LOS ANGELES

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I LIVE in a Spanish-style villa in Los Angeles, at the corner of Franklin and Grace, two blocks from Hollywood Boulevard and only one block from Yucca and Wilcox, known as "crack alley." One morning, my girlfriend walked down into the garage beneath the building and found human excrement on the windscreen of our car. The excrement had not been thrown or carelessly daubed, but somehow painted in a perfect rectangle, thick, four feet by two. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble. From a distance the excrement looked like a nasty modern painting; it also smelled powerfully and took over an hour to wash and scrape off. "Why didn't they just steal the fucking car?" she said. I did my best to be urbane about another unpleasant reminder of the nature of our neighborhood. The homeless, I told her, couldn't afford the gas, and the homeboys wouldn't be seen dead in a Volvo; they preferred old Cadillacs and new BMWs, white, loaded with extras.

Several times during the past year, I'd watched from my study window as officers of the Los Angeles Police Department staged elaborate busts on the streets. The officers, always white, wore sunglasses and had Zapata mustaches and carried shotguns or had handguns strapped to their thighs. A car was surrounded and stopped. The suspects, always black, usually young, often well-dressed, were dragged out and made to lie on the ground. They were cuffed with plastic thongs that, from a distance, looked like the tags with which I closed up bags of rubbish. Then they were searched and made to kneel, one on this side of the street, one on the other, while the

officers talked among themselves or, swaggering to and fro, conducted an ad hoc interrogation: "Shut the fuck up and don't move," I heard on one occasion. "Feel clever now, black boy?" "Be careful now, I'm in the mood to hit me a homer." Every now and then a helicopter would appear, a roaring accompaniment to the scene's edgy surrealism. Sometimes my neighbors came out: an old lady who used to sit in her car, although she never drove it (that was what she did most mornings: She sat there, in her car, not driving it); a long-haired heavy metal musician; a blonde from Texas, pretty, but probably not pretty enough to make it in the movies; a black onetime boxer whose presence was always a comfort. They watched without any sign of animation — it was all fairly routine — and after fifteen minutes or so, the suspects were driven away in the back of a black-and-white police, car, known to the officers as "a black and normal" ever since police chief Daryl Gates said that the reason why so many blacks died from the carotid chokehold — the controversial technique once used to detain suspects — was that "their veins and arteries do not open up as fast as they do on normal people."

I was surprised, not by the fact that this was happening in my neighborhood, but by the fact that the people of my neighborhood accepted it all with such indifference. There was, it was apparent, nothing remarkable about the behavior of the LAPD, which was seen less as a police force than an army at war, a perception encouraged by the department's chief. Gates referred to black drug dealers as "Viet Cong." He told a senate committee that even casual drug users "ought to be taken out and shot." And part of his strategy, Gates said on another occasion, "is to put a lot of police officers on the street and harass people and make arrests for inconsequential kinds of things." Gates was known to model his police department on the U.S. Marines; its stated aims were to be fast, mobile, and extremely aggressive.

"You're *supposed* to be frightened of the LAPD," a friend told me. "The question is why you live in the neighborhood you do."

My apartment, I explained, was a particularly beautiful piece of history, designed and built in the 1920s by the movie director Cecil B. DeMille.

"Are you insane?" my friend said. "Move somewhere else, move away from that shit, move to the Westside," by which he meant a small rectangle within the new 310 area telephone code: west of La Cienega Boulevard and north of the Santa Monica freeway. My friend stressed the borders: These weren't just streets; they were magical divides. By entering this area, I would be safe, secure, and white. Hispanics would be the people who didn't speak English; they would clean the house and clip the lawn, then get on the RTD and disappear back to the netherworlds of East and South Los Angeles. And blacks wouldn't exist at all, unless they wore Armani and worked at CAA.

Seeing a black in Los Angeles, I had come to realize, wasn't the same experience as seeing a black in New York. I found myself making categories. There were the smart professional blacks — lawyers, entertainers, film industry schmoozers. These I greeted with a smiling "Ciao!" There were middle-class blacks, who ran businesses and owned property in more or less exclusively black and Hispanic areas — Inglewood, Compton, Crenshaw. These I knew about but never met: our worlds didn't intersect. There were the bums on Hollywood Boulevard, asking for a quarter or shouting their rage among the tourists, the runaways, the hustlers and hookers, the followers of L. Ron Hubbard and his Scientology Church. These it was safe to ignore. And then there were the homeboys, the gangbangers, who pulled up alongside at a stoplight, or ran whooping through the aisles of smart movie theaters in Westwood or Century City, or strutted along that same stretch of Hollywood Boulevard in Nike Air Jordans, baggy shorts, Gucci T-shirts, and baseball caps with an X on the front. Perhaps they really were in a gang, perhaps not, but they behaved with an anger, an arrogance, an aura of fearlessness that suggested they might be. With them, I was the one who became nonexistent. Staring straight ahead, I would quicken my step, but not enough to attract attention, and was most comfortable if I happened to be wearing sunglasses, so that no eye contact was possible. I would hold my breath. I would be invisible.

I knew that my fear was out of all proportion to the true nature of the threat, but, like the earthquake that must happen eventually, the black street

gangs of South Los Angeles were a part of the city's apocalyptic demonology. They were armed with Uzis and AK-47s and even rocket launchers, killing each other, and sometimes innocent bystanders, not just for money or "turf," but for wearing the wrong color of shoelace or baseball cap. There were said to be as many as 100,000 hard-core gang members. Their tags were sprayed on the wall of our building and on the sidewalk outside, an indecipherable crossword, a labyrinth of black paint on white concrete that our Mexican gardener washed away with Clorox and whitewash. A few days later the crossword was always back.

