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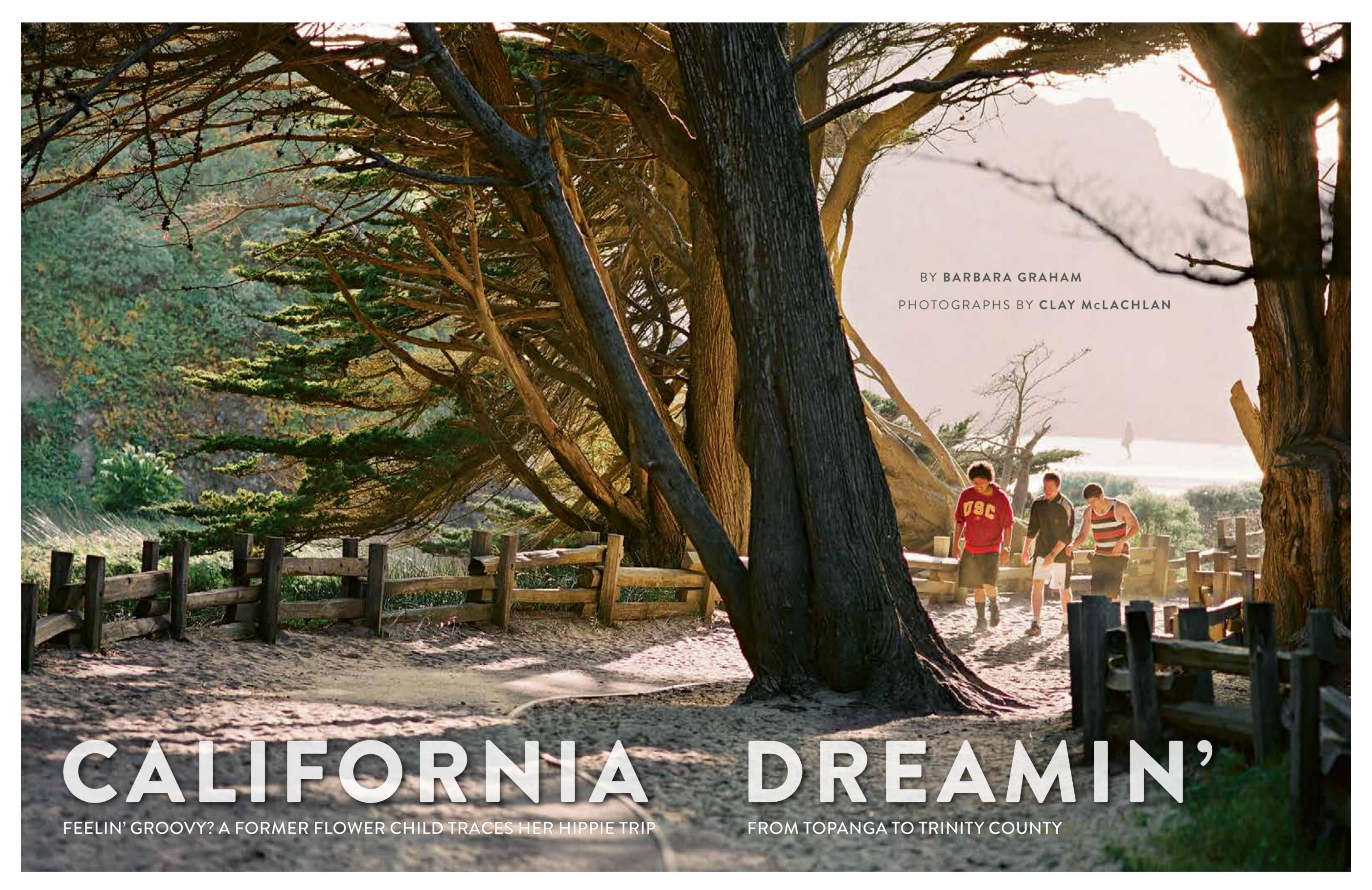
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BY BARBARA GRAHAM
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAY McLACHLAN

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

FEELIN' GROOVY? A FORMER FLOWER CHILD TRACES HER HIPPIE TRIP

FROM TOPANGA TO TRINITY COUNTY

I'd never come close to a shotgun before. Or a bear.

