THE WOMAN WHO REMEMBERED PARADISE

THE LAST SAN JUAN INDIAN IN SILICON VALLEY

LONG, LONG AGO, before Silicon Valley was settled and suburbanized, before it was leveled and developed, subdivided and paved, tract-homed and condoed, malled and gridlocked,

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THE WOMAN WHO REMEMBERED PARADISE

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and long before the air was broadened and seasoned, the streams and well waters she
hiked with her chipped, manhandled, and P.God, before she was afoot, thorn-parched and lastughed, before the road
sweeping of the first automobile shattered the pristine along on the narrow rutted
trails that passed through miles and miles of gorgonous orchards, before Leland Stanford
built his university, before the silver mines were closed, the hills or the missions
constructed, before Sir Francis Drake poked from the peak of the Golden Hind at
the Golden Gate, long before any European
ever even heard the word American, when
another race of people inhabited the place
we call Silicon Valley. They believed they
were living in an earthly paradise. They
called it Popolocuchum.

The people of Popolocuchum were gen
tle. As gentle, it was said, as the climate and
the cool breezes that slipped over the moun
tains to the wind and wafted through the
fruit trees and scattered all the living things
in the valley each season. They believed
this valley was the most beautiful place in
the world.

Because of that conviction they had no
desire at all to travel far and to look upon
what must surely be lower lands given by
the gods to lower men. In this garden of
Popolocuchum, where the air was clean and
the water pure and the Earth naturally
fruitful and abundant, they were happy.

When the first Franciscan missionaries
arrived and told the stories of their God and
the Deeds he had created for his first man and woman, the people of Popolocuchum were fascinated and flattered. Uncertainly, they felt. the God of the Franciscans had once seen this valley and
had tried to copy it for his people far
away.

The important difference, of course, be
tween his stories and this place was that no
one had ever been expelled from this para
dise. Here there was no evil serpent and no
curse from grace. So perfect was Popolocuchum paradise preserved.

In the English translation of their own language — a language long since lost — the people of Popolocuchum called themselves "the West
erners" because they were the westernmost
group of several loosely related tribes. Over
the years, though, they had lost contact with
their Eastern cousins, who had simply melt
d away like snow in the summer sun. Yet
the gods had preserved and sustained the
Westerners in Popolocuchum.

The Westerners were an ingenious peo
ple who knew neither treachery nor deceit
nor war. They welcomed the befuddled
strangers who sometimes stumbled upon
their settlements. Such lost travelers were
regarded as honored guests who would, when
trusted warmly, tell unusual stories about distant places and strange gods before
moving on.

And so the Westerners welcomed the
first white men who "discovered" their val
ley. Unlike the travelers, however, these
strangers stayed. They constructed missions, put up walls and worshiped the
gods who created them. And they brought
with them also their deadly Trinity of cloth
era, smallpox and measles. The Westerners,
with no immunity to the European diseases,
began to die by the hundreds. Those few
who survived were brought within the disci
pline of the missions. They lost their old
faith and their old lands. They were given a
new name by the missionaries. They became
the San Juanos.

And gradually, like their Eastern relatives,
they melted away.

Early in our own century when histori
ans and ethnologists tried to record the sta
ry of the Westerners, they found that those
gentle people of Popolocuchum had become extinct. And they concluded, after careful
research, that sometime around 1880 the last
member of that kindly and tolerant race had
vanished.

I
came, then, as a substantial surprise
when word was returned to the Smithsonian In
stitution in Washington, D.C., in June of 1930, that all of the Westerners had not
died. There remained, in fact, a single sur
viving full-blooded member of that tribe.
And she wanted the story of her life and of
her people recorded for posterity.

John Harrington, the Smithsonian's lead
ing ethnologist, rushed to California in order to transcribe the final testament of
this rare survivor of a lost race, this last
Westerner.

She called herself Amelie Sibilato, and
for as long as she could remember, she
had lived in Cibor. There she was
known, because of her curious power, as a
great and generous doctora. For several de
ceades the few remaining Indians of the
region had known of the miracles performed
by the doctors. Her wisdom, they believed,
was the accumulation of learning of a hun
dred generations of shamans.

Each day the sick and the lame and the
afflicted came to her from hundreds of
miles away. They lined up in the doorway
to her tiny house and camped at night in
her yard, transforming her property into a hum
ble, pastoral version of Lourdes. Inside, the
doctor listened carefully in their tales of
physical woe. Then she mixed tonics and
elixirs from local herbs and roots and
dispensed them to the afflicted. It was re
vealed that the remedies of the doctors
were always successful. She restored the
health of anyone who sought her help.
Those who could not pay money brought
food or small articles of some value. And
those who could pay with nothing material
were reminded simply to remember the
doctors in their prayers.

For many years the doctors tirelessly
worked on her practice. The local press ig
nored her and the local authorities overlook
ed her. She practiced medicine without a
license, to be sure, but those who were sup

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EXCEPT FOR THE SIMPLE PROCESS OF GATHERING FOOD EACH DAY, WORK WAS COMPLETELY UNKNOWN TO THE WESTERNERS. THEY LIVED LIKE ADAM AND EVE IN EDEN. DAILY LIFE WAS ORGANIZED AROUND LEISURE AND PLAY.

Barbara Sierra, Ascencio's mother (corrected).

Age was respected and revered. It was not, as among the white people, considered simply a purgatory prior to death. With age, the Westerners realized, came wisdom and mystical power. Aged women, it was believed, had the power to control the growth of plants.

And death was not something that the Westerners feared. When death came, relatives of the deceased covered themselves with ashes and mourned openly. Some even remained with them from the moment the tribe for several days and fasted and chanted songs of death.

In Popolochum, Ascencio said, nature provided such an abundance of food that the Westerners always had an overabundance of wild fruits, greens and seeds. Consequently, they did not practice agriculture, nor did they ever cultivate the land. And except for the simple process of gathering food each day, work was completely unknown to the Westerners. They lived like Adam and Eve in Eden. Daily life was organized around leisure and play, and there was neither worry nor care about tomorrow.

The men and boys hunted in small groups, hunting the camp each morning and returning late in the afternoon. They used the ledges and the valley floor of Popolochum in search of game, especially deer. They were informed during the hunt, always making it more sport than work. When other local bands were sighted, the groups would stop to talk and exchange stories. If game had already been taken, part of it was roasted and eaten by both groups. Athletic competitions—running, wrestling, and archery—were also common at these informal encounters.

The Westerners had learned, through centuries of observation, the habits of their prey. Ascencio recalled. They could therefore, over themselves with ease, walk on all fours like a deer, and
The gods, Ascencio said, stamped their feet upon the valley floor and caused buildings to fall and great cracks to open in the ground. The white men, of course, were utterly terrified by the quaking of the Earth.

The white people poured in and disregarded the warnings.