So it was: Don't go here, don't go there, lock the car doors, never spend more time than you have to in parking lots, avoid eye contact on the freeway. This wasn't *just* paranoia. One Friday night, I happened to glance at an old Cadillac Coupe de Ville cruising alongside us on the Hollywood freeway. I saw a black kid hand a gun to a friend in the back, not even looking, passing the gun over his shoulder as casually as if it were a pack of cigarettes. So it was: Don't go south of Wilshire, here's a homeboy, here's a cop car, a black and white, a black and *normal*. Good. The police spoke about perimeters and containment and points of control. They spoke about South Central as if it were a township.

Los Angeles was a lot like South Africa. The apartheid wasn't enshrined by law, but by economics and geography, and it was just as powerful. In Los Angeles I was afraid of blacks in a way I never had been. I behaved in a way that would have disgusted me in New York or London. I was a racist.

The Taser stun gun was introduced by the LAPD in 1980, and it was used against Rodney King, the black motorist whom LAPD officers Lawrence Powell, Ted Briseno, Timothy Wind, and Sergeant Stacey Koon were accused of unlawfully beating shortly after midnight on 3 March 1991. Despite all that had been written about the incident, I had read very little about the operation of the Taser. It was, I discovered, a weird-looking device, a crude, chunky gray pistol which fired darts into people. The darts were attached to wires, which on pushing a button administered a shock of 50,000 volts. "Seems to cool off most people pretty good," said a representative of Ray's Guns of Hollywood. It had been used more and more to restrain suspects following the banning of the carotid chokehold in 1984.

Rodney King was stopped after a high-speed pursuit, first on the Foothill freeway, and then on the streets of Pacoima, during which he drove at speeds in excess of 100 miles per hour and ignored a number of red lights. The initial pursuit was made by Melanie and Timothy Singer, a husband-and-wife team of the California Highway Patrol, but when LAPD cars arrived on the scene it was Sergeant Stacey Koon who took charge. As Koon notes in an as yet unpublished autobiography, he looked at the petite Melanie Singer and then at the six foot, three inch, 225-pound Rodney King (who, according to Koon, had dropped his trousers and was waving his buttocks in the air), and decided that this was about to develop into "a Mandingo type sex encounter," a reference to a Hollywood movie which involved black slaves raping white women.

Koon used his Taser stun gun, firing two darts into Rodney King and giving him two shocks. One was enough to subdue most suspects and even the Mandingo Rodney King himself was on the ground by now, showing little sign of resistance. Koon and the three other officers then kicked him and hit him fifty-six times with their batons, breaking his ankle, his cheekbone, and causing eleven fractures at the base of his skull, as well as concussion and nerve damage to the face. The force of the blows knocked fillings from his teeth.

The last of the not guilty verdicts was announced in Simi Valley at three-forty-five P.M. on Wednesday, 29 April 1992. As Stacey Koon left the courthouse, it was declared that he had hired an entertainment attorney to sell the movie and book rights to his story, which would be titled *The Ides of March,* since he had been indicted on 15 March of the previous year.

After the verdict, I went to the Mayfair Market, to a bookstore, to a bar on Franklin. People were nervous, excited. Something was going to happen in South Central; the question was how bad it would be. When I got home, the phone was ringing. Crowds had gathered downtown at the Parker Center, LAPD headquarters. A police car had been turned over.

Looting was said to have started in other places, though the moment when the riots began in earnest was easy to spot: It was broadcast live on TV.

At six-thirty P.M., Reginald Denny stopped at a traffic light at the intersection of Florence and Normandie. He was on his way to deliver twenty-seven tons of sand to a cement-mixing plant in Inglewood. Denny, thirty-six, would have been driving through South Central to avoid the rush-hour traffic on the freeways. It was the territory of the Eight-Trey Gangster Crips, one of the city's most famous gangs. While waiting for the light to change, he was pulled from his rig by five or six black youths. Two news helicopters were overhead, watching the crowd which had been gathering since the verdict was announced, and the incident turned into an uncanny mirror-image of the Rodney King beating, though where the King video had been dim and murky, captured by an onlooker from his balcony with a newly acquired Sony camcorder (a few days earlier, on the same tape, he'd bagged Arnold Schwarzenegger, filming a scene from *Terminator 2* in a nearby bar), what I saw now was shot by professionals — the camera zooming in and out, the images well defined and horribly colorful.

Denny was kneeling in the middle of the street, now empty. Two blacks entered the frame and beat Denny's head with their fists and then kicked him. Another black raised his arms and hurled the truck's fire-extinguisher, hitting Denny on the side of his head, which lurched from the impact. Denny tried to move and rolled onto his side. The helicopter circled for a better angle. You could now see how Denny's white T-shirt, which had slipped up his belly, was saturated with blood. A black appeared briefly, smashing what appeared to be a lamp-base over Denny's head. He collapsed again. Another black appeared: This one was holding a shotgun at arm's length, very casual, and shot Denny in the leg. A black was wheeling a bicycle in the background. A black ran up, leaped athletically in the air and kicked him in the head. Denny tried to stand up. The right side of his face was a mess of red, as if it were melting. A black hit him with a tire iron; Denny went down. A black hit him with a beer bottle and then raised his arms in triumph. Another black appeared, went through Denny's left pocket, right pocket, back pocket, and then ran away with his wallet. A black in baggy shorts stepped up and kicked Denny in the head and danced away on one leg very slowly.

