The Mavericks of La Honda

The Kesey's new home in La Honda was only fifteen miles or so from Perry Lane, but the two places could not have been more different. La Honda was a fairly isolated village community, nestled on the westward slopes of the Redwood hills that separated Palo Alto from the Pacific Ocean. The location looked and felt more like Oregon than California, possessed of a rainy climate and an earthy character that even Hank Stamper would have found familiar. In the mid-nineteenth century the place was not much more than a few lumber mills and a stagecoach stop, but it grew as its industry expanded. A schoolhouse was built in 1870 and local legend had it that in 1877 some members of the infamous Younger Brothers gang settled in the area and built the old Pioneer Mercantile Store in what was then the center of La Honda. By the turn of the century the commercial and residential heart of La Honda had moved about three quarters of a mile up the road from the Pioneer Mercantile Store to its present day location. It had a saloon, a dance hall, a new school house, a post office, a hotel, a blacksmith and a burgeoning tourist industry that attracted hundreds of visitors from San Francisco and elsewhere on the peninsula. To meet the growing demand, La Honda soon boasted four hotels and seven bars, one of which was famous for hosting frog shooting competitions and musical entertainment by a group possessed of the unlikely name of the Tapioca Band. On summer weekends up to three hundred campers would pitch their tents all over La Honda, especially down by La Honda Creek which was renowned for its bountiful supply of trout.

La Honda's heyday did not last long. When its virgin timber ran out in 1910, its logging industry rapidly declined. And with the advent of the automobile, vacationers from the city started venturing further south to Santa Cruz or Monterey. The final nail in the coffin came with the stock market crash of 1929, which collapsed real estate values and put an end to any large

scale residential development in the area for the next thirty five years. Its economy in tatters, La Honda become something of a forgotten backwater, home to mavericks and a few old-timers; all possessed of "a spark of pioneer in their blood that makes them want to venture out where conformity has never yet been witnessed," as one newspaper reported.[1] By the early 1960s, La Honda was starting to recover, in part because it was turning into the peninsula's version of Big Sur; increasingly home to all manner of artists, writers, naturists and people who just wanted to get away from it all. Robert Stone described it as a place that "had the quality of a raw Northwestern logging town, transported to suburban San Francisco."[2] No wonder Kesey loved it. In August, 1963, he, Faye and the kids, including the new one, Jed, became the latest and most famous mavericks on La Honda's block.

Fred Kesey, it was, who first spotted the log house for sale at 7940 La Honda Road, about half a mile beyond the Boots and Saddle General Store, by then the heart and soul of what passed for La Honda central. The one-storey house, built in 1942 by the Pepper family and named "Wychward," was a modest place, less than sixty feet long and only about thirty five feet deep at best. One master bedroom and two small secondary bedrooms took up most of one side of the house. A tiny kitchen and an equally small bathroom were tucked away at the back. The kitchen looked out onto a small, elevated clearing that looked like a fairy circle among the trees. The biggest room by far was the living room—about thirty feet by fifteen—which had a tall, vaulted ceiling paneled with 13 inch wide Redwood boards that had most likely been milled on site. The high ceiling's pine and fir beams gave the place the feel of an old Viking lodge. A stone fireplace settled in one corner, a woodstove stood against the back wall, and French windows ran along

[1] Tom Stockley, "La Honda: The Peninsula's Maverick Community," *The Advance-Star and Green Sheet*, June 19 1966.
[2] Stone, "The Prince of Possibility," 70.

the entire length of the house's frontage.[3] The house sat on what was really just the southern bank of the La Honda Creek. This often misty, sometimes raging stream ran along the line of the property and separated it from the road out front. A small, gated bridge across the Creek was the only way to access the property from the road. From bridge to the front door was about a hundred feet.

Behind the dwelling, the ground rose steeply up a hill that was covered in towering redwoods. At the top was a clearing, named Barking Bug Meadow in honor of four year-old Zane who had once exclaimed on a walk up there that "them damn bugs are all the time barking."[4] Roughly one thousand acres of forest encircled the house, much of it part of what is now Sam McDonald State Park. One could neither see nor hear any neighbors from the house, but it was plainly visible from the road that ran along the length of its property. Some of the trees in the forest were hundreds of years old, but most of them were second-growth, born in the twentieth century after the logging declined. Lots of huge Redwood stumps could be found scattered in amongst the trees, all that remained of the ancient forest that once covered these slopes. But new-growth, old-growth, it did not really matter; the place was spectacularly beautiful, the house an organic part of the woodlands that engulfed it. Yes, it could be dark and dank—especially in the winter when the sun shone through the front windows for little more than an hour at midday—but it was just about as close as a person could get to living in nature without having to get cold and wet.

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[3] I am indebted to Terry Adams and Eva Knodt, the current co-owners of Kesey's house, for providing me an essay that Terry has written about the house and its restoration entitled "Picking up the Pieces - rebuilding Ken Kesey's house in La Honda." Kesey had been forced to sell the property in 1997, primarily to pay a local police officer who had sued and won a settlement from Kesey after the officer fell of the bridge while responding to a call about the house. In February 1998, a torrential downpour virtually washed away the property when the La Honda Creek overflowed its banks. Two walls at the back of the house were practically destroyed and the front wall was left listing badly. At tremendous expense, the new owners have restored the house to its former glory, albeit with new concrete pile foundations that leave it standing six feet higher than in its glory years.

