deco wooden interior is relaxing, and I walk around taking it all in.

Get talking to a boy about my own age who seems to be doing much the same as myself. He tells me he's German. It crosses my mind that he's pulling my leg about this, as his English is just about perfect with a flawless American accent, *and* he's called Hans. He seems perfectly serious though. Hans and I walk about for a bit, then decide to have a beer on the hotel's veranda looking out over the meadow. Although it's quite crowded, there aren't many people sitting out here, which I think is strange considering the weather is so nice. After a time, a waiter comes up to us and we order. He asks us what our room number is, and we tell him we're just passing through. He says that unless we are bona fide Ahwahnee guests, we cannot sit here or use any of the facilities. Hans does a wonderfully American "C'maaan, man!" but the waiter cannot be persuaded so we mooch off.

Hans tells me he's travelling alone around California for a couple of weeks before returning to Germany to study law. His mother is American, hence the accent. I describe the developments of the last few days, and he agrees with me that all women are bitches, but I wonder from the way he says this that he thinks I'm the one who's to blame for Flora's behaviour. Maybe I am.

With nothing much else to say to each other, we go our separate ways. He's thinking of getting a bus tour, but I'm not really into that — they've got roofs on. I walk about the valley floor a while

longer before tiring of all these trees. Decide to start the hike to Mirror Lake.

It's a long walk, but I get there in the end. Mirror Lake is indeed a mirror of a lake. The amazingly calm water reflects the cloudless blue sky and the trees that encircle the place remind me of dreamscapes I sometimes have. Cyclists hum about. Never far from humanity. After walking about some more and admiring the water, I head back along the trail to the village and buy lunch. A banana bread bun and a couple of apples.

Sit eating these on a concrete bench outside the Yosemite Art Gallery. A blue-crested bird flies down and plants itself in front of me, catching crumbs. Read a sign saying that Yosemite river water is now unsafe to drink following the first known cases of poisoning in 1974. Something to do with disposal of visitors' waste. I feel guilty about taking that pee. Have a look at the Art Gallery, which contains a lot of books of Yosemite photographs by photographers that worked in the park. It's certainly very photogenic, in fact so photogenic I should think about the only skill you'd need in order to come away with a pile of masterpieces from this place is to be able to hold a camera horizontally. Flick through some "collected works" of a 1960's female photographer, and come across a pregnant nude. Her stomach is so huge and round that I stare at the picture for ages. There must be about ten kids in there. Her navel is the size of a tangerine.

The museum is my next stop. All jolly fascinating geology about why the cliffs are dome-shaped and how come there are so many waterfalls here. The whole place was once brim full of ice. Discover the bird that sat in front of me was not a blue-crested crum-snatcher as I had suspected, but an "olive-sided gnat-catcher" instead. It doesn't mention that the Yosemite variety is practically domesticated as far as I can tell.

I feel whacked by 5:00. It's all been very scenic, and God knows the weather was perfect, but Yosemite is very big. I feel I've hardly scratched the surface. I've been coughing, and now I have a headache and feel slightly ill. Maybe I've caught a cold. That's just all I need. The fact that Flora isn't with me has also affected things. I want her to be here, even if she doesn't say anything, but I'm not sure why. Maybe it's so that I know I'm not the only one here. The tourists are just so many faceless robots. I want to be with somebody I know so that we can look at things together. Without another person,

I find myself feeling as though it doesn't matter if I'm here or not. I tell myself to stop being stupid and enjoy what is surely one of the most beautiful places on earth.

Look at the map and see that the time/distance chart on the back says it takes three hours from Yosemite Village to Fresno, so I'd better head out. The road from the park gives even better views of the valley, and is lined in places by the burnt-out remains of the 1990 forest fires that wiped out large areas. The black undergrowth and spindly white trees look spooky and spectacular. Concentrate on my cornering while I listen to the Peppers.

Get to Fresno as darkness falls. Bloody hell the place is bleak. The guidebook describes the city as "almost classic in its ugliness." It's also where shopping malls were invented, apparently. Get badly lost coming off the freeway as I try to head into the centre. There seem to be no motels anywhere where I am, and I toy with the idea of doing a red-eye all the way back to LA, but the prospect of driving through the city to Mum and Dad's place at the other end puts me off.

Eventually find a place called The Sequoia, and check in for a \$25 room. When I fill out the card, the Asian girl behind the counter asks if I've ever been to Walsall near Birmingham (I thought she said "Warsaw"). She's from there, although she hasn't been back for eleven years. Can't recall visiting the place myself.

