

Max¹

There was this guy once. He lived in Los Angeles before the wars; before the event. Los Angeles before the turn of the century ... 1999 ... a long time ago. What was he doing in Los Angeles ... this isn't really a question. Anyone who ever lived in Los Angeles knows; so it can't be a question. People pass through Los Angeles ... a constant flow of people like water rushing to the sea. The city takes people. There is no one reason; if the city wants you to be there you will be there.

This guy had no idea why he was there. The city took him; he was there. He was there so there must be a reason why he was there. He had a reason; he was there to look at the city. Not to admire it. He was there to look at the city.

Most people, in that day, traveled around in cars not paying attention; isolated by glass and rubber, and steel. No one looked at the city. People remembered the building they left from; people felt how the ride was going in the car they were sitting in and people saw their destination in their mind's eye. No one looked at the city.

So about this guy looking at the city ... what did he see? Now, that is a question. Only he knows what he saw; all we can do is try to get into his head. Getting into this guy's head is like launching an archaeological expedition to the great wasteland—where under the wasteland hide the remains of a vast civilization whose greatest secrets we may never know. We go there looking for treasure. All we can do is poke around hoping something shiny will catch our attention.

There was a girl; a beautiful girl ... then there was another one and another and another ... lots of beautiful girls, and beautiful women, everywhere in the city. Lots of people in the city. No one was in the street unless they were going somewhere on wheels. There were people off the street walking in and out of buildings ... there were some people who just seemed to be there without going anywhere in particular.

Walking down city streets Max could see there was nowhere to sit down unless you had money to pay for your seat. There were bus benches. The idea of a bus bench is that you should sit down until the bus stops when you should get up and pay for a seat on the bus. There isn't any rule requiring you to pay to sit where the bus is going to stop. It seemed likely not everyone sitting at the bus stop intended to pay for a seat on the bus. He sat down to watch the wheels roll by. He had a book. He always had a book. He read the book while the wheels made a sound like water running.

| "How is he looking at the city if he's reading a book?"

• "The city is his muse. He is a person who seeks to understand."

| "What will he do with his understanding?"

• "He will contemplate it for a very long time."

| "He's still reading."

• "He looks at the city watching him reading. He sees the city through the book."



"That book is good huh?"

He looked into a plain face ... makeup softening blemishes ... a young female, physically fit ... her youth and energy gave her an aura of beauty ... he was an older man ... in appearance he seemed neither young nor old ... in the twilight between the bright light of youth and the deepening darkness of age ... he could not imagine any reason any young female would find him interesting.

"I can't imagine I have anything you want, other than my attention, which you now have."

"Why be like that?"

He smiled a little bit. "You are admirably physically fit." He closed the book and put it in a pocket.

"You waiting for the bus?"

"No." He stood up. "I'm out for a walk. Goodbye."

| "He's not going to get laid like that!"

• "He's not trying to get laid."

| "So what was that?"

• "He validated her athleticism."

| "Why?"

• "Because that is what he noticed when he looked at her."



Grass, palm trees, bright sunshine, wispy clouds against blue sky. He walked on a wide sidewalk along one edge of a park. Skateboards, roller blades, people all over the park.

"You got fifty-cent." This was not a question.

He looked at a bleary eyed blood shot face. "What happened to you?"

A heavy younger male in filthy sweat pants and a stained t-shirt stood up. "Man give me fifty-cent."

He put a dollar in the outstretched hand. He walked on down the street.

"Silly ignorant motherfucker." The hand with the dollar vanished into a pocket.

| "You can't do anything for these people."

• "I don't believe that is his understanding."



As he walked he remembered:

a story he had once read about a small businessman back in the farthest of far back days who had promised to pay a worker fifty cents to do a job. The job was done; the businessman did not pay the worker. Time went by ... the worker held a grudge ... everyone who knew the worker knew about the debt. There was a day when the worker's family desperately needed money ... the youngest child, who had not yet been born when the debt was made, went to the businessman on her own and demanded she be paid the fifty cents ... the businessman raged at the child ... the child stood her ground and demanded the

fifty cents ... the businessman would have beat the child to death had there not been another man who, impressed with the child's courage, stopped his hand and chastised him. The businessman paid the child the fifty cent debt ...

Give me fifty-cent was just what the young girl had demanded in the story ...

He was not a businessman. The young man was not a small girl. There was no debt to be paid. Fifty cents is no longer a month's wages. The story is generally unknown ... yet ... 'give me fifty-cent' ... somehow lives as a phrase to be spoken by the desperate and broken here in the city to this very day ...

Then he saw how millions, even billion's, of families had ancestor's whose debts had never been paid. Unique stories and individual grudges lost in the dust of time ... he wondered if this vast unpaid and un-payable debt had somehow been hardwired into every human consciousness ... always there ... with no brave little girls to collect the un-collectable.

He concluded the rich were in debt to the poor and with all their resources could never repay the burden. The poor have always been in debt to the rich. The poor can never pay the debt. The difference between them being: the rich do not believe they owe a debt, so do nothing to pay it; the poor believe they owe a debt, and do everything to pay it.

But ... he thought ... the problem is far more complex. That there may be truth in his conclusion he was convinced ... for now. What is the solution? How does one pay an un-payable debt? Human lives are so short. Human potential is so tremendous. His heart hurt thinking about it. He knew the traditional way that humanity had of rolling this injustice over from generation to generation ... religion.

He remembered the words of the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca ... "Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful."

He did not consider himself wise. He knew his life would be too short; he knew his pursuit of truth was most likely futile. He had studied, he had read, he had meditated and contemplated all of his life. He still had nothing to say. All he could do was look at the world around him knowing there was more to the world than he could ever see.

He stepped around the trash. Looking down the alley he imagined the smell of urine hanging like a mist in the air. He crossed the street. He looked at the magazine covers. The newsstand was part of the sidewalk; corrugated steel doors rolled up a steel frame bolted down.

"Don't touch anything unless you are going to buy it."

None of the magazines looked that interesting. He bought the day's LA Times.



He walked up La Brea Avenue to Hollywood Boulevard where a bright sculptural neon abstract advertised a coffee shop in the corner of a large building. There was plenty of outdoor seating. Tourists, locals, transplants, people everywhere. He liked to sit drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, looking at the crowds. The palms were so tall along the Boulevard ... sometimes people would sit and talk with him.

He looked straight into her eye's unblinking. Bright dark eye's. He listened intently.

"I do everything I can for the homeless; of course I don't know what to do. I can only imagine what it's like for them. I couldn't afford the rent increase once. I couldn't find a place I could afford in time. I put everything in storage. I lived in my car. I washed up in restroom sinks; changed clothes in the stalls ... it was so scary, so humiliating, it was like an interminable terrifying embarrassment. That's when I found the place I have now."

He remembered the Romans provided free public baths and toilets. He mentioned it.

"I don't think that would work here."