[4] Lish, "Ken Kesey: A Celebration of Excellence," 19.

Kesey rapidly set about making the place his own. He began by fixing three large speakers to the roof of the house, out of which he would blare loud Sousa marches or stirring Beethoven quartets. Later, he and his friends would hoist additional speakers into the redwoods high up above, along with strings of colored lights. The woods became an improvised art gallery with weird mobiles hung from branches and paintings of brightly streaked colors nailed to tree trunks. Kesey took to hiding objects around the place, here a tiny tin toy horse lodged in the hollowed-out base of a huge pine tree, there a small skull resting on the branch of another. Later, Ron Boise, a Santa Cruz artist of some repute, would add some of his metal sculptures to Kesey's house at La Honda, including a full size figure of a man that infamously hung from one of the tall trees in the yard. Bottles of Cool-Aid sat cooling in a small stream that ran down the hill, held secure by rocks until someone was passing and thirsty. Morning glory vines grew everywhere, a product of Kesey's recent discovery that the seeds possessed psychedelic properties.[5] He had taken to filling the magazine of his shotgun with the seeds and then blasting them across the highway into its far bank to facilitate their widespread distribution.

A small building, no bigger than a medium-sized garden shed, stood apart from the house, close to the creek. Kesey made this his writing room and his den, sharing it at one point with a litter of dachshund pups who lived beneath its floor. The building was referred to by all as "the back house," and it was there that Kesey put the finishing touches to *Sometimes a Great Notion* during his first couple of months in La Honda. *Notion* is set in Oregon, but one cannot help but occasionally wonder whether Kesey's La Honda surroundings were not also inspiring

[5] Back in June, 1963 Kesey had sent Babbs a postcard informing him of his recent discovery. "It has recently been ascertained by a reliable group of dedicated scientists working on the problem at HIGH (Head's Institute for Greater Highs) that a person can get loaded on morning glory seeds! Of various varieties (ie Heavenly Blue, Pearly Gates and Flying Saucer – isn't that too much?) by eating one-to-two-hundred-and-fifty seeds. Little gut trouble, but not as much as Peyote or IT-290, and they chew up nice as grape nuts….Wow!" Ken Kesey, "Letter #32," June 12 1963, Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.. These days, morning glory seeds are advertised as toxic.

him as he wrote. The opening passage of the book, for example, beautifully described the flashing tributaries of the Waconda Auga River, but the sounds that Kesey probably heard as he worked on that passage were those of the La Honda Creek.

Kesey wrote virtually the entire *Notion* manuscript in longhand on yellow legal pads, cutting and pasting here and there, amassing piles of bits of paper, each bearing a phrase or a sentence or two that Kesey hoped to use somewhere in the mix. He kept an elaborate chart on the wall of his writing room to help him "keep tabs on who's where and how and who's telling you so," as he explained to one interviewer.[6] Chapter by chapter, he assembled the passages together, using italics, capitals and parentheses to distinguish the multiple perspectives, oftentimes within the same paragraph, and sometimes even within one sentence. Amazingly, it took him little more than a year to write the first draft of a book that was, by any measure, big, bold and unique. When one considers that Kesey wrote the bulk of it on Perry Lane with all of its pleasurable distractions, his efforts seem all the more remarkable. By March 1963, he had sent his handwritten manuscript to Viking where some poor secretary had to type up the assembled papers into some sort of coherent document. Kesey had high hopes, but he also knew that the scale of his ambition could be his undoing. "It's a big book. Possibly a damned big book. Certainly a remarkable book," Kesey wrote to Babbs early in 1963. "If it fails—and it could, could fail, and still be very close to being a great book—I'll have still learned a hell of a lot about writing from doing it, enough, I hope, to know better than try anything so cumbersome again."[7]

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[6] Lish, "Ken Kesey: A Celebration of Excellence," 24. A copy of one of these charts can be found in Ken Kesey and Michael Strelow, *Kesey*, 2d ed. (Eugene, Or.: Northwest Review Books, 1977). This book also includes some of Kesey's outline notes for *Sometimes a Great Notion*. These notes make fascinating reading because they allow us to see Kesey developing the narrative and distinctive style of the book.
[7] Kesey, "Undated Letter #26,"

Kesey's editor at Viking sent him a six page letter full of suggestions for revisions and improvements. He toiled to accommodate her wishes, finding her request to make Lee Stamper more likable particularly difficult since the character was so much a part of his own personality. Puzzled, Kesey wrote and joked with Babbs that he was not sure how to go about "changing the character of a guy you've known most of your life?"[8] He sent a copy of the manuscript to Babbs for comment, in part because he trusted his old classmate's opinion more than that of his editor. Babbs responded full of praise and enthusiasm. He particularly liked the Hank Stamper character, who, despite his rough exterior seemed wiser than his over-educated brother Lee. "I think we know one another well enough, always have, to bank on Hank," he told Kesey. "He knows he's not just a clod, but his custom is to let things be communicated through feel and by knowing, what does he need with all this fancy talk? Talk which today seems to be substitute for balls and emotions and guts. Hank is tuned into a frequency that goes beyond the need for words."[9] Babbs was impressed enough to write to his brother to tell him about Kesey's progress. "His book is a knockout, "he wrote in July 1963. "[F]rom what I read he won't have a best seller, but a work that will put him right up with the big boys of the day, Mailer, Jones, Updike, Roth – none of them have tried anything as tough as what he has done in the way of construction."[10]

