

TALES FROM LA
PERLA

A Misspent Hippie Youth



Ralph M. Flores

TALES FROM LA PERLA
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Front cover photograph courtesy of Bob Christensen

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To our children, Gabe, Elena, and Adam

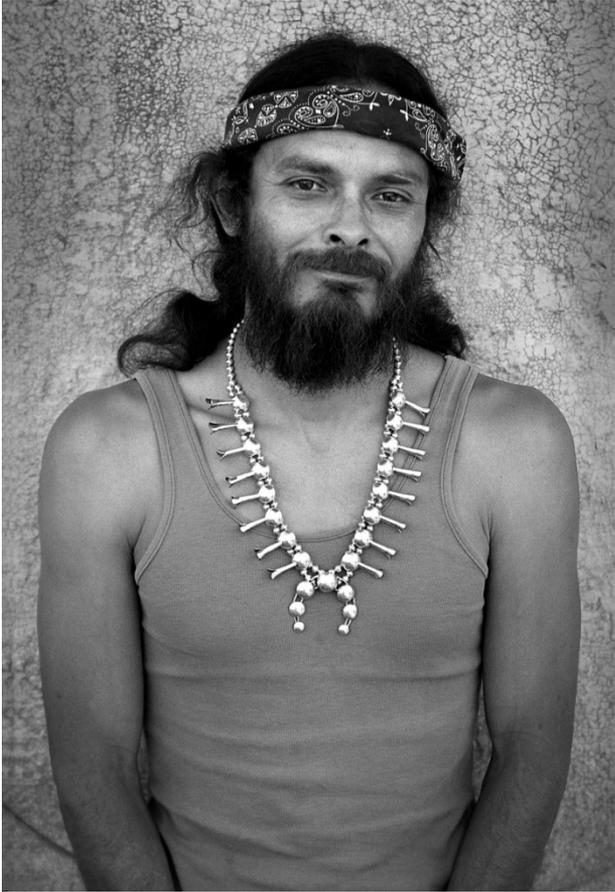
and their families

and to Ralph's friends who helped realize this book:

Alex, Betty, BG, Bob, Hank, Laura, Leo, and
Richard

In a story, fact and fiction become one.

“My Life and the Existential Duck Pop”



Ralph M. Flores Photo courtesy of Bob Christensen

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Foreword

I always liked these stories, so when others asked to read them, I put *Tales from La Perla* at the front of the line of manuscripts Ralph left behind—among them a post-apocalyptic novel, fables and moral tales, and many poems. Ralph had listed a partial table of contents on a small note pad, and there was a folder labeled “*La Perla* tales to organize.” I think he never got around to integrating the two and have puzzled about why. Were they too personal? Might some people recognize themselves and feel hurt at the portrayal? Might they say, that’s not the way it was, not that way at all? He would have said, “It’s fiction.”

About a week after Ralph died in June 2017, I found his back-up flash drive on the ground in our yard near my car. I don’t know how it got there, but I took it as a sign and a permission. It’s now more than a year later, and I’ve found the process of putting the stories together painful but comforting. Reading Ralph’s work

now that he's gone is very different from reading it while he was alive. I can't consult him or watch his reaction to what I say.

So be it.

I knew Ralph when he was at mile marker zero in the town he calls La Perla, knew him before and for many years after. We were married for nearly thirty-seven years up to his death. I knew many of the people he gave pseudonyms, and most to me are recognizable, so I'm guessing others will find them so as well. I thank Leo, many miles away, for writing the Introduction; BG for writing the Afterword and for his help preparing the manuscript for printing; Hank and Bob for returning to La Perla with me; Bob for his impeccable black and white photos and Betty and B.G. for theirs; Betty, Laura, and Richard for their tributes; Alex for his memory of how he met Ralph and Jon; and Ken, who, the day before he died, gave me the red depression-glass artifact Ralph would have added to his wall had he found it at the time. Leo told me he didn't realize how much living in La Perla meant to Ralph before he moved on to Edge City. All told, Ralph stayed in La Perla close to five years, but what he learned lasted a lifetime.

