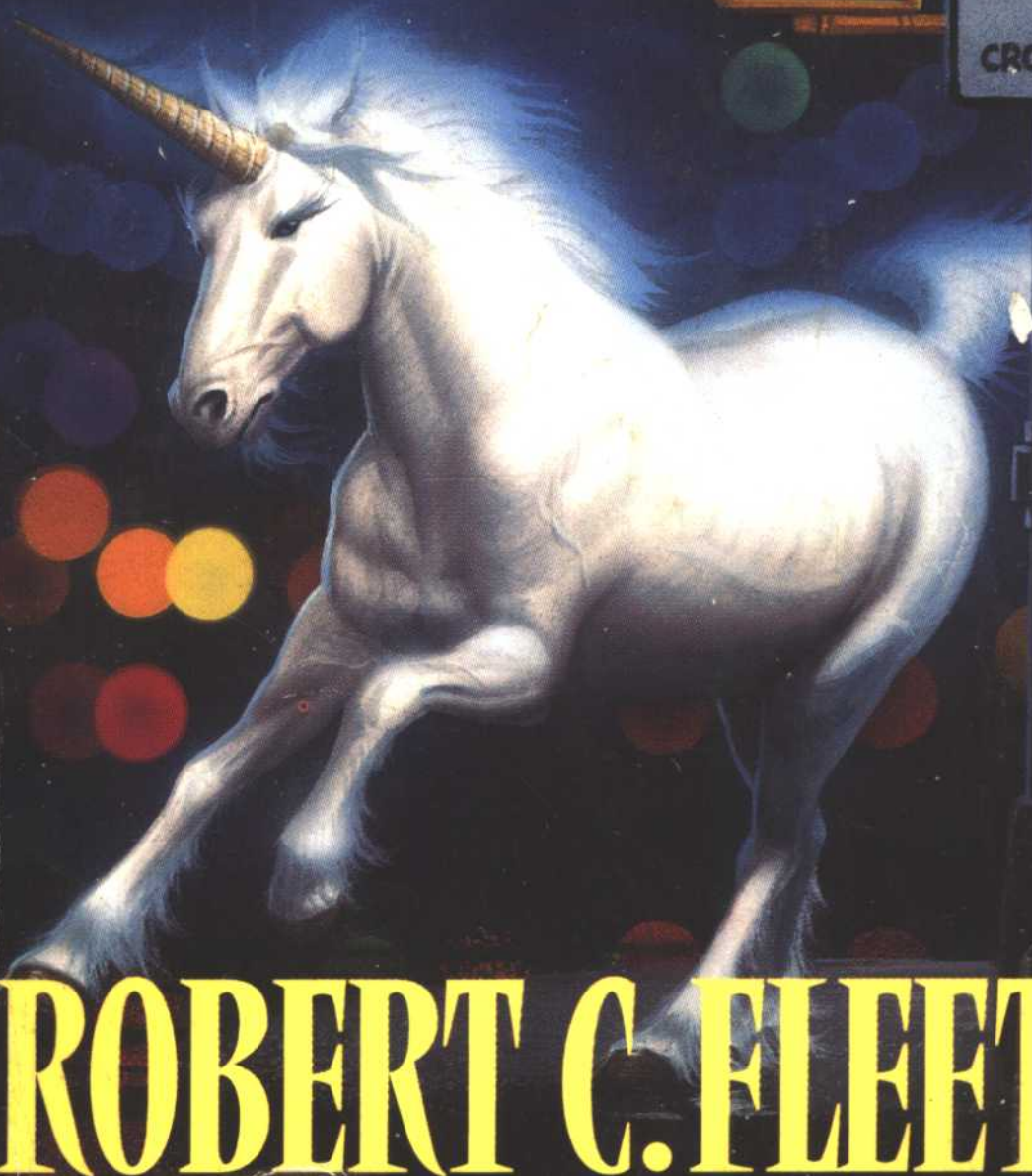


# LAST MOUNTAIN

When you  
hunt a unicorn,  
love is the  
only lure...