Viking had made it clear that Kesey would receive the second half of his $5,000 advance only after he had completed a second draft. Kesey, though, was loath to embark upon the wearisome task of revision. By the late spring, he had still not read all the way through the typed manuscript that Viking had sent him. He finally got down to business over the summer, though he found it no easy task. "I'm trying what to me is extremely difficult," he told Babbs, writing

[8] Kesey Ken, "Undated Letter #26," January according to Faye Kesey 1963, Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.
[9] Kesey, "Letter #32,"
[10] Babbs, "Letter,"

from La Honda. "[N]amely to write intellectual and educated prose. *Cuckoo* is obviously illiterate on-coming."[11] The work took its toll, draining Kesey's enthusiasm for writing and fostering a hatred for his poor old typewriter. **"**I've worked up such a seething of ill feeling against that chunk of clattering equipment," he told Larry McMurtry. "In fact, I'm beginning to suspect that I may someday draw novels instead of write them."[12] It was a throwaway line, but it was the first hint that in the year to follow, Kesey would announce that he was giving up writing.

By the fall of 1963, Kesey was done with his revisions but the effort had left him exhausted and uncharacteristically modest. "Finished my book and ran the bastard off the premises at pencil-point," he wearily told Helen Guthrie in late October 1963. "[I am] sick to death of the sight of it and convinced that I have spent two years concocting from my crucible the most glorious, spectacular, outrageous and supercolossal failure since Sparticus."[13] Kesey's lack of confidence was misplaced. The book was certainly overly ambitious and demanding of its readers—how could it not given the scope of Kesey's ambition—but it was also a tale so beautifully written and so powerfully told that most readers would surely chose to forgive the author his youthful conceit. *Sometimes a Great Notion* would turn out to be a breathtaking accomplishment; a genuine classic of twentieth century American literature.

Cuckoo on Broadway

The Boston run ended on November 9. The plans to stage additional warm-up shows in Buffalo were scrapped and the cast headed straight to the city to prepare for their Broadway debut. Opening night—November 13—at the Cort Theater was a sell-out. Kesey, Faye, Grandma

[11] Ken Kesey, "Undated Letter #36," Fall 1963 according to Faye Kesey Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.
[12] Ken Kesey, "Undated Letter #34," Summer 1963 according to Faye Kesey, Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.
[13] Ken Kesey, "Undated Letter #37," Fall 1963 according to Faye Kesey, Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

Smith, Chuck and his wife Sue flew in as Kirk Douglas's personal guests. Dorothy Fadiman, a friend of Kesey's from Palo Alto, was there, as was Carl Lehmann-Haupt, Kesey's one-time neighbor on the Lane. George Walker had driven cross country to attend what turned out to be quite a star-studded occasion. Attendees included two of President Kennedy's sisters, Jean Kennedy Smith and Patricia Kennedy Lawford; George Plimpton, journalist, sometime actor and founder-editor of the literary magazine *The Paris Review*; pop singer Tony Martin and his actress/dancer wife, Cyd Charisse; and Tony Award winning songwriter Jule Stynes. After the performance, a tuxedo-wearing Kesey mingled with the guests at a post-production party at the Four Seasons Hotel, and then sat with Kirk Douglas in Schraffts, a nearby restaurant, waiting for the newspaper reviews to come out. Kesey thought the play was great. "Marvelous, it was absolutely marvelous," he recalled years later.[14] "Kirk Douglas was so good it was like I had written it for him."[15] A few of the reviewers felt the same way. *The New York Daily News* lauded it as "a most enjoyable and exiting play," and the influential Norman Nadel of the *New York World Telegram & Sun* called it "a wacking good play, beautifully cast, directed and staged." Unfortunately, a good two thirds of the reviewers felt differently, often vehemently. Howard Taugman, for example, of the *New York Times* called it "a crazy quilt of wisecracks, cavortings, violence and histrionic villainy." *The Village Voice* dismissed it as "a very bad play for very good reasons ….bathroom humor played for its own sake." One concerned critic even questioned whether such a play was in the public interest.

By far the most damning review came from Walter Kerr at the *New York Herald Tribune*. "'*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*' is so preposterous a proposition for the theatre that it could be dismissed very briefly if it weren't for the extraordinary tastelessness with which it has been

[14] Charles Kiselyak, "Completely Cuckoo: A Film," (Pioneer Entertainment, 1997).
[15] Barnard, "'Cuckoo': From Psych Ward to Broadway."

conceived," Kerr began his piece. ". . . . I'd like to make it plain at once that when I speak of the evening's essential cheapness I am not in the least thinking of its deep and abiding fondness for the scatological; of its interest in whores who are therapeutic for male virgins, of the whooping and hollering that goes on over a toilet flush, of the vodka that is served out of enema bags, of the 'Frig 'em all' that is intoned like a litany."[16] Kerr concluded by suggesting that Kesey was an "unlucky man" for having had his novel adapted so poorly for the stage (even though it seems clear that Kerr had not read the book).

