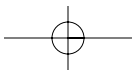
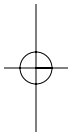
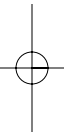
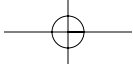


PART

I

# SANTA CLARA VALLEY



## 1

## SNOW TRACKS

In March 1936, an unusual confluence of forces occurred in Santa Clara County.

A long cold winter delayed the blossoming of the millions of cherry, apricot, peach, and prune plum trees covering hundreds of square miles of the Valley floor. Then, unlike many years, the rains that followed were light and too early to knock the blossoms from their branches.

Instead, by the billions, they all burst open at once. Seemingly overnight, the ocean of green that was the Valley turned into a low, soft, dizzily perfumed cloud of pink and white. Uncounted bees and yellow jackets, newly born, raced out of their hives and holes, overwhelmed by this impossible banquet.

Then came the wind.

It roared off the Pacific Ocean, through the nearly uninhabited passes of the Santa Cruz Mountains and then, flattening out, poured down into the great alluvial plains of the Valley. A tidal bore of warm air, it tore along the columns of trees, ripped the

## SANTA CLARA VALLEY

blossoms apart and carried them off in a fluttering flood of petals like foam rolling up a beach.

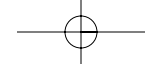
This perfumed blizzard hit Stevens Creek Boulevard, a two-lane road with a streetcar line down its center, that was the main road in the West Valley. It froze traffic, as drivers found themselves lost in a soft, muted whiteout. Only the streetcar, its path predetermined, passed on. . . .

I am haunted by this image of the little trolley soldiering its way through a fruit flower blizzard, its riders cocooned. One reason, I think, is that it presents something profoundly strange and unexpected about the hometown I know so well. Another is that it will never happen again. By the time the same combination of events occurred, the orchards were gone and the wind blew emptily through the parking lots of the emerging Silicon Valley. It is an experience lost forever.

But the biggest reason is that the past—or more precisely, some moment that contrasts neatly with today—is always a happier place. Agrarian people dream wistfully of the life of the hunter; democrats envy the sophistication of the aristocracy. Americans forever relive the bandstand and barbershop quartet world of 1910. And I console myself with images of the petal-bound trolley as I drive the treeless, six-lane arterial that is the modern Stevens Creek Boulevard, home of a hundred auto dealerships.

But the past is a lie, a trick of the mind. It is a fraud because our imaginations are too small to encompass even a single moment of it. Our Music Man vision of 1910 doesn't include diphtheria, the black Pullman porter in the background, or the Jacob Riis tenement scene on the other side of town. Our awe at the great British country houses doesn't also carry the knowledge that they were paid for on the backs of Haitian slaves.

Even my sweet little streetcar, bathed in petals, is more complex than my reveries will allow. It doesn't include the smeared goo



### *Snow Tracks*

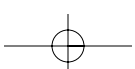
on the windshield wipers, or the sour sweat unhappiness of the seasonal workers on board as they watch half of their annual income blow by. Most of all, my dream doesn't include the fact that a common itinerary for travelers on this trolley was to leave downtown San Jose, stop at Vic's Curve Inn and its 112-foot bar ("longest between LA and Frisco!") for a quick shot of courage before riding to the Cupertino terminus of the line, home of the Hoo Hoo House, the Valley's best bordello.

I know all these things, yet they don't intrude on my warm little trolley fantasy. They offer too much complexity and contradiction. The present is a movie, but the past is a photograph. And that is just how we like it. We never have to look to the next frame or pan the camera. We just choose the single image that holds us in its warm glow and ignore the messy rest. It may be a lie, but it is a welcome one. Unfortunately, it also means that we can never really go back. We can never answer the question: Was any time in the past really happier than now? As nice as it would be to know the answer, we would never trade that knowledge for the greater happiness that nostalgia provides.

But if the past offers only false comfort, then the only escape from the dreary quotidian present is into the future. Here on Stevens Creek Boulevard, in the heart of Silicon Valley, we have grown very adept at flinging ourselves forward in time. In the silicon gate, we have found a way to accelerate time. In digitizing ever more of the world, we have put vast territories of nature under a metronome set at presto.

Not only has the world grown faster, but so, we like to think, has our ability to look into the future. After all, if we know the beat, then we need only count the steps ahead to picture where the dance will take us.

But in fact, all we really see is a masquerade: ourselves and our world dressed up in strange clothes and operating even stranger



## SANTA CLARA VALLEY

technology. Just as our imaginations cannot encompass the past, neither can they imagine a future that is the consequence of a trillion random events and odd trajectories occurring between now and then. Most of all, we cannot imagine—or simply don't care—about a future without *us*.

Yet, though it too is a lie, the future offers one thing the past cannot. We can actually inhabit it. If the present is inhospitable, then we will race to the future . . . and if not there, then the future of that future. And if not there—and God knows, it probably won't be—then still further, until we are hurdling into the future atop our tools and powered by our technologies.

This is Nostalgia for the Future. It is Silicon Valley's greatest contribution to the age; an invention born in traffic jams on roads like Stevens Creek Boulevard. There is, of course, great irony—and perhaps even greater tragedy—in the idea of going faster and faster in order to stop. Yet, despite all of our doubts and fears, we will try it. We will take the risk because somewhere down that long rail, somewhere on our path between the saloon and the whorehouse, all of us weary and lonely riders may look up to find ourselves, if just for a brief moment, in a place where everything fades to silence and time appears to stop. A place where it rains flower petals.

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Written in 2001. Previously unpublished