Geri Rhodes aka Jeni
Tomé, New Mexico

Introduction

I first met Ralph soon after my arrival in New Mexico while he was teaching a Chicano literature course at the University of New Mexico. Friends of mine, ex-servicemen I had met in Canada, were taking his class and singing its praises so I started sitting in on some of those classes. It was an introduction to a Chicano history and culture I grew to love. While he was enthusiastic about the subject matter he was teaching, his underlying dissatisfaction with the way his life was going was becoming more and more apparent. We maintained contact while I moved around traveling throughout the southwest and Mexico before finding my home at the ‘end of the road’. A couple of years later, Ralph followed me down to ‘La Perla’ after casting off academia for a simpler way of living. Reflecting on the stories presented here, I experienced nostalgia and a wide range of emotions. I thought about the people in the stories and the situations they were in. I thought about the other people on the periphery there at that time, just outside of those highlighted places. What was happening then with them and where were they now. I contacted some of the old time ‘freaks’ that were still living there. Who? What? Where? I was not too surprised to learn from them that very little had changed. People came and went, people died, and children were born, but there is still no store, few new houses, and the highway still ends at the lone stop sign. I wondered about the desire to leave a legacy, a wish for some part of you to remain. My thoughts went back to *The Horse in the Kitchen*, Ralph’s book about his

father and that way of honoring his life. Be it legacy or memoir, the story here is part of what Ralph saw, felt and left behind. Ralph Flores was a dear friend of mine. In the years we spent together in 'La Perla' and after, a bond developed that I remain thankful for and will always cherish.

Leo Bottos aka Louie
Montreal, Canada

Beely and Me

It's a cool May morning, a few minutes after sunrise, and I'm walking down a silent unpaved street at the edge of town. No one in sight, and if it weren't for the smoke rising from the stovepipes of some of the adobe houses, the town would seem deserted. Off in the distance I can hear the sheep calling excitedly to each other as Brownie, the sheep dog—the only working dog in town—herds them to the grazing fields. Avenicio's cows are lowing as he lets them out of their pens to take them to the pasture grass out toward the river, the Rio Grande, at the edge of town. Dark clouds are building to the southwest behind Ladron Peak, bringing a slight hope of rain for later in the day. Everyone in town is longing for rain to cut the heat, wash the dust out of the air, and bring new energy to the crops. But already the coolness is melting away as the sun climbs higher, and I can feel sweat running down the back of my neck and trickling down between my shoulder blades.

Another summer morning in La Perla, New Mexico.

Life in La Perla moves slowly, like someone crawling out of bed before he's fully awake, stretching languidly, smelling fresh-brewed coffee and thinking *life is good*. Listening to the bell on the bellwether ram and the lowing of the cows, and hearing hard-working Brownie barking at his charges as he herds them out of town, I feel a contentment that I'm not yet accustomed to. I still can't accept peace and harmony without feeling like they're only temporary and catastrophe and doom are

waiting in ambush down the road. Life as toil, sweat, and disappointment, a blasted vale of tears. Jesus! Would I ever get away from those feelings fostered by my Catholic upbringing? Life as a vale of tears? Why would I poison my own life?

Anyway, I'm standing in the empty street, ruminating like one of Avenicio's cows, when a young couple steps out from around the corner of one of the deserted houses. He's Anglo, wearing a straight-brimmed black hat with a silver concho hatband, a pale blue shirt, and heavy brown cotton pants with a gun belt and a gun in a holster. The girl he has his left arm around is Mexican, dark eyes and darker hair, a blouse that leaves her brown arms bare, and a loose, multi-colored skirt that drapes down to her ankles, just above her bare feet. In his right arm, the man cradles a scatter-gun with the barrel pointed down. He raises the gun barrel when he first sees me, and then quickly lowers it again. My heart pounds. It's Billy the Kid!

"Hi Kid," I say.

He nods his head at me. "Howdy." He looks around. "Now this is one fine, quiet little town, kinda place a fella could hide out in and nobody'd ever find him. Am I right?"

"I sure hope so, Billy. I'm looking for a place to hide too. I hope this is it, but I can't really say. I'm just visiting a friend for a couple of days."

"Say, you know where my seenyorita and me can rent a room for a few days? We gotta stop and rest for a while, get to know each other better." He pats her bottom as he talks.

She giggles and squeals: "Oh Beely!"

I shake my head. “No, not around here. This town is dying, and there’s hardly anybody left. Most of the houses are abandoned and falling apart.”

His eyes seem to mist over. “I guess everywhere is dying. I’m running out of places to run to. Everybody chasing me til I don’t know where to go anymore. Even guys who used to be my friends are running me down. No more shelter. Nowhere.”