Douglas and his supporting cast escaped relatively unscathed in this barrage of damnation. Even the worst of the reviews respectfully praised the Hollywood star's performance and one of them went so far as to offer him some sympathy for having to carry the heavy "load" of a play of such "cheap" and unconvincing quality. It was the substance of the play itself that the critics objected to, and so, not surprisingly, they reserved their sharpest invective for its creator, Dale Wasserman. He was an easy target; devoid of the protective armor worn by movie stars and wealthy producers. Some of the comments directed at Wasserman were just brutal. "It would take a knowing, compassionate, perceptive, ironic, and enormously skillful playwright to make this germ sprout," wrote John McCarten in the *New Yorker*. "[A]nd it is unfortunate that Dale Wasserman….has none of the necessary attributes."[17] Wasserman was not around to hear such remarks. He had skipped out before the play even opened on Broadway. "It was not my play," he explained in 2003. "It was dramatic goulash cooked by Hollywood chefs….[I chose] to save my sanity by decamping to California.[18] There he wrote his own tale of mad men and heroes, *Man of La Mancha*, his masterful stage adaptation of Don Quixote.

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[16] Walter Kerr, "Kerr at Cort: 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest'," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 14 1963.
[17] [McCarten, 1964 #520
[18] Wasserman, *The Impossible Musical*.

The poor reviews killed whatever chances the Broadway production had of being a success. Norman Nadel conceded as much. “It was a good play. It was interesting, it had vitality and very lofty moments,” he recalled a couple of years later. “I’d say this is a case where with a better press, that play could have made it.”[19] Kirk Douglas kept the production limping along for a few more months, in part by not paying himself a salary for his acting duties. When he asked the cast to take a pay cut to help keep the operation afloat, they refused and Kirk pulled the plug. The last of Cort Theatre’s eighty two performances took place on January 25, 1964. Douglas was crushed. “I crawled back home to Los Angeles like a wounded animal, defeated in my last battle to become a star on Broadway,” he wrote in his autobiography. “I gave New York a classic and they don’t even realize it.”[20]

The World’s Fair and the Day Time Stopped.

Kesey was as disappointed as everybody else with the poor reviews. He found Walter Kerr’s diatribe so offensive that he was driven to write and tell the critic that he “damn well enjoyed the play and thought it quite faithful to the book’s story.”[21] Haughtily, Kesey also told Kerr that he did not appreciate being called an “unlucky man” by someone whom he had never even met. Faye and the rest of the Kesey family flew out of New York shortly after the opening night, but Kesey and George decided to stick around and do some sightseeing for a few days. They camped out at Carl Lehmann-Haupt’s third floor walk-up apartment on the lower east side. Carl and his younger brother Sandy spent the next few days showing their friends around New

[19] Quoted in Dan Wyant, "New York Writer Admits: Critics Do 'Kill' Plays," *Eugene Register-Guard*, July 22 1965, 10B.
[20] Kirk Douglas, *The Ragman's Son: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 341.
[21] Ken Kesey, "Undated Letter #42," December according to Faye Kesey 1963, Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

York, visiting museums and driving around in the old Chevy station wagon that George had driven from California for the occasion. A big mustard squeeze-bottle full of boiled peyote that he had brought with him helped to keep things interesting.

One of the places they went to look at was the New York World's Fair then being built on a site on Long Island in preparation for its opening the following summer. The sight generated much excitement amongst the group. Kesey had often talked about the great time that he and Mike Hagan and Babbs and several others had all had at Seattle's World's Fair the previous year. An idea was hatched: "When we saw the World's Fair in New York," Walker remembered. "We all thought, 'we can do that, bigger and better, let's go to the World's Fair, take a bunch of drugs and have another big experience, see all this unique stuff, in a unique way. What an adventure."[22] It was agreed; they would come back the following summer to visit the Fair.

Kesey, George and the Lehmann-Haupts spent about a week tripping around New York. When it came time to leave, Kesey decided that instead of flying he would drive home with George. At Carl's prompting, Kesey had also asked Sandy to go along with them, inviting the young man—he was just twenty two—to come and stay with him in California for a while. Sandy—born Hellmut Alexander—was the youngest child of author and bibliographer Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt. Born and raised in New York, Sandy had had something of a difficult childhood, at least according to his brothers.[23] "He had a hard life," Carl wrote after Sandy died in October, 2001. "[He] was in trouble long before he met Kesey."[24] Sandy's mental health

[22] Walker, "Interview with George Walker,"
[23] Cited in Douglas Martin, "Sandy Lehmann-Haupt, One of Ken Kesey's Busmates, Dead at 59," *New York Times*, November 3 2001. Sandy's eldest brother was Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, now an established critic at the *New York Times*. It fell to Christopher to write Kesey's remarkable obituary in the *New York Times*.
[24] Carl Lehmann-Haupt, "Ken Kesey," *My Generation*, March-April 2002, 87.

problems had caused him to drop out of New York University after only six months of study. He used his interest in electronics and audio equipment to get a job as a sound engineer but his health remained a challenge. At one point he tried to commit himself to a psychiatric ward, but Carl talked him out of it. Carl thought that getting Sandy out of New York, away from his family and his bad habits, might be just the thing his brother needed. The trip with Kesey out West was supposed to be recuperative, an opportunity for Sandy to get his head together and start anew. Unfortunately for Sandy, it did not quite work out that way.

