

"So long as we don't move to Burbank, I'm in," I told my old speech team bud, Catherine, when she asked if I wanted to ditch Indiana and move back to California.



The thought of leaving my full-time job in the midwest hadn't even crossed my mind, but once she said it, I was immediately on board.

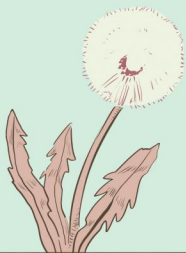
That's how most of the decisions in my life got made back then.

Someone posed an offer out of left field and I acted on it, pivoting into a whole new trajectory. It's how I chose both of my college majors — aerospace engineering and advertising. How I wound up at Grad School for communication at Ball State U in Muncie.

How I started a career as a comic book writer.



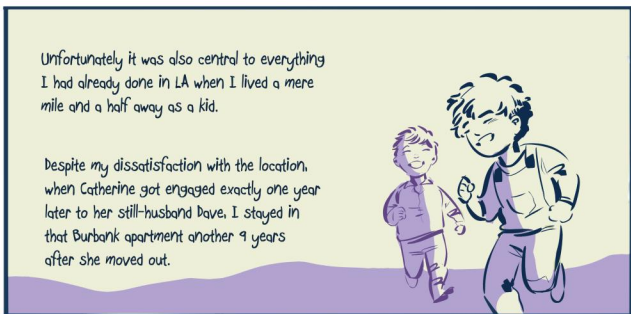
As deterministic as I like to think I am, the fact remains that I often used to drift in the wind like a dandelion seed.





So we wound up moving to Burbank.
"I could have sworn this was the
only place I didn't want to live..."
I said, but Catherine liked it.

The rent was cheap for a two
bedroom/two bath, and it was
central to everything she was
planning to do in LA.



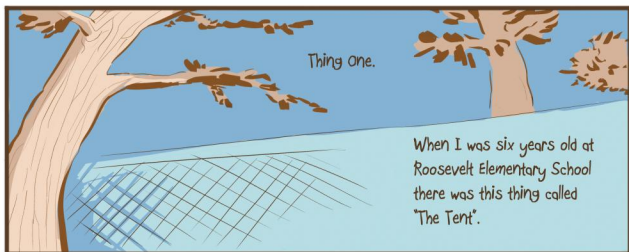
Unfortunately it was also central to everything
I had already done in LA when I lived a mere
mile and a half away as a kid.

Despite my dissatisfaction with the location,
when Catherine got engaged exactly one year
later to her still-husband Dave, I stayed in
that Burbank apartment another 9 years
after she moved out.



In that entire time, only three naked things of note happened.

Before describing those events, I should note
that moving back to Burbank threw into focus
some eerily similar events from my childhood
in Burbank, some even naked-related.



Thing one.

When I was six years old at Roosevelt Elementary School there was this thing called "The Tent".

The Tent was an unsanctioned construct in the far back corner of the playground, abutting the chain link fence perimeter. Half Cub Scout campout lodge, half transient encampment structure, it was basically a "circus tent" fashioned from coats slung up over the backs and heads of all the kids in the circle.

I'm not sure who started it or why, but I am certain that if the teachers knew what was going on under that big top, they would have run our show out of town on the rails.



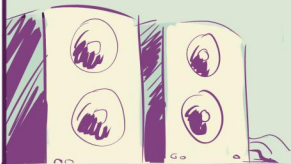
It's common for young kids to be curious about bodies at that age. But in the California of 1970, the *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives* book was still a decade away from publication, so we decided to investigate each other's changing bodies.



Each day one girl and one boy would reveal their genitals to the other kids in The Tent.

The general reaction of the show-ees to the show-er was "Wow! That's cool!"

Twenty Five years later, I was having an impromptu party at my Burbank apartment.

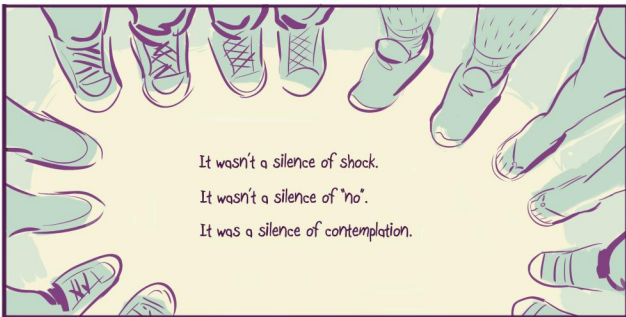


I don't remember everyone who was there, but it was definitely a lot of other comic book artist guys that lived in the building, a visiting speech team alum, Kim, and her local friends, some struggling actors, actresses, and several entertainment industry aspirant people (because it was a party in LA). All in all, about 20 people.

There had been food, and beer, and some 1950s level party games since that's how I rolled back then. No one wanted to leave, but everyone was feeling a definite lull in the evening when Kim decided to liven it up:

"I propose we turn out all the lights and everyone gets naked."

There was a silence.



It wasn't a silence of shock.

It wasn't a silence of "no".

It was a silence of contemplation.

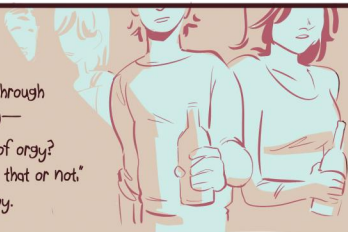
Kim didn't let it linger long:

"Are we doing this or not?"

