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LA and I

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The first image recorded in my head of Los Angeles was a sea of lights. For miles and miles I watched with my mouth open. It was endless.

The direct flight arrived LAX from Jacksonville, Florida late at night. Bobby drove me to the airport from our Gainesville off-campus rooming house after saying good-bye to John and Nita. It was the first 747 I rode in. It was 1973. The powerful thrust was impressive, it pushed me back into the seat while taking off. Dr. Tou's long face kept popping up in my head during the entire flight. He was not happy. I didn't know how to tell him, till the very last day, that I was trying my luck with film schools in LA instead of continuing my graduate research in information sciences at the computer lab he had already set up.

A friend of my brother Bob came pick me up. The guy said, in LA, not having your car is like not having your legs. I said I didn't have money to buy myself a car.

I remember the day. I got up early, boarded the bus around 7 AM near Huntington in San Gabriel near his place where I stayed. I made it to USC at almost noon. Got myself an application form for admission. A senior student barked at me to put out my cigarette. He said I was burning down the film school. I was later told that run down building used to be a horse stable. It was all wood.

Got myself another application form for admission at UCLA, the building was new. It was almost 7 in the evening when I made it back. 12 hours and 2 application forms. That was it for bus rides.

LA had a unique smell to it. Ever since the first moment I arrived LAX, I recognized that flavor of smell. It was like from someone's body, someone you know well. The weather was mild, the neighborhood was quiet. Looking out of the house, the view was nice and soft, like there was always a soft filter on the lens. I got up one Sunday morning and walked out to get the Sunday paper on the driveway. Suddenly, I was shocked. There was a huge mountain in front of the house looking north. How come it wasn't there the whole time? Later I was told it was called smog.

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It was USC that accepted me for the spring semester of 1974. Before heading back to LA, I stayed with my brother in Seattle and worked hard as a draftsman to save up enough for tuition and, of course, a car. Why draftsman? Can't help it, computers weren't IN back then. They were huge machines, few big companies had them, and they didn't want temporary employees. Plus, Seattle was in a crisis. Boeing was about to go under after the cancellation of the SST project. Unemployment skyrocketed. A billboard along the interstate heading out of town used to say, "Whoever leaves town last, please turn off the lights." I never tried drafting, but I could draw, and I had friends who were architecture students, so I told the boss I was an experienced draftsman, and he took my words. It was a much better paying job than pumping gas and busing dishes. I saved up and got myself a used Camaro a week before I had to drive down to LA as school was about to start.

Took the coastal highway 101 as a new page of my life was being turned. For some reason, LA looked totally different coming in from 101 than flying into LAX. All you could see were brake lights. Though I was constantly stuck on the freeway along with hundreds of others, for the first time, I just felt that much more alone.

Found an apartment to share within walking distance from the main gate of SC. My new roommate Rich was an athlete. He used to play football for his high school but didn't make it with the Trojans. He told me never to lock my car at night, they'd break your windows if you did anyway. That night, people were hollering and screaming outside. All the windows opened and everyone looked out. A group of fraternity kids were running naked down the blocks. Rich said it was a fad called streaking.

Found myself a part-time drafting job in Arcadia. This time, I was experienced. The first day on the job, there was that famous oil crisis. No car, no legs? How about no gas? Most gas stations were closed. The one that was open that morning had lines around the block. I was prepared and got up 5 in the morning to queue up.

One day, while I was at work, it started to rain. It felt so strange, for all these many days I spent in LA, it had never rained. When it rained, it poured. It came down so hard. By the time I got off work, the rain had stopped, but several blocks of the street were flooded. I waded my car through flood water backed up by clogged up drainage for several blocks. What a relief, I made it to the clear and I could rev up the 350 V8 down the main street. A light turned red, I stepped on the brakes, and the car just kept going at 50 MPH! Buildings were flying by outside the windshield, along with cars and pedestrians and trees and what have you. The car eventually stopped on the other

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side of the main intersection. I couldn't move and I thought I had wet my pants and froze for several minutes. After I came around and caught my breath, I had to drive the car for a few blocks stepping on the brakes trying to dry them up.