To me, a girl from New York City and the mother of a five-month-old son, that bear was as terrifying a threat as Godzilla. Luckily, it didn't attack us, but it did eat the Naugahyde window padding off our parked camper before my then-husband's shotgun blast sent it scrambling into the woods. That was in 1972. I was living far north in California, in Trinity County, with my son, Clay, and Brian, his father. A few months after the bear incident, we ourselves fled. Now, 41 years later, Clay, a professional photographer, and I are on a quest to find our old Trinity forest home, as well as the other hippie outposts throughout California where in my early 20s I went to transform myself from an anxious, urban college dropout into a free-spirited earth goddess.

Going "back to the land"—from which I never came—was Brian's idea. In those days I was so lost that I attached myself to my man's dreams like a barnacle to a rock. Still, what was I thinking when I agreed to make a go of it in the wilds of Trinity County? With a baby? Didn't I know that we could die of exposure if we tried to last out the winter in our primitive A-frame sans heat, electricity, and plumbing? Just as pressing to me now is this: Who would I be if I'd stayed?

THE FIRST STOP ON MY CALIFORNIA journey now, as it was then, is Topanga Canyon. Even though it's a short hop up the Pacific Coast Highway from Los Angeles, I feel as if I'm

entering an alternate universe as our car snakes up the ribbon of road that leads to the heart of the canyon. From certain angles, Topanga looks much the way it did when I arrived in early 1970, when it had already earned the nickname "Haight-Ashbury South." What's more, Topanga still retains some of its rugged Old West flavor.

Clay is astonished. "This place feels more like a thousand miles from L.A., not 30."

In a sense, Topanga's geography—sandwiched between the coast and the densely populated San Fernando Valley—has shaped its destiny. And though the striated, rocky outcroppings that rise like skyscrapers from the canyon's bowl lend Topanga a raw, rare beauty, the livin' ain't easy. Homes jut precariously from cliffs, and there is the ever present danger of landslides, floods, drought, and, especially, fire.

It's no wonder that the people drawn to Topanga can best be described as iconoclasts—from the homesteaders who arrived in the mid-19th century to the loners, John Birchers, leftists, beatniks, artists, blacklisted Hollywood types, hippies, environmentalists, and New Agers that followed.

"Topangans have very strong opinions, and they sometimes disagree, mostly over land use," says Ami Kirby, Topanga Historical Society archivist. "But the one thing that seems to unite everyone is a love of nature." Fortunately, the efforts of a forceful activist community have preserved much—but not all—of the canyon from development.

