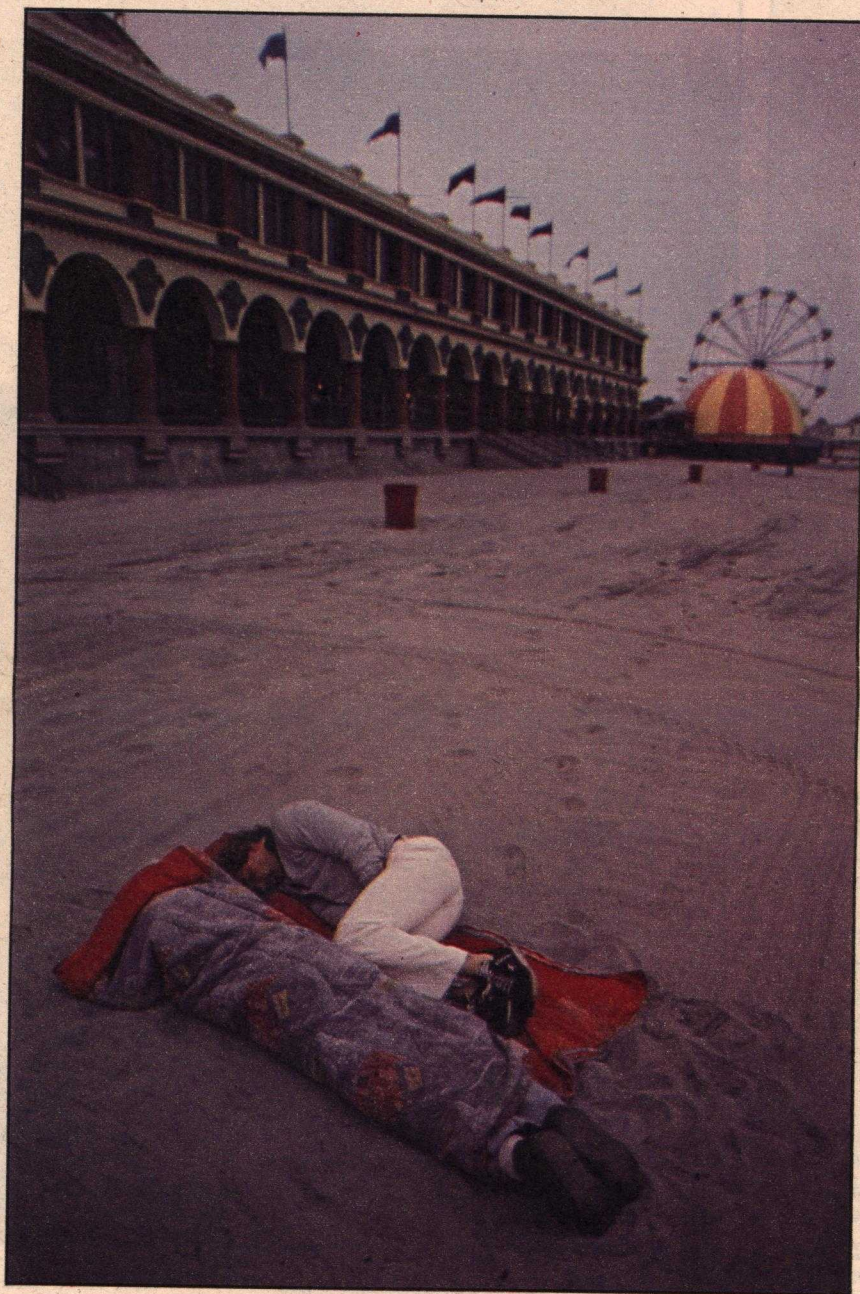


Beach People

Photographs
by Randy Olson



Text by
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Come down to the water, watch the sea drift in, the gulls cant and cry in the morning sky. This is Saturday, Santa Cruz, where the Ferris wheel whirls, the arcade looms and the sand at dawn lies smooth like the trackless field of a dream. The beach smooths lives. It grades the ruts that divide the American tribes: young and old, primitive and not, seen and unseen. People come here to mingle in a truce as unwritten as ocean air.