ROBERT C. FLEET

AUTHOR OF *WHITE HORSE*, *DARK DRAGON*

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ROBERT C. FLEET



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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## LAST MOUNTAIN

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**“If the true history of the world were ever told  
—and it never will be—  
it would be told through myths and legends.”**

DJUNA BARNES, *NIGHTWOOD*  
OR “D-MINUS” OWENS, PH.D. LIT.,  
LECTURING AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, 1973,  
“AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1920–PRESENT”  
(A REQUIREMENT)

## DISCLAIMER

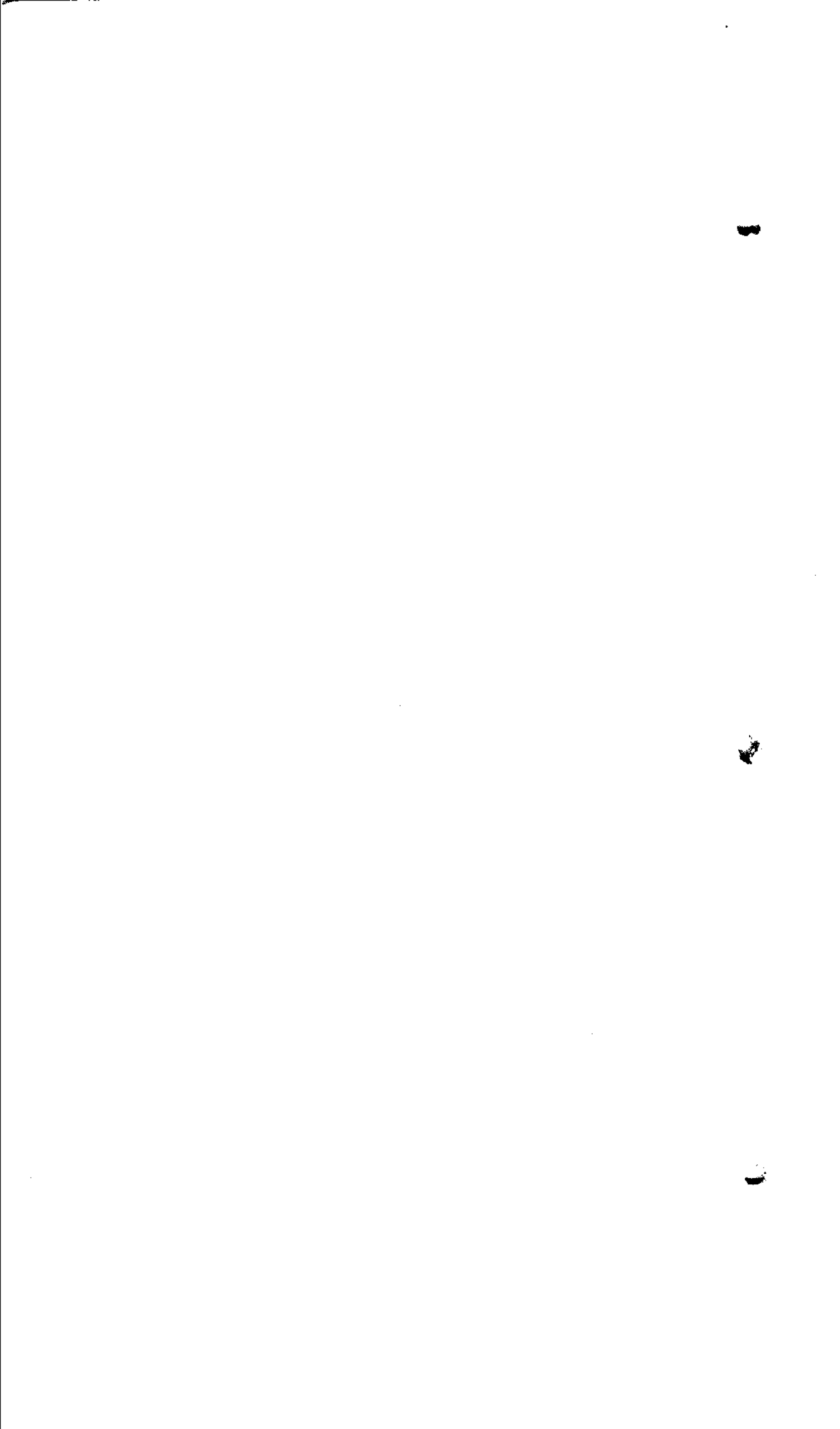
It is considered proper to state that “all characters, situations, etc., are fictional, and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental”—or words to that effect. However, such is not entirely the case here: several real locations and people who I like are presented in their own names because, quite frankly, they deserve a little recognition. And I like the Southland—a lot—even if I do see the warts.

# CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
NANCY	7
PASAJEROS	43
ANNUNCIATA	59
KARUS	95
AVENIDA DOLOROSA	135
FORTUNE	167
CABALLOS	201
SACRIFICE	207
PLACE	241
PICHILINGIS	283
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	289



# PROLOGUE





How long it was since sunset he did not know. It was twilight, the sun below the horizon, and colors were turning to grey. There was a close, comfortable feeling to the evening: he could see clearly, the shadows posed no threats. There *were* no more shadows, it was too dark, greys blended with greens now.

Somehow, at this time of evening, sounds seemed clearer as well. Most certainly this was not true: in the dark his ears would have to be more perceptive of noises by necessity. Still, reassuringly, the rustling branches and soft crunching of his own footsteps murmured with familiar clarity.

Mulholland Drive stretched out before him, its ribbon of paved road scratched across the top ridge of the eastern Santa Monica Mountains. The sun had set behind his back: he was headed east, compelled, to face each morning's rising sun. He left the small stand of fir trees and crossed the asphalt. The click of his hard nails on the road's surface was almost impossible to hear.

*Too loud, though, he thought, too loud—I could have crossed in total silence once. Before.* But he was out of sight again without incident, so self-recriminations were unnecessary.

He knew these mountains intimately. The only real challenge was in keeping track of the changes that the developers wrought unexpectedly. A house sprung suddenly on matchstick stilts propped against the steep slope of Benedict Canyon, cutting off a path the deer had walked clear a hundred years earlier. Of course there was a way around the obstacle; the coyote had been doing their job even as the City of Los Angeles road crews pursued theirs. This new path was very faint still, smelling of scavenger dog, but it was acceptably functional. The green arms of the trees thrust their way before his white chest and were brushed aside accordingly. His scent would encourage the deer to follow, knowing now that more than predators had passed this way. Within a year, he knew, even hikers would discover this path, beat it down with their heavy-soled boots.

#### 4 Robert C. Fleet

But no hunters—Los Angeles was lucky at that: with the press of humanity came the restrictions of civilization. Guns had not been removed from the city, but hunters had. At least hunters after animal game. Along this same spine of mountain ridge surrounded by the great city, only a memory ago, a group of people had descended into Laurel Canyon and massacred their like kind. He had not seen it, only heard the cries, arriving too late to help—and that had surprised him. Not the tragedy of delay, but the desire to help. He had not wanted to do that for such a long time. Not so actively.

A car horn honked in the distance. Without conscious decision, he stepped away from the path and into a stand of eucalyptus trees. Their thin bark peeled in dense strips, like skin being tortured. *They had tortured Cuauhtémoc*—he brushed away that short memory brusquely: if you remembered everything there would be no time to live forward. He could see the beautiful spread of city lights twinkling in the Los Angeles basin below his vantage point. The city's reflected lights killed most of the stars in the sky—only to replace them with stars on the ground. He admired them as he slid between the eucalyptus.

The low-slung Corvette slid up to Mulholland without effort; its shifting gears were almost a part of the background clamor of city noises drifting up to the ridge crest. In point of fact, inside the fire-red sports job, the driver and his passenger heard nothing of the city outside their windows: this was a warm October night, the air conditioning was cranked to full and the digitalized, CD, Dolby-perfect sound system was pumping out enough decibels to keep smiles intact and reality at bay. The tinted windows looked bitchin', too, all view out, nothing in. Insular security on an L.A. night.