I nod. “Yeah. If this town dies, I don’t know where I’ll go.”

“Look,” he implores, “I just want a place where I can spend what time I got left with the love of my life here”—he pats her bottom again—“while I’m still full of life and love. That aint too much to ask, is it?”

She nuzzles her face in the crook of his neck. “My Beely.”

“Aint there anywhere we can go?”

“No, not anymore, leastways not here.”

He looks at me with despair. “You know, a fella has no idea where he’s gonna end up once he starts the journey. He thinks he does, but he sure don’t.”

As I look at them they start getting blurry around the edges, like a movie a little bit out of focus.

He turns to the girl. “Conchita honey, I gotta be moving. I gotta go or they’ll hunt me down.” He looks at me with desperation. “*Anywhere*, anywhere at all?”

I shake my head.

Slowly, he and the girl begin to fade away.

“Billy! Don’t go!” I shout. “I know there’s a place for you somewhere, a haven for you and your love. And me! Take me with you. Together we can find it.”

I’m standing alone in the middle of the dirt road.

Yeah. It's really *nineteen*-seventy, not eighteen-seventy, and although La Perla is real, it is a vestige from a dying past. This quiet, forgotten village is a haven for me in a world gone mad, but the winds of chaos and ignorance are blowing and dust is drifting over the landscape, over houses, cars, and people. So I felt, young and searching, in 1970.

Now, forty years later, I return to La Perla in memory.



Highway's End
Christensen

Photo courtesy of Bob

La Perla

I recently saw a TV program on the “hippie movement,” and the “hippie philosophy,” and on the hippies’ foolish idea that they could change society and transform people into loving creatures who go around singing “Kumbaya” and practicing “free love.” Or something very like that. The pundits expostulating on the hippies were all relatively young, probably suckling babes in the sixties and seventies during the height of the so-called hippie movement which they were explaining to one another. One of them was an editor for the *National Review*, for Crissakes, precisely the sort of person that the so-called hippies were trying to get as far away from as they could. Listening to their babble made me start thinking about the time in my life when I was part of a back-to-the-earth migration from the cities to the countryside. I simply could not make what they were saying jibe with my own experience as a “hippie.”

A few comments before we transit to La Perla. First, I never knew any drop-outs to refer to themselves as “hippies.” Hippie is a media word created by the media for the convenience of the media. All the people I knew called themselves “freaks,” a suitable term pointing to the fact that we were social misfits, not normal, not suited to a forty-hour-a-week job or to making money. In the Middle Ages the term “freke” meant a person, a human being. If there was anything all freaks agreed on it was

the idea that personhood was what modern society was destroying. But I never heard any freak press a philosophical or political view on anyone else. I never heard a freak talk about changing or reforming society in any way, much less overthrowing the government, or any other “radical” action. All we wanted was for society to leave us alone. We believed we could set up our own “society” based on community and communal values, where people live together, cooperate, and help each other and even learn to love each other. We may seem foolish and naïve to the pundits for thinking so, but even now, more than forty years later, I don’t believe we were either wrong or foolish.

La Perla (a fictional name) is literally the end of the road. About sixty-five miles south of Albuquerque, a state highway which runs north/south, parallel to the Rio Grande, atop an extended mesa which separates the low-lying, green river valley from the high desert, suddenly swoops down off the mesa and into the Rio Grande valley. As you drive off the mesa into the valley, you are struck by the dark green ribbon of the *bosque*, the forest of cottonwood, Russian olive, tamarisk, and coyote willow that borders the river. Much of what used to be farmland in La Perla has not been cultivated in years and is now bare, hard-packed dirt. There are, however, enough trees scattered throughout La Perla to provide sufficient windbreak to protect some of the topsoil, and if you supply it with seeds, fertilizer, and water, it will once again turn green and lush.

The road dips off the mesa into La Perla, runs west through town for about two hundred yards and dead-ends at a stop sign. This stop sign is the geographic center

of La Perla. Past the stop sign, all the roads—to the south (left), to the north, and straight ahead—are unpaved and dusty. To the south and north, the road runs about a half-mile in each direction, beyond which there are no more houses, living or abandoned. Straight ahead about two hundred yards and running north-south, about 250 miles long and a mile wide, is the Rio Grande *bosque*, the largest cottonwood forest in the country. I have no idea why the highway department would put a stop sign at an intersection that might see four or five cars a day.