It happened in silence since the scene was filmed from a helicopter, but later I watched a video shot by an eyewitness — again the uncanny mirror image. In this one there was sound; you could hear the voices: "No mercy for the white man, no mercy for the white man." It seemed to be choreographed and went on for a very long time — thirty minutes. Watching the Rodney King video, I had thought it reasonable for American blacks to hate the police and be suspicious of all whites. This didn't make me suspicious of these particular blacks; it made me want to kill them. If any of them had been in my power in that moment, as Reginald Denny was in theirs, I would have done it gladly. I actually saw myself with a gun in my hand. Pow. Pow. Pow.

A few feet from Reginald Denny's truck was Tom's Liquor and Deli; it was the first store looted. The first fire-call was received thirty minutes later at seven-thirty P.M. Forty-five minutes later was the first fatality, Louis Watson, thirty-two blocks and three miles from where Denny's truck had been, yet still in the heart of South Central. Watson, an eighteen-year-old black who had wanted to be an artist, was shot to death at Vernon and Vermont, hit by a stray bullet while waiting for a bus.

The TV showed a fire, then another, and still more. Soon there were so many that fires normally requiring ten trucks were dealt with by one. A fire captain was threatened with an AK-47 to the head by a gangbanger called "Psycho." Another fireman was shot in the throat, and more people began to die, a lot more people. Dwight Taylor, forty-two, was shot to death at 446 Martin Luther King Boulevard. He had been on his way to buy milk. Arturo Miranda, twenty, was shot to death in his car on the way back from soccer practice. Edward Travens, a fifteen-year-old white youth, was shot to death in a drive-by attack in the San Fernando Valley. Patrick Bettan, a white security guard, was shot to death in a Korean supermarket at 2740 West Olympic. But the dead were mostly black. Two unnamed blacks were shot to death in a gun battle with the LAPD at Nickerson Gardens

Housing Project. A robber was shot to death at Century and Van Ness. *Shot to death:* The phrase itself had a velocity, a connectedness to the violence it described, that even constant repetition couldn't reduce to TV babble. At ten-forty: Anthony Netherly, twenty-one, was shot to death at 78th and San Pedro. At eleven-fifteen: Elbert Wilkins, thirty-three, was shot to death in a drive-by attack at 92nd and Western. Ernest Neal, twenty-seven, was shot to death in the same incident. Time unknown: An unknown black male shot to death at 10720 Buren Street. A man *of unknown race and age* was dead of "riot-related injuries" at Daniel Freeman Memorial Hospital: what possible state was he found in?

Thirteen dead by the end of the night, 1,600 fire-calls, and in the moments when TV stations had nothing new to show, they always went back to Reginald Denny, a white man, forever on his knees, being beaten. Outside, the choking, fried-plastic smell of the fires wafted across the city.

On Thursday morning, people were wanting the riots to be over, hoping they were, believing that they had been a one-day affair. At nine-thirty the radio weatherman was still trying to be wacky. "Our weather today calls for hazy sunshine. Let's change that," he chortled, "smoky sunshine." If the riots were going to start again, I wanted to see them for myself, and I wanted to see them with a black, not, I'm afraid, because I thought I'd get a special insight (although that was the way it turned out), but because I knew I'd be safer. I called Jake, a black screenwriter. He had grown up in Los Angeles, in South Central, in fact, where his father had been a preacher, and he had gone to college in New York. He had only recently moved back. "I've been talking to people, not just the gangbangers, and they're saying they just ain't gonna take it. They've been resting a couple of hours, but it's all going to start up again." Today, he predicted, the rioters and looters would march across the city. He said he's pick me up soon.

Jake arrived by eleven and we drove down Normandie, a helicopter overhead, following us south.

Hispanic families stood in doorways, waiting. A street was taped off where a building had burned the previous night, and twice we were passed

by LAPD cars, not moving singly, or even in pairs, but in groups of four and five. "For safety," said Jake. "Those guys are nervous. The LAPD got burned last night." He exchanged a fisted salute with the black driver of a Chevrolet. "The way they left that guy there at the intersection? The *police,*" he said, as if it were the rock group he were talking about. "The homies think they've got something on them *forever.*"

A palm tree was on fire. Flames ran up from the base to the leaves above and seconds later the entire tree was ablaze. Five or six young black kids were running. For a moment I thought they were frightened, running away, and then I realized, of course, they'd set it alight. There was the sound of a gunshot, though it wasn't clear who had fired it; it seemed some way off.

But it was my first experience of the riot close at hand. I was afraid and began to babble. I explained to Jake that I hated gunfire. Americans were obsessed with guns. Before New Year's Day the city authorities had found it necessary to place billboards all over Los Angeles, in English and Spanish, warning people not to fire their guns into the air at midnight. So lots of people fired their guns *into the ground.* Sometimes, lying in bed, or finishing dinner in our Cecil B. DeMille dining room, with its wood beam ceiling and baronial stone fireplace, I hear shots outside the building. "Car backfiring again," I'd say, and my girlfriend would roll her eyes.

"I'm the sort of person," I told Jake, "who lies awake in bed thinking someone's about to break in and slit my throat." No doubt I'd be like that if I lived in the Cotswolds or on the Isle of Skye. Unfortunately I lived in a neighborhood where corpses were found stuffed into our garbage bins or decomposing in closets in nearby apartments. These stories never made it into the *Los Angeles Times.*

"Move to the Westside," said Jake, and I presumed he was joking, though I remembered the first time he'd visited our apartment when he walked around checking the locks; then he'd gone around the block and advised us not to walk on Yucca.

