

*A MEMOIR*

# CITY OF ANGELS

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# CHAPTER 1

## HIGHLAND PARK

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I don't know it yet, but we are living now in the mean streets of Los Angeles. When we arrived in the early hours of this morning the only view of the city that we could see was of millions and millions of earthbound stars spilling across the horizon. Appropriately enough for the City of Stars. We briefly glimpsed far below us, through a momentary cleavage in the hills surrounding the 134 freeway, the city lights of Los Angeles, an ocean of lights twinkling below us as if tumbled carelessly onto a jeweler's cloth, sparkling into the distance as far as our eyes could see. The night sky was an inky jet black and the air was warm and velvety.

We were traveling east past Glendale and heading toward Highland Park, looking for our

exit. Our babies had been asleep in their car seats ever since we left Carmel Valley, picking up the I5, the Golden State freeway, east of Salinas and heading south over the Tejon Pass, known forebodingly to Southern California drivers as the treacherous Grapevine. Heavily-laden tractor-trailers screamed past us in the pitch darkness of the late night and early morning hours, bearing to the teeming markets of the Los Angeles basin the abundant produce harvested in the agricultural richness of the Central Valley.

The great Central Valley, known in earlier times as the Golden Empire, provides more than half of the produce grown in the United States. This abundance of agricultural fertility is harvested by itinerant and undocumented migrant workers from Mexico. Harvested by entire families of mothers and grandmothers, children and able-bodied men, bending and stooping and picking the rich abundance of produce throughout the day under the dry remorseless heat of the burning California sun.

These migrant workers are the agents of our sustenance, and their lives are spent in ceaseless labor for the least of recompense. Proximity to their countrymen would be our point of entry for immersion into the culture and economy of the Mexican under-class of Los Angeles, and into an awareness of the social inequalities and injustices which were camouflaged by the intoxicating beauty and luminosity of the southern California landscape.

My husband was driving our 1975 chartreuse green Mercury Bobcat Villager station wagon with faux wood side panels that nostalgically evoked the woodies of the 30's and 40's. We ourselves were a new generation of migrant worker, a generation navigating the emerging realities of the economic landscape arising in the aftermath of the 1973 OPEC global oil crisis. This would be our fourth home in three different cities or towns in two different countries with two new babies (one in each country) in the less than three and a half years since our wedding.

“Take the exit at Figueroa Street” my husband’s friend from Los Angeles had said, “turn left at the stop sign at the bottom of the ramp and go south on Figueroa. When you cross Buena Vista Terrace you will be in Highland Park.” My husband’s friend had found the apartment for us, and her words gave me a comforting sense of familiarity. Our address in Carmel Valley had been on Buena Vista del Rio. A ‘Beautiful View of the River’. Which it was.

Now, after two years in Carmel Valley, and the home birth there of our second child, our son, we are moving to Los Angeles. So I am very happy to live again on a street with a Spanish name. A name which promises a beautiful view. A beautiful view this time of the City of Angels. As my young husband turns left at the stop sign and heads south on Figueroa Street, I feel a shiver of hopeful anticipation. At Buena Vista Terrace, I think to myself, we will be driving into the unknown, promising life of our future. Do I yet feel the pulsating undercurrent

of menace in the warm, soft night air? Not yet my child, not yet.

When we married in London three and a half years earlier, I had thought that we would be living there for the rest of our lives. I already had been living in London for ten years, and in my view there wasn't any other reasonable place to live. At least for people like us. We were passionately devoted to the arts, cosmopolitan in our socio-political views, and had the same circle of friends with mutual interests. What else is there to have in common, when you are in your mid-twenties and you have access to everything that is cutting edge and world-class? Theaters. Art Galleries. Museums. Concert Halls. Rock Stadiums. Artists and writers and actors and musicians. In a city which throughout history has been a center for every social, political and cultural movement on the planet. But none of which is preparation of any kind for being married or earning a living or raising a family. Which at that point in our young lives we both deeply wished to do.

It is April 8th, 1977, and the first day of our new life in Los Angeles. We arrived in the very early hours of this morning and now at 8:00am the temperature already is a humid 84 degrees. It is hotter and more humid than I have ever experienced on an early spring day in April. I wonder if this is a Los Angeles heat wave or if it will prove to be our new normal. Because I once had severe heat-stroke during a visit to the tropics and am still very sensitive to the heat. Our four-month-old son is asleep in his cradle and I am trying to find the mental fortitude to begin unpacking and sorting through all of our worldly possessions before he wakes again for his next nursing.

But right now I am outside, watching our two and a half year old daughter. She is standing in the entrance way to the courtyard of our tiny apartment, which is surrounded by a six-foot high concrete wall. She is holding the seat to her swing set in her hands, and the chain links attached to it are trailing behind her. I am afraid that she is going to trip over them and

fall onto the hard pavement. My beautiful little daughter is staring out at her new surroundings, confusion and dismay spreading across her young face. The last time that she was awake, just yesterday afternoon, a lifetime ago, she was playing on her swing-set and running with her friends through the long green grass of the Carmel Valley countryside, the azure-blue sky of a California spring arching over the lushly green lowland valley, verdant from the winter rains, birdsong thrilling through the air.

Now in the early Los Angeles morning the air is thick and yellow and acrid with smog. Graffiti scars the concrete walls of the courtyard. Ancient, rusted-out vehicles crowd the curbsides. The rancid air shudders with the vibration of boom-boxes pounding and car engines roaring as neighborhood cholos, urban Angeleno vigilantes, roll slowly and menacingly down the street, scoping out the barred windows and chain-link fences enclosing the tiny yards of dingy houses and dilapidated apartment buildings in the territory that they enforce. Across the street, a



weathered, rotting house sags into its foundation, its windows, which may never have seen the light of day, covered with grimy curtains.

I wonder how all of this can look to my young daughter, still on the edge of her babyhood. Our new home, sight unseen by us until now, is a tenement, one of a string of apartment blocks in a battle-scarred north-east Los Angeles barrio, the secure homeland turf of the Los Angeles ‘Avenidas’ street gang. We are living in the ‘Avenues’ of Highland Park, in a tiny apartment on the corner of Benner Street and South Avenue 58. I will soon learn that when members of the Avenidas gang are sent to prison, they come under the direct control of the Mexican mafia. And that they bring this affiliation back with them when they are released and inevitably return home to the barrio. Drive-by shootings are a common occurrence in the Avenues. As I will discover.

But I am the child of a Canadian home prairie version of the Fifties. A child raised with the

promise and the expectation of life being as it was portrayed in the television shows ‘Father Knows Best’ and ‘The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet’. Of life being as it was portrayed in the reading primers ‘Dick and Jane.’ And never in my life have I ever lived in any place that was so dangerous, so desolate, so desperate, and so hopeless. How will I ever be able to raise my children here. How will I ever be able to nurture them and protect them. How will I ever be able to find community for my family. My heart is breaking.