Making the most of what New York had to offer, Kesey, George and Sandy spent their last night in the city going to Loews downtown movie theatre where they caught a late showing of a Western, *How the West was Won*. Then, to round the evening off, they paid a visit to Ripley's famous Broadway "*Believe It or Not!*" exhibition. Of course, they were all high courtesy of Walker's mustard bottle. By the time our three amigos were ready to leave the city, dawn had already broken on a new morning: November 22, a memorable date.

Kesey and George sat up front sharing driving duties. Sandy was crammed in the back with the luggage, the sleeping bags and a set of triangular drums that someone had made for him. They drove out of the city and headed West across the state of New York and into Pennsylvania. The occasional slug of peyote made the colors and the early morning mist radiant in their beauty. "It makes the driving interesting," Kesey casually explained, "especially the late fall in that northern part of America."[25] Conversation ebbed and flowed as it does on long road trips, but a steady diet of teenage rock and roll on the Chevy's radio kept the mood light. Kesey was at the wheel looking for a Howard Johnson's restaurant for some pie and coffee when an urgent news bulletin interrupted the blaring radio. Kesey wrote and told what he could remember of the

[25] Ken Kesey, "The Loss of Innocence," *Newsweek*, November 28 1983.

broadcast to Babbs: "President Kennedy was shot today just as his motorcade left downtown Dallas," Kesey repeated. "Shots were fired just as the presidential motorcade entered the triple underpass which leads to the freeway route to the Trade Mart."[26] The car went quiet and stayed that way as the radio devoted its coverage to the unfolding events. An hour or so later, word came that the President was dead. "My God," said Sandy, rendered speechless. "Dead?" George repeated quizzically, unable to believe the news. Kesey could do nothing but blurt out, "The pricks, the dirty pricks, the dirty goddamned pricks!"[27] He found some solace and hope in the people they passed on the road and encountered at stops along the way. "As we drove we saw this look in people's faces," Kesey wrote on the twentieth anniversary of Kennedy's assassination. "[A]nd they would look at us, and there was an energy to it. It was a good energy and we liked it. We liked the feeling of the country and the look of the country and the look of the people. It was like a light was shining and everything else was foggy."[28]

News of Kennedy's assassination filled the airwaves for mile after Mid-west mile, but it was still difficult to believe that the reports of his death were true. Kesey was still in a state of shock even as they approached Chicago. "I was still harrowed by that reoccurring taunt, 'This is nuts. It's all hopelessly insane,'" he told Babbs. "Because, okay, I can handle Sally's accident and Faye's dad being wiped out by a stroke, but how can a man of that size be destroyed by some little worthless rat? And other giants—Hemingway, Marilyn Monroe—I can handle their dying because it is worked somehow into their contract with me, it makes a sort of sense…but what sense is there if Kennedy can be killed?"[29]

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[26] [Kesey, #524] Underlining in the original.
[27] Ken Kesey, "Undated Letter #41," After November 23, possibly December according to Faye Kesey 1963, Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.
[28] Kesey, "The Loss of Innocence," 78.
[29] Kesey, "Undated Letter #41,"

Kesey had never much cared for party politics or politicians, but as for so many others of his generation, there was something about the youthful, energetic Kennedy that inspired him with a little hope and optimism. He had once composed a letter to the President—probably around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis—that offered some advice "from one jock to another" on foreign policy. "I'd like to point out that we are involved in a very weird game, where advances are made without possibility of touchdowns, where everybody bats at once and an error, or a knockout, is fatal to all opponents," Kesey wrote, urging caution. ". . . . It is therefore safer, though maybe not so flashy, to stick to the bread-and-butter plays."[30] There was nothing "bread-and-butter" about Kennedy's assassination and Kesey told Babbs that the moment left him frightfully aware of his own mortality. "I remember tasting the bleak, cold, metallic taste that your mouth recalls from the time you lie awake in your boyhood bed realizing for the first time in your life that the future held grief and pain and fear for you too."[31]

The three weary road warriors bedded down somewhere beyond Chicago, abandoning plans to sample that city's Friday night delights. George spread out across the wide front seat, Kesey and Sandy settled into their sleeping bags in the back. Kesey had not slept in almost 48 hours, but the events of the day left him sleepless still. He lay quietly and reflected on Kennedy's presidency: the speeches, the images, the Democratic convention of 1960 that Norman Mailer had described so unforgettably in his *Esquire* article, *Superman Comes to the Supermarket*. It was a long night.

