

## Dreaming in La-la-land

by Arwen Vidal

Sometimes when I tell people that I am from Los Angeles, they inevitably blurt out, “You mean La-la-land?” and jokingly make that gesture towards their head that indicates the denizens of my city are lunatics. Then, anxious that they have offended, they ask me what L.A. is like. I want to tell them that their initial reaction was perhaps more accurate than they guess, but I know this is not what they are expecting. So I say what they want to hear. I am entertaining, as Los Angelenos (Los Angelinos) are believed to be. I regale my audience with my adventures on a surfboard; I talk of the amazing diversity and culture that vibrates through the city; I list the stars I’ve seen and even talked to. I entice them. And defend my city with the only ammunition that seems to defeat – stereotypes.

La-la-land is actually a fitting description of Los Angeles. It is a dream-world and to live there you must be willing to live in a dream. The world there shifts to become what you will it to become and takes root in your unconscious being. To some it is Hollywood, glamour-filled and gorgeous. To others, it is just a job and just a place. To some it is a trap, a nightmare from which to escape.

I have often envied others when I hear them speak of their hometowns. They seem so sure of what it is. It has a character, carefully crafted and handed down from generation to generation. Los Angelenos, so caught up in our dreams, seem to waver when asked to speak of our city. Because it is not of the city that we can speak, but of ourselves. Yes, there is a physical

reality of our city. We can list names of streets and landmarks with the rest of them. Yes, there is a history, too. But it is a vast and complicated history, one of many peoples. We have changed allegiances and flags more than any other state, with the exception of Texas, perhaps. Each person in Los Angeles is a piece of the puzzle. Our city is a symphony of separate dreams.

The first written records of our state are from Spanish missionaries and Russian trappers. Somehow, I doubt that these were the first bearers of dreams. I believe this must have always been a land of dreams. The land knows it. When the fog comes in from the ocean, it is not unexpected. The weather forecasters cursorily comment on the marine layer, and move on to say it will burn off by the afternoon. But it lingers from the night until morning, ushering in the day, dragging our sleepy recollections out into the world. The missionaries must have seen this when they built their first settlements.

The Valley, the San Fernando Valley, my valley, was green and fertile and wild once. Now it is covered with roads. But my grandfather, whose family came here from Mexico, cannot help but remind me it was not always the same. As we drive through the Valley, he tells me – “there were no streets here, baby doll. My cousin lived here. My uncle took us to get fruit here. I remember when they built this church.” He drifts into silence, and I do not know if he is remembering or dreaming. I try to squint my 7-year-old eyes and make believe that the houses have vanished and I am running through the Valley, eating oranges and speaking to my cousins in Spanish. Instead we pull into school, and I get out and walk towards my best friend, who speaks only English. The vision falls away. It is not my world; it is his dream that has covered me for a moment. La Ciudad de Nuestra Señora, Reina de los Angeles. I am just a Valley girl.

People are curious about earthquakes. How can you live there? Aren't you scared? I brush this off, and point out that you can build a house to withstand an earthquake, which you cannot do with things like hurricanes and tornadoes. Plus, it seems a small price to pay for sunny, warm days 340 times a year. What I do not tell them is that you cannot build yourself to withstand the emotional force that comes from watching your youngest sister hide mute in a closet. The uprooting of your life, when your high school crumbles to the ground. The knowledge that, had it not been at 4:31 in the morning, you may have died at your desk. The two weeks spent at your grandmother's house, where you duck every time a plane flies overhead or a garbage truck rolls by with the steady rumble of impending doom. The image of ash raining from a nearby fire, the closest thing to a snowfall you have ever seen, beautiful and bizarre. The dread of letting your parents go to check up on a neighbor, when you fear they may not return. Feeling your sisters crawl into your tiny twin bed, because they are frightened of sleeping alone. But soon this nightmare passes. You can live with the ground shifting beneath you. You learn not to hold onto anything too tightly, and the earth is teaching you how to live in Los Angeles. You must bend with the dream and go where it leads, or you will crumble, too.

Everyone is in the business or knows someone in the business in Los Angeles. Yes, this may be true. Some of these are thoroughly-modern-Millies, fresh off the plane, certain they will be discovered. But for the most part, the people you know in the business are simple laborers. Detroit's mechanics are Los Angeles' sound crew. They go to work and come home. We accept Hollywood and love it. It brings the tourists in. It makes us special. Our most well known

landmark is the simple sign proclaiming its existence. Sometimes high-schoolers climb the hill and get drunk beneath it.

Once upon a time, I wanted to be an actress. I had this idea about “art for art’s sake,” and the moving work of academy film actresses. Dentyne commercials, however, seemed beneath me. And then I discovered that 80% of the members of the screen actor’s guild make less than \$20,000 a year. That’s one Dentyne commercial. I studied science at school, instead.