There were numerous things going through my mind, not the least of them being—

"Is this gonna turn into some kind of orgy?"

'Cause I don't know if I'm down with that or not," interjected my upstairs neighbor, Troy.



I couldn't tell if the terms "I don't know" and "or not" were a solid "no", or just his folksy Michigan colloquialisms. But I, too, wondered what Kim's intention was.

I think I was so uncomfortable with the idea of this many friends of mine — and some strangers — seeing me naked that I might have been more comfortable with the orgy concept than just a vague nude-in.

"I don't know. Let's just get naked and see what happens."



The lights went out.

Everyone got naked.

There were some hoots and some funny comments.

There was a tangible tension.

But there was no orgy.

I think the six-year-olds on my playground saw more action.



Thing Two.

When I lived in Burbank as a kid I was invited by my same-age friend Cindy for a bath. She was already in the tub. I walked by. And she said flatly,

"Wanna come take a bath with me?"



"Sure," I said and I took off my clothes — stopping at my underwear as a thought hit me. "I should go ask my mom."



I marched down the hall in my underwear and asked if I could take a bath with Cindy. Cindy's mom chuckled,

"Why would you want to do that, sugar?"

"Because she asked me to."

My mom was more decisive, "You don't have to do everything someone asks you to. And you've already had a bath. And boys and girls don't get naked together. Put your clothes back on."

I went back to Cindy and reported the verdict.



Living back in Burbank for my 30th birthday I noticed my friend, Charity, had been acting weird all day. I feared the worst — a surprise party.



It was the worst, but a party wasn't the surprise. After one of the best presents I ever got — a "looner puppy" black retriever for 4 hours from my friend, Evvie — the night rolled up on me and so did a long, black limo.

Charity had booked for me...
an in-home stripper.



I am not a stripper guy. I don't like going to strip clubs. The few times I have been, I've had one overwhelming thought:

These women hate what they're doing and everyone in this place including me.

Now... there was a
stripper in my apartment.

I'd just gotten it painted and furnished and fixed up with my first real spate of money as a writer. I couldn't help but think it was about to be soiled.

"Hey! Thanks so much, I'd rather not, so... how about I tip you and you can drive right on to your next—"

The stripper took my protests as fake play fighting and shoved me down - hard - onto a chair. My chair. Which she then straddled.





Then some friends that Charity's husband-to-be, Henry, had corralled rushed in and started whooping and laughing and urging the stripper to do things I definitely did not want burned into my memory in the place that I live.

I played along so as not to waste Charity's money or effort. I also played along because the Stripper had brought along a friend — a six-foot-four knot of muscle — her bodyguard.

As hard as it is to enjoy a lap dance when and where you don't want one, it's even harder with a scowling murder-minded guy hovering over you in a tiny living room.

Why am I like this? Why can't I just go cave man like every other guy on the planet and enjoy this?

I wondered. But when a nipple was forcibly plopped in my mouth, I was out of my chair like a rocket.



I pulled Charity's man, Henry, into the chair and encouraged the stripper to finish her performance with him. Henry seemed to enjoy it. Charity seemed to enjoy Henry enjoying it. My friends all laughed and hooted like they enjoyed it.

I donated that chair to the Salvation Army a week later.



Thing Three.

The massive Sylmar earthquake was a 6.6 magnitude shaker jolted central Burbank at exactly 6am on a February morning in 1971.

It cracked streets, dropped a major freeway overpass and trashed houses far and wide. Most of the deaths were ironically caused by structure failures of a local hospital and medical clinic.

My brother and I — 9 and 5 years old at the time — *slept through it*. We only knew there was an earthquake when our parents rushed into our rooms and jumped on top of us to protect us from falling debris that never fell.

The reason we were spared when others weren't? Our house was directly across the street from a railroad freight line track. Our house shook like mad every morning at 5:45 when the lumber shipment came through. The house and its residents were apparently used to a little pre-dawn earth movement.

Total damage in that quake? One tea cup that fell from a shelf.


I was fully dressed for this event.



LA's next big modern-era quake waited until I moved back to let loose. Not anticipating the Northridge Earthquake, I had just started sleeping naked.


A lifetime of pajamas had been eschewed when my roommate, Catherine, moved back to Colorado and I had the apartment to myself. I decided that "in the buff" was the only way to sleep, the gods be damned.






As it turns out, the gods actually were pissed. The Northridge Quake was not a gentle echo of some nearby train. It kicked condo complexes over like an unseen Godzilla, dropped the exact same freeway overpass again, and ripped the shit out of trees, homes, and anything it found fault with.

I was literally thrown sideways out of my bed and onto the floor by the initial jolt of the rocker.



Nude and on all fours, I had a decision to make: Do I run outside butt-naked where all the other neighbors — including my friends in the building — will be in order to increase my chances of surviving if the second floor apartment comes crashing down into my first floor apartment? Or, do I linger in my apartment to get dressed, saving myself from dying of embarrassment, but possibly actually dying as a side effect?

I grabbed a sheet and took off running like a streaker.



Fashioning myself a flimsy toga, I congregated with other nightwalkers on our hillside street. At 4:35 in the morning we stood silently in the middle of the road — as far from our buildings as we could get — as the earth continued to shift and roil.

With no shoes and only my sheet to wear, the pre-dawn air was cold on my thinly veiled skin. But I was warmed, as we all were...

... by the green glow of power
transformers exploding one
after another all across the
San Fernando Valley below us.