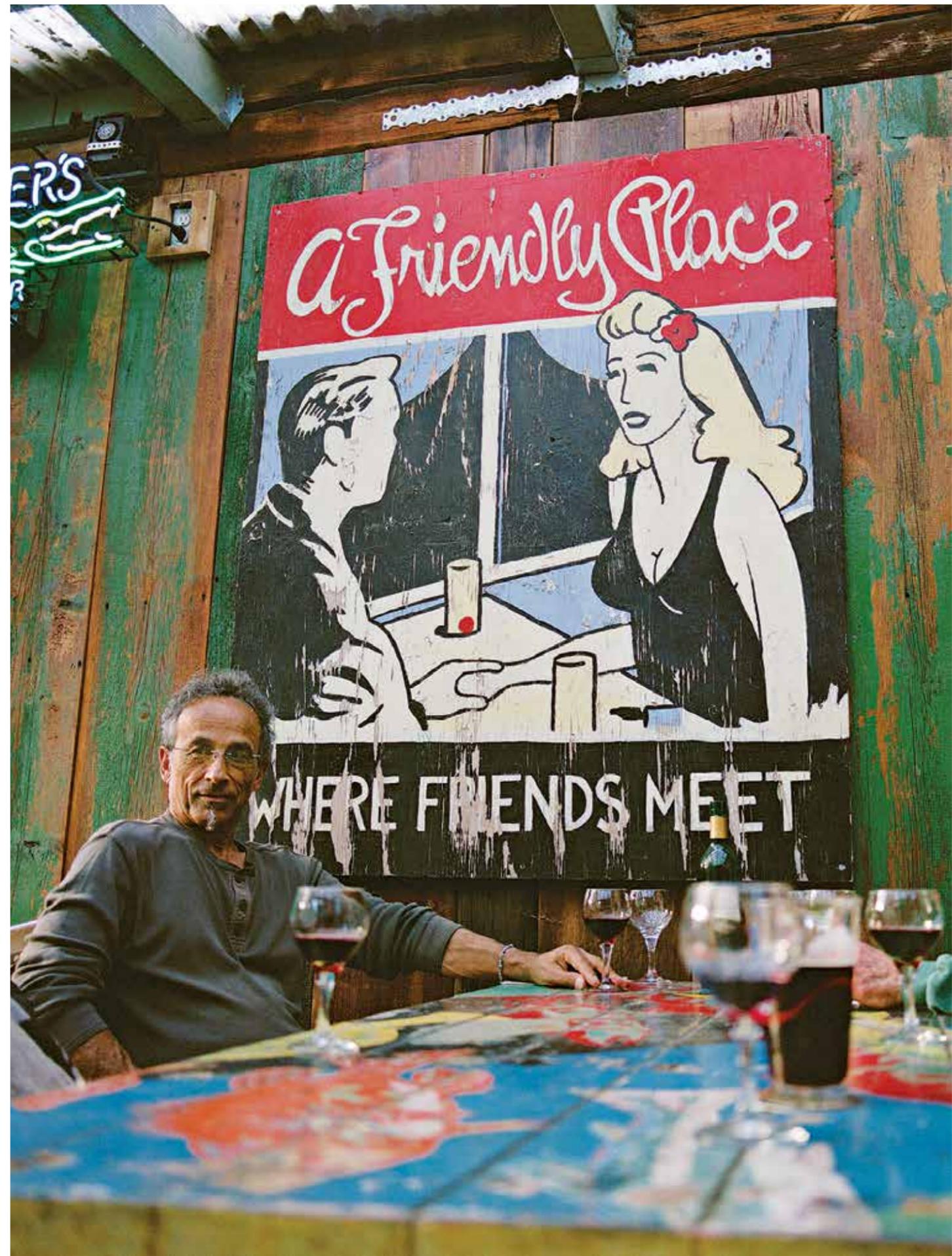
It was in Topanga that I first fell in love with California: The roaring Pacific at the base of the canyon, the scent of sage that perfumes the air, the broad, gnarly coastal oaks and the wildflowers that carpet the hillsides, the vast sky that enfolds you like an upside-down cradle.

As soon as we arrive, the search is on for the enclave of ramshackle wooden cabins where Brian and I lived for a year. This was also the place where Clay was conceived, though when I mention that, he shoots me one of those Mom-I-don't-want-to-hear-about-it looks.

After a few wrong turns, we find the place but not the cabins. I'm disappointed to see that a sprawling, gated ranch house has been erected on the site of our former hippie haven. But there's something about simply being here that sends me time-traveling back to 1970. I have a vision of myself in patched jeans and halter top, wild hair flying, as I scramble up the creek

The view from Garrapata State Park in Big Sur (left) can include migrating whales. Froggy's, with its laid-back patio (opposite), is a favorite Topanga gathering spot. Opening pages: The path to Pfeiffer Beach.

ERIC FOLTZ/VETTA/GETTY IMAGES (SEASCAPE)



bed to the highest point on our mountain. Or leaning over a cauldron of hot wax in our cabin, batiking the T-shirts nobody wanted to buy. And I can almost hear Don, the troubadour of our little ragtag community, serenading us at dusk with “Me and Bobby McGee.” “Freedom is just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” Of course, we had nothing: a few found sticks of furniture, a bed, a couple of pots and pans. We didn’t care. We were unencumbered, free to reinvent ourselves and the world as we saw fit, and for a sliver of time in Topanga, I believed it.

After revisiting that previous lifetime, Clay and I head to the center of town to eat lunch at Topanga’s most famous restaurant, Inn of the Seventh Ray. The setting is like something out of a woodsy New Age fairy tale, with Buddhas, flowers, and angels everywhere. We take a table by a burbling fountain.

