

PEP VENTOSA

Santa Cruz Sea Swings, from the series
In The Round—Carousels, 2009
Archival Print, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JOHN CHANDLER

The Santa Cruz Experience

Milton had been even more remote since his return from the latest sales conference. Was he about to say something terrible? Did he want them to be over? Against that fear Vera had been trying to invoke her mother's three angels, Faith, Hope, and Charity, to lift up into the space between herself and despair. And here it came. He called her from the kitchen, told her to sit down. She sat. And squeezed her hands together as the words came, words so different from the dark words she'd feared. She concentrated on his mouth, lifted into a smile, the tone of his voice, gentle, melodic. "I think we deserve a vacation, don't you?" he said, and she couldn't trust her voice, could only nod and push back tears of joy: Yes, yes, oh thank you. "It's been a little tough, hasn't it?" he asked. "Time for a change of pace." He reached across and settled his palm gently on her shoulder, and she nodded and pushed away a suspicion that he had rehearsed these words, this gesture. Accept the angels. She straightened and looked into his eyes and gave him a more emphatic nod. "Where?"

"How about," he said, "California?"

She blinked in surprise. California was a constant source for him of jokes—Why wasn't Jesus born in California? Because they couldn't find three wise men or a virgin. What do Californians and bottles of beer have in common? They're both empty from the neck up. You know you're in California if the guy next to you has eight body piercings and none are visible. Each year when the San Jose conference approached, he'd shaken his head and said something about another visit to the land of earthquakes, of fruits and nuts. But even as she blinked, as her mouth gaped, Milton reached into his breast pocket and produced two airline tickets, and when she asked where to, he chuckled and said, "San Jose and bring some good walking shoes," and winked and added, when she said, "But I thought you said . . .", "From here on no questions answered, the mystery will unfold."

And now they were here. Not in San Jose. San Jose had been only where he had picked up the rental car; they had immediately gotten on a packed six-lane highway that narrowed to four as it wound over a mountain's tight, narrow curves, cars inches from them, back, side, and front, faces not three feet away but funneled into their private worlds, eyes forward, mouths moving, nobody in the seat beside,

She hated roller coasters. Her father had taken her on one when she was small...

sudden swerves out of or into a lane, anger and impatience compressed against each other for an hour. Even Milton had been focused ahead, discouraging of conversation the whole way. Then down the clogged throat of Ocean Street, past gas stations and a liquor store and diner into a town of sixty thousand called Santa Cruz.

Now they were sitting in a restaurant with fog outside and the sharp smell of salt and rot wafting in through the open doorway, also the choking, protesting voices of seals who, Milton joked, were saying “Wharf” over and over. Milton had told the waiter two salmon orders. The waiter had three earrings in his right ear and a glimpse of a tattooed tail of something peeking out from his shirt cuff, the mouth emerging, it seemed possible, above his collar at the side of his neck. He had just listed salad dressing ingredients she’d never heard of, and furthermore, she was sure he’d laughed at her for her ignorance and maybe Milton had too, she couldn’t tell.

“So, what do you think?” Milton said now.

“That highway scared me,” she said. “And it seemed you didn’t want to talk.”

He smiled and nodded to tell her she was safe. “I had to be vigilant, couldn’t let down my guard in that pack, not with your safety in mind. When we talk I want to be able to concentrate on our conversation, no distractions. Don’t worry, we won’t go on that highway again until we return to the airport.”

Behind him a hundred yards, the flashing lights of the amusement park kept drawing her attention, and she could hear, every thirty seconds exactly, the roar of people just

over a crest on some sort of roller coaster. She hated roller coasters. Her father had taken her on one once when she was small, when she was frozen in dread had raised her up in front of him to get some reaction, shaken her back and forth as they sped downward on the track, fumbled her momentarily into the air before regaining firm hold.

She squeezed her eyes shut a moment, to evoke the angels. “Well, well thank you.”

“All those people bumper to bumper over the mountain, ten times a week,” he said. “And you know why? Because they hate San Jose. They’d rather live in Santa Cruz and make that drive than live in there. That’s how desperate they are, trying to get away, get home. Who knows what kind of pressured day they just had, they probably feel like killing someone.”

“Well, we’re here,” she said.

“That’s right,” Milton said, “so you can relax.” He beckoned with his wine glass and she sipped.

“This is going to be a constant surprise, honey. From here on out expect the unexpected.”