I wish to expound on the ocean, but there is hardly anything I can say that has not been said before. It is swift and furious. It is lethargic and beautiful. It is biting and salty and fresh. It is polluted and crowded. It is as the dream is, constantly changing. I have been there at two in the afternoon, watching people skate on the boardwalk and build sandcastles in the sun. I have been there at two in the morning, running from my best friend as she tried to pull me into the chilly water. I have surfed and fallen into the waves while trying to impress a boy who did not even see me. I have almost drowned, and was saved by my grandfather’s quiet and quick action on a family outing. The ocean of Los Angeles cuts the sand beneath my feet, and I feel we are kindred spirits. It too, reminds me, that I am passing by, but that for now, this world belongs to me.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1846 a group of restless American men declared war on the Mexicans who controlled California. They marched to the home of General Mariano Vallejo, who invited them in for breakfast and resigned command. The Americans hastily stitched together a flag (the Bear Flag) and called themselves the California Republic. The Republic

lasted less than two years before the U.S. annexed California in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Rebellion is not in my nature. In fact, I was very cautious never to appear rebellious before my mother or father. When I heard this tale, I always sympathized with the kindly general, who later became a California state senator. My best friend in high school, however, was always anxious to escape her parents' house. I was fascinated by her courage. She was wild and free, and seemed to me the epitome of a California girl: blonde, bold, and beautiful. I would follow her anywhere.

And so, we went one day on a mission: to find a porno shoot. Chatsworth, in the Valley, is the porn capital of the world. There more movies are made in one month than the major studios, combined, make in a year. We were sure that by driving around, we would find one. We jumped into her car and set off. After an hour driving around the neighborhood, we found a large mansion with two vans parked in front. We felt sure this was it. We would try and sneak a look over the fence. She spotted a hill with a tree. We walked towards the hill. My steps slowed. I turned towards the mansion. Barely visible over the fence was the end of a pool. Suddenly I pivoted and went back to the car. Footsteps came behind me and I dreaded her words of reprimand or condescension. But she said nothing and we drove to *In-n-Out* for a burger. Four years later, we discovered that a mutual friend had become an adult actress. She is now, I recall, trying to become a "serious" actress. I believe that Los Angeles is innocent.

A friend of mine from Northern California says that he can distinguish Southern Californians from everybody else in the nation, simply because we insert the word "the" in front of our freeway numbers. The 5, The 210, The 405, The 101. The one time I get a glimpse of the

dreams of other Los Angelenos is when we walk the same road. Or in this case, the freeway. Some are held in fast-paced, harried dreams, racing towards their desires at break-neck pace. Some weave in and out of lanes, perhaps unsure of where they are going, or doubting the path they have chosen is the correct one. Some avoid the freeways altogether, afraid of the crowds or certain that they will be the ones to discover a new, quicker route that others have passed by. And sometimes we are all stuck in traffic. Personally, I do not mind traffic. I am of the laid-back variety, content to let the dream take me where it will, happy to pause for a moment to reflect on where I am. Others are afraid they are missing something – their boss praising them, a date smiling as she opens the door, a doctor telling them they are negative. I have lived here long enough to know that you can will the dream to take you somewhere and shift directions, but sometimes it takes a little while to happen. When we sleep we are never very fast.

Sometimes people are too tired to dream, and I think this is when they join together. The problem with joining your dream to another is that they bleed into one another. And anger spreads quickly in the dream world. Mothers who have seen their children die, children who have been hurt and forgotten, lonely scared souls, they are too tired to dream alone. Too weak to fend off the nightmare. So they take solace in each other's dreams; they allow themselves to be led into a darker, deeper sleep that is offered them. Violence, anger, hatred lies among them and poisons the dream. Some resist, and some fall to the nightmare. When you are tired, it is hard to find the strength to stand. When I drive through the "bad" parts of Los Angeles, I feel their weariness. I saw it, too, in the face of my father as he came home from a hard day of teaching in East Los Angeles. Teaching children who were tired and hungry, kids who had closed off the dream he offered them in favor of falling into someone else's. They choose drugs and gangs and

riots and die never having charted a path out of this poisoned world. This, too, is my Los Angeles. Without peace and equity, some will never have the chance to dream their own dreams.

My friends from New England like to tell me about their snowdays. In the Los Angeles basin, it has snowed only once in my life – a cold, hail-like frosting in February 1989 that covered my front lawn. I gathered the snow in a bowl and put it in the freezer as a memento. The snow in the yard had melted by the time I came home from school and I think my mother later threw away my memento. People still talk about that day when the beaches turned white. Cynics laughingly refer to it as “the day hell froze over.” I thought it was an interesting change.

