

A POCKET HISTORY OF SEX
in the
TWENTIETH CENTURY

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TWENTIETH CENTURY

[*a memoir*]

Jane Vandenburg

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AUTHOR'S NOTE ON TECHNIQUE

THIS IS A WORK of nonfiction whose events happened in the real world. I have, however, employed some of the techniques of fiction in order to tell the story that exists most vividly in my recollections. I have also changed the names of some of the participants in order to protect their identities.

*For my aunt, Janet Vandenburgh Godfrey,
who didn't get the starring role in this production, but is nevertheless its hero.*

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*it seems they were all cheated of some marvellous experience
which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it*

—FRANK O'HARA

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1

THE PULL OF GRAVITY

1

Normalcy

THE LAST HOUSE I will live in with both my parents and my two brothers was one built on a sandy lot in Redondo, a development in a beach town near Los Angeles. Our house is distinguished only by the pepper tree our father planted out in front, where other, more normal dads would dump topsoil and then scatter lawn seed. The house is new, but there isn't any hope for it. It smells of wet cement, as if something is wrong with its foundation. Cold leaks upward through the floorboards, drawing body heat down and out of our bare feet, back to the lot's damp sand.

My brothers and I are blond, tan, tousle-haired beach rats, seriously unkempt. Will and Geo and I know, because one of our more elegant San Marino relatives told us, that we are being raised "by Gawd." "By Gawd, quite obviously, since John and Maggie cannot be bawwthured." Our parents' parenting is described by our Aunt Nan as *benign neglect*.

My brothers and I know no discipline. We wander for miles, going off to the beach or to the pier to fish. We ride our bikes on the esplanade and come home late, idly poking sticks into the already rotting stucco

on the outside of the houses to get at the scraps of tar paper, which we pull out and chew like gum.

It is the 1950s, and both of our parents—who come from privileged backgrounds—believe they’ve ended up in this dump because their money and their luck ran out. Luck is no longer John and Maggie’s specialty. They can still count on one or the other set of grandparents, however, to swoop in to fix things when they mess up. My grandparents say it’s always trouble whenever the phone rings and it concerns Maggie and Johnny. That’s when they have to make phone calls to The Powers That Be, or help my parents out financially. Buying them this house at the beach in Redondo may be one of their last-ditch attempts, getting a starter home for people no longer starting out.

Redondo is an object lesson: How Normal People Are Content to Live.

Other families seem less ambiguous about what you’re supposed to do. You get this job. You buy that house. You raise your children. You build a foursquare life, you go forever to live in it.

On Avenue B in Redondo, our parents are losing any wish they’ve ever had to fit in. Folks believe in America as a Melting Pot, in which everyone urgently needs to learn to conform. The Melting Pot reminds me of Little Black Sambo, who is chased by a tiger around a tree every Saturday morning on cartoons: They go round and round until they melt together into butter.

Redondo is *I Love Lucy*, which I hate for its noisy domestic chaos, and *My Little Margie*, which I like because Gale Storm has a good haircut and a job she keeps from week to week. The name Gale Storm also contains the one grown-up joke I understand.

There is little about being an adult that is clear to me. What I do know is that the foursquare life doesn’t impress my parents. Homeownership does nothing for them, either. Homeownership involves housekeeping,

home maintenance, staying in one place. And awwwctually? our mother remarks as she swooshes her paintbrush around in the bright dyes she uses to paint on Bristol board. Truuuthfully? I'd *much* prefer to move.

Homeownership is a family tradition; real estate is what amounts to almost a family religion, everything being predicated on growth, on the ever-skyward direction of California land values. Everyone in our family has always owned houses, plural—the main one in town and also the ratty dream shack in the mountains or up the coast in Cambria, or at the beach for the summertime, when—like all real Californians—you hike and fish and swim. You very vehemently *picnic*, as my mother says, or you *are forced* to camp out in those gawd-awful sleeping bags on the wretched sleeping porch that is never heated, in order to simulate being in the tyrannical Out of Doors.

My god how I hate *na-chur*, our mother likes to say, how it's all red in tooth and claw.

