

The Menomonee Fallsians in Hollywood

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2006

Episode I: The Large Trousers

It was depressing to pack my trousers. I held them up before folding them, my arms extended, garment at nose height. A giant, square pants-ass stared me in the face. And I had tried, really tried, to lose weight for this trip to the Land of the Beautiful.

Dang. I folded the pants and plunked them into my suitcase. How was I going to not stick out like a Cheesehead in Los Angeles? How could a Menomonee Fallsian blend into Hollywood? And later, how could I hide my girth at the home of my thin brother and his thin wife in Escondido?

Ah... no use in self-flagellation. I packed some unobtrusive clothing, shut the suitcase, sucked in my stomach, and planned to keep sucking in for the next five days.

The direct flight was so quick that I only had ants in my pants for the last hour. After Mike and I landed in LAX, we experienced culture shock even before we walked to Baggage. Here and there throughout the airport were women who looked like they had visited the same plastic surgeon: dyed blonde hair, very skinny bodies, knee-high spike-heeled boots or mukluk- like "ugs" (even though it was 75 degrees outside), and very made-up, pouty-lipped faces pulled tight into cat's eyes. I'm not exaggerating when I say the faces were scary-looking, like Halloween masks.

I had to visit the necessary room, and in the stall next to me was a woman obviously vomiting. I was immediately afflicted with Midwest concern for others. When I emerged from my stall, I started to say, "Are you okay? Do you need help?" — when her stall door opened and out emerged one of the skinniest of the pouty-lipped creatures I had just seen outside.

I shut up. I understood immediately: she had been purging. Puking her meals was the secret to her stick-thin jeans!

I thought about the large trousers waiting for me in my suitcase back in Baggage, and I realized I loved those pants.

Episode II: Greeting Anna Rose

Our daughter Anna Rose had left at the end of January for a school year of study at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. With an international calling plan and phone cards, telephone calls were so inexpensive that for the nine-plus months she was gone, we probably talked more often and had longer conversations than we had since she moved into her own apartment in February of 2003. E-mail was incredibly handy also. What a dream right out of the Twilight Zone for someone like me who remembers junior year in Italy in 1970 as a struggle to communicate back home through writing on flimsy onion skin air mail stationery and WAITING weeks for replies.

Because of our frequent communication, I felt closer than ever to Anna and couldn't wait to lay eyes on her again. The week before, I had been talking to my son Charlie and his wife Katie when I realized that Anna's return was less than seven days away. Suddenly my hand flew up involuntarily to my chest, right over my heart.

"Oh!" I said, "That hurts." I felt pain there, like a thud.

"You miss her, don't you?" Charlie asked, a big warm smile stretching over his face.

I can't remember what I responded to Charlie, but it was then that I knew that "miss" was too small a word for how I felt about Anna. There's a word for "miss" in French, *manque*, that almost touches the pain. *Je manque*, they say. It means "I lack." That comes closer to the feeling — I lacked Anna, just as I would lack an arm or a leg if it were cut off. It's a feeling much, much harder and more sore than missing.

Anna's plane was to arrive a few hours after our plane. We just had to walk a few hundred yards to the international terminal and kill some time. Mike had worn tennis shoes on our flight because the airport police always make him remove his brown leather tie-shoes. The white tennies looked kind of dorky with his khakis.

"Maybe you should change into your brown shoes so you look like a Cool Guy for your daughter," I suggested.

But where? The shoe exchange was complicated by the fact that Mike had put on white socks, so he'd have to take them off and put on brown socks. Changing in the waiting area was OUT - barefoot, he really would look like a Beverly Hillbilly. And I had my "blend in" mind-set going. Mike vetoed the bathroom at the other end of the terminal. Finally we agreed that an unoccupied hallway would be a good place for the shoe transfer, and if Mike wanted to give his old toes a rub there as well, no one would be the wiser.