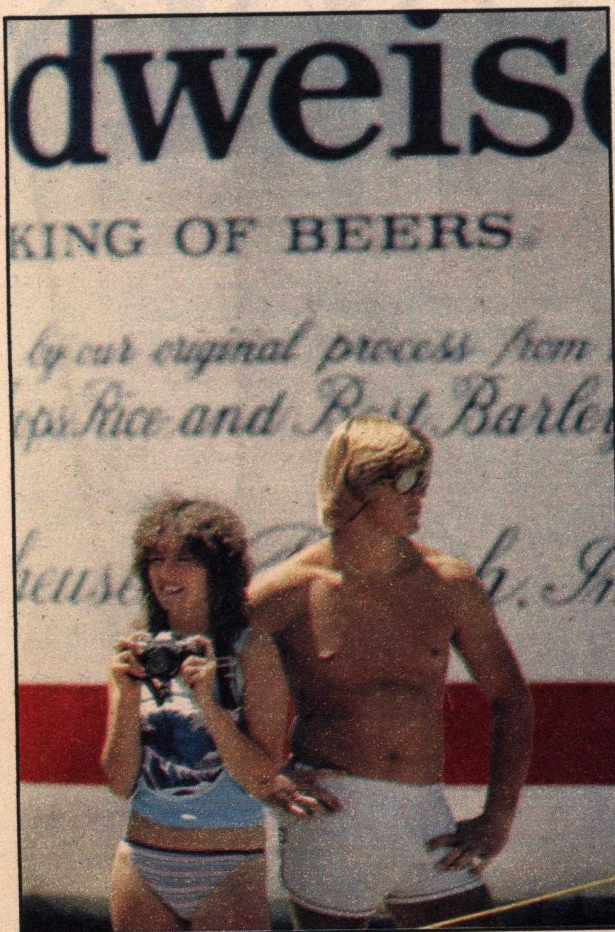
The beach is the sand eroded from mountains, carried down by rivers to be worked by the tides. At dawn the beach waits. The roller coaster stands silent, soon to ratchet and rush into adolescent scream.

People will cruise the boardwalk, baring their flesh and cloaking their souls. They will lie out in the sun, close their eyes, think nothing, sense all.

Walk out on the pier past fish sellers already laying out the silvery catch of the sea. Beneath you the sea rides gently on its moon-driven tides, at the barnacled pilings of the pier. Turn back toward green mountains serrated against a soft blue sky. The beachfront breaks into patches of red, yellow, white daubed onto the canvas of morning. Cezanne could have painted this. The light breaks into planes, the color is as rich as the earth.

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Two spectators catch some sun and the show at the First Annual Budweiser Tug of War.