“Where the freak are we?” Clay asks after reading the back of the menu, which claims that the food has been charged with “the vibration of the violet flame” and may transport us to a higher plane.

In fact, the next day Topanga astrologer Lola Babalon tells me that because of its position between the mountains and the sea—fire and water—“Topanga has a very specific energy vortex that magically draws people and expands their consciousness. Some stay, but for others it’s like a blender, churning things up.” I fell into the second category, she explains. “For you, Topanga was a gateway. It cracked you open and broke down your dream of who you thought you were going to be.” Paradoxically, she adds, “Becoming a mom kept you from losing yourself. In a way, Clay saved your life.”

I reflect on this early the next morning, as I hike up to Eagle Rock—Topanga vortex central, according to Babalon. Clay is by my side. We’re quiet as we wend our way up the narrow trail to the craggy outcropping with its sweeping views from the Pacific to the valley. My heart is filled with gratitude for this son and this place where our journey together began.

THE NEXT PHASE OF OUR TRIP takes us over 250 miles north to the central coast and Big Sur—rocky, wild places where I alighted but didn’t live during my early years in California. This comes as a relief: no ghosts or old baggage along this stunning coastal route. Still, a few miles north of Hearst Castle, we happen upon Piedras Blancas, where thousands of beached elephant seals are screeching and appear to be dying. But, in fact, we’re witnessing nature at work: This is the time of year when females and juveniles shed an entire layer of skin. It’s a remarkable sight, and in a way I identify with these molting creatures. Throughout this trek I feel as if I, too, am shedding a layer of my past.

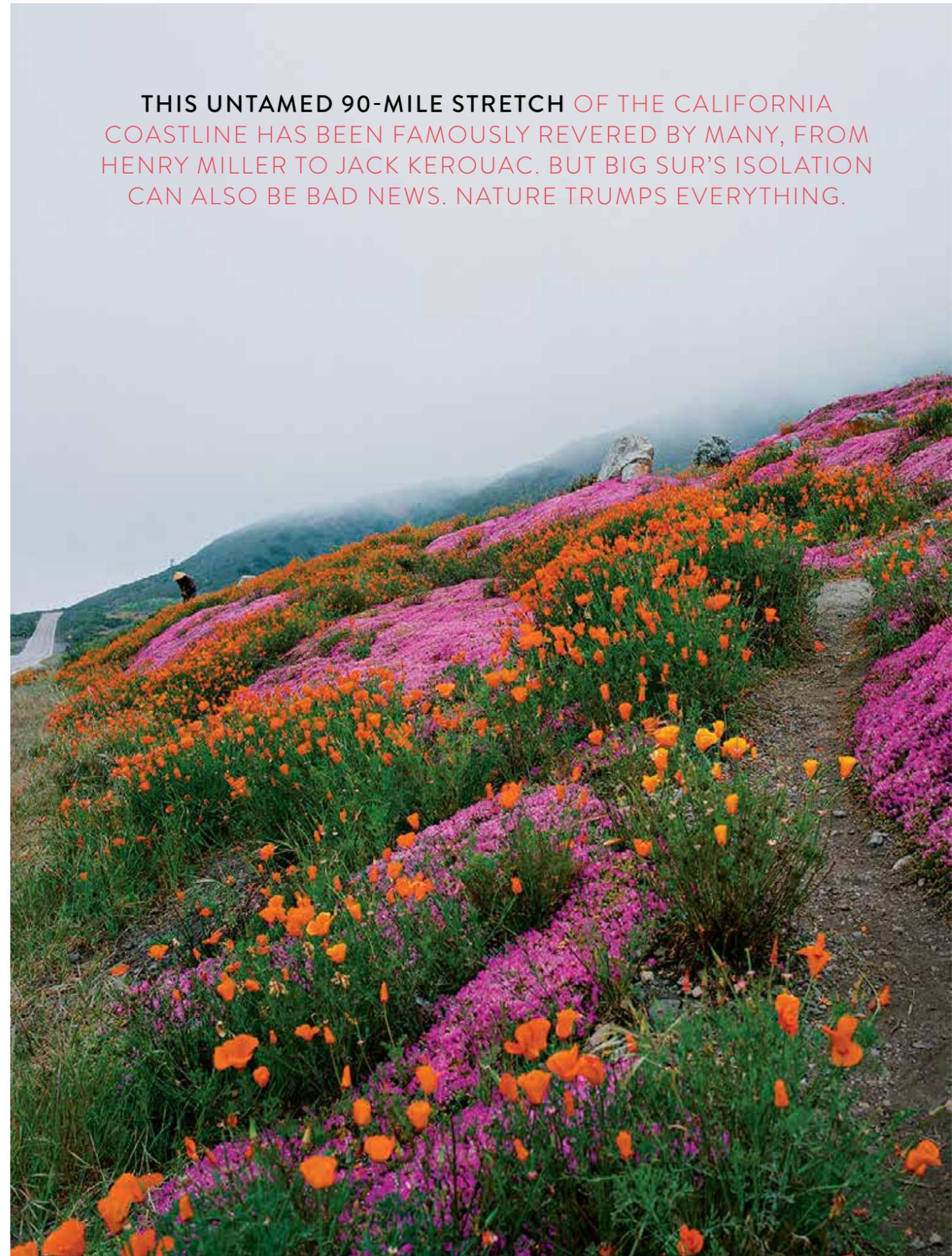
We spend the night at Treebones, a simple but elegant resort perched on a hill overlooking the sea south of Big Sur village. The accommodations range from yurts and campsites to a “human nest,” a woven wood shelter where adventurers can spend the night in harmony with nature.