She says these things to any and all who listen as she works at the kitchen table, where she is painting the storyboards she makes for Disney. Homeownership doesn't make you *a good person*, she says. The Vandenburg Seniors *awwwnd* the Whites *awwwnd* the Ainsworth-Rutherford-Rolands all own *houses, plural*, she goes on, and did we imagine this was anything that got them immediately into their version of heaven? Honestly?

She glances up from what she is doing, one eye winked shut against the upward bloom of her cigarette smoke. She then flicks her gaze over the four corners of her work.

Honestly? she asks again. Just look how crappily *they* turned out.

She inhales smoke, changes brushes in the water jar. Shitheels, she pronounces, whispering to herself.



Ours is a blue-collar neighborhood where the kids are tough and the fathers—cops, plumbers, workers in tool-and-die—will beat up a son who seems to be turning out to be a pansy. No one aside from our father—who is an architect—drives off to work on Wilshire Boulevard on the Miracle Mile wearing a dark suit, white dress shirt, and bowtie. No one aside from our artist mother acts like she does, sitting at the kitchen table, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, as she first inks in and then colors the Donald Duck comics that will be printed over Walt Disney's famous signature. There is no one else playing Bartók, as our father does late into the evening, on the baby grand that takes up too much of the tiny living room.

There is bingo in our neighborhood and there is bowling, but my parents don't go.

My parents can neither abide the normal world—the house, the marriage, the children—nor exit it entirely. They aren't rich enough to afford their privacy. They won't live long enough to find the more tolerant cultural atmosphere my brothers and I will someday enjoy (and even that tolerance will sometimes seem like a window only, one that is opened to let in light and air, but that can easily be slammed down and shuttered again).

Our little beach house is full of big, heavy, old-fashioned furniture that our parents inherited from Various Dead Rich Relatives Who Never Gave a Damn About Us When They Were Alive, as our mother will explain to anyone even vaguely interested. These dead relatives include enfeebled grammas and great-aunts and uncles who tend to live across the Los Angeles Basin in the leafier, more prosperous suburbs. Our parents don't actually *want* this furniture, which arrives unbidden by truck from Pasadena or Santa Monica, as these are artifacts of the fancy Vandenburgs, the Ainsworth-Rutherford-Rolands, the Moseses, the Whites, all that is *ritzy fitz*, she says, very high up,

dontcha know, in all the la-dee-da crap. They were wellborn, while we are Class Damage.

My parents' bedroom furniture, which is huge, mahogany, and ornately carved, came to them from our father's Grandmama Nell. It is so massive that it needed to be taken apart and then rebuilt in their bedroom. There is also a bureau and a dresser and night tables. The solid headboard is so tall it reaches almost to the ceiling, so wide it has to be pushed diagonally back against the bedroom's corner windows.

Oh Jesus Fucking Christ, our mother said when the truck showed up to deliver all this. Our father stood, hands on his hips, gazing into the truck's back, helplessly bewildered by the burden of what was their history.

What the Jesus fucking goddamn *hell?* she asked him, as if this were a form of existential question.

Our father, an elegant man who doesn't use profanity, gazed into the dark guts of the moving truck and shook his head. He was evidently baffled as to what he was supposed to make of this. He'd been depressed recently. *This* was supposed to cheer him up?



Our father has bright blue eyes and a space between his two front teeth. He is charming, winning, cultivated. That he is also promiscuous will come to me years later from his sister, my aunt, the woman who—aside from my mother—knew and loved my father best. According to Aunt Nan, my father wasn't particularly well equipped for the life he led. He roamed, yet suffered for it. Suffered, then roamed again.

He is so devotedly atheistic that he can find no spiritual avenue, not the road that would bring him home to us, not the one that will take him away for good. The religion practiced in our household is Freudian

psychoanalysis, in which confession is offered on a daily basis without either resolution or absolution at the end.

Our parents met at UC Berkeley during the Second World War, when the only men left on campus were those who had enough wrong with them to have been classified 4-F. There was nothing physically wrong with our father. He was tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed, tan from sailing. He was handsome and he was charming. Where my mother was loud and strident, he was soft-spoken, often offering a wry comment half-humorously and sotto voce.

