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How to Stop Dying in California

Excerpt

As I made my way by stages to San Francisco (Alitalia from Rome to London, British Airways from London to San Francisco) I recalled the old Gold Rush song:

Oh Sally, dearest Sally

Oh Sally for your sake,

I'll go to Californy

An' try to raise a stake!

That was where my Sally had gone, to stake her claim in a deep-tissue massage course. We were both after gold. The stakes we were putting down laid claim to the gold of Self Development, of which California and in particular San Francisco was the then world capital. We were seeking the placer bars of self realization and inner power. With these we would eventually be able to buy anything we chose. For a start we could gold-cement our own relationship, for certain holes had begun to appear in it.

At San Francisco airport, on one of the rainiest nights recorded in California this century, the first thing Sally said to me, with a laugh and a hug, was, 'I've been feeling increasingly hostile toward you as your plane got nearer.' She had come to meet me in a dress down to her feet, as if she'd left dinner during the entrée and intended to return for the dessert.

We sat down, first in the arrivals lounge, then in the limo which took us to Berkeley. It was the hugest limo this side of a stretch-car I had ever seen. I sat in my corner and she sat in hers and we could hardly see each other. There was room for at least five other estranged couples. We sped along the freeway and she pointed out San Francisco, which was obvious anyway, in a blaze of high-rise lights. I ought to have been elated but I was trembling from head to toe. My heartbeat was coming spasmodically, my mouth was dry, my right eyelid was twitching, my extremities were living a life of their own. Her first remark had flung me into a state of terror that she was about to abandon me. I would be alone not simply in the

sense of being without her but in the sense also of being in a strange city where I knew not a soul. In a word, Love Lessons had begun.

She on the other hand sat composed. In fact I've never seen a teacher so flushed with triumphant health, so fiery in the eye and imperiously in charge. She gave instructions to the driver, who looked in the darkness to be sitting several blocks ahead, and being a wise man he obeyed her like a Georgian cotton slave.

The house we arrived at after penetrating the bullet-swept streets of Oakland was cold and gloomy. It consisted of a long room which seemed to run the length of the building, its forbidding aspects aggravated by the dampness of the night outside and tiny breezes that came from the woodwork, so that the heating system, blowing tepid air from black holes in floor and wainscoting, simply helped the process by which this indoor night was rendered more treacherous than the outside one. The thought of a restful night in this place, even in Sally's arms, began to look wishful, and I suspected that even if there were a bottle of wine breathing on the kitchen table (there wasn't) it would sour in the belly. You needed schnapps or grappa on a raw indoor night like this.

She'd been careful to tell me on the phone (artful instructress) that a woman had been raped on the opposite pavement the week before and that the crime rate in the area was the highest not simply in the world but the USA. Which didn't exactly kindle a homely fire in my heart.