Jake wasn't joking. "You can afford to move away. Move the fuck away," he said. "What's your problem?" He'd been living down at the ocean in

Santa Monica since returning from New York. He said, "You live in a marginal neighborhood, so it's real for you, because you know it's there, but at the same time it's not real, it's just the big bad boogie thing you glimpse from time to time." The "it" he was talking about was violence. "But it's never reached out and really hurt you."

I agreed; I was lucky.

"I was lucky too. I grew up in a bad neighborhood. Guys I went to school with are in jail now, or long dead, or crippled in wheelchairs, or have had twelve feet of intestine ripped out by a gunshot."

On Vermont we passed a furniture store, burnt out and still smoking, and then a minimall from which people were running with armloads of loot, or calmly wheeling laden checkout trolleys. It seemed extraordinary that traffic was moving about quite normally at these places, and that these events were visible as we cruised about, snug inside Jake's Honda with the radio and air conditioning on. We drove past a Blockbuster video store — its window already smashed — as two police officers struggled to cuff a black who was kicking out at them from the ground. Three black kids were getting out of a white Toyota that had just driven up. They walked past the black on the ground and the two officers trying to hold him there, entered the shop, and started filling up their arms with videos.

I wanted to say, this is it, we're really in the riot now, it's starting up again, but Jake was so casual about it all. He said that these kids had no hope of getting out as he had. Everything about society told them they were worthless, nonpeople. They had nothing, so they had nothing to lose, something I'd hear a lot of blacks say over the next days.

We drove east on Pico, past blocks that were quiet, then past blocks where crowds had gathered in anticipation of something happening, and then, once again, past blocks where something *was* happening already. There was a mob inside a Payless shoe store, and a black kid, very young, emerged running with two boxes, stopped for a moment, then sat down in the parking lot to try the shoes on. There was a Vons supermarket that Jake had passed some hours before, while it was being looted, which was now on fire, flames leaping through the roof, a fire truck yet to arrive.

Jake said, "Sometimes they do it at the same time, other times they clean it out and come back hours later and burn it then. Keeps the cops on their toes."

I nodded, as if to say, yes, I could see the logic of that. Two Hispanic youths appeared, casually wheeling a piano around a corner. I was beginning to get a sense of the sheer scale of what was going on. It was huge. The radio was announcing a curfew. After sundown tonight people on the streets anywhere in Los Angeles would be stopped and questioned. The National Guard was on its way, and 2,400 federal troops, veterans of the Gulf War, were set to follow.

"Hubba, hubba," said Jake.

By one o'clock we were looping back to the east. We came up to Third and Vermont. There was a big crowd and a fire in the distance, and now another one, closer, but just starting, and to my left, a column of thick black smoke which made my eyes water and got into my throat almost at once. I began to cough. Twenty or so young men of various races, not running and not walking either, but hurrying as if toward a very serious appointment, crossed the street and kicked down the door of a toy shop. The Korean owner stood by, offering no resistance, shaking his head. On the other side of the intersection three black looters were running, away from the Unocal station, lugging cans of oil in either hand. I didn't need a diagram to figure out what they were going to do with the cans. A hydrant was shooting a plume of water high into the air. At the Thrifty Drug Store, there was a line of people waiting to enter through a door, its glass smashed out, while others made their way out with plastic bags or carts filled with stolen goods. A man kicked some glass aside and emerged leaning backwards like in a Monty Python silly walk, his cradled arms piled so high with white and brown boxes that I couldn't see his face.

The traffic lights were out at the intersection. Making a left turn, not a simple exercise at the best of times in Los Angeles, was now a game of chicken, with fire trucks speeding up the hill and drivers nosing forward anxiously, or stopping and then making perilous surges across the intersection, windows open. A mouth and yellow baseball cap in a Ford truck was yelling: "MOTHERFUCKER." The TV hadn't prepared me for the deaf-

ening noise of the riot—breaking glass, engines, sirens, smashing, shouting. Everyone was shouting. The noise of the riot was a shape, and it approached and receded like a wave, surging this way and that.

There was another thing: A lot of people had guns, in the waistbands of their trousers or even in their hands. They weren't firing the guns, they merely had them, but that was frightening enough. In England, people don't carry guns.

Patrol cars must have pulled up because there was now an LAPD sergeant shouting commands, and a line of officers—perhaps fifteen in all—was forming at the far end of the Thrifty Drug Store parking lot. The sudden phalanx of officers had no effect on the looters, and, as it advanced, they tended merely to drift into the next store. One sprinted straight at the police line, yelling, and then swerved off at the last moment, jumping over the low wall of the parking lot. A looter stopped to say cheese for a cameraman wearing a flak jacket. Another, a bearded black in a long white T-shirt, and with a cigarette in his mouth, was pointing to his penis, inviting the officers to suck it. The phalanx of police advanced a few steps farther; they began beating on their riot shields with their batons.

A kid stepped up and hurled a rock into the street. I didn't see if anyone was hit. The kid threw another rock, launching it from low behind his back as if it were a javelin. Suddenly there were lots of kids, all of them throwing rocks, and then more police cars, coming up behind the phalanx. Jake said in his view the situation was about to get nasty.

In my view the situation had gone some way beyond that. This wasn't at all like the quite pleasurable thrill of fear I'd felt at first. I was terrified. A young black, a teenager, stopped in the middle of the street with a bottle of Budweiser which he was getting ready to throw at a car, ours. The bottle was nearly full. He stared at me, saw I was white, glanced at Jake, saw he was black, and made an obvious calculation. He ran on.