The driver was vaguely familiar with Mulholland Drive, where sharp turns and blind curves were the stuff of drag-racing and city legend. The Corvette took the corners with a vector-defying sense of balance. The driver was aided in this task by the strategic placement of road mirrors along the shoulder. He watched the next one carefully as his headlights struck its reflective surface, revealing the unseen road around the bend. Hot light flashed back in his eyes a second—the mirror had been knocked out of alignment—and then illuminated a stand of eucalyptus trees—

The Unicorn reared up on his hind legs, striking at the light with his sharp hooves.

“What the—!”

The driver’s foot slammed down on the brake pedal with a force he did not control, jarring his passenger with a jerk that almost joined teeth to dashboard.

“Why’d ya stop?!?” the passenger screamed in panic, looking about frantically for the oncoming vehicle he expected to plow into them any second.

There was nothing reflected in the mirror. The driver swallowed breath after breath of conditioned air.

“It . . . a . . .”

The Unicorn knew that he was safest close to the car. He watched from behind a neglected hedge that had overgrown its mandate. The human’s voice was clear.

“. . . Unicorn!” The man behind the wheel was all of twenty-seven, his passenger twenty-five. The driver had been racking his brain for the past thirty seconds to remember the word for what he had seen, a classical education not being a requisite of study in the practical world the young professional inhabited. His passenger thought him a dipshit.

“If it was anything, it was a deer,” the passenger said with heartfelt annoyance, sitting back in his seat and wondering vaguely if the stiffness in his neck was the beginnings of whiplash. “Get your mind back on the road before someone plows into our rear.”

The road mirror was truly out of alignment: the image reflected now was that of the Corvette itself, bathed in the dimming glare of its own headlights. Of course it had stalled out with the sudden stop. The driver looked at the road mirror insistently, hoping to catch another glimpse of the horned white horse that had been so clearly caught in the glass circle.

To the Unicorn, the tinted windows and two bright “eyes” beaming through the gathering darkness reminded him of the Dragons that had once roamed Spain five hundred, no, eight hundred years earlier. Gone now, replaced by new monsters. There were humans inside that motorized “Dragon,” the Unicorn knew, but he could not see them and, anyway, did it matter? This was not his Place, certainly not the Last Mountain, so all these were were annoyances or obstacles or simply things to be bypassed on his way to the Last Mountain.

## 6 Robert C. Fleet

He heard the little red Corvette Dragon sputter to life again, saw the headlight eyes glow brighter with the new surge of energy. Then the human-driven monster carefully rounded the corner where he stood hidden—alert and invisible—watching the threat wind its way along Mulholland Drive until its twin-eyed red tails gleamed down into a dip and disappeared.

The Unicorn began to walk east again.



**NANCY**

1

2

3

October in Los Angeles, properly named *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula*, aka L.A. ("El-Lay" to Angelenos), rarely comes close to approximating the fall season the rest of the country enjoys. This year was no exception: two weeks into autumn and the mercury refused to dip below ninety degrees until night-fall. Then a sudden rush of ocean breezes fogged over the sea-coast area, while a gushing mountain draft swept down upon the eastern city borders—fighting it out in a mass of orange smog above the No-Man's-Land of Downtown L.A., where the powers that be continually conspire to join every transportation link in the Southland into a circle of auto-clogged freeways.

Not that everyone minds the L.A. October. There is always something smugly satisfying about watching the rest of the nation begin to chill its collective butt off with freezing rains and sudden snow flurries (always Montana)—while wearing a T-shirt and shorts, feeling the hot air curl around your naked feet. It is untrue that all Southern Californians do not wear socks—but it is safe to say that bared arms and legs are intimate parts of the Los Angeles lifestyle for eight months of the year.

With the price to pay.

This Saturday the price to pay was a city baking and heat-waved in the midafternoon sun. Downtown Los Angeles is essentially deserted on weekends, the towering office buildings erected in a storm of development in the 1980s having driven out the Skid Row living quarters and small businesses that were heavy in street traffic but low in prestige. Now you can drive down clean, barren streets, into the dark, cool caverns of a high-rise parking entrance, follow a short, security-guarded tunnel to a transparent-walled elevator, then ascend above the empty streets to a hidden floor of comfortable, undistracted shopping pleasure.