The next day, the weather became progressively worse the further West they drove. The radio continued to broadcast and analyze every detail of the tragedy; the hospital reports, the

[30] Ken Kesey, "Undated Letter #40," 1962-63, Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. Kesey, "Undated Letter #40,"
[31] Kesey, "Undated Letter #41,"

open window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, the shooting of Officer Tippet (the policeman allegedly slain by Lee Harvey Oswald), the ascension of Lyndon Baines Johnson to the Presidency, the capture of Oswald, and on and on and on. Kesey quickly grew sick of the endless punditry, but he could not bring himself to turn off the radio. By the third day, they had reached Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and the snowfall that had accompanied them across the state had grown into a blizzard. As the roads worsened, our not so merry band of travelers were eventually forced to pull off the road onto the forecourt of a closed-down Chevron gas station and wait for the blizzard to stop, or at least to slow down a little. Kesey was exhausted and emotional, worn down by "three days on peyote and national grief." He looked up to watch the snow-filled sky form a backdrop to the big red, white and blue Chevron sign that stood high above the gas station. His eyes started to fill with tears. "I began to cry," he remembered. "[N]ot so much for the president as for something American that was innocent and bright-eyed and capable….we lost the last person I can think of that we could believe in."[32]

Something else happened on that trip; something that both Walker and Kesey have suggested propelled them back to New York the following summer. Tragedy brings people closer together. It focuses their attention on one particular thing, causing a commonality of consciousness that is rare in our modern world. Our three travelers picked up on that feeling; it felt new and exciting, and worth exploring. "[W]e realized that there was something about traveling across the country with everybody's mind at this certain place that had a kind of power, a kind of magic to it." Walker recalled. "We got to thinking more about this trip that we were making next summer, started adding up all the people that were going to want to go….[it]

[32] Kesey, "The Loss of Innocence," 78.

galvanized our consciousness about this trip."[33] Kesey credits the moment with even broader historical significance. "[The bus trip] spun off this feeling of seeing the landscape of the American people in this new way. I think the whole hippie movement, this love-everybody feeling for each other was born of that feeling. It was born of the death [of Kennedy]….When God wants to really wake up a nation, he has to use somebody that counts."[34]

Prometheus Reborn

Back at La Honda, it was time for Kesey to decide what he wanted to do next. *Sometimes a Great Notion* was a great achievement, but it had come at some cost. "I think I have actually sacrificed this last year to posterity, fame, reputation, money, respect, to make a name for myself," he confessed to Babbs. "I thought this was necessary. Now I know better."[35] Fame had certainly started to come his way and it was clear he was starting to garner a reputation and a following amongst a certain set of readers who appreciated his ideological message as well as his writing. In June he had been featured on the cover of a well-respected writers' trade journal, *Author and Journalist*, which heralded an "underground of avid admirers" who saw in his work the "tentative beginnings of a new kind of fiction writing, a relatively new approach to charting the heart of man."[36]

In the fall, Kesey was also featured, or rather celebrated, in *Genesis West*, a small literary magazine that was published in San Francisco by its editor and creator, Gordon Lish. *Genesis West* 5 contained an excerpt from *Sometimes a Great Notion* and a lengthy interview with Kesey

[33] George Walker, "Memories of Kesey" (paper presented at the Koret Auditorium, San Francisco Library, San Francisco, November 5 2001).
[34] Kesey, "The Loss of Innocence."
[35] Kesey, "Undated Letter #28,"
[36] Gus Blaisdell, "Shazam and the Neon Rennaissance," *Author and Journalist*, June 1963, 7.

that provides a rare glimpse into the mind of the 27 year old author. Lish, the interviewer, was clearly blown away by the young Oregonian and his reverential approach to his subject offers a useful illustration of the effect that Kesey could have on others. So entranced was Lish by the sound of Kesey's voice that he forgot to turn on his tape recorder for the first three hours of their conversation. He had only known Kesey for a relatively short amount of time, yet he felt driven to describe him as one of *the* most influential figures in his life: "[one of those] few persons we meet whose effect upon us spiritually, emotionally, or intellectually threatens to achieve such massive influence that we suppose flight from them the only means toward preserving what we have been, what we long ago had convinced ourselves to remain"[37] Kesey had always been charismatic, but now he was becoming charismatic *and* famous, and that gave him something new: power. At this point in his life, one can almost sense him struggling with what to do with it.

For now, Kesey was still devoting a lot of his energy to writing. He was pretty worn out after finishing *Sometimes a Great Notion*, but he had no intention of resting on his laurels. Once back in La Honda after the Broadway trip, Kesey lined up his typewriter and started outlining a new project about "a place, and a lot of people that I love," as he told Gordon Lish. Kesey was planning to write a book about Perry Lane. This was not a new idea. Back in the early part of the year he told Babbs about "an unwritten book which is pushing at me like a 9 ½ month embryo," and he complained about the length of time it was taking him to get *Notion* finished. "[I'm] trying to get the mouldy goddam thing out of the way before the fresh new one comes bellering into it," he wrote.[38] Kesey also felt that that he needed to distance himself from Perry Lane before he could fictionalize it. "[T]he scene here is so overpowering that to write about it while being in it is somewhat like a drowning man in a hideous maelstrom of broken limbs and

[37] Lish, "Ken Kesey: A Celebration of Excellence," 3.
[38] Kesey, "Undated Letter #28,"

shambled lives and mashed egos," he told Babbs as early as the summer of 1960. "Too much love and too much hurt, all at the same time, constantly—with people who are gigantic in character and goodness that is strange to them and cruelty that is not—and I've got to get away to see it better."[39] Moving to La Honda gave him the distance he was looking for and in the last months of 1963 Kesey finally got around to working on his new baby, tentatively named *One Lane*. He completed at least one draft chapter, but more importantly, he wrote an eighty page outline of the complete book.