It was about two o'clock when Jake dropped me home. I didn't go out again until the early evening. I made a Waldorf salad, thinking: Now I'm making a Waldorf salad. It seemed a startling way to be carrying on. I had

to force myself to eat it. The radio said that a fire was being set every three minutes. That night's performance of *The Phantom of the Opera* at the Ahmanson Theatre was canceled; for some reason this piece of information was repeated over and over again. An interview with an analyst from Harvard was cut abruptly short for another repeat of the crucial *Phantom* announcement, and then it was back to the Harvard man, who was interrupted again, but this time for news of yet another fire and looting.

On TV, Tom Bradley, L.A.'s black mayor, appeared, calling for calm. As he spoke, the screen was split, one half showing a respectable black man urging restraint, the other showing the looting of a clothing store. Mayor Bradley urged everyone to stay at home and watch the final episode of *The Cosby Show* that night; perhaps that would help us solve our problems, he suggested. Then Pete Wilson, the governor of California, quoted Martin Luther King. His face wasn't shown, but King's words, spoken by Wilson in a slow and sanctimonious tone, were used as the soundtrack as hundreds of black youths rampaged through a minimall.

A friend called, a little hysterical, having been trapped in a gridlock for over an hour at Century City. It was like a scene from a *Godzilla* movie, she said, with Westsiders heading for hotels in Santa Barbara and San Diego, leaving the city in droves. She often had troubles because of her very blonde hair; it gave her the appearance of a Nazi, she said, and homeboys sometimes took exception. She explained all this as if it were no more remarkable a fact of her life than having a mole on her cheek. She was from Sweden and nothing about America surprised her. She'd been on Olympic when someone threw a rock through the passenger window of her car with such velocity that it passed directly in front of her face and then shattered the window on the driver's side. She'd held the steering wheel so tight on the way home that her arms were still trembling.

At six o'clock on the Thursday night, my girlfriend and I drove to the hills above Silverlake. I wanted the view.

A smart Korean gentleman in his early forties was watching as well. He had on a blue silk shirt and blue linen trousers, baggily cut, and his sun-

glasses were by Oliver Peoples. He was a *very* smart Korean gentleman, and he remarked with a world-weary air that he had a business in the mid-Wilshire district, right next door to the Sears building, which now appeared to be ablaze. He wasn't going to defend it, though he knew some of his countrymen had armed themselves with shotguns and machine guns in Koreatown. But they were shopkeepers and he — he shrugged, a little apologetically—was not a shopkeeper. "Nor am I Clint Eastwood," he said. "I pay America lots and lots of taxes so I don't have to be."

I asked what line of business he was in.

"I have a gallery," he said. "You're English?"

"That's right."

"Two foreigners together," he said. "And here we are, watching Los Angeles burn." He smiled, revealing his teeth, very white and even. Ah me, he seemed to be saying, the wicked, wicked way of the world.

On a clear day I'd seen the ocean from here, but not this evening; the entire Los Angeles basin was covered in a thick gray haze. The twin towers of Century City, a little more than halfway to the sea, were invisible, and looking south and east, the sky was darker still. Black smoke indicated fires that were out of control; white smoke, those that were now contained. The sound of sirens came from all over, and there was a convoy of army vehicles on the Hollywood freeway,

I said, "Do you think they'll ever feel the same about the city again?"

He asked, "Who?"

"The rich."

"The rich?" he said, and laughed, a sudden explosion. "The *rich?*" He found this very amusing. "Oh my dear, you're so naive. They might feel guilty for a day or two. Some of them might even be panicked into leaving, for good I mean, for Paris or London or Seattle, not just getting the children into the buggy and hightailing it for the Sierras. The rest will pull the wagons in even tighter than before. Watch those security bills soar!"

We were on the way back from Silverlake, driving down Sunset toward a sun that was in fact setting, when I realized that the looting had got very close to my home. I'd been expecting it all day, and I felt a thrill as I saw a pair of homeboys, shouting and jumping, dodging among the cars on Sunset, their arms full of bandannas and Ray-Bans and studded leather jackets, looted, I presumed, from L.A. Roxx, a store which pulled in tourists from the Midwest, relieved them of a couple of hundred dollars, and sent them away looking like clones of the whitebread rockers Guns 'n' Roses. I wondered how the homeboys would manage to dispose of *that* in South Central.

I didn't know why, but I felt a little proud. The riot had reached my neighborhood.

This time I was determined not to be such a wuss. I got out of the car at Highland and walked east along Hollywood. There were people running toward me. There was a small boy, he couldn't have been more than seven years old, with two cartons of Marlboro tucked under his arm; a middle-aged white woman was clutching a boom box still in its box, saying as if she couldn't quite believe it, "For free."

A photographer stood beneath the awning of the Ritz Cinema, shooting down the street. "It's a party now," he said. "It's carnival time."

There was a big crowd between Cherokee and Whitley. They were the type of people I usually saw in the neighborhood, which is to say tourists, teenagers from the Midwest who still dressed like punks, some kids, a few homeboys, even a few young middle-class types in suits. There was a balding fellow who worked in the Hollywood Book City bookstore. They had all gathered round to watch a very bewildered police officer.

