

# Lost in Los Angeles

**L**OS ANGELES — "I've got free-form anxiety," said my hostess as she waited for her maid to serve breakfast. Life in Beverly Hills has its downs. A little later, her free-form anxiety took solid shape. "I feel guilty about Sheldon," confessed my hostess, meaning her recently purged ex-loved one. She looked in the mirror for stress zits.

Being "rich, sweet and beautiful" (those were my hostess' own words) evidently was no proof against the angst that infuses Beverly Hills like emotional smog. Behind the glitter and the mansion walls is palpable fear of enlarged pores, sags and the curse of cellulite. Like Scarlett O'Hara, whom she much resembled, my hostess was afraid of only two things — poverty and old age.

Further up the hills, somewhere off Mulholland Dr., we pulled one night into the driveway of a newly built house. House is not really the right word. There, right in front of my amazed eyes, was a dazzling, floodlit reproduction of Tara. *Gone With The Wind* in LA, no less.

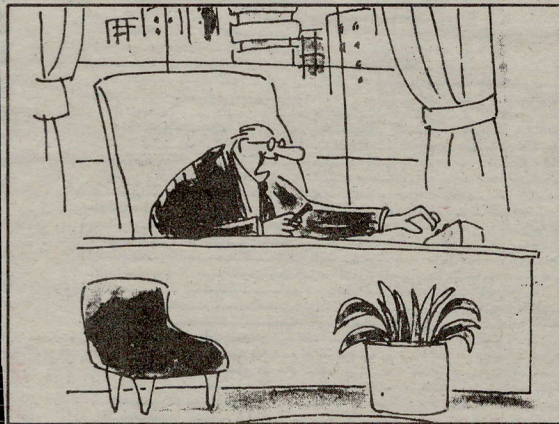
Seventeen white columns framed the front of this monstrous creation, 17,000 gargantuan square feet of vaulting bad taste. In fact, the house looked like some sort of grotesque Dixie Vatican for a new cult whose god was Col. Sanders.

Inside we found the owner, a former beau of my hostess. Let's call him Rhett. A reclusive and misanthropic fellow, Rhett had made piles of millions in funeral parlors, bus stop benches and real estate. Since Rhett hated most people, he stayed home and made money. Why, I wondered, did he have a ballroom in his house? Astoundingly, Rhett had reproduced this Taj Mahal of fried chicken somewhere down the road and actually sold it for a whopping profit!

Truly, the ways of the West are mysterious.

Now, I know that stories about the fevered eccentricities of Los Angeles are old hat but I hope readers will bear with my childlike marvel. To me, Los Angeles is the eighth wonder of the world. There, I feel like Sinbad.

## Punch



"Miss Winston, send in an army of stenographers, typists, marketing and packaging consultants. I had a flash of creative insight."

## ERIC MARGOLIS



Take, for example, the chain of bondage studios that cheerfully advertises: "A beautiful dominatrix is waiting to torture you." Featuring a complete assortment of whips, chains, rubber gear, benches, swings, gags, paddles and something called a "2,000-pound pulley." My imagination reeled. Try as I might, I couldn't figure out what one did with a 2,000-lb. pulley unless you're trying to pry apart mating elephants.

Or Beverly Hills' chicest restaurant, where the LA bon ton goes to "take lunch." The men don't look too bad, tanned and decked out in checked sports jackets. It's the women who grab all the attention. I never watch programs on TV like *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, but I'm sure the women I saw at lunch all looked like Joan Collins.

Facelifts so tight that too hearty a bite on a carrot stick might unleash a disastrous avalanche of suppressed skin. Tinted hair sprayed into petrified cascades. The noxious miasma of Giorgio perfume. And everywhere, the flash of jewelry so bright that one might have fallen head over heels into King Solomon's Mines.

I drove past the Mormon Temple, with its gilded angel, and past the Crystal Cathedral where Jesus takes brunch every Sunday. Past a huge billboard that said "Stop AIDS Discrimination." By a fast-food restaurant offering sushi and Mexican food. I took lunch with a lady producer who gravely informed me that she only liked to make love at night, in the desert — "like a lizard on a hot rock."

Unfortunately, I would have noted many more oddities had it not been for that constant problem that bedevils me in California. Bemused by all sorts of alien electronic devices and hi-tech gizmos, I am quickly reduced to the technological level of a visiting aborigine from Papua-New Guinea.

I can't figure out how to turn on lights or air conditioning, how to heat up stoves, open locks or use car phones. Before going to California, one should take a crash course in electrical engineering. Out there, people view my techno-illiteracy with gentle pity. To make me feel better, my friends ask me to show off at dinner parties by naming the capital of Greece or the date World War II began, mental feats that produce admiring oohs and ahs from the assembled audience of tanned technocrats.

But the final insult was my car. It kept flashing messages at me like, "Turn on headlights," or "Gear shift not properly adjusted," and, ugh, "Have a nice day." It wouldn't tell me how to disengage the brake. And it kept beeping at me. My last morning in LA, I turned on the ignition, the car beeped, and onto the screen flashed the message, "Good evening." I smiled with grim satisfaction.