

Vision in the Streets of Los Angeles – 1982

The events at the Center for Spiritual Renewal were still weighing upon me, as were the more troubling images, such as my body breaking apart and the divide in the road between the castle and myself. I was still struggling to bring forth some reasonable answers to the questions that I felt were hanging fire, not an unreasonable phraseology to apply to that rather volcanic episode.

Despite all the progress I had made I still had moments when I sunk into despair, feeling I would never attain my spiritual goals in this life and calling into serious question the value of battling my way towards wholeness. Was I getting anywhere and was it all worth it? Much sooner than I would have believed, I would have those questions answered.

As anyone who has been to or lived in Los Angeles knows, the streets of that city can be foreboding and forbidding. I was somewhere in the downtown area on rain slick streets. The light of the streetlamps would occasionally strike my glasses in such a way that I was unable to see what lay ahead of me.

The clouds were beginning to break; the moon was gibbous, its soft light illuminating the endless puddles in the potholed streets. It was cold and I pulled my windbreaker more tightly under my chin. I tugged my hat down over my ears and thrust my hands deeply into my pockets. My cheap leather shoes offered no resistance against the elements and my socks were drenched. And what was I doing out on such a night? I had no idea, no destination in mind, no real purpose for being in the rain.

As it happened, I was also unable to remember how it was I found myself on this street and I did not know where my truck was parked. A puzzling situation, but not necessarily alarming or upsetting. I peered into the dark interior of every alleyway I passed, all of the streets and seeming to merge into one boulevard.

I was surrounded by the sounds of night animals, dogs barking, cats scrambling over fences and garbage cans, owls hooting, merging with the sounds of human animals, laughter from an open window, a slamming door, the ringing of a telephone. In short, the typical sounds of The Big City At Night.

I paced down the sidewalk, my footsteps echoing off the walls of the damp buildings. Well off to my right a man approached, a very dark figure and I was grateful he was on the other side of the street. He was, however, the only other person I remembered seeing that night. I was somewhat apprehensive as he closed the distance between us. I withdrew my hands from my pockets and prepared to defend myself if need be. Fortunately, he passed me by without so much as glancing my way. Relieved, I returned my cold hands to the relative warmth of my pants pockets.

The sidewalk took me up a steep hill, an angle rakish enough to leave me winded with the climb. I still had not the slightest clue where I was going. The cold and damp and the fear of being lost at night in not the best part of the city was ratcheting up the anxiety level.

For a change of scenery I crossed the street and proceeded on I the same direction. I neared a house and saw light coming from the uncovered window. Curious, I did a little peeping tom thing. The scene was ordinary enough, a family seated at the dining table. The table bore a red and white cloth and candles were upright in holders. In some ways, it reminded me of my study, wherever that was. The one unusual thing about the scenario in the house was that the people were not moving.

In fact, there was no movement at all. It was as though someone had painted a well-detailed but thoroughly uninteresting canvas of a family having dinner, not exactly a rendering calculated to turn the entire art world on its collective ear. For some inexplicable reason the homey scene, bizarrely motionless though it was, engendered a feeling of melancholia that urged me further down the street. My mouth emitted a plume of steam as I puffed on my way. On top of everything else, I had developed a pain in my right side and an upset stomach. But I knew I had to keep going if I were ever going to extricate myself from this maze of metropolitan madness.

I finally arrived at the hill's summit, from whence I surveyed Los Angeles. It didn't look like The Big Orange at all; in fact, I didn't see any way this could be Los Angeles. The scene sprawling before me was of whitewashed walls gleaming in the moonlight. I also noticed that the streets were no longer wet, an impossibly fast drying job to be accomplished at night. And the streets were unimproved, nothing more than dirt thoroughfares, as in an old western movie.

I was in a Spanish town of a bygone era, surrounded by adobe buildings. A solitary figure stood about one hundred yards distant, decked out in sombrero and peasant clothes, straight out of Central Casting. My eyes were itching; I removed my glasses to rub them and when I replaced them and peered down the street, he was gone.