The room is grotty and small with a kitchen attached to it. Taps twist the wrong way. I mope about after bringing in my luggage and feel ill and depressed. Maybe some food will cheer me up, so I get back in the car to find a restaurant. Fresno is a pit, however, and Burger Kings and Taco Bells aren't what I'm into. Don't feel very hungry anyway, so I eventually pull in at a Wall Mart and wander around mountains of bland supermarket goods in bright UFO lighting. Everybody, almost without exception, seems overweight. Can't see anything on the shelves that I could imagine actually putting in my mouth, so grab a bottle of iced tea in desperation. I can drink that and see what's left in the freezer box back in the room.

Get into bed and watch TV. The iced tea has sugar in it. Look at the map. Burn a big one, then wig out. Cough myself to sleep with Nostromo under my chin. This is the last night on the road.

DAY THIRTY-SIX — FRIDAY APRIL 8

I hardly slept at all last night. The air was hot, the traffic was loud and my thoughts were of violence and destruction. I lift my head off the pillow and feel the blood bumping in my ears, squeezed now into an evil hissing sound by my headache, which has become even worse from yesterday evening.

It's 9:00. I try to work out when I should leave in order to meet Flora at the airport at 4:00. Decide I should be on the road by 11:00. Better leave good time for getting lost. Pack up and head out. Stop in at a Circle K and ask directions to the freeway, buying a massive cup of coffee as I do so. Ring LA and tell Steve we're on our way. Don't mention that Flora's in Reno — it'll take too many quarters.

It's too early to start off yet, so I sit in the car sipping my coffee in the carpark. I try to reflect on the journey we've had, but there are too many thoughts and conflicting memories to make any sense out of it yet. Can't remember what Flora's face looks like. She seems very far away. I wonder if she'll really be there at the airport — she might have decided to live with The Moustache. The more I think about this, the more it worries me. Maybe this whole thing has been planned from the start, and she'll blithely tell me when I ring her from LAX that she and Moustache Man are going to Canada to grow beavers.

After sitting in this greasy soup of addled thoughts, I lift my head back and wake up. Why the hell should I care anyway? Throw the coffee out of the window and wheel-spin the car back and out of the carpark. My back wheels throw a shower of gravel at the Circle K, and with my foot to the floor, I turn the radio on and find they're playing Nirvana.

*Come as you are; as you were; as I want you to be
As a friend; as a friend; as a known enemy.*

As "Lithium" plays out, the DJ says that Kurt Cobain was found dead at his Seattle home this morning. He had shot himself in the head, and may have been dead for a couple of days. They'll tell us more when they hear more. Can't quite believe it — he hated himself and wanted to die, and now he *is* dead.

Drive on down the freeway as boring desert scrub passes by and they play more Nirvana on the radio. Sing along to "All Apologies" and feel steely, fast and invisible. It's almost 200 miles to LA.

Arrive eventually in the big city after a brief stop-off to refuel and eat a fishburger at a Burger King along the way. Start hunting for signs to the airport. Suddenly, a new fear grips me: what if her plane doesn't arrive in LAX at all, but at some other LA airport. There are several signed along the expressway. No doubt I'll soon find out. There's nothing I can do about it anyway.

The freeways take me in towards LAX and eventually signs do crop up. When I get there I park the car in a multi-story behind the UFO mushroom. I'm about an hour early, so get out and look for a magazine stand in the terminal building, but can't find one. Return to the car and doze. The driving has tired me out in a strange way, and I feel sleepy but awake at the same time; the feeling of an endless road passing before me won't leave my head. It's hot inside the car, and jet fumes and smog leak in through the window when I wind it down. Decide to make absolutely sure I know where I'm meeting Flora, and walk off to the UFO. It's too early for her to be there yet, though, and I return to the car.

After sitting in the car and filling myself up with a mixture of feelings too worrying to name, it's time to meet Flora. As I walk to the white, smooth building and up the shallow steps to a corridor leading to the foyer where we arranged to meet, I try to prepare myself for her not be there. Feel suddenly very tired and weak, my mind floating away from the scene.

The corridor wraps around the outside of the mushroom and seems to stretch for ever, but eventually I see I'm nearing the end. What I find there will determine things, what I find there will change things. My heart beats terrifyingly slowly.

As I walk through the glass doors in front of me, I'm suddenly aware that everything is quiet. The noise in my head has stopped, and I look around the foyer. Flora is here. She's lying on a bench by the wall, and as I walk towards her, she sits up and smiles. A tiny light.

— THE END —