

A Tour of Heaven's Ruins

You are leaning against the wrought iron balustrade that wraps along the brick walkway in front of your grandparents' house, looking at the lights of your home city. Creeping rose vines tangle themselves among the balusters; they have a habit of prickling your legs when you forget about them. They're all thorns now since most of the buds have been decapitated. Your grandfather has a vendetta against all plantlife, especially if it was grown by his wife, and their crumpled petals lay strewn about in the soil below you. It's imported, of course, nothing grows here naturally unless it's highly drought resistant. Much like its plants, nothing is truly "from" Los Angeles County except oranges, avocados/avocado toast, meth and actors. Even then, they still aren't truly "from" here, they were all imported at some point or another. Rather than adapt to their new environment, their environment was adapted to them. Water was siphoned from the north to keep lawns from the east and people from all directions alive in what used to be and still is a desert wasteland. Only now, it has a blanket of asphalt and urban sprawl to cover up its barrenness.

Let's orient ourselves real quick. It is another night in Los Angeles, the distant summer of '23. The approximate date doesn't matter because every summer night in The City of Angels is the same cloudless and torturously temperate night, and it will stay so until we are all inevitably swallowed by saffron colored smog. The walkway you are standing on is near Los Feliz, east of West Hollywood. The two are often lumped together by people who aren't from here because their borders touch and overlap in some areas, and Hollywood *is* LA as far as they're concerned.

But these two areas are actually very distinct from one another. You see, Los Feliz is full of old people and homeless people, and Hollywood is full of tourists and homeless people.

To the south lies downtown, dominating the skyline in all its grimy glory. From where you're standing, it almost looks how it was intended to be - sleek glass and steel pillars heralding in a better future. It's an illusion quickly broken by the everpresent cloud of pollutants that hangs above it. Most people are too busy trying to beat rush-hour traffic to notice or care that downtown and its neighbors, Koreatown and Skid Row, are being engulfed in Stephen King's mist. Only instead of extra dimensional monsters, it's full of carcinogens and, yep you guessed it, more homeless people. Oh excuse me, slip of the tongue, they're referred to as "the displaced" now. God forbid they're called what they are - people who have lost their homes, people who are homeless. That word - it leaves an acrid, reality tinged taste in the mouth, doesn't it? Euphemize and whitewash until you don't notice the problems which surround you anymore. No matter what you call them, the mist still feeds indiscriminately on *the displaced* - the bankrupt, the immigrants, the hope-vacant, and the xylazine addicts alike, slowly choking them as paparazzi flashbang each other to get the best shot of America's favorite botox pumped egomaniac getting a thirty dollar coffee just ten miles to the west in Beverly Hills because why sell papers about actual problems in your city when you could be printing money out of pulp?

Further south is home. In southern LA, away from the media moguls, the Weinstein wannabes, and the Kardashian's caravans, things move slower. You go back sometimes to visit childhood friends and the parents down in Westchester. There are so many memories there, tangled in the verdant leaves and branches of Mom's garden, which live in the walls of her and Dad's brightly painted house. Westchester is its own little idyllic piece of suburbia amidst the

rest of the city, and would be a mere 10 minute drive from LAX if the surrounding area wasn't one of the most heavily trafficked in the city. That's what it was designed to be, after all. Back the 50's, Westchester was constructed to house 9-to-5-ers in quaint little bungalows to reduce commute times, which were becoming insufferably long after monopolist and Nazi Party supporter Henry Ford decided to buy and decommission the entire railway system to force LA residents into buying his cars. Westchester also acted as a pocket of gentrification which walled off Inglewood from Playa Vista and her beachside condos with its white picket fences and the inefficient maze of streets which are synonymous with suburbia. But not anymore. As they always do, the realtors, The Harbingers of Gentrification, made their descent upon Inglewood like a plague, stripping it of its personality and forcing out its long-time residents.

Part of you wants to stay. San Pedro and some of your closest friends are just 20 minutes from home, and it is good to be back. It's one of the few parts of the city you actually like. It doesn't seem real at times. Childhood memories roll in with the tide and that dense sea fog which makes brief appearances in cool early mornings, enveloping you in a stillness which is difficult to describe. It hides you from the world in its cool gray swirls for a short time, bringing you a bit of peace before the perpetually sunny weather and the exhaust from the cars of early morning commuters sears it all away.

But you can't stay, you're needed up north in Los Feliz. What if grandpa falls, forgets where or who he is, gets into a domestic dispute or steals the car again? You have responsibilities. But right now, right here in the dark, this time belongs to you. So you watch from your roost, perched above it as the bulbs flash on an influencer's ass, traffic lurches its way through the city's streets like phosphorescent blood in clotted arteries, and the middle-aged

mosaic of lonely desk lamps slowly flicker out in the US Bank Tower. Los Feliz is witness to it all. It translates to “The Happy Ones” and it’s populated by reanimated corpses who call private security companies when a minority loiters in front of one of their mausoleums for too long. Maybe that’s what happiness is - not impossible dreams of wealth and fame, but power and the illusion of safety.

Maybe the power is an illusion too. Grandpa and his dementia are still convinced that “ne’er do wells” will break in if he doesn’t close the shutters at night, as if a group of burglars will suddenly spawn in his backyard the moment the sun goes down if his little ritual isn’t completed. He used to keep a Glock 17 tucked in his mattress, anticipating the thought of that very occasion until his family took it and the rest of his arsenal away from him. After all, they were in no hurry to get shot while trying to deliver his medication, and neither are you. But despite all this, despite missing most of his gray matter, as well as his dignity, his ego persists. He needs to feel powerful, to be the man in charge. So you let him. You bring him along with you on errands, drive him to the bank when he becomes convinced that his disability check has come in the mail, and shouts at your grandmother when she tells him it won’t come for another two weeks. You drive him to Fosters Freeze when he asks you to, and you let him choose what ice cream he wants (it’s always a medium soft serve vanilla cone). You pretend you aren’t disgusted when he says something incredibly racist, or when you have to clean up after him when he shits himself in Hobby Lobby. Instead you smile, and reassure him that it happens to everyone once in a while. And you know what? It works. When the day is through, he goes to sleep satisfied, with his mouth hanging open and his arms crossed across his chest like a mummy, like he’s already dead, believing that he is still the man of the house.

Sometimes you feel like the city is just as broken as he is. You feel like everyone who's successful here is either famous, or was born at just the right time to make an ungodly amount of money in a city which was still being shaped. That those of them that are still kicking had a hand in making it what it is today. That they live here still, in Los Feliz, clinging with wizened fingers onto a vision of a future that passed them by a long time ago. Why else would they wait around in heaven's ruins for so long? The angels left this city long ago, if they were ever here at all.