



California dreamin'

Seven yapping dogs greet us at the gate as the sun, filtered through the smog-stained sky, casts its characteristic bleached-out pallor all across the Hollywood Hills.

Duly announced, we plunge into the dark, rustic interior of the secluded home. Saddles hang from the beams, and Navajo rugs drape the walls. Three men are sitting around the coffee table. I study each dimly lit face and conclude that they're all David Carradine.

Hidden in the shadows off in the corner, a fourth man is playing the piano and singing. I think he sounds like Barry Manilow, but realize it would be rude to turn around and stare.

Carradine, the erstwhile Kung Fu cowboy, has a new movie called "Americana" opening around the country, and my companion is negotiating a deal to produce a TV commercial for the film.

As I sit and watch the action, I realize that nothing is more embarrassing than chatting with three guys and not even knowing which one is the star. Then, as we leave, my companion asks what I thought of Carradine's skill at the keyboard.

We head for The Back Alley Theatre. I have heard that the company is staging a play about a family of simple country folk who live in — wait for it — Oregon.

"In The Sweet Bye and Bye," by Donald Driver, turns out to be an uproarious comedy. Rue McClanahan, co-star of NBC's "Golden Girls," plays a distraught housewife in the habit of "out-screaming the immediate family" at funerals, and flinging herself into open graves.

Her husband, seeking to ease the tension of having been laid off from the local mill, is having an affair with his wife's sister. But only on Wednesday nights. Needless to say, everything that goes wrong with their lives, and right with this play, happens on Wednesdays.

After the performance I head backstage seeking information about the playwright. I learn only that he had been directing the production, but has just been fired for being so disOregonized. But the cast assures me that Driver really does hail from the Beaver State.

We retreat to the beach. For some strange reason, perhaps having something to do with the number of roadies once employed by Rod Stewart, there is a large British community in Santa Monica. Every evening it gathers at The King's Head pub.

The spectator sport there is watching the muscles ripple up and down the bouncer. He boasts a 70-inch chest and a 28-inch waist, and has long, blonde, flowing hair. (For some reason the word Viking springs to mind.)

His thighs are so enormous that the legs of his Levis have been split up the seam and are held together by a 5-inch length of leather thonging. A film industry insider tells me he's the next Arnold Schwarzenegger. I nod sagely.

The day is drawing to a close, and it's time for dessert. Forget ice cream and coffee. In Venice, the thing people do after dinner is congregate at the home of whomever on the block has the biggest hot tub and get naked beneath the stars.

And so I sit there, poaching, as the sinking moon sizzles into the Pacific. And I get the feeling that if I am not careful, I might get to like life in Southern California. So I promise myself that I will get up early again the next morning, head down to the beach. There I'll dodge the junkies and the burnouts, the Tarot readers and the tofu salesmen, and, yes, the bikini-clad starlets roller skating to appointments with their astrologers, click my heels twice, and remember that there's no place like home.