The back of a car was hooked to the steel protective shutter in front of an electronic appliance store. The driver was black, about twenty, with a scrubby beard and a woolen hat. The oblong badge on the officer's chest said: *Barraja.* Officer Barraja wore a helmet with the visor down and sunglasses behind it. In any other circumstances, we would all have been very frightened of Officer Barraja. But the moment he walked forward and aimed his shotgun at the head of the driver, I knew, and the crowd knew, and the bearded man certainly knew that Officer Barraja had put himself in an absurd situation; I knew, the crowd knew, and the bearded man certainly knew that Officer Barraja would not shoot. Officer Barraja did not know this yet; he learned it

a few moments later when the bearded driver turned and grinned and, gunning his engine, then accelerated until the protective shutter gave way with a groan. Officer Barraja stepped back and shouldered his weapon and then: did nothing. People were hooting and clapping. Someone paused to take his picture. Outside the electronics store a queue was forming, as the people in front ducked through the wrecked fence and stepped inside.

The swapmeet was on fire at the corner of Wilcox, making my eyes smart again, sirens in the distance. I had an exhilarating sense of chaos. I wondered what was going to happen next, when up ahead I spotted a black teenager smashing the door of Frederick's of Hollywood with a hammer. Another pitched a chair and then climbed through the shattered window into the display. Alarm bells sounded, and the crowd, my neighborhood crowd, responded as though to an invitation, and so I went along as well, not trying to resist as I was almost lifted off my feet in the dense mass of bodies that suddenly crushed forward. I had somehow become part of a mob about to loot and trash what passed in Hollywood for a landmark: a lingerie store.

Someone found a switch and turned on the lights. Frederick's was classier than I'd imagined. The floor was slippery marble tile. The lingerie was red and pink and emerald green. As well as black and white, and each piece had its own hanger, its own place in the spacious arrangement of spinners and wall racks.

No one but me appeared to be admiring it. A girl ran to the far corner of the store, ahead of the pack, earning herself just enough time to be a little selective, as she lifted down hangers one by one. A fat lady in white appeared at the back, pushing, shouting at a man, "Let's go, let's go." She, along with the others crushing in behind her, were panicking at the prospect of having arrived too late. The members of this new lot had a strangely fixed expression, concerned perhaps that everything had gone, and were determined to make up for lost time. Broken glass crunched under my feet. Someone had found a ladder and was carefully prising loose an imitation art deco light fixture. There was no anger or fear; just bedlam. A black teenager in a T-shirt with a big cross around his neck made for the door with a mannequin under his arm. Pieces of other mannequins,

stripped and smashed, were lying in the window display. The fat lady in white was on her hands and knees, her broad butt swinging in the air, as she rushed to fill up a suitcase. The suitcase had pricetags; she'd just taken it from somewhere else. She looked at me, a round, chubby face, and smiled, nodding, a gesture that I'm sure was supposed to say to me: *Go on.* I wasn't sure how to behave. I must have looked a little odd, standing there. I fingered some silky stuff.

"Hi!" someone shouted. Not at me, I assumed, but then it came again: "Hi, Richard!" It was the not-quite-pretty-enough Texan from the building next to mine, on her way from something called the Lingerie Museum at the back of the store. She picked up an intricate lace bra. "What do you think?" she said, and, without waiting for my reply, folded the bra carefully inside her black leather duffel bag. "I'm having a ball," she said, though she was disappointed that the Madonna bustier — the prize exhibit of the Lingerie Museum—had gone before she got to it; there'd been quite a race. She could have got a leather bra belonging to the pop star Belinda Carlisle, but she didn't care for that sort of music and, in any case, "Definitely a D-cup." She had the same pouty expression I'd seen on her face once before, when a producer of violent action films had brought her home one morning and ridden off on his Harley-Davidson, leaving her without so much as a kiss.

Frederick's, five minutes after being broken into, was picked bare.

A block and a half away, back up on Grace Avenue, a man was wetting the roof of our building with a hose in case somebody set fire to it. Some of our other neighbors were out on the street. They'd formed a vigilante committee, they said.

But of course, I replied, a little dazed, why not? I felt like Bertie Wooster. A fat man I'd never seen before wore a baseball cap that said FUCK EVERYBODY.

The black ex-boxer said, "This town is lost, man. This town is so *lost.*"

The heavy metal musician, standing nearby, opened his jacket to reveal an Ozzy Osbourne T-shirt and, stuffed inside the waistband of his jeans, a gun. "Browning automatic," he said proudly. It turned out he was English too.

"Oh, my God," said my girlfriend. This fellow didn't look like he should be let loose with a water pistol. Was I the only person in Los Angeles who *didn't* have a gun?

"I was in the Falklands, man," said the heavy metal musician. "I've seen this kind of stuff before. Let 'em come."

"Let them not," said the ex-boxer. "I can't afford to move again. I've been moved too many times."

I wondered what he meant by "been moved," but then it was the heavy metal musician again, saying, "The curfew's in force already so you folks had better go home now, okay?" It struck me that he was a strange authority figure. Had he really been in the Falklands? Everything was so extraordinary now I could almost believe he was for real. He walked toward the corner, not without a certain John Wayne swagger. "You all take care now. Okay?"

Nine-thirty, Thursday night, and the death toll was up to thirty. Howard Epstein shot to death at Seventh and Slauson. Jose L. Garcia shot to death at Fresno and Atlantic. Matthew Haines pulled off his motorcycle and shot to death in Long Beach. Eduardo Vela shot to death at 5142 West Slauson. Some of the dead were very young. Fourteen, fifteen. Keven Evanahen died while trying to put out a fire in a check-cashing store at Braddock and Inglewood. At least that made for variety. I blinked and shook my head as soon as that thought popped out. I'd been amazed by the riot, thrilled by it, swept along by it, terrified by it. It wasn't just that events had moved at such speed; the actual nature of what had occurred seemed to be shifting all the time. The riot had started with a particular angry focus: race. It had turned quickly into a poverty riot and then, diffused, became interracial anarchy. I wasn't sure what I'd seen, but I felt changed. Los Angeles itself seemed more tangible, now that everyone, even the players themselves, would have to acknowledge that there was more to the city than the make-believe Medici court of the movie business.