For the last half-hour of our wait, I aimed my camera toward the area Anna would walk through to us. I didn't really want to greet her with the camera, but I knew we'd all like the picture. Mike and I stared and stared at every person who came through the hall, as if we could somehow turn each one into Anna Rose. Finally there was our girl, pushing a cart piled with a year's worth of luggage and scrapbooks. She wore blue jeans, a tropical scarf tied into a top, a long string of shells around her neck, and a palm frond hat that screamed FIGI, where she had enjoyed a four-day hop between New Zealand and LAX.

We didn't cry. It's hard to cry when your face is breaking from the smiles. She made it! She made it! Finally I could stop praying for a safe trans-Pacific flight and I could stop nagging all my friends to pray, too. Thanks for the safe flight, dear God!

Memories forever yours

A bit of *narrative interruptus*: I'm writing these memories on the last day of November 2005, back in Menomonee Falls, where snow is flying and any memories of palm trees are remote indeed. I came home from work today to find the CD player blaring the Maori verse of New Zealand's national anthem and Anna singing along, dancing around the kitchen. I think her eyes were slightly wet.

"You've got New Zealand in you, just like I have Italy," I said. We gave each other a big long hug and weaved back and forth to the music. *No one can ever take that away from you*, I thought.

Episode III: 15 MPH

We got the rental car, jammed the trunk FULL with our bags, and began the 29-mile trek to our hotel in Burbank. I'm going fast over this part because it's painful.

My brother had advised against the freeways in Los Angeles. "The city streets are fine. It's easier to drive through than Chicago," he assured me.

It was about 3:00 pm on a Thursday, so we decided to give the freeway a try. It took exactly one minute in the congestion for us to frantically look for an exit.

Thus began our city-street migration. I was "nav" in the front passenger seat. Mike was the ever-patient driver. Anna was the backseat traveler, regaling us with visions of Figi. We had an unfortunately un-detailed map of L.A., but I could see that Santa Monica Boulevard would take us almost all the way to Burbank. Mike started singing Sheryl Crow's lyric "till the sun comes up over Santa Monica Boulevard." It was clear. We *had* to take Santa Monica.

Anna's stories continued along with my frustration with the lack of markings on our map. I wondered how long it would be until I offered her a dollar to be quiet for one minute, as I had one vacation when she was a little girl. But I needn't have worried. Long before we took a little detour to see the fancy shops on Rodeo Drive, Anna checked into the Land of Nod.

It wasn't jet lag she was suffering from. It was holy terror. She had just spent four days in an island paradise, and we were crawling through the clogged arteries of Los Angeles. She escaped through sleep, a drug I have always preferred.

Meanwhile, we found Sunset Blvd. Now we were singing the theme song from "77 Sunset Strip" - snap, snap. But continuing, continuing on Santa Monica -- red light, red light -- 15 miles per hour -- getting darker and darker. Now we were in West Hollywood and I was really glad Anna was asleep. I didn't want her to feel my fear. In just a handful of city blocks, we had traveled from Rodeo Drive where we saw a stretch limo pick up a leggy blonde laden with shopping bags — to a seedy area strewn with pawn shops, porno stores, thrift stores, and strip clubs. I had recently watched the film "Crash," and I felt movie-inspired paranoia about mean streets and mean people. I didn't want us to be the dumb white folks lost in L.A. I wanted to check out like Anna had, but I couldn't leave Mike alone to cope with this pickle we were in.

Just when it became too dark to read the map, we got away from West Hollywood and stumbled into the San Fernando Valley. No more porno, pawn, strip, thrift. And there was our hotel, finally. I felt like the cartoon guy who crawls through the desert and finds an oasis.

We looked at our watches. Two and a half hours. We looked at our odometer: 29 miles. Welcome to California.

Episode IV: The waiter and the jewelry guy

That night we decided to have dinner in the Gordon Biersch micro-brew restaurant across the street. It could have been a McDonalds and it would have been all right — as long as it didn't involve driving!

We were delighted to eat outdoors in true California style, with a heater nearby for the cool night air. Anna and I immediately spotted a waiter with big muscular arms. *Yum*. Much to our delight it turned out he was our waiter. Much to our disappointment, it turned out he acted flamboyantly gay. Why do two straight women even care? We weren't going to ask him out. It's just that automatic reaction, like when you see a really good-looking priest. The straight woman sighs and thinks What a waste.