She smiled as best she could and followed the lights of the roller coaster and the bursts of delight/terror. He was watching her, smiling, sipping his wine. She raised hers again, too, finally, though she was tired already and wine made her more that way.

“We are here at the edge of the ocean,” he said. “Here’s to the ocean. Vast, powerful, unknowable. Like life.” Again he raised his glass and drank and she had to too. “So,” Milton said just as the salmon arrived, “you were going to tell me what you think.”

“I’m . . . I don’t know what to think, it’s all so unfamiliar.” She stared down at the salmon, squeezed the lemon slice over the meat, carefully pushed to the side the seed that lay on top. Was that enough of an answer?

“Good,” Milton said after a pause, “unfamiliar is good, right? Unfamiliar is unexpected. This vacation is an escape from the familiar. No looking back.”

She nodded and pushed her fork into the meat, recognizing as the flesh gave smoothly that it was undercooked. But Milton had already taken a bite and was savoring it, so she tried to control the impulse to gag at the sliminess of the meat, to enjoy this meal, this parade of the unexpected. It was surprises the angels were bringing her, Milton was being nice, even playful, even more than playful, too

playful, but she was a bad sport. *Get used to it*, she told herself. *Faith, hope, and charity. You’re being a pill.*

“How do you know about this?” she asked.

“This town, this county, this restaurant?” He leaned toward her, seemed to have an impulse to wink and then to reject winking in favor of a grin. “Because I found out. This trip is the result of years of research. I’ve been doing secret forays the last dozen conferences.”

“But you’ve never even mentioned . . .”

He raised his index finger to his lips and shook his head slowly as if her complaint—was it a complaint or just a question?—was exactly what he had wanted to hear. He said in a lower voice, “Secret. Planning. Getting an idea.”

“What was the idea?”

“This. Here. Right now.”

“But you seem so . . .”

“Mysterious?”

She was going to say, “Not yourself,” but she supposed that word would work. Outside a white van with the words THE SANTA CRUZ EXPERIENCE appeared in the grayness and passed slowly, headed toward the end of the pier, drawing a swirl of mist behind it, and returned moments later and was gone back where it came from.

“You know what you need to do,” Milton said. “You need to open up.”

She flushed and nodded and he brought up his glass again, signaled the pierced waiter to take a photo of them as they smiled and clinked glasses and drank. As the waiter handed the iPhone back to Milton, she experienced the exhaustion she’d anticipated.

The meal done, at the car he suggested, to her surprise, a little hike around the area, to digest their meal, so she cast a wistful look at the passenger seat and they dug out their hiking boots and headed back down the wharf and along the boardwalk, and at least the shoes still seemed to fit after all this time, and her legs felt firm. A mile, she was sure, even more, in a thickening fog before they reached the car again. But no soreness, and more awake, with even some pride that she had held up, kept pace, been a good sport.

“I’ll bet you’re wondering where we’re going to sleep,” Milton said as he started the engine. “Well you’ve earned it, I guess we can find some flophouse that will take us.”

She produced a laugh of appreciation she hoped was adequate. The motels they’d passed along Ocean Street

looked questionable, especially just above that Domino’s Pizza place near the last stoplight, where slovenly people were entering and leaving. “Around here?”

He chuckled as if she’d just told a joke. “You remember Venice?” he asked.

Which knocked her off balance. Their honeymoon. The gondolas, the moon, the music, the basilica, the bridges, the fountains, the apartment over the canal, the sound across water, the sound of water lapping, moments, things they had done in bed. For an instant the pain of remembering nearly overwhelmed her. Why would he bring that up?

“Yes,” she said. “Why did you ask?”

He lifted a forefinger over his lips and winked and drove a few moments like that before he held the wheel with both hands again, and under a blurred sickle moon she averted her face and wept as they drove along a twisting coastline street past a yacht harbor and a lagoon, finally down into a village named Capitola where, just this side of a bridge, was the Capitola Venetian.

They were given a key and a newspaper and then they were inside a small stucco apartment that looked out over the roofs of a lower line of apartments onto a beach and a line of restaurants across a narrow channel of water that ran to the surf. The Soquel Creek, Milton informed her, though she hadn’t asked. She’d imagined something larger, with a sixty-inch TV. They were standing beside their luggage in a very small living room, looking at a very small kitchenette, a massive wooden panel with a red, carved, many-masted ship and red seagulls flying out of the frame dominating a wall. The television was small; she supposed they had to do that, considering room size.

