

## Strange Encounter with Arne Naess

It was a lovely sunny fall day on the beach in Santa Barbara, California, in the late 1930s. A Norwegian girl, a student named Gro, and I were lying on the sand, talking about her studies in philosophy. Suddenly, a gangling guy appeared, big-nosed and buck-toothed, with a huge smile and utterly mischievous eyes. He was an older friend of Gro's named Arne, and a university teacher from Oslo. He joined us and we talked and laughed and joked for a couple of hours. Gro had to leave for a class, but Arne and I stayed on for awhile, thoroughly enjoying each other.

When we left the beach he took me to the Art Museum. I was only 18, and not very knowledgeable about modern art, but Arne was wildly enthusiastic about it. In fact, he seemed to be that way about everything. We lingered a long time in front of one painting, "The Cat's Whiskers" by Joan Miro. It was enormous, covering almost the whole wall. The squiggle lines of a large, beige, cat head filled the painting. It had coal eyes, a red nose, and long black whiskers. I was so fascinated by this child-like image hailed as "great art" that I copied it as a signature for years – with my name trailing off the end of one of the whiskers.

After this enlightening artistic adventure with Arne, he invited me to dinner. I went home and changed, but when we met at a simple restaurant he was still in jeans and his beach shirt. We ate a hearty meal, continued our bantering and joking – the topics long forgotten. It was such a harmless meeting, and I was not at all attracted to this older man, though he was fun to be with for awhile.

However, he did make a shocking impression on me at the end of the meal. "Mari, I don't have any money, could you please pay for our dinner?" I couldn't believe my ears. I was utterly shocked and discombobulated as I looked in my purse to see if I actually had enough money. Fortunately, I did. But what if I hadn't? Would we be sent out to the kitchen to wash the dishes? Would we be thrown out on our bottoms? Or – would the police be called in?

Perhaps Arne was just kidding – to see how I would react – but that never occurred to me at the time. I was an innocent little Midwesterner staying with friends in Santa Barbara before starting university in the spring.

Arne said he would pay me back the next day, and I certainly hoped he would, as I had no extra cash. I was working in Woolworths, behind the chocolate counter, having a grand time weighing out chocolate pieces for eager, smiling kids, and sneaking a bit for myself, too. Instead of balancing the brass scale I let it sing with a clang, as the bright little faces beamed up at me – and I at them. I had been warned against this a couple of times by the store manager.

On the other hand, I did bring in a lot of business, and there were always many kids and moms buying chocolate from me.

Such was the situation when Arne arrived the next morning with a big smile. I could see that all the mothers and children wondered who this creature was. He did not exactly fade into the scenery. He handed me a wad of money with the words: "I hope this is enough for last night."

When I realized the import of his words – and saw the shocked faces of my adult customers – I blushed to high heaven, my face turning beet red. Arne just stood there grinning mischievously.