There are a few inhabited houses to the south of the sign, a few more to the north, and a few between the stop sign and the mesa to the east. There is one house and the church and its rectory to the west. There are more empty, crumbling houses than inhabited ones. Many more. The only house still standing in the center of town, at the stop sign, is a tiny two-roomer, which serves as the town post office, open from ten in the morning to eleven. Every weekday morning the post office becomes the gathering place for the entire community. The names of the people who received mail are called out, the mail distributed, and news and gossip shared. At one time there used to be a public phone booth next to the post office—then the only phone in town—but as the town faded, the phone became inoperative and the booth was overturned where it still remains lying next to the post office. There are no private businesses, no official offices, no commerce of any sort. Invariably, any strange car that drives into town is lost. Invariably, the drivers ask directions for getting to the Interstate, and invariably they are told, “You can’t get there from here.”

There was a time when La Perla was a thriving farming community, the largest in the area, site of the only schools—from kindergarten through high school—for miles around. Kids from Las Nutrias, Veguita, Sabinal, Concepcion, and all the other small clusters of people that comprised the rural communities surrounding La Perla went to school there. Before World War II, the Village was also the center of social life. Fiestas were always held in La Perla. It housed the only dance hall for miles around. And the only church.

The Great Depression and World War II eventually destroyed the town. Many young men left during the Depression in search of work, and never returned. And then the War started, and the young men who remained went off to fight. Those that survived came back for a short while and then left for the big city, Albuquerque, San Diego, Los Angeles. *How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm?* The young women who did not leave with the men left on their own. Only the old timers remained, and they are dying out, crumbling like the abandoned adobe houses scattered throughout La Perla. That's the nature of an adobe house. If abandoned for a few years, the mud bricks dissolve and melt back into the earth. Eventually only a few scattered artifacts remain—a hair brush, a broken mirror, a rusted toy, a battered saucepan—melancholy ghosts of what used to be.

The effect is melancholy but also deeply satisfying: A house is built of mud bricks molded from the earth, the house is vibrant with life, the house becomes empty, and then it disappears back into the earth it arose from, and the cycle is complete. Just like with people. La

Perla was becoming like the faded ruins of the Piro Indians on the East Mesa, where the desert beyond the river valley begins, right outside of town. The Piros were here before the Spaniards came. It did not take long after the arrival of the Spaniards for them to be annihilated. There is a place in the desert about a mile outside La Perla where you can see the remains of their village, the outlines of the walls where their houses used to be, and if you get down on your hands and knees you might find some of the most beautiful obsidian arrowheads you've ever seen. I suppose someday people will be sifting through the ruins of La Perla in the search for archeological treasure, wondering what the people who lived here were like.

By the late sixties, La Perla was becoming a ghost town. There were maybe twenty people living their last days in the town. Then La Perla was "discovered" by some of the drop-outs from society who were leaving the cities and fleeing into the countryside. They bought some houses for under four hundred dollars each (with electricity and indoor plumbing), and the influx of drop-outs began. The town was not quite dead yet.

In 1970 I was a teaching assistant working on a PhD in American Studies at the University of New Mexico. This was a dark time for many citizens. The war in Viet Nam was a moral grinder wearing everybody down. The war split the nation in a manner unlike anything since the Civil War. You either gave wholehearted support to the war or you were a commie pinko traitor. Nothing in-between. There were fights among conservatives and liberals, "hard hats" and "long hairs," children and parents, and students on campus. In 1970 the governor of New Mexico ordered the National Guard

onto the University of New Mexico campus to break up a student antiwar protest which had closed down the school. The Guard attacked with fixed bayonets and eleven people were bayoneted, fortunately none fatally. But there were officially sanctioned killings of unarmed students on other campuses, e.g., Kent State and Jackson State.

Richard Nixon was a Mafioso disguised as President of the United States, *il capo di tutti capi*, running the country as a criminal enterprise. Before the end of his second term, Nixon's Vice President, his Chief of Staff, his Domestic Policy Advisor, the Director of the FBI, two Attorneys General, and the President's lawyer were all convicted of crimes committed while in office. And those were only the Big Fish. The majority of those convicted, the small fry, remain historically anonymous. The *Capo-in-Chief* resigned in disgrace but was pardoned by the successor president he appointed before resigning. There was, of course, moral indignation, but Nixon was too big to jail, so justice was denied the nation. Vietnam, Richard Nixon, Despair.