Only an occasional earthquake disturbs this Downtown serenity: although these new skyscrapers are cushioned upon

## 10 Robert C. Fleet

shock-absorbing rubber pylons, no one can persuasively dispute the feeling of terror that invades your heart when floors eleven on up begin to swing in twenty-foot arcs. To date, though, only a few windows have popped out during the recent earthquakes, shattering with miraculous harmlessness on the streets below. So—the clouds continue to be pricked by new erections; offices and condominiums fill with nouveau tenants; everyone from the Mayor on down tries valiantly to ignore the fact that a heat wave in October is followed by an earthquake in California three years out of five.

Of course, outside the freeway-enclosing circle of Downtown Los Angeles the sky is rarely scraped and the streets take on more of the appearance of a city. The area embraced by Los Angeles is huge, especially if one includes the County borders—which almost everyone who lives here does, heart-, mind- and I.D. -wise. "I live in L.A." does not necessarily mean that the speaker resides in the city proper, particularly if he or she is addressing an outsider from, say, Boston, who does not recognize Los Angeles as being a "true" city anyway. Names like *Glendale, Burbank, Westwood, Venice, Playa del Rey* and so forth spring up in conversations between Angelenos—all are within the L.A. County border and id—but it is almost impossible for the outsider to know which ones are truly a part of the city per se. Many residents would be hard pressed to tell the difference. It should be noted that Los Angeles County extends from the Pacific Ocean east, north and south to cover an area roughly the size of Belgium. Within the "country" of L.A., several mountain ranges thrust their rough fists up into the horizon, creating a "hill" and "valley" division of neighborhoods; further subdivided into "canyon" folk and "beach dwellers," "THE Valley," "The Basin," "San Gabriel Valley"; fifty miles east to nibble at the edges of the ominous-sounding "Inland Empire."

Or you could live just outside the magic circle of Downtown, in any one of three hundred sixty degrees direction, to the neighborhoods fighting the slow descent that decades of neglect and economic decline have inflicted on them. Poverty in L.A. is not like it is elsewhere: once upon a time this was a land-rich area, where a person could be poor and still have a small house and a yard and even a tree (lemon or orange—the smell of fresh fruit fallen on the ground is also a distinct part of Los Angeles). Fear of earthquakes, recently



forgotten Downtown, kept the older parts of the city's buildings low-slung, rarely topping four stories. As a consequence, even where apartment buildings push together in the poor sections of L.A., there is less of the oppressive crowding of brick and concrete that characterize poverty elsewhere. In some sections, terraced hills look positively picturesque, dotted as they are with wood-framed and stucco structures.

There is a greater sense of life here than on the Downtown streets, especially on a Saturday afternoon. Certainly the three thousand people sitting around the muddy pond at MacArthur Park could be taken for happy weekenders. This is not the crowded sensation of New York. People and cars circle, move and hum with vitality, space. It looks a lot more habitable than most urban centers of less-than-middle-level economic status.

Still, these were streets where Nancy del Rio was beginning to feel defeated by it all.

She was almost thirteen years old. Still a child inside and out, with not much time left to be one. Nancy's long dark hair, eyes and complexion told of a Spanish origin—which was not surprising since practically everyone she passed on the street was Latino. Even the old woman calling to her from the second floor of the fifty-year-old apartment building held a look of Old Spain in her eyes.

"Annunciata!" she called.

Nancy's attention was on the crack in the sidewalk, her eyes focussed on a thought five thousand miles deeper.

"Annunciata!" the old woman repeated, not raising her voice.

"Nancy," Gloria Esposito said, nudging her friend and pointing up toward the apartment window. Gloria had been trying to convince Nancy to cut her bangs and tease the front of her hair straight up just like a certain popular singer who Gloria was pretty certain she herself resembled, give or take thirty pounds and talent. "Your grandmother's calling," she added in a twangy Spanish that sang of her family's native Sonora.

"Abuela?" Nancy brought her eyes up. They were hazel eyes, sometimes dark, sometimes a deep green. Her grandmother's.

"What do you want, Abalita?" she called, rising to her feet and walking the few short yards over to stand beneath the window.

Gloria watched her friend and lost interest in the conversation when thoughts of what would be the best eye makeup