Megan Handy, one of the owners’ daughters and our waitress at breakfast, explains that the eco-conscious resort was “inspired by ’60s back-to-the-land values, but with an understanding of sustainability and energy use that people didn’t know about in those days.”

Unlike Topanga, which may feel off the grid but is practically spitting distance from Los Angeles, Big Sur really is cut off by nature from urban sprawl. This is mostly good news—and the reason this untamed 90-mile stretch of the California coastline has been famously revered by so many, from Henry Miller to Jack Kerouac. But Big Sur’s isolation can also be bad news. Nature trumps everything.

“This is a very hard place to live,” says Don McQueen, an engineer and owner of the Big Sur Campground. At 85, a commanding six feet eight, McQueen is Big Sur’s unofficial conscience and historian. “The reality of life here doesn’t fit people’s fantasies,” he tells me over coffee at Deetjen’s, a funky and beloved restaurant/inn that he helped build when he was 11 years old. “The roads get washed out, the power goes down, there’s not enough water, and the fire danger is extremely high. Many folks who come don’t last long.”

From the Summer of Love to the Haight, the Magic Bus recalls San Francisco hippie highs with guide Sarah Shoshana David (left). Wildflowers (opposite) brighten a stretch of Highway 1 between Gorda and Big Sur.



THIS UNTAMED 90-MILE STRETCH OF THE CALIFORNIA COASTLINE HAS BEEN FAMOUSLY REVERED BY MANY, FROM HENRY MILLER TO JACK KEROUAC. BUT BIG SUR’S ISOLATION CAN ALSO BE BAD NEWS. NATURE TRUMPS EVERYTHING.

Like many of my generation, I visited Big Sur and dreamed of one day living there. But the place I really want to show Clay, the place that is sacred ground to me, is Pfeiffer Beach. Not exactly a secret but not overrun either, this beach with its jagged, arched rocks that open onto the sea like doorways is one of the most beautiful on the West Coast.

There's a fierce wind gusting when we arrive, but we find shelter beneath the cliffs. Compared with the crowds at the Nepenthe restaurant and other spots along Highway 1, the beach is relatively empty. A few tourists take photographs; some young men scamper up the rocks ahead of an incoming wave; a woman with a crown of seaweed in her hair slowly creeps across the sand on all fours, trying to communicate with a seagull. The year could be 1969 or 2014. The seagull flies away. People come and go. The primal rhythm of the ocean thrashing against the rocks is unwavering. There's something about Pfeiffer Beach—its magnificence, the scale and dominance of nature—that comforts me even as it reminds me of how small I am, how fleeting my time on this earth.

