

Inner City

by Allen Plone

This time he was dressed in a snap-brimmed hat, zoot suit with a gold chain and two-toned shoes; something out of a sad, lost Los Angeles past. I had no choice but to follow him as he walked down stairs that led to the Metro.

We stood near one another, waiting for the next train; he humming a Celia Cruz tune, tapping his foot to keep the rhythm. Nearby, a man, looking regal for all his shabby clothes, began setting up a small table. I watched him curious to see that he was as ignored by the waiting people as was the man in the zoot suit. My companion, if he can be called that, didn't seem to notice that anything but the ordinary was happening. I walked over to the table and to the man behind it, who, upon my arrival, removed three worn and bent cards from inside his jacket pocket. With the practiced hand of a street magician he threw the cards on the table, then, one by one, showed me their faces. The Queen of Spades. The Ace of Hearts. The King of Clubs. He pointed to the Queen, then quickly moved the cards about, confusing their positions, but keeping them in a straight line. With an open palm he gestured towards the table. I knew I was supposed to find the Queen. I hesitated, then lifted my hand and pointed to the card in the center. He smiled, turned the card over to reveal the Ace of Hearts. Once again he moved the cards. I watched the Queen slide between her consorts. There was no way I could be wrong this time. Again he gestured toward the table. With certainty, I turned over the last card. The Ace of Hearts. We repeated the dance over and over until the revelation of the Ace became part of the ritual. No other card existed. All the cards the same, though each time he showed me that the three wore different faces. Over and over, against all odds, I chose the Heart.

We moved together, in our separate parts, like dancers. No one else existed; no place else was real. I felt the heat of the oncoming

subway and breathed the metallic smell of the rushing air and ozone the cars push before them and ignored the train's arrival. The dance hadn't ended and all I could do was continue to watch his hands as he moved the cards; and my hand as again and again it pointed at the Ace of Hearts. Again he shuffled. Again I chose. The Queen of Spades. I had chosen the Queen of Spades! I flushed excitedly, and looked up into the eyes of the card man, which is how I had come to know him. He looked back, reflecting towards me my own image. With what little awareness I had left, I began to feel a sadness confuse my joy; somehow I had destroyed the web of the dance we had created.

I looked down, then up, then over toward the train just in time to see a two-toned shoe disappearing into the car. I looked back to the card man. He was gone. How could he have packed up so quickly? How had he left so silently?

My feet moved with a speed that contradicted the lead I felt them to be. I just made it onto the train before the door closed.

II.

For morning, the subway was crowded. I found a seat near the far end of the car, between a young girl in a school uniform and a man reading his paper. Neither paid any attention to my arrival. Nearly the length of the car away I could just see his two-tones shoes resting beneath the bench seat. The car rocked gently, its movement nudging most of the passengers into a shell of isolation. I settled into the movement, the strobing lights, the warm air; drifting, waiting, half-watching. The whoosh of the train through the tunnel, the clicking of the wheels on the tracks, the sound of newspaper pages turning became a lullaby hummed by a distant and

ever receding voice. From the edge of this near-sleep I saw a woman seated on the last bench. She had forced herself into the corner, creating a space between herself and the other passengers. She was dressed in a pair of old jeans, torn at the knees and at mid-thigh, over a red leotard. Heavy black boots with thick high soles came to her mid-calf. Slowly, as if from deep below the surface, I surfaced from the stupor I had fallen into. I looked at her fully. Her long brown hair framed a small face. No make-up. Not beautiful, but someone you wanted to look at again. She was still. Not just without movement, but a stillness that seemed to root out from her center. My eyes followed the curve of her body, set into the crevice of juncture of seat, wall and window. I sat up, suddenly fully awake, brushing into and annoying the man next to me. Why hadn't I seen it before? She was pregnant. Her hands rested on a round belly that sat on her lap like a large melon. Why was this so shocking? I had seen young, pregnant women before. But something seemed different. I thought about her life: was she married or living with someone? Would she, like so many women these days, be raising the child alone? Thinking about her and her baby quickly segued into visions of her naked; in bed with her lover. The man who would make her pregnant. Her thin body, not yet swelled, with its small breasts lay on top of the sheets, her legs spread only wide enough to offer a promise. The man next to her was a gentle lover, his long-fingered hands moving over her face with tenderness. It was important to me that he loved her. I strained to get a better look at him. He was smiling, perhaps anticipating. She was quiet, still. I watched her move, rolling over on top of him. She moved slowly up and down making herself ready for seeding.

I looked up, away from her belly, as the train began to drop into a lightless station, just in the time to see her crying.

III.