Now I knew it was a hallucination. I continued walking, coming upon an old church on a street corner. It was a mission of some years' age, showing signs of wear but extremely large. I decided a season of prayer would not be unwarranted and crossed the street, feeling dust from the crude roadway bogging down my shoes, worming its way between the folds of my clothes. I reached the foot of the stairs leading up to the doors of the church, kicked my shoes against the bottom stair to dislodge the dirt, and walked up the stairs. Feeling dizzy, I kept a firm grip on the handrail.

The front portal was huge, requiring every ounce of strength to open. I went into the sanctuary, dark except for candles flickering at the end of the tabernacle. I knelt in the aisle and made a sign of the cross out of respect for the surroundings, then walked up to the main altar. A primitive-looking Christ hung forlornly upon a very large crucifix. It looked about fifty feet tall. I dropped into a pew and rested my feet on the prayer bench, hoping for a few minutes of rest to restore my breath and figure where the heck I was and how I was going to find my way out of this mess.

The flames of the candles danced before me, their unsyncopated rhythms sending reflections ricocheting in all direction and bouncing off the stained glass windows near the altar of Mary. The flickering beams played upon her face. On the right side of the church was a statue of Christ, the face of which was interesting, much like those of a countenance I had been seeing for years. I actually thought the statue was going to speak to me.

Without warning the doors behind me blew open with a loud crash, wind blowing through the sanctuary, papers, leaves, and assorted debris scuttling down the aisles and hopping around the floor. The gust blew out every last candle in the place, plunging me into pitch darkness. The wind was howling through the sanctuary, sweeping through every cranny.

When I recovered from the shock of the sudden blast of air and its effects, I looked back to the open doors, spying a huge creature perched there. I quickly hid behind the back of the pew. The thing was deep red in color but it was impossible to tell whether it was human or not. I would soon find out though, as it was walking towards me. I was paralyzed with fear.

The sound of the wind seemed to be following this beast, shooting over and past lamp stands, candelabra, scattering papers everywhere. The only light was coming from him or it, illuminating the whiteness of the crazily careening sheets of paper.

Then he was within a few feet of me, his closeness magnifying his already terrifying size. Within arms' length, he opened the cloak he wore, showing me an extraordinary vision, vast beyond measure or description, stars everywhere. It looked like the top of the universe, a universe not only of infinite space but measureless time as well.

I felt myself walking again, no longer through rainy city streets or the dirt roads of a poor village, but through eternity itself. I could even see all the way home. So hypnotic was the effect of this panoramic scene I momentarily forgot its frightening source. But I didn't want to run, did not even want to leave the church. I was in a state of all-encompassing peace. The illumination of the universe suffused the church sanctuary, lighting it up everywhere yet seemingly focused in no particular spot. I felt part of it all, an integral part of all creation and being.

From the limitless expanse of the universe I found myself on a wet bench in the Los Angeles night. The rain seemed a holdover from the past, having trailed me from some forgotten yesterday, from the sleepy village. The church was nowhere to be seen.

I rose, cold, still damp from the rain that had passed but left the wet streets in its wake. I again pulled my jacket collar up around my neck and replaced my hands in my pockets, then trudged once more up the street. Moments later I came to an old house, very familiar, the door like an old friend, part of my essence. I let my hand find its way to the gold doorknob, opened the door, and stepped into the room.

When I entered I found myself in my study, safely seated at my desk working on a drawing of an old church.

The sounds of Susan playing in another room reached my ears and I could hear the television from the livingroom.

I thought about the night's strange events, looking at it philosophically. All one need do is touch darkness and they are no longer there. We can fade out of so-called reality with the snap of our fingers.

What is reality anyway? What is its nature, if it even has one capable of a universally accepted definition? Why do we invest such confidence in the world, why trust it so? Why believe the world exists and that we are part of it in our allegedly normal waking consciousness? These were the thoughts threading their way through my mind.

Following that night I could never again place confidence in anything as ephemeral as the concept of reality. It made me think that, in some way, we are not really in this world at all.

I never again committed the error of underestimating the infinite.