Your father was always *highly* attractive, my mother will say, and always adds, to *both* women and men. She says this as she says most things, in a tone laden with irony, but I know she admires his beauty. It is as if our father's being good looking is just another of her life's own amazing miracles, like their shared artistic talent or the physical beauty of their own three children.

Our grandparents tell my brothers and me over and over again that what is wrong with our parents is that they've always indulged their *artistic* natures, that they chose the wrong friends at Cal, friends who were funny looking and leftist. That my parents imagine they can live outside the rules, as *bohemians*. That my parents have little regard for consequence. We were very small when the chorus began speaking to us like this, in a tone of diagnosis, the ominous shadow of penalty hanging over our uncombed heads.

We endure a double dose of what is wrong with each of them: their promise, their brilliance, their high IQs, their complete lack of common sense. They are intellectually arrogant, the two of them positively convinced they are the two most interesting people either has ever met.

They harbor antisocial attitudes.

And we are their inheritors, our more conventional relatives tell us; they warn us that we are going to have to keep a sharp lookout for our

own wayward tendencies. This is also told to us by our grandparents, who are educated and collect art, who love books, music. This confuses me—aren't books and music *artistic*? I eventually figure out that the problem isn't that our parents are *artistic*. It is that they get caught being that.

Others in the family present as more upright, normal: bankers, teachers, the prosperous owner of a building supply company, a consular officer posted to various oil-producing countries. One uncle shocked the family a few years ago by going beneath his *class* in marrying the woman who had been his secretary; she was pregnant when they married. Marriages in our family aren't normally made like this. You don't marry people randomly, and the women are always educated. A woman might even work, as long as it is agreed that it is economically unnecessary.

Our mother's working is not only necessary, it is being practiced with an ever more thinly veiled desperation. *Where is all their money going?* I wonder. Our parents are both *highly neurotic*, as is openly said. I've known words like *neurotic*, *psychotic*, *Miltown*, and *breakdown* since before I learned to read. Each is in psychoanalysis, which means driving to West Los Angeles and lying on a psychiatrist's couch four or five times a week, then giving him every cent they ever hoped to make, plus more from their parents, something their parents are not going to ever allow them to ever forget. This huge expenditure is thought to be the fee to purchase what the 1950s promises to people like my parents: happiness, prosperity, normalcy. Our parents' two analysts are discussed so much and so intimately, they seem to me to be invisible members of our own nuclear family.



My parents look out of the plate-glass window of what will be their final Slumgullion Dream Shack and drink. They drink, they smoke, they say wry things to each other, talking back and forth in code or shorthand, a volley no one else is in on, their words, half joking, only partly said, as one will leave off at what the other is left to finish. They say, We started out with such high hopes, only to find ourselves living next door to Tony and Sylvia Castanzo—Tony, whose job is *itinerate knife sharpening*; Sylvia, who is *always pregnant*. They call the Castanzos *The Dynamic Duo. Big She, Little He. The Psychopathologies of Everyday Life*.

My parents write and paint, each with little to show for it. Each is in *conflict* about what my mother ironically refers to in the singular as their *identity*, as if their twin identities were something they share spiritually. They do seem intimate in a way that transcends language.

It is a terrible time and place for a family like ours. HUAC is in its heyday. In the infant suburbs of postwar Los Angeles everyone is actively afraid of differences. You can See Spot Run. My brothers and I are sometimes taunted at school because we are smart and because our last name, which has a *burgh* at the end, apparently proves that we are Jewish. We are teased because our father wears a suit and tie to work, because that shows we think we are better'n everybody else on our street.

We don't, do we? I ask my mother. We don't think we're better than everybody else.

On Avenue B? my mother says. Oh, yes, we most certainly do.