Violence and turmoil were ongoing. There were violent demonstrations involving racism, particularly in the late sixties with the assassination of Martin Luther King. The nation seemed on the verge of race war. Student organizations which were founded as peaceful voices for equality and reform eventually turned to violence as their only means of being heard, most significantly the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and, an offshoot of Students for a Democratic Society, the Weather Underground. The nation was tearing itself apart.

Just about everybody I knew at the University was longing for escape. We fantasized about joining together and buying land as a group, leaving society and “pulling the plug,” back to the earth, growing our own food, using firewood for cooking and heating, etc. None of us, of course, had any experience growing anything outside of a backyard flower garden and a couple of tomato plants, or of living without the amenities provided by modern society. It was a pipe dream, and deep down we knew it. But it was a ubiquitous dream anyway.

The word we used the most in our fantasizing was “community.” We wanted to be a part of people who live together, who help and cooperate with each other, who share grief and joy and live in peace and harmony. It was this desire for community that was my driving force. I could not find community anywhere in our society. The University could become its own insular world, but it was never a satisfactory replacement for real community.

One night at a party, I met Louie, a young man who lived in a small community south of Albuquerque, a group of people who had fled the city. Here was someone who was actually doing what my friends and I only talked about! We hit it off instantly and talked for hours, while he filled my head with images of a life in La Perla that I had been dreaming of. He invited me to come visit and spend a weekend in his house in La Perla. It was time to quit talking and start doing.

I visited Louie in La Perla the next weekend and fell in love with the town. I entered a time I thought had died with the onslaught of the Twentieth Century and the Industrial Revolution. No cars on the road, no telephones, no televisions, no radios blaring bubblegum rock, no

convenience stores: A fulfillment of the monastery fantasies which always lay just beneath my surface. When I told Louie I was thinking of quitting my job and moving to La Perla, he offered to let me stay in his house until I could find a place of my own.

“I want a divorce,” she said. “I knew he was going to twist your life around.”

And so it happened. My wife left and started divorce proceedings. I informed the University that this was my last semester, and at semester’s end, I went to La Perla and moved in with Louie, where a section of his living room became my space until I could find my own house. Unfortunately, my money had gone with my divorce, and I didn’t have enough to buy a three-hundred-and fifty-dollar home should I find one for sale. But Louie was generous and glad to have someone living with him. My excitement was palpable. The University and the city and their frustrations were dissolving from my memory.

We who fled to La Perla really thought we could find or create a sane, harmonious place to live and work alongside others, and turn back the clock to a simpler, more innocent time. Okay, so there never was a “simpler” time of innocence, but the idea was seductive nonetheless. *Innocence!* Now, years later, I understand that innocence was a key word for me. When you lose your innocence, is it irretrievably lost? I know I can never be a child again with a child’s innocence, but is there some form of innocence that can be retained as we age? For me, *innocence* took the form of believing in people again, in

their essential goodness, in their desire to live a good life, to shoulder common responsibilities for the community, to help and support each other, and yes, to love each other too. We thought you could do your own thing as long as you did not infringe upon others. It was that simple. Whether our attempt was successful or a failure depends on how one defines “success.”

What I remember most about my life in La Perla were the many different people I met there. Some were old-timers whose families had lived there for generations, some were visitors, some resident freaks—like me, young and dissatisfied with the lives they had been living. As different as the freaks were from each other, they all shared that dissatisfaction. Everybody was searching for something that contemporary society did not, for whatever reasons, provide for them. But living harmoniously with others in your daily life can be very difficult. It sounds simple enough, but to accomplish harmony with others requires getting rid of so much of one’s pettiness, and that which is petty—ego, ingrained bad habits, selfishness, distrust, cynicism—is often the most difficult of all things to eradicate. La Perla was a filter which separated those who truly wanted community from those who thought they wanted it, but for their own reasons were incapable of grasping it.