Kesey had told a few interviewers that he intended to write something from the perspective of a young disc jockey or an artist, but he eventually settled on telling the story through the eyes of a young innocent from Derrian, Connecticut, called Matthew Murphy, a student at Stanford University Law School. His father has arranged for him to stay with friends on the Lane while he went to school, and as the plot unfolds, events conspire to change Murphy and those around him in unexpected ways. We follow the story mostly from Murphy's perspective, but Kesey also planned to allow himself an all knowing author's voice as well. Most of the action took place in 1959-60, but Kesey intended to begin the book with a chapter that described the Lane's early history and significance.

Shortly after the First World War, so Kesey's story went, a disgruntled student—Mr. Johnson—tricked the U. S. Army into selling him a plot of land on the outskirts of the Stanford University campus. Johnson set about transforming the lane of barracks that came with the land into dwellings for his friends, all of whom shared his hedonistic spirit and rebellious nature. As a result of his efforts, a small bohemian community was born on what became the Lane, much to

[39] Kesey, "Undated Letter #9,"

the disgruntlement of the local authorities who struggled to control it and resented its independence.

Johnson was portrayed as a Prometheus-like figure, responsible for bringing the fire of rebellion and enlightenment to the people on the Lane. He left the area in 1930, somewhat against his will, but he retained the ownership of the land and its properties. He eventually returned five years later to find the place empty of all the people that he had once known and loved. At first he was disappointed, but then he realized that the rebellious spirit of the place lived on in the new tenants, different though they may have been from the originals. He was content, happy to see the Lane exist as an important crucible of revolution and change.

History lesson over, Kesey intended the story proper to begin in the fall of 1959. We follow Matthew Murphy as he arrived on the Lane to find himself right in the middle of a huge street party. The wildness of the event was an eye-opener for the young student. Wandering around, suitcase in hand, he encountered lots of drunken debauchery and lewd behavior as he tried to locate his father's friend's house. At the end of the party, a big fight broke out between a group of frat boys and some of the Lane's inhabitants. The police arrived and tried to arrest everybody involved in the fighting. They carted away a large number of people, but when they get to the station they realized that they had not arrested any residents of the Lane, only a bunch of guys from the same fraternity, all of them sons of the well-connected. Frustrated, the police chief resolved to do something about the Lane once and for all. It had long been a thorn in his side.

The chapters that follow introduced us to the major characters on the Lane. We learnt of their troubles and their stories and we witnessed their unconventional morals and manners. We found that the Lane was under threat from all directions. It was being targeted by the police who

distrusted its liberalisms, and hounded by the local authorities who object to its un-incorporated freedoms. Most of the neighbors also opposed its rowdy existence. The Lane also found itself at odds with the local frat boys who crash its parties and invariably provoked fights. Even their supposed rebel allies, the beatniks from the city, pressured the people on the Lane to conform to what the Laners thought was a rather staid brand of hipster nihilism. Personalities and relationships on the Lane were also complicated and convoluted; sometimes even caustic enough to contribute to its eventual decline. After a series of complaints and charges, the local authorities seized the place and evicted everybody, despite the last minute efforts of a very old and very sick Mr. Johnson. At the end of the story, one of the former residents of the Lane set fire to its empty buildings, burning all the homes to the ground. At first Johnson was distraught, but then he realized that the flames were not destroying the rebellious spirit that the Lane had nurtured over the years; they were merely serving to spread its influence like sparks on the wind. The End.

Kesey's *One Lane* plot was obviously a barely-fictionalized account of the rise and recent fall of Perry Lane. The story is full of familiar events and situations, from the pig roast party at the beginning of the book to the destruction of the Lane at its end. The autobiographical nature of the project did not stop there, for its cast of characters was clearly born of the people that Kesey had lived with on the real Perry Lane. Anyone familiar with his circle of friends would have been able to easily identify them in the narrative. Some of Kesey's characterizations were flattering, but certainly not all of them, and it is doubtful whether many of his old friends and neighbors would have been particularly pleased with the way they were depicted in his novelization of their recent past. Not that Kesey made his own fictional namesake the hero of the book. Far from it. Even though he depicted himself as the leader of the bohemian set on the Lane, he actually chose

to show himself as something of a fake, someone who was more than capable of abusing and manipulating his status for his own selfish ends. In this, Kesey may have been exploring the darker side of his own personality or struggling with the burden of leadership that he had enjoyed (and endured) as long as he could remember. Either way, he came across in the narrative as a character possessed of far more flaws than virtues.