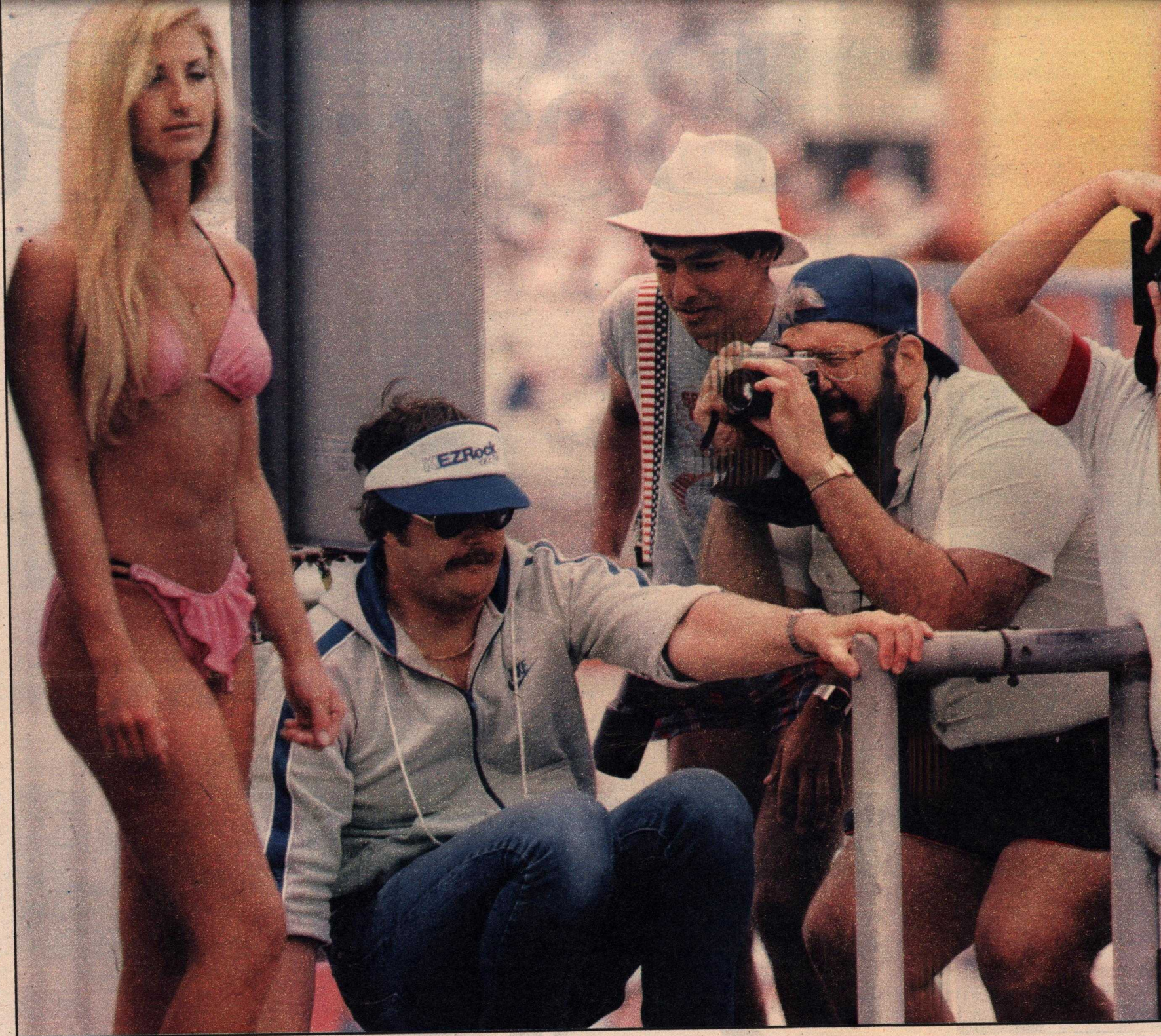


The beach is a place for pairs. They preen and pose. They skitter across the sand as fecklessly as shorebirds; they migrate here, ruffle their feathers and turn their backs to the brazen California sun. They come to see and be seen.

From a macho slouch, through a mirrored gaze, he surveys the beach. The inflatable beer can rising behind him speaks more than the Budweiser Tug of War it announces. In the crisp morning boardwalk air, men step on a meat market scale. They weigh in for the event, eight men to a team. "Steve, then Ralph," calls a man with a clipboard. "Steve 213. This is Ralph, 192. OK, we're looking for Willy and then John." "C'mon, Willy."

Willy hops onto the scale, sucks air and expands his iron-pumped pectorals. There are 27 eight-man teams with names like 24 Hour Nautilus, the Booze Brothers and Awesome. This is a P.R. brainstorm brought to life by a beer

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maker and a radio station. Give the boys their Saturday in the sun to sweat and grunt; strength through exhaustion. Give the guys a chance to slap a few high fives, before a hooting crowd that says not only beer by Budweiser but stomachs as well.

The tug of war is an event not unlike the painstaking search for Miss Jose Cuervo. Beefcake, cheesecake, beer, tequila. You want it, you got it. The shutterbugs cluster like bidders at a cattle auction. All eyes pursue the parade of flesh. They reduce the woman to her sexual parts, make her as invisible as the octogenarians parked on the bench and watching the boardwalk crowd breeze by.

Why do old people come to the beach

when time and flesh are stacked against them? They come because here in the fresh sunny air lingers the scent of memory. It was back at the century's turn that they built the boardwalk and nearby casino. People came for the summer, and mused a season away. The lithe young girl extending a well turned calf to be nipped by the surf—hair bobbed, swimsuit covering nape to knee—is today a grandmother.

She came here when the big bands rolled into town and played the casino with their swinging sound: Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Harry James. She came when the Casa del Rey across the street was a grand hotel, not the retirement home it is today. At the Casa del Rey today the gardens riot, the

gutters rot. Off in a corner room sit two stationery bicycles and a rowing machine warning all comers: USE AT YOUR OWN RISK. In the lobby people sit hunched over jigsaw puzzles in a light so monotone the air seems veiled in dust.

