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HEAVEN AND EARTH

by Heather King

For a long time after I moved here, L.A. looked to me like one giant mishmash of ugliness, a big emperor with no clothes. I couldn't believe that rich people drove the same featureless freeways I did; that movies stars reached the zenith of their careers in the Dorothy Chandler pavilion, with its pedestrian lobby and Liberace-style chandeliers; that immigrants left their unspoiled homelands only to come here and spend their days among cheesy mini-malls and prefab "food courts." There were some pockets of town so packed with Rite-Aids and Chevron Stations, so choked with concrete and cars, so devoid of greenery, humanity or charm, that a near-suicidal depression engulfed me each time I passed through: Alvarado just before it hits Glendale Boulevard, the intersection of Venice and Overland in Palms, the entire cities of Industry, Irwindale and Torrance.

Then, slowly, small treasures began to reveal themselves in the homely landscape of my day-to-day life, the way glints of gold sometimes reveal themselves to a prospector who stares long enough at a slag heap. Lilies-of-the-Nile rose, phoenix-like, from litter-strewn median strips. The scent of jasmine wafted in on the evening breeze along with the thudding beat of boomboxes. From exhaust-shrouded curbs rose men selling garnet cherries, roses the color of old ivory, dusty bags of peanuts.

Over the years deeper, richer treasures surfaced. Amidst a cacophony of gunfire, circling helicopters and ambulance sirens wailing the news that yet another Seoul-trained driver had merrily run a red light, I learned--was forced to learn--to pray. Assaulted by billboards for Disneyland, Universal Studios and Magic Mountain, I discovered instead Huntington Gardens, the County Museum of Art, the architectural and intellectual wonders of the downtown library. If the traffic was fiendish, I eventually found, KUSC's classical music eased the pain of gridlock; if it was crowded, all those people created an infectious level of creative energy; if it was noisy, I was that much more grateful for every moment of silence.

Partly, this was the willed optimism of a born pessimist. But the longer I lived in L.A., the more I saw it wasn't so much that the good "balanced out" the bad--in fact, the bad, the irritating, the ugly, seemed clearly to have the upper hand--it was that the good was of a different order altogether. The guy in line ahead of me at Trader Joe's who noticed I had only three items and waved me through cancelled out not just the cel

phone-yakking driver who'd just barreled into the parking space I'd been waiting for, but the supercilious clerk at Rocket Video, the jackass who cut in line at Starbucks, and the crabby Wells Fargo teller, too. My downstairs neighbor threw his thousandth unjustified snit, but when he padded upstairs with a single bowl of minestrone soup that night, the slate was wiped clean once again. A friend OD'd and died, but my tennis partner brought me a copy of Jane Kenyon's "Let Evening Come," and I pondered the mystery of how the smallest human touch brings comfort in the midst of the most staggering tragedy or grief. I started to feel the transformative power in this underground network of seemingly inconsequential acts, to discern a pattern. I started going to Mass and saw that scattered throughout the city, in the midst of clamour and chaos, were sanctuaries of quiet: oases of dark tranquility smelling of incense and wax. Through shoot-outs and stabbings, mudslides and earthquakes, jittery nights and adrenaline-charged days--all over the city candles burned in red glass above the Body of Christ, the deepest, most hidden mystery of all.

Going to Mass did not make me "better": my first thought, still, was usually the fearful one, the cynical one, the critical one. But I went anyway. I went because in the dimmest reaches of my confused, angst-ridden mind there was still something in me that wanted to get down on my knees and, in spite of my own shortcomings and the shortcomings of everyone around me, give thanks. I went because I was beginning to understand the parable of the yeast--that the reign of God is like yeast which a woman kneaded into three measures of flour, and eventually the whole mass of dough began to rise. I went because I was beginning to believe that heaven is not some other world, but shot all through the broken world where we already live.

After awhile I noticed another woman at morning Mass. She had high cheekbones and short curly hair, she wore a heavy sweater and a pair of faded blue Keds, and she was white, a relative rarity in Koreatown. She didn't look rich, but she didn't look dirt poor, either. I tried to peg her: a struggling artist, a social worker, a nurse? When we greeted each other at the Sign of Peace, her hand felt like sandpaper: A sculptor? A painter? One morning I introduced myself--her name was Barbara--and, after we'd chatted a bit, I asked her what she did.

"I dance," she replied.

"A dancer!" I exclaimed, thinking Suzanne Farrell, Martha Graham, Gelsey Kirkland. "Jazz or ballet or...?"

"I have to go to my lesson now," she said. "But come to Mass at St. Thomas Sunday. I'm a lector there. We'll go out for coffee after and I'll tell you all about it."

St. Thomas the Apostle is on the edge of Pico-Union, an Hispanic neighborhood so dicey that when I once passed another Anglo on the street we exchanged sickly smiles of relief, as if to say, "Nobody's shot me yet either..." The fact that Barbara attended church and possibly even lived there intrigued me more than ever.