He swung his gold chain and walked quickly out of the car. I had just enough time to follow him off the train and now was falling farther behind. We had to go down in order to go up. A quirk in the subway system. The brim of his hat rose over the top stair of the escalator. I increased my pace, just a little, to keep up. I stepped onto the top step as he stepped off the bottom one. The way before was long and straight so that I had no fear of losing him. He hesitated, watching something come toward him. A train, its headlight creating shadows where only dark once lived, came rushing into the station. Everything became white in the glare of the train's beacon. Except for the silhouette of the man I followed and a figure wearing what looked like a white crescent-shaped hat, a long flowing white coat over a white sheath dress. She held onto a leash which separated at its end into two large sleek dogs; greyhounds.

The train ran through the station without stopping, leaving behind a dull and familiar neon glow; just enough light to show me that one of the dogs was white, the other black. The leash was taut, yet the dogs were not pulling. All three seemed to see me at the same time, six eyes watching as the escalator set me down on the station platform. She and the dogs stood between the exit to the street and me. The two-toned shoes had just taken the first steps up the stairs. The eyes watched as I made my move to follow.

The dogs moved just enough to stand between me and the way I needed to go. I stopped, unwilling to challenge them. Without taking their eyes from me, the black dog squatted and began to pee. Her urine ran towards the edge of the platform where it stopped and began to collect. The black dog finished after what seemed to be an eternity. As the black dog's haunches began to rise, the white dog squatted, taking up where the other had ended. The pee continued to collect, creating a small puddle that spread from the edge of the platform to the back wall. The lady and the dogs were now on one side of this flow, I on the other. When the white dog finished, she and her companion stood, still staring at me, and began to howl.

Like a doo wop group singing in the subway, their voices echoed and blended. The sound cut through me, icy lines of terror and awe. They bayed and howled. Sometimes I could hear their separate voices, other times only the harmony. I closed my eyes and thought I heard the woman's voice mix with the dogs. I was lost in the sound, frozen between my desire to run and threat of the dogs before me. I opened my eyes. The woman watched. The dogs sang. I took a step towards them. At the edge of the yellow stream, I stopped. The voice of the dogs rose. Another voice, lower but just as fierce, joined in. My own.

Slowly the dogs stopped howling. The woman reached her hand out. The dogs sat down and watched as I took it, stepping over their outflow and continuing towards the exit.

IV.

He must have slowed to watch, since he was just turning the corner at the top of the stairs. I climbed, keeping him in sight, feeling no need to catch up. On the surface, the night had just begun. The night's coolness was augured by a half moon, itself bisected by a wisp of clouds. The street, an area, which during the day would be crowded, was empty, save for stretched-out cardboard, worn blankets, shopping carts, all partly hidden in doorways and corners. I smelled him before I saw him. He came up from behind, flicking a small lighter on and off. Soot and black dirt rubbed into his face and hands, black leather vest over a dirty and hairy chest, black jeans, filthy with living, bare feet, caked with dirt that no amount of washing would ever remove. One of the Ash People. His long hair hung in greasy strands. A pair of silver wire frame glasses sat on the bridge of his nose, contrasting the dark in which he walked. Through their lenses, his eyes were intent, a watcher in a world only he saw. Again he flicked the lighter on, holding it out to me. I recoiled, not wanting to be burned. It was as if he was offering me a light; but I had no cigarette. The lighter flicked off. The night grew darker; no doubt a trick of the eye. On. How could the shadows, which now moved ominously against the wall behind,

be reflected from so small a light? Off. Darkness. Only his eyes, and the silver frames were visible.

I tried to walk away from him, but he followed, holding me with the rhythmic on-off of his lighter its fire, which seemed to pour out of his eyes, concentrated by the lens of his glasses. I was impatient to leave him behind, to follow the two-tone shoes, a more familiar path. On. It was day. The street became clear. I could see the bodies of the homeless ones settle into their cardboard, others rolling their shopping carts, each item defining a moment of their world. One had started a small fire with newspaper and twigs and was heating a can of beans. I turned to look into the eyes of the ash man. I watched the fire in them. Off. The afterglow seemed to suck me into his world. I could see into it, through it. His world was shadows, without definition, without contrast. Each shape poured itself into the next. There was no light, but no darkness either. Movement seemed impossible, but things moved nonetheless. Black shapes folded onto a brick wall. As we approached them they disappeared. Someone had written: "where will you go for it?"

He flicked his lighter on and, holding the flame before him, turned and followed it across the street. I could make out less and less of him; finally seeing only the small glow of his lighter. Looking towards the corner ahead, without seeing hat brim or two-toned shoes, I knew which way to follow.