“In the day you’ll see each apartment is a different color,” he said.

She nodded, walked to the small bedroom, and tested the bed. It was a queen, not the king-size they were used to. Then he was behind her, his arms around her neck and belly. “Let’s make love,” he said, “like this is the first and last time ever.” Which, she recalled instantly, was what he had said to her on their honeymoon. The arm around her neck was too tight against her artery. She could hardly catch her breath. “Wait,” she whispered, and he loosened his hold and allowed her to turn to face him. “It’s been so long.”

“I know, too long.” He gave her the same look he’d

given when they'd finally stopped outside the restaurant, assurance he knew what he was doing. "Let's make up for lost time. Don't you think we owe it to ourselves, to each other?"

"But you're acting strange, Milton."

"You're just not used to it, honey. From here on out the way I was will evaporate. Everything will be different." He had been resting his hands on her shoulders since she turned. She was tired from the weight.

"Please," she said, and he dropped his hands and took a step back. They looked at each other, her eyes moistening, his smile constant.

"Okay," he said. He took her hand and walked with her into the living room. "Sit." He indicated the overstuffed chair and sat on the couch opposite and leaned toward her. "Tell me our story. I want you to tell me the story of us."

"Milton, I don't know what you . . . I can't . . ."

"Sure you can. How we met, our honeymoon . . ."

"I can't, Milton. This is all so . . ."

". . . then how things changed over the years, right up to this awkward moment when the only way you can see it ending is sad, or empty, or both."

She sobbed and nodded.

"You know what my story has in it that yours doesn't?"

She shook her head.

"And then they took this vacation. This life-changing vacation. And everything became new again. Can you try it, honey? What do you have to lose?"

"I don't know," she said. He knelt and loosened her shoelaces and released her feet from shoe and sock and kneaded each foot briefly and set it back on the carpet. He remembered. It was what he had done that first day in Venice. They had walked and walked the promenade, hours in that floating city of wonders, and then they'd returned and he had uncased her sore feet and tended to them. She'd been dazzled. "You remember," she sighed and sank back in the softness of the overstuffed chair and closed her eyes and tried to allow in pleasure.

The lovemaking was a series of momentary releases, then panic. His body had an insistence she couldn't remember. There was some light from the backsides of the restaurants across the channel, not enough to see his face, enough, she feared, to give him glimpses of hers. She was accustomed, on their rare occasions of sex, to him finishing

quickly, then falling asleep. Tonight he persisted. Each time she froze he slowed, waited, at one point whispered, "Acceptance is hard, I know," and she thought *rape by a stranger*, and hated herself, thought of her mother's angels, then there was a sensation in her and she gave up, let herself go, a number of times. Afterward she couldn't get to sleep, rose, carried the newspaper into the bathroom, opened it to a section with the headline *Forty Years Ago Today Santa Cruz Murder Capital of US*, read about the dark woods of Santa Cruz county, places to hide bodies, about Edmund Kemper, Herb Mullin, John Linley Frazier, murder, necrophilia, cannibalism, thought of threes: three angels, three fiends, three kinds of hideous acts, until her disgust with herself stopped her. She tore out the page with the story, balled it up, threw it into the wastebasket, turned off the light, and stood in the living room by the window, watched the circle of seagulls, blurry white mounds huddled below them on the beach.

She woke first, her body more alive than usual, went outside, stood on the bridge, and noticed that the water under it had coagulations of yellow froth she didn't want to know about. She turned to the Venetian and saw that yes, each stucco apartment in the two lines of apartments was painted a different color from its neighbor, and some had gargoyles and sea monsters as decorations above the doors. The complex *did* vaguely recall the feeling of Venice, even if it was a little seedy. She searched for words of approval. She could say it was cozy, unique, it had character. As she was going back into their apartment, she smelled marijuana, she was almost sure, from somewhere out on the street. And so early in the day.

He was up, inquiring with his eyes, smiling.

"I surveyed the hotel," she said. "It's so cozy, so unusual. It really has character."

"Of course it does," he said. "We're staying here. How'd you sleep?"

"Okay, a little hard falling asleep."

"New place, new time zone, new ocean. Let's see, what else was new? Can you think of anything? Maybe last night?"

She felt herself blush.

"Shall we pretend we're newlyweds?" he said. "Or save up for tonight? Tell you what, how about climbing the steepest, longest set of stairs you've ever seen? I saw those

feet, not even the beginning of a blister. Those feet can handle it. Warm us up for a longer hike tomorrow. And we'll be on the cliffs, great views of the coastline."