I DIDN'T MOVE TO SAN FRANCISCO until 1975, but I did make a pilgrimage to the city in early 1967, the winter before the Summer of Love. I arrived soon after the first Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park and crashed with a friend of a friend on Stanyan Street. The Haight was overflowing with people. There were long-haired girls in brightly colored peasant garb dancing barefoot in the park alongside dreamy long-haired boys in serapes playing guitar and beating drums. The Diggers, a

radical commune of actors and activists, were everywhere, handing out food, and everybody was stoned out of their minds.

There's no way to revisit that San Francisco, especially now when the tech gold rush has transformed this once scrappy town into a place nearly impossible for the average person to afford. So Clay and I do the next best thing: We hop a ride on the Magic Bus.

The bus is a performance piece on wheels that aims to transport travelers back to the city in the '60s. With its psychedelic paint job and streaming soap bubbles, there's no mistaking the Magic Bus for one of the standard tour buses that clog Union Square. "This is not just a tour, it's a trip," says Artemis, leader of our "tribe." She offers each passenger a flower, à la the famous song lyric, "If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair." This and classics by the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and other bands provide the sound track as we pass many of the iconic spots of the era: City Lights Bookstore, the original Fillmore West (now a Honda dealership), Golden Gate Park, a large mural of Janis, Jerry, and Jimi on Haight Street.

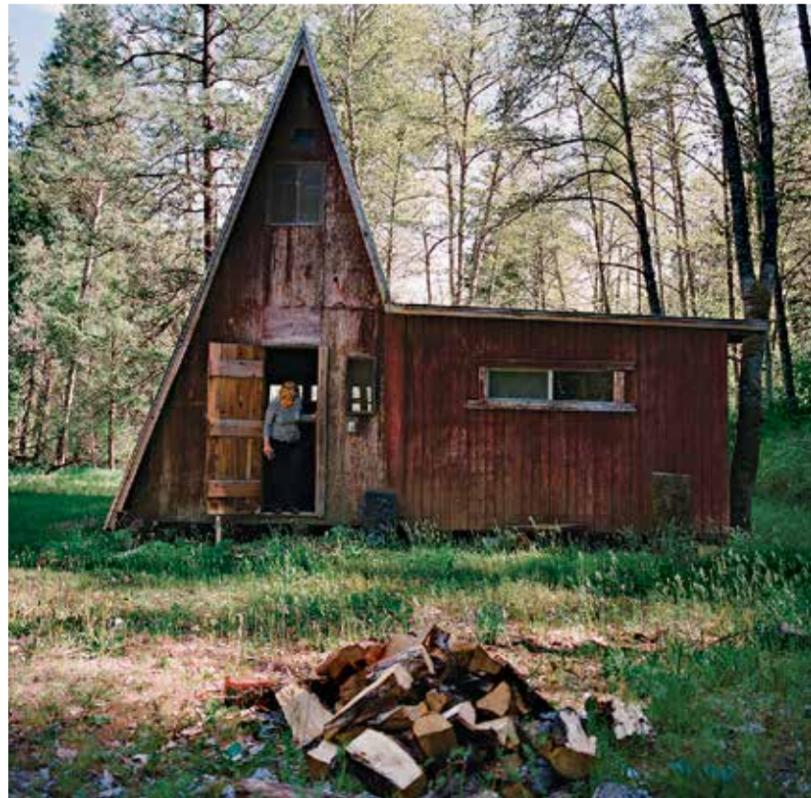
When the bus pulls up to the corner of Haight and Ashbury, the recorded narrative tells us, "To be standing here in the '60s was like standing at the center of the universe." True. And the trip aboard the Magic Bus gives Clay a sense of what it was like to be a young person in his hometown back then, even the darker bits—troubled runaway teens, bad trips, racial tension. For me there's something unsettling about taking an organized tour of my life. It's a reminder that the raucous, idealistic time with which I still identify is now (marketable) history.

FROM SAN FRANCISCO we head north on Highway 5. We're on a mission to find that Trinity County A-frame where we lived when Clay was a baby. For some reason I can't explain, I need to revisit the place where, at 24, I had my aha! moment and realized that living off the land in a remote location—no matter how beautiful—was not for me. The problem is, we don't know exactly where the cabin is or if it still exists.