We quickly overcame our disappointment when we found our waiter was completely friendly and funny. When we complained about our 29-mile drive taking two and a half hours, he said in a high-pitched voice, all on one note, "I know! I live here!"

At a table near ours sat a guy with a long dangling beard — except it wasn't a beard. It was a long (about eight inches) silver jewelry piece in the shape of a cat, dangling from his somewhat-bearded chin. He was sitting with a young woman and they were in animated conversation. The woman at the table next to ours got up and went over to ask him "Why?"

His explanations involved cats and American Indians and symbolism. All Mike could say to Anna and me was "You're kidding me, right?" Mike could not stop staring and Anna chided him. Surely people are more tolerant of eccentricities in New Zealand!!

Episode V: Warner Bros. Studios

We had decided to act the tourists as long as we were in L.A. During our many visits over the past 23 years that my brother has lived near San Diego, we had never explored Hollywood. Now was our time, and after her months abroad, Anna was primed to tour. All three of us are movie freaks, so a month earlier, we booked a tour at Warner Bros. Studios. Mike had done minimal Internet research and found that Warner offers the most intimate tours (15 people max instead of a cattle call) — also the most expensive at \$40 a head for a two hour and 15- minute experience.

The studio was a skip and a hop from our hotel, and we were right on time for our 9:30 am tour. We were directed to enter Gate 6 and were met immediately by Security. That was the tone of the whole day: Security. The other tone was: Money. Every building reeked of MONEY. Lavish materials everywhere, including the bathrooms (always a woman's essential judgment standard). No coins had been spared building this place. Later in the tour we saw hundreds of workers employed by the studio — none of them actors. We realized show biz is a huge employer. Lots and lots of money here. No wonder our movie tickets cost \$8.50 or more.

In the Welcome Center, we watched a short film explaining the genesis of the studio. It highlighted some of the many movies and TV shows made there. WB was obviously especially proud of "Harry Potter" on the big screen and "Friends" on the small screen, as well as the WB cartoon characters Bugs, Daffy, Elmer Fudd, and pals.

Then our small group piled into our own electric cart, like an oversized golf cart. Here and there throughout our tour we had to put all cameras into a locked storage container on the cart. Security again. All bags and purses also had to be locked up. *Sheesh*. Our guide was a former film "extra," so he had a lot to say about the extras we saw sitting, bored, waiting to be used in a scene. They have a fancier name now, but I can't remember what it is, and they only make \$60 for eight hours of work. If they're lucky, they get "bumps" — extra pay for extra "work" like having a costume change, bringing their dog along for the scene, or getting their face in a close-up. Our guide said one elderly Hispanic guy makes about 80 grand a year from 30 days of work as an extra. His impeccable suits and genteel looks make him a stand-out.

We saw a lot of outdoor sets: full-size buildings that have no depth because they're for show. We got to prowl around the "ER" emergency entrance set, as well as the hospital waiting room set. We saw the fire escape where the orphans sang "It's a hard knock life" in "Annie." This is where Spiderman kisses Mary Jane upside-down in the first Spiderman movie. We drove through "Midwest town" with Marian the librarian's house from "Music Man," also used in some "Friends" flashbacks, as well as "the streets of New York," and Kings Row 1940s street. There's no more "Western town" because they don't make cowboy movies any more.

We saw guys stapling down white sheets over grass in the Midwest town square. The sheets would look like snow on film. Our guide said they'd soon be making snow for a scene there. Later as we rode around, little flakes of the "snow" (tiny bits of white paper actually) drifted by our heads. We could give them some of ours from back home!

We went into the giant costume warehouse ("*Don't touch!*") and I stood right next to the cone-bra costume worn by Will Smith in "Wild Wild West" ("*Don't touch!*") From ceiling to floor and all along aisles at least a block long, there were Panama hats, ties, suits, enough shoes to make Imelda Marcos look like a pauper, and clothes regular people wore in every era since gladiator days. Each costume was labeled and catalogued. The tailors worked nearby, sewing like bees.