She was mute, remembering their visit ten years ago to the observation deck of the Sears building in Chicago, standing too close to the glass wall that looked out over the city from the 110th story. She recalled Milton pointing out buildings as she tried to listen and fought against fainting, nothing but glass between her and the plunge she couldn't stop experiencing, even when she retreated to the middle of the room. Didn't he remember? Or did he consider that was from their old life?

The fog had vanished and they walked under a sky without clouds, every building and person sharpened as if cut away from everything around them. And the glare! She'd never seen anything like it in Indiana. She had to keep raising her palm over her eyes and blinking. The staircase was on the other side of the bridge, past the Psychic Mermaid, which advertised Spiritual Love Advice, past swimwear and clothing places, past The Village Mouse and a crystal store, past galleries, a surf shop, ice cream stores, and a store that sold fitted toe rings. She spotted it finally behind a sushi—ugh—restaurant, at the back of a parking lot. Steep, narrow steps that rose a hundred feet to a cliff. Her heart sank.

Milton laughed and patted her reassuringly. First, he said, it was dark glasses and a good breakfast.

She felt better when she donned the glasses, protected, as if her eyes had found a private retreat. But his eyes, too, had disappeared. As he took her hand and they angled along the esplanade to an outside table at Zelda's, as they sat across from each other under an umbrella and ate their omelets, as she stared out at the steady, eyeless smile, she could not invoke the three angels. He seemed a stranger.

Each time they reached a narrow landing on the staircase, Milton insisted on hopping a few steps up, snapping photos down at her as she caught her breath and clutched the steel railing and produced the smile he asked for. At the top she stopped, bent over, panting, her legs throbbing. But she had made it. In the village a white van, dwarfed, perhaps the same one she'd seen at dinner, stopped, and four miniature people got out and were sucked into stores on either side of the street. She felt the advantage of looking down from this height, as though she lived here and

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they were part of a board game. "Hey," Milton said, "give me a smile." He clicked the phone. "You conquering the summit," he said. "She's a real sport," he said to a man sitting on a bench nearby. The man, also wearing sunglasses, smiled. "Eighty-sixed," he said, and explained there were eighty-six steps.

They strolled along Grand Avenue along the bluff as the street became a path with a railing between them and the edge of the cliff. At regular intervals there was a sign:

DANGEROUS
SHEER CLIFF
STAY BEHIND FENCE

And she could not help noticing fragments of pavement on the ocean side of the fence, where the road had fallen into the ocean. As they strolled along the cliff, railings always separating her from the edge, he took her arm, and she allowed herself, in addition to Milton's congratulations, some of her own. It was a beautiful day, they were on level ground. She was all right.

"So you're enjoying yourself," Milton said. He had just had a stranger take their photo, smiling as always, with the bay in the background. Now he pointed toward a single smokestack. "Moss Landing," he said. "And to the right, in the haze, Monterey."

Suddenly they were near the edge of a long cliff, this one without a fence.

A thought came unhampered: *He's making me feel at home.* Yes, she was enjoying herself. She nodded and he laughed. They turned when they got to Hollister Avenue and walked away from the cliff into the neighborhood, to Escalona Avenue.

Escalona Avenue sloped down to a sign: STOP, ROAD ENDS. In front of them huge eucalyptus trees loomed. "It's okay," Milton said. "I want to show you something." The pavement narrowed, berry bushes and colored leaves Milton told her were poison oak leaned out. At the end of the roadway they came to a large gate and a fence behind which an elaborately tiled driveway angled off to the right, toward what she could see was a mansion. Milton pointed to what looked like a path alongside the fence. It seemed to lead downhill, away from the home into the midst of the eucalyptus forest.

"Tomorrow," he said. "I want to show you something. This is a shortcut."

She came to the edge of the fence and looked down. It was dark and overgrown and she couldn't see anything but more forest. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I scouted it all out before. Remember, everything new. This is an adventure. But this is for tomorrow. Tonight we relax, no more walking. And I haven't forgotten that foot rub."

Back at the motel, at the end of their shower, he made good on his promise. She sat on the toilet in her robe as he rubbed moisturizing lotion into her feet and in between her toes. She placed a palm on the back of his head and he started, then looked up, smiling. "Thank you," she said.

"I think we're both doing great," he said.