Post Office
Christensen

Photo courtesy of Bob

La Perla People

When I first came to La Perla there was a hard core of freaks, most of whom had been living there for about one year. Joel and Tommy were the first freaks to come live in La Perla. Joel had a Masters in math and a PhD in psychology. Tommy was a recovering heroin addict. They had driven across country together, from Lexington, Kentucky, where Joel had been a drug therapist and counselor in the federal rehab center in Lexington, and Tommy had been one of his patients, rehabbing from a heroin addiction. Tommy turned Joel on to marijuana and then supplied him with weed thereafter. They eventually took LSD together, and under its influence, Joel decided to quit his job and take to the road, and Tommy went with him. The two of them, and Shep, Tommy's German Shepard, headed west in Joel's old, beat-up Mercedes, until they got lost in New Mexico, and wound up at the stop sign in the middle of La Perla. It was the end of the road, so they stayed. They contacted the absentee owners of a couple of derelict

adobe houses and were told that if they resurrected the houses, they could live in them rent-free. They set to work immediately. Shortly after I arrived, Sara, a slender, doe-eyed, serene lady moved in with Joel. And Tommy also established a somewhat uneasy relationship with a young woman who moved in with him, as I detail later in this narrative.

The next to get lost and drive into La Perla were Ron and Cindy. She was from the upper-scale Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, and he was from a semi-disreputable neighborhood in the city. As teenagers, they met at a rock concert and became lovers. He was just what she wanted in her rebellion against upper-middle class life in Shaker Heights. He was everything her parents feared for their daughter—a high-school dropout with no job and no “future.” But he was a pretty good mechanic and had a VW Beetle, and they drove west into the sunset. For him, I suppose she represented what had always seemed unattainable, the girl at the other end of the socio-economic scale. He was bright, and like many self-educated people, he knew a little about a lot of things, and often made a point of demonstrating his knowledge. She was red-headed, voluptuous, and docile, almost bovine. But she did have enough spirit to rebel against her parents, although now she let Ron make most of their decisions.

Louie was Canadian but had been living in the U.S. illegally for five years. At eighteen, he had set out from Canada with his inheritance money from his father’s death, and traveled all around the Mediterranean world, living in international “hippie” colonies on various Aegean islands. He returned to the U.S. and traveled

aimlessly until he met Joel at a party in Albuquerque and found out about La Perla. He moved in and bought a two-bedroom house with electricity and indoor plumbing on three quarters of an acre. A few months after I moved in with him, Karen, a friend of a friend of Louie's from San Francisco, came to visit La Perla. She was a legal secretary in San Francisco on vacation, and like so many other young visitors to La Perla, she became enchanted with the town. She stayed and moved in with Louie.

Jill was a petite lady with an iron will. She too had been a teaching assistant at the University of New Mexico, where we had met and, in those weeks before my last semester was over, became occasional lovers. A couple months after I quit my job and left the city, she too quit and moved to La Perla. Of all the dropouts in the community, she was the most dropped. She kept disengaging herself from all the "conveniences" of modern society, and even though she had a house in La Perla, she eventually put up a teepee and moved into it. When the freaks who lived in the mountains some thirty miles away moved into the valley to spend the winter, she would take down her teepee and move into the mountains and live in the snow, alone, until the weather warmed up and the mountain freaks came back. She would then return to La Perla. As small as she was, she was a farrier, and once travelled along the mountain peaks of the Continental Divide from Colorado into Mexico with only a burro as a companion.

Len and Amy were the ambiguous members. They came shortly after Louie. They had been married for three years. He was working construction and she was studying to be a teacher when they dropped out. He

wanted to farm, so they bought a farmhouse and twenty acres on the outskirts of La Perla. I don't think they saw themselves as freaks the same way the rest of us saw ourselves. Like the rest of us, they were discontented with modern society, but their move to La Perla was a change of occupation and lifestyle, from construction to farming. They came to the communal dinners and feasts but remained on the outer fringes of the group where we'd find them when we needed to borrow an egg or a cup of milk.

There was a continual stream of misfits and discontents who would come, move into an empty house, stay for two or three months, sometimes longer, and then leave. Mostly I think they found life in La Perla too difficult and too different from what they were used to. When you heat and cook with firewood, it takes a lot of time and work to keep a constant supply of fuel on hand. One of the symbols of security in La Perla was not having a lot of cash but rather having a large stack of cut firewood next to your house. Growing your own food was another time-consuming enterprise. You had to have manure and compost, you had to water and weed your garden, you had to keep out the hungry varmints and insects which saw your garden as their little Eden. And, of course, there were difficulties in maintaining smooth relationships with others. These temporary residents were a cross-section of the disaffected and discontented of our society. There was nothing *wrong* with them; they just didn't fit into modern society, but for whatever reasons were incapable of changing their situation.