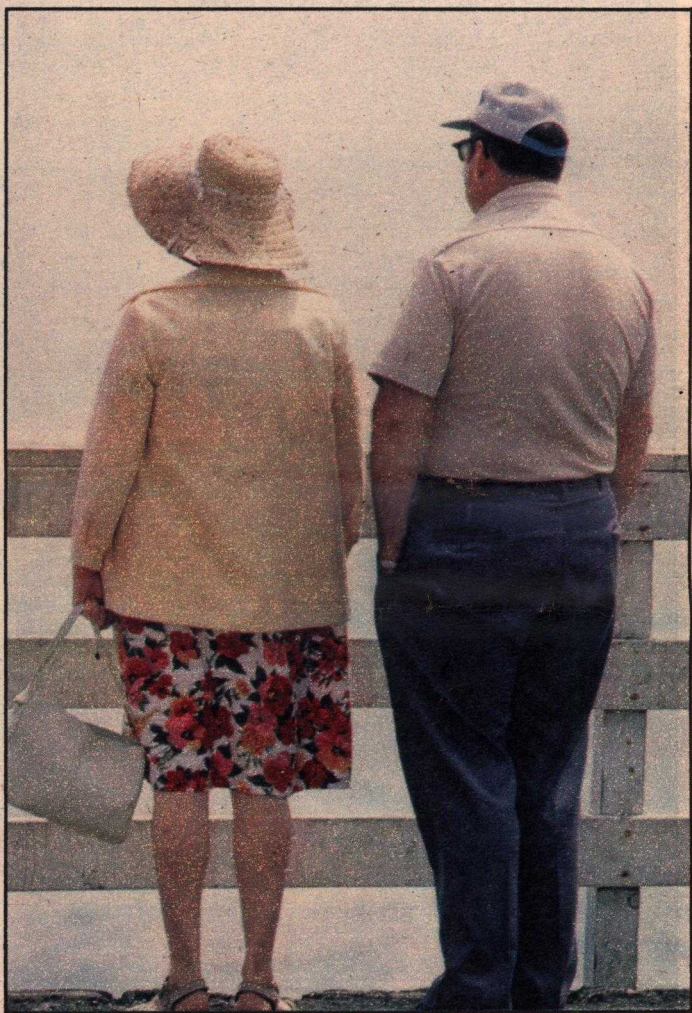
"We're trying to survive the times," says the hotel's manager. "I think we're still an island." An island indeed. Outside roam the hordes. They have overrun the casino so totally it forms a perfect counter image of the Casa del Rey. The casino pulses with the energy of youth; innocent, aimless, somehow looking to find its way. Laughter, the lingua franca here, resounds in the darkness. The glow of video games draws kids like moths.