V.

His shadow stretched behind him. I made a game of stepping on it, seeing if I could hold him back by holding the black shape. I was so intent on the sidewalk and the moving blackness, which I could

not stop, that I nearly ran into her. A woman of medium height, well dressed and quite beautiful. Next to her, sitting regally, a leopard, as sleek and beautiful as she. Strangely, what I noticed first was her hands, one of which rested gently on the leopard's head. They were long, thin, fine-boned, translucent, like expensive china. They were hands that saw little work, but they were strong hands. I knew at once they were hands that held firmly onto what they grasped. The leopard looked up at her with respect and adoration; not as its master, as its cherished partner. The envy I felt confused me. Was I more jealous of the cat, wanting that hand to touch me or of her, enjoying the easy relationship with the beast? Knowing I watched her hand, she let it glide sensuously down the big cat's back. Its fur rippled with the touch. The guttural growl was half roar half purr. Something began to drip from its mouth, thick, viscous liquid that pooled between its spread front legs. The woman's hand disappeared behind the lowered haunches of the cat. Deliberately, she brought it up to where I could see it. Her hand was covered with bees, their collective buzz a soothing hum. They swarmed up her arm, covering it. With her other hand, she dip into the liquid between the cat's legs and brought it to her mouth. She licked her fingers then held them out to me.

I went to my knees before her and the leopard, bowing my head, wanting to be stroked, be anointed.

I reached out and put my hand beneath the beast's jaw, letting the liquid run out its mouth and into my palm. Laughter burst from her, from the leopard. I stood up and looked into my hand. The liquid was pale, lightly golden, with the faint smell of flowers. It tasted like honey. Her hand, still held out to me, dripped. I took her wrist and lifted it to my lips. I sucked the honey from each finger, becoming drunk with the sweetness.

The bees rose and flew towards the promise of light and pollen. The woman, her hand licked clean, walked off. The leopard

followed, leaving me to chase a shadow and the sound of distant shoes.

VI.

He crossed the street in the middle, avoiding the traffic light at the corner. I began to follow but was nearly run into by a bike messenger. She wore a blue Air force jacket against the night's coolness and a funny hat with wings sewn on its sides. Her shoes were red canvas. I wondered what she might be doing here so late at night; all the offices were surely closed. She turned her bicycle and began to circle, aiming for a puddle near the right side of the street. The front tire, then the rear went slicing through the water making a hissing sound. She completed the circle, pedaling counter-clockwise, then, rather than straighten out, she continued to circle, each orbit had the puddle as its goal. Her joy was evident. Like a dancer moving in a strobe light, she moved in and out of the glow of the street lamp; in and out of the street's darkness. Each hiss through the puddle an occasion for delight. The waters parted for passage to safety. Not wanting to cross the street for fear of breaking into the circle, I stood and watched as she circumscribed the world; remaking it over and over. Just when I became used to the repetition, she swerved her bike, coming full speed toward me. Rather than run me down, however, she came flying close enough to drop a manila envelop at my feet. I looked down at the package, then up at her. She was riding rapidly away into other pools and other darkness. I bent down and picked up the sealed envelope. It had no name on it so I opened it at once.

Inside was an eight by ten white sheet of paper. I took it out and read it. One sentence only. "All that is above is also below."

Crossing the street, I followed the braying laughter of the night crowds knowing the brimmed hat would be among them. The paper fell from my hand into the puddle where the ink ran into the water. They flowed together toward the drain.

VII.

The peak of his hat stood above a small crowd gathered to watch a street performer.

I pushed my way towards the front of the pack finding a position directly across from where he stood. I watched him watching the performance until I, too, was drawn into it. The performer was naked to the waist. A small table nearby held a bottle of alcohol and three thin wands with blackened tips. Under the table was a series of swords of different lengths and widths. The performer was warming up the audience with tales of magic and circus while juggling several different sized melons. The juggler was able to shift all the floating spheres to one hand while bending down to pick up a small sword. With a wicked swipe, one melon was neatly divided in half, each piece falling to the ground and splitting apart. A woman, wrapped in rags, scuttled from the crowd and began collecting the pieces of the melon, shoving one chunk after another into her mouth. People laughed as, her arms full of fruit, she disappeared, pushing her way through the gathering to open street. I wondered whether she was part of the act.

The sword point now perched over the juggler's mouth. Slowly the blade descended, was swallowed whole. The next blade was longer and thicker, but as easily eaten. Then followed a blade as thick as a hand. This too disappeared. Then several blades at once.