My mother hates Huey, Dewey, and Louie, so she quits Disney and takes other awful jobs. For a while she goes door-to-door in high heels and her outdated suits from San Francisco, surveying housewives on the

contents of their kitchen cabinets. She can be charming and persuasive when she wants to be. She talks her way inside housewives' front doors, gets them to let her open their refrigerators and their cupboards to do a tabulated inventory. Then they get busy together to mix up little test packets of what will become the first salad dressings and sauces to be marketed as *convenience* foods. She teaches French at a private school, hired on the basis of her fake French accent. Finally she becomes so desperate that she goes back to Disney. She spends even longer hours at the kitchen table, spilling beer and coffee on the Bristol board, flipping her cigarette ashes into empty cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon, talking to Sylvia Castanzo, to me, to anyone who'll listen about how she's noticed that these *ducks* have whole elaborate outfits, shirts and shoes and hats, but *none of them owns any underpants!*

She is drinking heavily by now, and our father has been arrested again. He is arrested for being in *certain bars*. One is called The Lighthouse; it is on the water in Hermosa Beach, where jazz is played. *Certain people* go there—black men, white men, men who might not yet have begun to refer to themselves as “gay.” Going to these bars is against the law. I don't yet know why.

He gets arrested even though he is a man incapable of committing a real crime.

Whenever my father is arrested, his psychiatrist, her psychiatrist, his parents, and her parents all talk on the phone, or else meet to confer: Whatever to do about Johnny *this time?*

Call it crime or call it disease—these are the two answers to the question that shouldn't have actually been asked in the first place. But it is finally decided that he needs treatment, so he's sent off to a sanitarium. The logic goes like this: He is married and he has three children, so he can't be a *real* homosexual—perhaps it is something adolescent, something he hasn't outgrown?

So he'll be gone to the hospital that is out in the desert near Palm Springs, or he'll be gone to Mexico, which has a different attitude toward men and masculinity. It was to Mexico his family had always gone on summer holidays, where he was free to be himself, my mother says, where he lived with La Señora, where he practiced his Spanish, admired the new architecture, despised the old neoclassical colonial buildings. Where he wasn't persecuted for being the man he was born to be.

Then he'll come home again, rehabilitated. He'll go back to work, and then he'll be gone again, flying on business out of Los Angeles Airport on a prop plane to Texas or Chicago.

One postcard he sends us from a business trip shows the exterior of the Palmer House in Chicago, an X etched in ink on the high window of the room in which he is staying, maybe measuring the drop.

He is tall, broad faced, freckled, lean, always smiling. He stands at his drafting table, which is shoved into one corner of the already crowded bedroom, smiling hard, as if it hurts his face somewhat to do so. He is working on a house that he says our family will go live in and be happy in. He is a disciple of Wright, of Lescaze, of Neutra, and this ultramodern structure he is drawing looks to me like the shape of a box kite laid on its side on the ground. It is the sort of thing about which my mother will invariably remark, Oh, how *très* ultra-ultra!

One wing is for the adults; the other is designed for the three of us, my brothers and me—they call us *the poor, the huddled, the great unwashed*—to go be unruly in. The connecting struts—the long sides of the box—are solid and walled on the outside, then tiled in waxed flagstone so our wet feet won't mark them. The long halls, with sliding glass that opens onto the interior patio, will be hung with artwork done by our parents and their abnormal Berkeley friends. The outdoor pool in the open center of the house is enclosed on all sides. This, our father says, is so our mother will be able to sunbathe naked. Oh, my darling

baby, she tells him when she hears this, arching an eyebrow to say it's he who'd be the one more likely to lay his lanky body out on a chaise, naked in the sunshine, facedown, his dark head cradled on his folded arms, while she stands in the doorway, eyeing him wryly. She'd be turbaned, wearing stylish sunglasses, covered from neck to toe in some smart wrap made of turquoise terry cloth.

He is a better cook than our mother is, but she is a better painter. She recently painted our mailbox in oils, in an abstract expressionist design unappreciated by the neighbors. There are gem cubes that resemble blobs of Jell-O, a huge anti-Disney eye or two, curves and squiggles, black-bordered areas of oceanic blues and greens. The block letters, each stranger and more cubist than the last, spell out THE VANDENBURGHs, which you can read only if you already know what it says. The whole of the mailbox is painted, each inch, and small clay objects have been placed inside to activate its magic, my mother says. The galvanized steel box is covered in paint, and so is the wooden post it sits upon curbside, and even the used-to-be-red sweep-up flag.

That! our grandfather Virgil thunders when he sees it, *no longer conforms to postal regulations.*