In school, we had something better than snowdays to look forward to – we had smogdays. When the air was particularly heavy with the ugly gas and the days were warm enough to bake it, we would all get the day off from school. If the conditions weren't extreme enough they would just make us spend recess indoors. On smogdays, my high school let us out at noon, and I would take off with my friends. We would gather at someone's house to play full-contact Monopoly or go to the nearest theatre to catch a matinee movie. And, unlike snowdays, smogdays did not necessarily force you indoors. If you didn't mind being a little out of breath, you were free to play Frisbee in the park or go swimming in a friend's pool. These impromptu respites from the doldrums of school stand out as some of the best-spent days of my youth, the dream-world freeing me into a careless and silly adolescence.

The Santa Ana winds come in the fall with bellows of hot air that knock down all of the small girls like myself. The winds have reached legendary status. Murders are said to increase.

People become wild-eyed and angry. A lot of women wear pants to school and work. The winds blow from the northeast and bring the desert on their backs. Harried from our itchy eyes and messy hair, we all feel just a little out of place, as the winds must. They don't belong, and we don't belong. Fires erupt on the mountainside, the dryness catching flame from the foreign visitor. Houses burn in Malibu and are rebuilt later. Only surfers love the swells that they bring. But I have always thought surfers to be alien, too. More at home in the hypnotic water than in the city, they fully embrace the transient nature of their dream. The rest of us are happy when March leaves like a lamb and we settle back into our world, foreign no more.

The colors of our dreams are the colors of our city, the colors of our cultures. I am fortunate and unfortunate to be among the newest color the city brings – the merging of two colors. The halfers and multis we are called. My parents are from different cultures, different backgrounds. They chose to join their colors. More have done so, but still many people prefer not to share their color. When all the reds and blues become purple, will we remember blue anymore? And so to the older colors, my color is not always welcome. I understand, though it pains me. Some people will not share their dreams with me, and I would not force it. The beauty that they bring is enough for me. The city is painted like a fragmented rainbow, it is stirred and cut and blended and yet, perfect in its way. I could not give you the name of the color, though some brave souls have asked me for it. Who knows what color are the angels?

My family is a Bruin family, with the exception of one stray cousin who crossed over to the dark side and attended USC. In Los Angeles, the biggest rivalry is between the Bruins of the University of California-Los Angeles and the Trojans of the University of Southern California.



The city is framed in blue and red, and gilded in gold. The campuses lie less than twelve miles apart, but the division is much larger to their respective fans. We Bruins like to think of the Trojans as rich, spoiled preppies, although the UCLA campus is in beautiful, wealthy Westwood and the USC campus is in a, well, less idyllic spot. I have known poor friends who went to USC and rich ones that attended UCLA. I do not know what Trojans think of Bruins, and I do not wish to know. A Bruin team could lose every other game during their season, but if they beat USC, we are as proud as can be.

The day after the “Big Game” we go to Mass, and you can tell who won by glancing at the people in church around you. If what you see is a sea of blue, then everything was all right, and you say a prayer of thanksgiving. Otherwise, you are slumped in the pew, dressed in black, and staring at the blur of red around you. Sometimes we don’t even go to Mass.

I left Los Angeles in August of 2002. My father flew out to Colorado with me. It is a Mexican tradition that women never travel alone, one that even my modern-day father holds on to. I am comforted by his presence. Some people dislike the Los Angeles airport. It is crowded, loud, huge. I tell them to fly through Burbank. It is small and never crowded. You have to go up steps to board the plane. I always dress up and imagine I am an old-fashioned movie star. Is that Edna Purviance or Natalie Wood? No, it must be Rosalind Russell! When they used to let my parents wait at the gate, I would turn at the top of the stairs and wave to my mother. I could see that she was already crazily waving as I turned towards her.

Of course, the way I travel in my dreams is on the train. The Amtrak Southwest Chief takes you from Los Angeles to Raton, New Mexico. From Raton, you can board a bus to get to Denver. I have taken this route twice now. Entering Los Angeles Union Station is slowly

taking the steps into a familiar portal, where 74 trains drift in and out during the weekday. The Spanish façade and tile roof that you see as you enter always seems to pay homage to the historic Olvera Street that it faces, where you can buy piñatas and enchiladas all year round. Once inside, you see there are Metrolink trains arriving to take commuters to and from work. Business people are dressed to the nines. College students are arriving home for the weekend from their universities in Santa Barbara or San Diego. And there are always children, hiding in the deep wooden chairs of the enormous lobby or running in the courtyard. They laugh. It is that laughter that you carry with you down the long tunnels to the train, further into the station and you emerge in the California sun, just long enough to travel out of your dream world and into a distant city.