I had no talent at all, I realized after a few weeks of film school. I couldn't do the things my classmates could. I couldn't fit in. There was this one guy, he always carried a 35mm Nikon still camera and a big portfolio. He would open his portfolio to the female classmates sitting next to him and show them the Mickey Mouses and Donald Ducks he drew, and he kept saying "I did this". He would show the teachers the photos he took with his camera of longhaired female classmates like in shampoo commercials and kept mentioning "I did that". Boy, I didn't know we had to do that to make films. All I had thought what filmmaking should be like appeared to be all wrong.

We were shown an impressive student film done by a grad student a couple of years earlier. It was a 16mm science fiction by a guy on a teaching assistantship one summer semester while there were a bunch of naval officers enrolled in a summer training program. He used all these guys as actors and their high tech military facilities as sets. Not too many classmates paid attention. All we knew back then from the teacher was that this guy only stayed one semester after he did the short film, and he was making a 35mm feature length full version of it at the time. His name was George Lucas.

At the time, there were a total of 11 film students in all of LA's film schools from all the Chinese territories. We formed a kind of a club that would meet twice a week, usually at Chinatown's dim sum places. But there were only me and Dennis could drive! So, twice a week, I would pick up 4 others and packed them into my car and off to Chinatown. Weiching was closest to me. We both did a lot of manga when we were kids. He was more into animation. He and I lived close by, we hung out every day. Allen was a year senior at SC. Later he was the first one that made it big in Hong Kong as one of the first new wave directors emerged in the late 70's. Dennis made it big also, he quickly became a big time producer in Hong Kong after UCLA. There were a few radicals too. One of them was a medical student before turning to filmmaking. Every dim sum session we had, he would remind us Film was the most powerful tool to fight for the poor and against imperialism. He was Taiwanese and he wore a few Mao buttons.

After I helped out on his graduation super-8 project on Santa Monica beach, Weiching graduated from film school a few weeks later. He was leaving LA for Hong Kong. I said to him that I was leaving LA too, I had no talent to stay on and make films. I had to make a quick decision. That was it. It was over for me. I tried my best, I didn't feel bad.

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We packed up my car that afternoon. The only thing we left behind was... film. I have made it a rule of thumb, the stuff I accumulate would never exceed the trunk of a car. We drove off that evening up I-5. The speed limit was 55, Nixon just went on TV to tell everyone what his engineer friend told him that 55 was the most fuel-saving speed to travel by. I could still see the red sunset in the middle of the southern California desert. It was peaceful. Funny thing was, Weiching and I never stopped talking films.

That ends my first stint with LA. I drove on to Seattle after dropping Weiching off in Berkeley. I didn't see him again till years later when he gave me the first break in the film business.

I went back to Seattle and my old trade: computers. I became a typical content middle-class. I bought a few cars, a nice house with a 180-degree view of Lake Washington, a German Shepherd, and I mowed the lawn once every three days. I remember the day a coworker and I drove past a newly opened company in Bellevue and we couldn't stop joking on its name: Microsoft.

I didn't go back to LA till years later. Not for films, but for the people I knew. They suddenly began a huge wave of migration to southern California in the Reagan years. It must have been the economy they later called bubble. First my Seattle buddies Ding, his wife Adele, and his brother Norman. Then Andy with his first avenue grunge rock band. Later, my brother Bob moved from Cleveland to a nice job in the new development of Irvine. Then, my sister Li and her husband Stan left theirs in Washington D.C. and moved all the way into the tall ARCO building downtown. We witnessed how Monterey Park turned into Little Taipei.

I had so many places to stay, I often flew into LAX beginning the late 80's. There was no reason for anyone to fly on to the East Coast anymore. Every time I flew in, a friend would come pick me up and drive me around. One time, a friend was late in picking me up. I was waiting in the crowded exit of the international terminal. There were all kinds of people walking by, laughing and talking. They were from all places of the world. They were white, black, yellow, brown, red, and what have you. They spoke in all the languages you could recognize plus more. Suddenly, there was this deeply felt emotion inside me. I said to myself, this is not the US of A, this is but a small test tube of the future world where everyone is everywhere. Apart from the superficial differences, we were all alike! For some reason, right there, I felt deeply moved and I felt I was so lucky to be a very small part of it all.

Isn't this what film had brought to us the last 100 years?