They walked around the corner to The Sand Bar, where with the meal she had a full glass of wine without consequence. Milton talked to the singer, paid the musicians something, and they played "What a Difference a Day Makes." They danced, the first time in ages. The lovemaking afterward kept telling her with each allowance of pleasure how tense she'd been, what a relief to finally let go. Again she lay awake when Milton had long ago settled into a quiet snoring slumber, but this time she drowsed over the marvel of the past day and a half. She thought of her mother's angels, how uninviting she'd been to them. Milton was right, she'd been falling into despair. What gratitude she felt to them, and to Milton. He was right, already old memories, the hurt of them was evaporating like the fog. The snappish, critical Milton was gone, this new one lifted her up, showed her the way with his patience and consideration. How had he found in himself what she would never have found without his help? She let herself drift through the events of the last day and a half, that crazy drive over, the waiter and the walk by the boardwalk, the lovemaking, both nights, the seagull that sat on a wall ten feet from her and eyed her all through breakfast. All of it what Milton called it, unpredictable, fresh, challenging, new. Of course the new would frighten her, the old her. She thought of how her mother had bolstered them both all through her growing up, how tired her mother had seemed. But Milton wasn't like her father, not now. She felt cleansed of her old self, desired. She recalled bits of conversation, how cautious she'd been. She'd been like that seagull at breakfast, waiting for what they left behind. But this was a feast spread for her leisure. Even his ordering salmon for her, knowing she didn't like seafood, she'd been too flummoxed to order. Strange, though, how that man, that smiling man on the bench at the top of the stairway with his thumbs up, how his comment that she'd been eighty-sixed stuck in her mind. And Milton's determination to go down that narrow dirt path where the road ended, where there was no one, no houses, just deep forest.

He had turned his head toward her, she could feel his outbreaths on her cheek. But everything he'd insisted on so far, she told herself, had been to benefit her, them. It would be all right. Besides, if he meant to do something, why would he have been asking all those people to take their picture?

Still, she was relieved when the next day they came out of the woods, up to a clearing with a couple of houses and to the left a series of short hills Milton told her were a skateboard track. He guided her past them and suddenly they were near the edge of a long cliff, this one without a fence. He walked over near the edge.

"How's this for a view?" he asked.

"It's fine," she said. "Don't stand so close to the edge."

"It's fine here. Try it."

She shook her head.

"Come on, honey, this is for leaving all those fears behind."

"I don't want to."

He smiled, glanced to his left and right. Even from where she was standing, ten feet from the edge, she could see there was a beach down below to the left. "But who is talking?" he asked. "Is it the you you're discovering, that you discovered last night and on those stairs, or is it the old you? Remember how good you felt when you made it up those stairs? That was preparing you for standing here and looking out over everything, with nothing between you and all that." He swept his hand over the view and stepped toward her and extended his hands. "I'll stand beside you."

"I don't want to die," she heard herself say. She looked at the hands, up at the place in his dark glasses where his eyes would be. "Milton, I'm so scared, please don't . . ."

"Don't what?"

"Can't we just go back?"

"Go back? Go back to the way we were? You know we can't. That's not what you want? You know what your story was about us, where it ended. We can't go back to that story, honey. It would crush all hope. Just this. Just a step to the edge, ten seconds, and you'll feel the new you, you'll feel so much less weight." His hands found her wrists and held them gently. "Come on. For you, for us. I'm here. I'm trying hard for us. That's what we need on this vacation. You're trying too. You've been so brave. Please. Stand with me." He pulled her lightly toward him until his feet were at the edge. "Now you come up beside me," he said softly.

"Please, take off your glasses," she said.

"So you can look in my eyes?" he asked. "I think that's a great idea. No barriers." He released her wrists, raised his hands to the stems of his glasses, and lifted them away from his eyes. "You take yours off, too." His voice had softened

to the coo she remembered from the pigeons of Venice. In a moment he would drop his glasses into his breast pocket. He was nodding encouragement. "That's the way to do . . ." and as she shoved his chest, as he tipped at an unsalvageable angle back and began to drop, she heard him whisper, as if to himself, though his eyes stayed on hers a surprised few seconds, ". . . it."

John Chandler is a retired literature and writing teacher from the University of Arizona and Cabrillo College. He writes plays and fiction and has published in *Quarry West*, *Porter Gulch Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Phren-Z*. His play *Poetry Reading* was produced at Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre. He is currently working on a novel, *After Life with Uncle Horace*.