When I showed up Sunday, I spotted her in a pew down front, all dolled up in a kickpleat skirt and spectator pumps, radiating class and good cheer to everyone in sight. The muscled calves, usually hidden beneath her jeans, rippled as she walked to the altar for her reading, and with her erect carriage and neatly-turned head, she was every bit the dancer.

Afterwards we walked to her favorite pastry shop, its shelves so jam-packed with chocolate-dipped churros, pasteles de tres leche and miniature tins of flan that the very air tasted of sugar. Barbara introduced me to the owner, the owner's sister and the owner's granddaughter before settling us in at a table near the door.

"Hey, Maverick, where ya staying?" she called out as a crew-cut gal wearing grease-stained fatigues and a tangle of dog tags walked by.

"Still on the street," Maverick mumbled, and Barbara got up to slip her a handful of change.

By this time I was dying to hear her story. "So how'd you end up in Pico-Union?" I asked. "Where do you dance? What else do you do?"

Between sips of weak coffee and bites of stale bolillo, she filled me in. She'd been raised in a Jewish household in New York City and converted to Catholicism in 1981. Then God had taken her "out of the world" for seven years, during which she lived in an ex-seminary in Italy, cooking for the priests and teaching dance.

"It was totally medieval," she reported cheerfully. "Stone walls four feet thick, cold, damp. When you opened a door bats flew out."

Now she lived in a nearby apartment; looked after six dogs, eleven cats, and her senile Armenian landlady; and rode the bus five days a week to Studio City--an hour-and-a-half each way--for ballet classes.

"I've had the same teacher off and on for 25 years. He's always on my case," she laughed. "'Some people think they don't have to work!' he says, 'Some people think they can just light a couple of candles in church.'"

25 years! Of lessons? Her intelligent eyes were lined with black, her head cocked like a bird. "So do you dance...professionally?" I asked. "I mean do you put on shows or what?"

"Not really," Barbara replied. "I don't dance for success or money or to be noticed: I do it as a form of prayer. I think of it as offering up my time and body and pain to someone who needs it more than I do. I say the Rosary, one Hail Mary for each pli e."

"You...pray?" I faltered. "You say a Hail Mary for every?..."

"On weekends I shoo away the animals and set up a barre in my room," she continued, and I remembered her callouses. "When I'm really tired or discouraged, I try to think of Christ on the cross."

I fell silent for a moment, attempting to digest this scenario, to even remotely envision such a life.

"What do you do for money?" I asked finally.

"Oh, I don't need much," she said with a vague wave of her hand. "God provides. It hasn't been easy: for a long time I felt so isolated I thought I was going crazy. But eventually I learned to integrate my dancing with the rest of the world, and now my life is so rich, so incredibly abundant I can't begin to describe it..."

I studied her closely, the smile brilliant but for a missing tooth at one end of the lower jaw; the turquoise angora sweater lightly matted with dog hair. Was she a nutcase or some kind of saint? I wondered. Was I, with my limited vision, capable of judging? Is sainthood perfection or the surrender of our entire selves, including our imperfections, to be transformed into something that remains invisible to most of the rest of the world?

Barbara pointed across the street, to a man collecting bottles in a shopping cart. "I respect those people," she said. "Do you know what hard work that is? I always save my glass for them."

Then she leaned in and put a roughened hand on mine. "Hard times are coming," she whispered, "and, all over, God is planting seeds, preparing people. Not showy people, but little people. You don't know. It could be that crazy old lady begging for change on the corner who's going to save us all."

Walking down the sidewalk towards home, the brown faces shuttered against my white one, I was thinking, How many people like Barbara can there be in the world? What are the chances of meeting one of them? A lone man browsed a sparsely-stocked record shop, candles burned from the dim interior of a botanica and, inside a pocket-sized restaurant, upside-down water glasses glinted from white tablecloths: a world parallel to mine, yet hopelessly alien. The smells of spit-roasted chicken, soapy perfume, overripe bananas drifted into the street. A group of teenaged girls pushed by, their tattooed young bodies clad in Lycra, their eyes saying, Get outta my fuckin way.

Half a block down, on the sidewalk in front of Doti's Bridal, stood a mannequin in a satin wedding gown: shiny as licked lips, so white it had highlights of blue in it. Sequins sparkled like diamonds in two long rows that ran past her breasts, her flared hips, her long legs. The hem of her billowing

skirt grazed two white high heels, her eyes were raised heavenward and one hand was lifted, as if in song.

She was love incarnate, a transfiguration sandwiched in between a nail salon and a video store: I was close enough now to touch her. That was when I saw the garland of wax flowers askew on the brittle blond hair, the missing clump of fake eyelashes, the expanse of flesh-colored plaster chest, above the sweetheart neckline, veiled with a layer of gray grit.

And somehow that made her more beautiful still. Because isn't that always the way it is? And isn't it always, in the end, somehow all right?