The juggler's appetite was enormous. No sooner had the last blade disappeared when the juggler took up the small wands on the table and, lighting the ends, began to eat the fire. The flames were devoured in large gulps. The juggler's hunger spread to the crowd. People were searching their pockets for things to eat. Checkbooks, wallets, keys, money, notes that should have been thrown out weeks ago, all disappeared into eager mouths. As fast as the juggler swallowed, the crowd kept up. One man turned to the person next to him, pulled off his glasses and ate them. A woman was eating her

shoe. Soon everyone would be standing naked. I feared what would happen then.

The juggler was just finishing the little table when a police car rolled to a stop at the curb. The juggler looked up, wiped his mouth, walked to the car and entered the rear door. The crowd moved on leaving me standing alone.

It had begun to rain lightly. The street showed the footprints of a two-toned pair of shoes. They led around the corner, towards the center and the light that poured from it.

VIII.

I caught a glimpse of him as he entered a popular downtown bar, known for its good drinks and attractive crowd. The bar was deep with people. I stood at the edge of the mass until an opening allowed me to make my way forward. Stella, the bartender, was a local legend, pouring perfect drinks with lightening speed. She moved with grace, mixing the colors and aromas of the many alcohols before her. Invention was her specialty. She could look at you and know what was the perfect elixir to improve the day. Tomorrow might be different. Unlike other bartenders, she said little, always involved in creating. She set a tall glass with several different colors of liquids, one carefully balanced upon the other, before the man who sat next to me. He sipped the top green layer and became a meadow with sheep grazing. In the blue layer he was sky and birds. Yellow and he was Icarus flying near the sun. I sipped from the mug she placed in front of me, watching the woman across drink a deep red drink. She became an apple, ripe and full. Around me, two deep, were cacti and sand. Everyone was happy; the music loud and joyous. Several paired birds flew perfect patterns above our heads. Songs broke out. Trees rooted and grew; bore fruit. Children circled the trunks, dancing. At the center, Stella mixed and poured without a break in rhythm. Each creation emboldened her, inspiring new genius. Blush blended into colors.

New hues were founded, each in their own time becoming the beginning of newer, more glorious shades.

Her hands moved with the grace of doves. Her long fingers surrounded the bottles she held, teasing magic from them. She spun around the bar, the liquids she held were in constant motion, always pouring.

I watched through the eyes of a snow-white wolf. The color's blinding vision stung eyes used only to white. My feet felt the movement through soft pads listening to the ground. Each voice was distinct, separated by degrees of sound I had never before heard. Wind stroked my fur, every hair registering its intensity and direction. Every smell was distinct, richer than perfume, and each with an intention I understood deeper than language. Stella moved faster and faster until she became a blur, a light rising above us, glowing. I felt my body arch. I began to howl.

IX.

How I came to be in the cab was only slightly more a mystery than why he, with the wide-brimmed hat, was driving it. I settled back and let myself be driven. The sky was beginning to turn dawn red. The light posts ran by, hurrying to rest until needed again. The streets, washed and ready, stretched, then settled in for the day's rides.

The cab surrounded me. It was an old-fashioned Checker model, with leather and cloth, cradling me in its comfort. The wheels sang about others they had carried. A baby had been born in here. Many had slept. People clung one to another; some for fear of the dark, other as the prelude to a night of love. I smelled their musk, which the cab held along with cigarette smoke and sweat. The blood and tears. Hope, want, need all drove with me; sat next to me on a seat stained and starting to crack. We held hands and hummed prayers hoping it wasn't true that all the dawns of the world are forgotten.

That night dances were not canceled. The rising sun sent our shadow across the road where it had to hurry to keep up with the speeding taxi. I hoped it wouldn't get lost. The buildings changed to houses with the alchemy of the day as the sun rose higher and brighter. We flew towards it with abandon.

X.

I walked up the stairs to my house, turned and watched him drive away. The morning was in its prime. The earth had turned gold. My door was closed but unlocked, just as I had left it. Gold light ran through the rooms; the cat chased it. Circling the space that was my home, I looked for what was changed, what was new, what was old. The sun's beams broke into bits, motes of light dancing. They moved with the rhythm of the breeze, dancing Siva's dance of creation and destruction. The furniture joined in. The pictures flew from the walls and spun in the joy of their freedom. I whirled into the center, holding an egg above my head and danced, let myself go into movement as pure as the light that danced with me. Within me. The house vibrated, dissolved into its essence and joined us, swirling. Everything returned to its beginning, moving with the all in all. *Tat tvam asi*. This is you. Dance and song.

As one, we spun and spun until the center failed dropping us into a dust mountain from which we were reborn.

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