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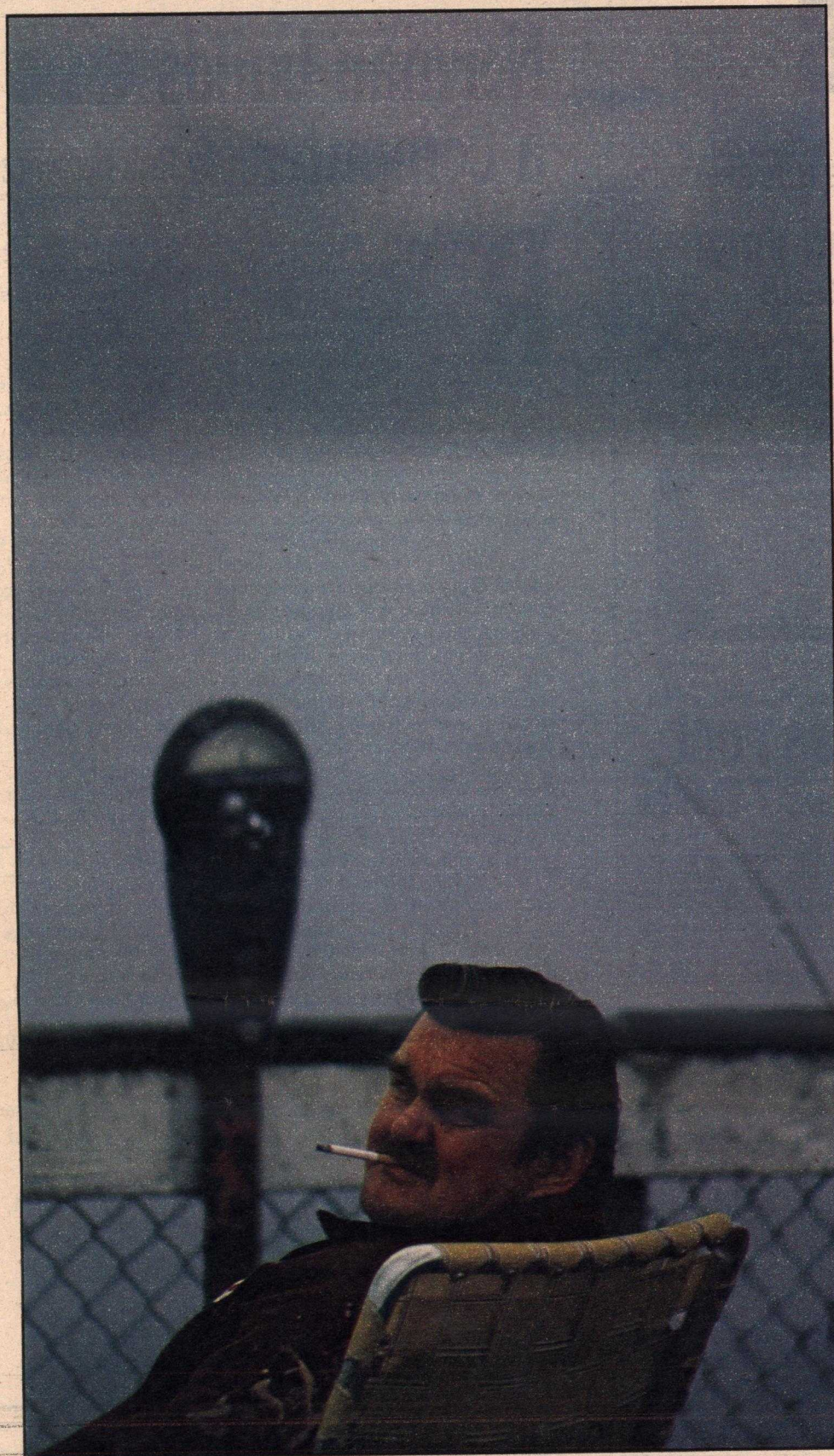


Beset by a gaggle of amateur photographers, a prospective Miss Jose Cuervo strikes a pose. The search for a woman to tout tequila drew a raucous crowd and plenty of weekend paparazzi to the boardwalk.



Left: At home on a bench if not a beach, some senior citizens watch the boardwalk parade. "I have a couple of beers, come down here, sit and watch the girls," says one older man. Above: An anonymous pair, out on the pier, seem more interested in the quiet rhythms of the sea.





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he boardwalk is as bright and alive as the sweet bird of youth. Come down here with your buddies, cut a turn on your skateboard to show them who's who. Come down and feel the pneumatic charge of an arcade gun.

Five high school girls from San Jose cruise the boardwalk. Why do they come here? A collective giggle, shrug and blush. "The guys," says the boldest of the lot. Her lip curls in a sexy, shy sort of way. These are fragile, innocent beauties still, lured into thinking that men are all. But aren't there guys back in San Jose? Again the vaguely sly curve of the mouth and the spokeswoman speaks: "Why not have one over the mountain here and another one back in the valley?"

Come down in the afternoon when sunlight slants and the sand has been used. Beer cans wash up here at the low ebb of the day. A boy

gathers them, tends the leavings, the traces of a people long since gone.

One day the pier will crumble, the Ferris wheel will creak to a rusty halt. The sea will keep shifting and the light will turn, dividing the day that always was.

People come to the shore while they can, looking to bathe their lives in peace. Out on the pier they break out the lawn furniture, sit down and light up a smoke. They throw out a line. It sings through the reel, arcs out from the pier and plunks into the water. Then they watch. Seals snort to the surface and look for some bait. A fishing boat rocks on the swell of the ocean, mast and spars inscribing right triangles on the horizon. Leaning on the rail, one fisherman says: "This is a good place to get away from everything. I like to just come out here and waste a little time." □