La Perla was a sort of ink blot test for visitors. People saw what they wanted or expected to see when

they first visited. The young saw a group of people living in a harmonious and cooperative community, something missing from their lives, something they yearned for. They would walk around saying, “Boy, I wish I could live here. It’s so peaceful!”

Our reaction to these comments was two-fold. First, it was *not* peaceful in La Perla. Underneath the peaceful patina were emotional turmoil, flashes of anger, disputes, personal relationships in constant turmoil, and never-ending accommodations to the needs and wants of others. Our society does not prepare us for cooperation and compromise. Everything is a zero-sum game: If I win, you have to lose, and *vice versa*. Why can’t we all be winners?

Second, we felt that if you really wanted to drop out and move to La Perla, you would do so. Ultimately, you do what you really want to do. Everything else is just talk. We never tried talking anyone into joining us. The only thing holding people back was fear—fear of having no steady income, or a greatly reduced income; fear of finding out who you are when you don’t have a job by which you can identify *what* you are and verify your worth to society; fear of giving up some of your rights and freedom for the sake of harmony and community; fear of intimacy with the Other; and a general fear of letting the future come to you in whatever form it takes.

So whenever anyone said they wished they could live in La Perla, our response was a silent shrug.

Then why did I, and the others, eventually leave this haven? What drove us away and apart? One thing the freaks all had in common when I moved to La Perla was the absolute conviction that we would never, *could*

never, return to mainstream society, and we could never change it; we just wanted it to leave us alone. We had a little island we lived in and were happy there. I've thought about why it fell apart and why we left to re-enter a world we had tried so hard to run away from. Ultimately, I think we all learned that it is possible to live in modern society without feeling trapped. As the Sufis say, "Be *in* the world, but not *of* the world."

TV in La Perla

Although my plan was to cut loose from all my “material possessions,” as I referred to my car, my color TV, expensive sound equipment, and books, the terms of my divorce were such that I wound up with all of those things since my ex-wife, now in Florida, did not want to bother with having them sent to her or to come pick them up herself. So I arrived in La Perla with these possessions. I not only had the only television set in La Perla, it was a *color* TV, not that common in 1970. I just assumed that I would store these things in someone’s shed until I could sell them for a few bucks.

To my surprise and disgust, the TV created quite a stir among the freaks in town. It was immediately hooked up in Louie’s house, and the freaks came in daily to watch the soap operas. I said nothing for a few days—it was, after all, Louie’s house, not mine—but finally I complained about the TV going almost constantly.

“What are you bitching about?” asked Tommy, a slender man with long black hair and piercing eyes. “*You*

brought the television with you. Why'd you bring it if you didn't want it hooked up?"

"I didn't want it. It was part of my divorce settlement, and I brought it with me until I could sell it and the other stuff."

"You think somebody in La Perla's going to buy it?"

"Of course not, but I just wanted to settle in before I tried to sell it, maybe in Belen or Albuquerque."

"If I don't want something, I get rid of it. I don't carry it around with me until I find the right place to dump it. I don't want it, I don't keep it."

"OK, OK, so maybe I should have thrown it away and didn't. But it's still my TV and I don't want it going all the time."

"Why should you care what I do with my time? If I want to watch TV, why should that piss you off? If you don't want to watch TV, don't. What's simpler than that? Why lay your trip on me?"

The situation was very confusing. What I wanted to say was, "I thought we were all trying to get away from television and all the other bullshit of modern society," but maybe I was wrong. The other freaks may have had completely different reasons for living here. Maybe some were just here because they fell into this sort of life and didn't really know what they wanted. But then maybe I didn't know what I wanted, maybe Tommy was right—if I had really wanted to get rid of the TV, I would have done so before I came to La Perla.

There was a "free store" set up in a shed in La Perla. The freaks from all the surrounding area brought in extra clothes, appliances, tools, and left them and took

whatever they needed in exchange. No one tended the store and no money was ever exchanged. You left what was superfluous and took what you needed. I wonder now why I didn't take my TV there and let it end up in someone else's house in La Perla so I wouldn't have to listen to it. Now, though, I just tune it out.

The TV ended up in Louie's bathtub.