The Gap was being looted on Melrose.

The TV news was replaying a bulletin from earlier in the day. At Third and Vermont an unknown Latino had been shot with his own gun and was

lying dead in the back of his car. No ambulance had been able to get there. This was the very intersection where I'd been with Jake. The reporter, talking to the camera, was trying to describe the situation, while black teenagers milled around behind him, clowning it up. At last the reporter gave up. "There's a dead person here and it's a big joke. Back to you at the studio."

At midnight we went for a drive. Hollywood Boulevard was blocked off by National Guardsmen in combat fatigues — they were on every corner — so we got onto the Hollywood freeway. Even at this hour, the freeway was normally crowded; now it was deserted. Los Angeles had become another city. We headed south and just as we were passing L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology Celebrity Center, a police car came up alongside. A voice came through the patrol car's loudspeaker. "*A curfew is in force. You are breaking the law. Go home. Get off the streets. You are breaking the law.*"

In the middle of the afternoon on Friday, it became clear that it was probably over, and, curiously, there was a sense not of relief but of disappointed expectation: People wanted more. The rioting had become an entertainment. Announcers at KWIB — news twenty-four hours a day, all day, give us twenty minutes and we give you the world — actually apologized for the fact that the station was now returning to its true obsession, sport, and it occurred to me that during the time of the riot the city had gathered round a spectacle, as it might during the Super Bowl.

I wanted to see the damage where it had been worst, in South Central, so I went to see Beverley, a black schoolteacher I had recently been introduced to. I was cadging a ride with blacks again, this time so that I wouldn't feel threatened when I looked at their burnt-out neighborhoods.

We started off on Vermont, heading toward South Central. Straight away Beverley's eleven-year-old daughter Maya declared that she was thirsty, so I said I'd keep my eyes peeled for a store still standing to buy her a soda. The task turned out not to be so easy.

"Burned," said Beverley, pointing to one store, and then to another. "Razed . . . looted and burned. See that check store over there? Korean owned, looted and burned." Above it was a bright green sign, still intact:

INSTANT CASH. On top of the sign stood a National Guardsman with his assault rifle.

"Burned," she said, as we continued on our quest. "Leveled to the ground." Delicatessens, liquor stores, furniture stores, a Fedco warehouse where six hundred workers had turned up and found, literally, no job to go to — building after building was burned. Before the riots, there was one store for every 415 residents, less than half the Los Angeles average. That ratio looked pretty good now. On some stores, metal cutters had been used. Solid steel shutters had perfect triangles cut into them, like cans popped with an opener. At the intersection of Vernon and Central all four corners had been wiped out.

"Burned, burned, burned, burned. That's the deli where Latasha Harlins was killed," Beverley said, pointing to the store whose Korean owner Soon Ja Du had been fined $500 for shooting dead a fifteen-year-old black girl in a dispute over a $1.79 bottle of orange juice. It was one of the first stores attacked (nearly one thousand Korean businesses were destroyed, I would learn later). "Homies," Beverley continued, "tried to burn that deli three times, but they were ready. Not open now, of course." In the Watts riots of 1965, many Jewish businesses had been burned in South Los Angeles, and the Jews had left the neighborhood for good; this time the Koreans had been a target. Yet here, ironically, a BLACK OWNED sign had been a less effective guarantee of safety than in other areas of the city, because the destruction had been so general. "See that furniture store over there? A black family ran that for twenty-five years. Razed. Look at the job they did there, that was a liquor store, burned to the ground. Korean owned."

Beverley had been ten in 1965. "This was much worse," she said. "Spread farther and faster. More people died. The abuses that people reacted to in '65 were just the same — police abuse, economic discrimination, lack of jobs, but those riots were about hope. We had hope then. Gone now." It had taken twenty years to get a shopping center built in Watts after 1965. How long would it take to recover from this?

There was graffiti everywhere, on the remains of the buildings that had been burned, on the walls of every one that was still standing:

FUCK THE POLICE
FUCK WHITE PEOPLE
FUCK LAPD
FUCK GATES
FUCK THE LAW
POLICE KILLA
FUCK WHITIES
FUCK THE LAW
FUCK WHITEBOYS
NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE
GATES KILLA
BLOODS 'N' CRIPS TOGETHER FOR EVER
POLICE 187
And then: THIS IS SOUTH CENTRAL.

When I'd first spent time in Los Angeles in the mid-1980s, I'd had no more thought of coming here than to the moon, though I did go with friends to the Los Angeles Coliseum or the Forum, sports arenas close enough to make us very careful about planning the way back to the freeway. Turn a corner, I'd thought, and there I'd be, with bad street lighting and people dreaming of doing me damage. For me, South Central hadn't been just a small, bad neighborhood of the sort that existed in any city; it had been a very big bad neighborhood the size of a small city, and it had existed in my mind not as a real place — with stoplights and movie theaters and stores on the corner — but as a black hole stretching from downtown to Long Beach. I was ashamed of that. It seemed quite possible, now that South Central had had the effrontery to impose itself on the rest of the city, that the rest of the city would respond by turning it into an even grimmer ghetto.

"Security Pacific bank, burned, razed to the ground," said Beverley. "Burning a corner store, that's one thing. But to get into a bank and leave nothing except the empty safe still standing at the back. That takes dedication."