We took pictures of ourselves sitting in the "Friends" Central Perk coffee shop, and posed for a set-up photo of us being "scared" by the "Dukes of Hazzard" car "General Lee" hurtling over our heads. Finally we toured the WB museum with its awesome collection of movie paraphernalia from the old days and tons from the Harry Potter movies.

I'm glad I went, and now when I see the rounded tops of the studio buildings and the old WB water tower at the beginning of a Warner Bros. movie, I can think hey! I was there!

Episode VI: What I really went for: Marilyn's handprints

After our tour, we drove to Graumann's Chinese Theatre to meet our friends Joanna and Jacob. They had recently spent a year in Milwaukee where Jacob worked as an graduate student intern with our son Charlie. They live near L.A., in Cypress. While we waited for Joanna and Jacob to fight the traffic from Cypress to Hollywood, we wandered around the Walk of Fame and searched for the foot and handprints of some of our favorite actors and actresses. There was only one I really cared about: Marilyn Monroe. Anna snapped my picture as I put my hand into her handprint. I have the photo now. There I am, leaning over in my large trousers, slightly smiling. The photo doesn't show how moved I felt. I always loved Marilyn since I was a little girl. She was the image of beauty for me when I was growing up. There was only one woman prettier: my mother.

The real shock about the footprints is that they are so small. Mike's feet were the same size as Richard Gere and Tom Cruise and Paul Newman. "Wow," I said, "Your stock is rising." The women's footprints were typically teeny tiny spike heel prints with tiny toe boxes — *sheesh!* Anna and I liked that Susan Sarandon put her two bare feet into the cement.

Episode VII: Narwhals, Mouth Banjos and Djiridoos

When Joanna and Jacob arrived, we had lunch in a Japanese restaurant where you cook your own food in boiling water at your table ("*shabu shabu*" I think). It was fun but we all eventually gave up on those @\$%^\$#@ chopsticks. I see why Japanese people are thin.

The five of us returned to the big plaza outside Graumann's Theatre and watched all the strange characters in costume. They were hoping for tourists to take their pictures and give them money: Sponge Bob, a pirate of the Caribbean, some weirdos from Star Wars, etc., etc. Anna and Joanna got into a longish conversation with a weirdo who had contacts (he said they were implants) that made his pupils look like black holes and his irises look white. He told them he had survived plane crashes and had 17 children and an eye condition. Joanna was moving backward slowly but Anna was just getting a kick out of him. I pulled them away — we had places to go!

We hopped in their car and Jacob drove toward the Hollywood sign. We took pictures here and there as we got closer and closer. We wound up and up into the Hollywood Hills, marveling at the fancy houses built close together with no place to park. We never could find access to the sign itself. Jacob and Joanna were pretty sure the only way to get up close is to hike in.

Then Jacob drove us to the Griffith Park observatory. We heard coyotes yip as we stood on the hill watching the sun set over the sprawling city far below. Jacob pointed out the more brightly-lighted areas of the city. "Those are the higher-crime areas," he explained. The lights are supposed to be a crime deterrent.

We decided to go to Santa Monica Beach and the pier there. On the way we passed through Beverly Hills and Bel Air. Mike and I didn't care about going through Bel Air, but the gate was open. "The gate's never open!" Jacob and Joanna both said. They couldn't resist. We drove in. More mansions. Yawn. I fell asleep, but Mike and Anna enjoyed the tour. Anna chanted every word of the "Fresh Prince of Bel Air" — amazing for a girl who "never watched TV."

We finally descended the hills and parked at Santa Monica beach, where an awesome display was set up for Veteran's Day. Stuck into the sand right near the pier were a couple of thousand white crosses in straight rows — one for each American killed in the war in Iraq. A candle burned in a luminary in front of each cross on the black-dark beach. We quieted down and walked among the crosses to read the names of

the dead. Here and there were Stars of David and some Muslim symbols. A video ran nearby, featuring interviews with wounded Iraq veterans who have returned. All were amputees. A sign explained that if there were a cross for every civilian killed since we went into Iraq, the crosses would cover the entire beach that stretches for at least a mile.