As soon as we head west on Highway 299, the main road connecting the Central Valley to the north coast, I can see that of all the places Clay and I have visited, Trinity has changed the least. There still isn't a single stoplight or parking meter to be found in the county. With dense forests, snowy alpine peaks, abundant lakes, and the rushing river that runs through it, Trinity shows little signs of development.

Continued on page 85

The author (left) confronts memories at a weather-beaten cabin outside Weaverville, in Trinity County, where Trinity Lake (opposite) remains as wild a place to commune with nature as it was in the '60s.



California

Continued from page 77

We head into Weaverville, the county seat as well as the largest town. Weaverville could easily pass as the set for a remake of *High Noon*—only it's for real. My room in the antiques-laden but appealingly fresh Weaverville Hotel and Emporium overlooks the redbrick courthouse, erected in 1857.

I hope to glean some intelligence about the location of the phantom A-frame from Dero Forslund, a fourth-generation Trinityite. "I've sold a lot of real estate based on the back-to-the-land idea," says Forslund, an affable man with an encyclopedic knowledge of all things Trinity. We're meeting in the Jake Jackson Museum, surrounded by old photographs, tools, and pioneer outfits. "People move here to live a simple life, but not everyone can hack it," he admits. Before we part, Forslund, who is director of the museum as well as former county administrator, promises to sift through old tax records to try to find the site of the A-frame.

I worry that even with Forslund's help we'll never locate the property, which is starting to seem as elusive as Oz. "As great as it was to show you Topanga and the other places, I'm afraid this trip will feel incomplete unless we find that land," I tell Clay over dinner at La Grange Café in Weaverville.

"Did you say Topanga?" a woman at the next table asks.

This is when our adventure takes the sort of turn that happens only in movies.

I shift in my chair and see that the speaker is about my age. "You know it?" I ask.

The woman, whose name is Megan Curran, chuckles. It turns out that she grew up in L.A.—her father was a well-known Hollywood producer—and she hung out in Topanga (once with Crosby, Stills and Nash) around the same time I was there. In 1973 Curran ventured north to Trinity with a friend. She never left. And her son, Michael—her dining companion, who looks strong enough to wrestle a bear and earns his living leading wilderness trips—plans never to leave either.

It's not often that you come face-to-face with your doppelgänger, but

that's how my chance encounter with Curran feels. This is one of those rare sliding-door moments when I see who I might have been—and who Clay might have been—had I stayed in Trinity. Like Curran, who confesses that when she first arrived she didn't know you could actually grow your own vegetables, I probably would have raised as much of my own food as possible and done whatever else it took to survive here. And like Curran, who for 25 years worked as a cook at the local school, I would have had to find a way to pay the bills that, likely, would not have involved a career as a writer. Not surprisingly, Curran is friends with another '70s immigrant, Susan Holthaus, who happens to live down the road from the property where—yes!—the A-frame still stands.

In the morning everything comes together. Forslund phones me with the exact location of the land, and I call Holthaus, who leads me there.

Although it's been 41 years, the area feels as strangely familiar and unfamiliar as a dreamscape: the rutted dirt road, the rushing creek, the narrow bridge we cross to get to the property,

the tepee-shaped A-frame itself (pictured on page 76). At some point a small room and new roof were added, but the place has not aged gracefully.

It is startling to be here. I'm amazed that I lasted for even six months.

Holthaus describes the difficulties of living for years without electricity, having to scrounge for firewood, being snowed in for weeks at a time. "My family thought I was crazy," she says, adding that she had fled a few times when life seemed too hard. "But the beauty of the natural world always drew me back."

When I was new to motherhood—and unaccustomed to life without any modern conveniences—I wasn't able to appreciate the splendor. Still, I have no regrets—either about living here or leaving. Like Topanga and the other stops along the way, Trinity was part of the journey of finding myself and my home in the world.

After years on separate continents, **BARBARA GRAHAM** and her husband, Hugh Delehanty, now reside near her son, **CLAY McLACHLAN**, and his family, in Marin County, California.

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