Beverley's daughter Maya reminded me that she was still thirsty, and Beverley said there was a 7-Eleven over on the edge of Inglewood. The rioting hadn't been so bad there, and we drove for another ten minutes only

to find another destroyed building. "Looted," said Beverley. "Burned *to the ground*." She began to laugh, and it did seem funny all of a sudden; we'd spent forty-five minutes driving through the geographical center of America's second largest city, and we'd been unable to buy a Coca-Cola.

I had never seen Simi Valley, the town where the four officers had been found not guilty of beating Rodney King and from where, every morning, more than two thousand LAPD officers, county sheriffs, and other law enforcement personnel commuted to their jobs in distant Los Angeles. I wanted to make the journey myself. My girlfriend and I drove there from South Central.

The journey took us about an hour; in traffic, it could take two hours: the Harbor freeway to the Hollywood freeway, short stretches of the Ventura and San Diego freeways and the bland sprawl of the San Fernando Valley. It was on our last freeway, the Simi Valley, that the landscape changed. This had all been part of Southern California's ranch country; its nineteenth-century history concerned trails and horses and men who did what men had to do. But now housing estates could be seen on most hillsides, and freeway exit ramps were marked CONSTRUCTION VEHICLES ONLY, where new dormitory suburbs were being built. It was like a passage between continents.

At the far end of Los Angeles Avenue, there was a sale of "recreational vehicles," where a short man called Ted said that, while he had been shocked by the verdicts, and horrified by the riots, this was all good news for him. He was a real estate agent. He predicted a boom in Simi Valley, and indeed throughout the whole of Ventura County, as more and more fled black street crime and the Dickensian hell of Los Angeles. "You know the worst thing about the looting all those niggers did down there?" he asked. "*They couldn't afford it.*" Ted paused. "Just kidding," he said.

We drove through the city. Los Angeles Avenue itself consisted of shopping malls: Simi Valley Plaza, Mountain Gate Plaza, Madre Plaza, the Westgate Center. In these plazas, huge parking lots were surrounded by stores of all kinds. A cavernous home improvement center issued the smell of wood. Everything else issued the smell of air conditioning. You could buy things here: a new Ford, a taco, a garden hose, an ice cream, an airline ticket to Lake Tahoe, a pair of jeans, a carton of frozen yogurt, a CD player, a haircut, a chili burger, a spade, a doughnut, a bag of enriched soil fertilizer, a vegetarian health sandwich, the *Simi Valley Advertiser,* a novel by Stephen King, a new tie, a bathing suit that dries in minutes, spark plugs, a suit for $250, a nonstick frying pan, a small plastic container of Anacin, the *New York Times*, a set of plastic poker chips. You could collect interest on your savings, wash your car, or go bowling. You could buy beer, Gatorade, and many different kinds of California Chardonnay. You could buy a Coca-Cola. I bought a Coca-Cola.

You could tell who lived in Simi Valley (they were white) and who worked there but lived elsewhere (they were Hispanic). We didn't see any blacks but we may not have stayed long enough. I'm sure there were blacks in Simi Valley.

At the East County Courthouse, where the King verdicts had been reached, I was confronted by a local resident, a middle-aged woman in a beige suit made of an indeterminate fabric. She smiled at me coldly.

"You're not from here, are you?"

"No," I replied, a little surprised. Was I really so obvious? Perhaps I looked a little thin. Simi Valley seemed to be a place where fat people got fatter.

"I thought so," she said. "And you've come because of that Rodney King thing."

I said yes.

"I don't feel guilty," she said, answering a question I hadn't asked. "I refuse to feel guilty. I did everything I could back in the sixties for those people. They just refused to make the most of their opportunities."

"Why was that?"

"Oh, they're lazy," she said. "Those people are just plain lazy.

"Go back to Los Angeles," she said, "and take your issue with you. It has nothing to do with Simi Valley. Those people on the jury did the best job they could, and for you to assume that twelve white people can't hand down a fair verdict in a case like that, well, that's racist in itself, isn't it?"

She was right: If thinking that twelve people like her couldn't be relied upon to hand down a fair verdict was racist, then I was a racist. I hated her. I wanted to hurt her. I didn't want to argue or protest. I wanted her injured. I saw myself doing it. Pow. Pow. Pow.

We returned to Los Angeles.

The riots began on Wednesday, 29 April 1992. Monday, 4 May, was the first day — the first of many — that gun sales topped two thousand in Southern California, twice the normal figure, a gun sale every forty seconds. By that Monday, this was the riot toll: 228 people had suffered critical injuries (second- and third-degree skin burns; blindness; gunshot wounds to the lung, stomach, neck, shoulder, and limbs; knife wounds; life-threatening injuries from broken glass), and 2,383 people had suffered noncritical injuries (requiring hospital treatment); there were more than seven thousand fire emergency calls; 3,100 businesses were affected by burning or looting; 12,111 arrests. Fifty-eight people are dead.

THE BEACH AT SUNSET

Eloise Klein Healy

for Colleen

The cliff above where we stand is crumbling
and up on the Palisades
the sidewalks buckle like a broken conveyer belt.

Art Deco palm trees sway their hula skirts
in perfect unison
against a backdrop of gorgeous blue,

and for you I would try it,
but I have always forbidden myself to write
poems about the beach at sunset.

All the cliches for it sputter
like the first generation of neon,
and what attracts me anyway

are these four species of gulls we've identified,
their bodies turned into the wind,
and not one of them aware of their silly beauty.

I'm the one awash in pastels
and hoping to salvage the day, finally turning away
from the last light on the western shore