Kesey's mythical retelling of his own recent history makes for fascinating reading, in large part because one cannot help but think that it gives us some idea of his state of mind in late 1963 and early 1964. One needs to be careful reading too much into a work of fiction—and an unfinished work at that—but Kesey's not-so-subtle promethean message in *One Lane* seems clear: he thinks a revolution is coming and he does not think it can be stopped. He thinks that Perry Lane and its occupants were early participants in that revolution even though only a few of them may have realized it at the time. Theirs was not a revolution of guns and glory; it was a new type of revolution, one of morals and manners and of the mind. Its ambition was not to bring about a regime change or anything as mundane as that. Politics, how passé. No, this was a revolution that would affect the way people thought and behaved: it was a revolution of consciousness. Perry Lane lived out that revolution in its own little way, breaking social and sexual conventions, experimenting with all manner of mind-altering psychedelic drugs, and, well, just imagining that things and people could be different. The end of *One Lane* is clearly intended to be prophetic: the revolution is upon us, born of Perry Lane and other bohemian enclaves like it. Mr. Johnson went off to die happy in the knowledge that he has kept the flame of rebellion alive, but now it is time for a new Prometheus to spread that fire to the masses. Step forward Mr. Kesey.

Kesey's background and his politics were anything but radical, but here he was writing about revolution in 1963, a good few years before such talk became all the rage. "He noticed something that I didn't, that a revolution was in progress," Robert Stone admitted later. "Ken saw the revolution coming and felt that he had a social mission. He was going to use the power of his personality to do something special."[40] Kesey was not just writing about revolution, he was already making public pronouncements about it. "We're on the verge of something very fantastic," he told Gus Blaisdell, back in the spring of 1963. "[A]nd I believe our generation will be the one to pull it off."[41] In the same interview, he also claimed to be part of something he called the "Neon Renaissance." Blaisdell took this to be a reference to some sort of literary movement of young writers, but it is clear from Kesey's later comments to Gordon Lish that he understood it as something far greater than that. "It's a name I hooked onto a thing I feel is happening nowadays," Kesey explained. "What this is I cannot say exactly, except that it's a need to find a new way to look at the world, an attempt to locate a better reality, now that the old reality is riddled with radioactive poison."[42] He claimed that he was not the only one searching for this new reality. He listed Ornette Colman in jazz, Ann Halprin in dance, the New Wave in movies, Lenny Bruce in comedy, and Wally Hendrix in art as like minded explorers, all striving "to find out *what* is happening, *why*, and what can be *done* with it."[43]

These were precisely the questions that Kesey had been asking himself. He could sense that change was coming, sense that a revolution of some sort was in the air, but he was still struggling to make sense of these feelings. "What's happening," he asks Babbs in their

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[40]Perry and Babbs, *On the Bus: The Complete Guide to the Legendary Trip of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and the Birth of the Counterculture*.35.
[41] Blaisdell, "Shazam and the Neon Rennaissance," 7-8.
[42] Quoted in Lish, "Ken Kesey: A Celebration of Excellence," 21.
[43] Quoted in Ibid.

correspondence. "What's happening?"[44] Whatever it was, it already felt special. "I can't imagine another scene, another period that I'd rather be living in," Kesey told Lish. "I think we're living in a wild and woolly time, a time that history students will one day view in retrospect and say, 'Wow! That 20th Century! Wouldn't that have been something to make!'" Kesey was also starting to realize that he had somehow found himself in a unique position to do something meaningful, if not, promethean in this "wild and woolly" time. "We have something going," Kesey wrote to John Rechy author of City of Nights, inviting him to come and visit La Honda. "We—us, the heads, the hung-ups, the hassled, the bunch born about thirty years ago at the same time that Hitler came into his own and the Bomb was germinated—we are doing something to the scene!...I'm convinced….that we can make something happen, I don't know yet clearly what, but I'm getting some notions."[45]

[44] Well, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that what was happening was that all manner of social, political and economic forces were coming together in the early sixties to generate some sort of pressure for change, a moment of historical adjustment, if you will. A booming economy, for example, was transforming people's material lives, improving their standard of living and granting them a remarkable amount of disposable wealth. The sheer size of the baby boom generation was also a factor, creating an unusually large youthful demographic, many of whom were going to come of age in the sixties to enjoy the benefits (and the liberties) of a college education. New technologies also generated new lifestyle choices; the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1960 being but the most obvious example. The Civil Rights Movement, of course, precipitated change and idealism like nothing else. If the stain of segregation—what Kesey once called a "worn out reality"—could be removed from the nation's conscience, then what other repressive shibboleths could be undermined by simply insisting that all humans really are created equal? The Women's movement, the American Indian movement, the Gay Rights movement, are all children of the Civil Rights Movement. Living under "the Bomb" was another force promoting change, for who would not want to escape from the threat of nuclear annihilation? Mutually Assured Destruction? Surely we could come up with a better reality than that? And though the full tragedy of the Vietnam War would not yet become apparent for another couple of years, it would eventually shake American society to its core, generating ideological and cultural conflicts that are still playing themselves out over forty years later.

[45] Ken Kesey, "Undated Letter #35," August 1963 according to Faye Kesey, Ken Kesey Papers 1960 - 1973, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. Underline in the original.