Later, on the pier, the three of us women got punchy. Mike and Anna and Joanna went up in the ferris wheel. Jacob and I opted for coffee over the chilly beach wind. After the ferris wheel ride, Anna walked Joanna toward us in an obvious attempt to make us think Joanna was ill from the ride. When they reached Jacob, Joanna "threw up" a rolled-up paper napkin on Jacob's end of the table (complete with sound effects). Later, I showed Joanna how to be a narwhal by inserting a toothpick between her two top front teeth. She made a great narwhal. As we walked along the pier, we did the hillbilly dance to the tune of "Beverly Hillbillies" theme song. We finished with a duet featuring the same song, mouth-music provided by me as banjo and Anna as dijjiridoo. The guys were half-ignoring, half-laughing at us.

When we were leaving the pier, a live band was starting to play. We three punchy women cried, "Let's dance!" But we didn't stay to dance because it was nearing 11:00 pm and we didn't know if our parking lot back at Graumann's was open all night or closed at midnight. We didn't want to haul our rental car out of the hoosegow.

When we returned to Graumann's to get our car, Jacob and Joanne couldn't believe how non-seedy the area was. They told us that they had never seen so much lighting — the old crime- deterrent. Tourists and costumed characters still milled about. In years past, this place had become very rough at night when the prostitutes and other street-livers emerged from the shadows. It had been a place to buy a Rolex from inside a trench coat.

We said good-bye to Jacob and Joanna and promised to send them nice snowy pictures of Wisconsin. When we got into our own car, I realized how tired I was and how I must have been infected by Joanna's hyperactivity. If I had danced, I'd never get up early to drive to my brother's tomorrow! It was the geezer factor at work.

Episode VIII: Family Reunion

Speaking of geezers, I had invited my brother Dan to bring his wife Nan and join us in L.A. We had enjoyed two previous reunions in New Orleans, and this could be another city to add to our list. He took a pass on this opportunity.

There's not much to say about our visit with Dan and Nan except that it was a wonderful family reunion — one that included Nan's best friend and her beau, our niece Nikki, Nan's mother, and my sister Sally, who lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin, a half-hour from our home. She happened to be in San Diego for a conference the same time we were touring L.A. "This is what it takes for us to get together!" we both said to each other.

On Dan and Nan's quiet hilly street in Escondido, I saw no plastic surgery Halloween masks or white and black iris weirdos. The most exceptional thing about this visit was that Dan and Mike did NOT play the board game "Napoleon," their decades-old tradition. Supposedly Nan lost half the battlefield in a cleaning frenzy, but Mike won't let Dan live it down, claiming cowardice on Dan's part.

We took naps, ate wonderful food, and had a back yard campfire. We danced at a trailer park bar in the hills near a lake where my brother had a stand-in gig with a band. Mike jitter- bugged with Anna and with me. An old white-bearded hippie danced with us women. We took more naps, sang songs and played guitar late into the night. Mike and I walked in the wild hills near their home where I sniffed hard to get all the good earth smells into my head, knowing it will be half a year before I can drink in those scents back home. Anna played with their funny dog who tries to eat water coming out of a hose. Our visit ended with a sunset sail on their boat as the fog rolled in. I took a picture of Dan peeking out of the hatch on his sailboat looking exactly as I remember him as a little boy.

Dan tried to talk us into staying a second night and driving to LAX Monday morning before our noon flight, but Mike and I both nixed the idea. Mike wanted a relaxing drive and I wanted to SIT as little as possible on our last traveling day. So we had long hugs and "I love you's" and said goodbye. Dan and Nan had more to hug when they hugged Mike and me. But did it matter? Nah.

Now we're home in cold Wisconsin, enjoying quiet roads and itsy-bitsy traffic "jams" on the freeways. In spite of my trepidation, I never felt like an out-of-place Cheesehead in Los Angeles. With all the strange types there, I felt like I fit right in. There's always a place for narwhals, mouth-banjoes and dijiridoos.

The End