

**OK, imagine if all
the roads and the
streets in LA were
completely empty.**



There was a spiritual disconnect between Adam and the city.

GETTY WAS AN OCTOPUS
BY JIN AN HIRST



Adam was stuck in traffic. Again. Five miles or so from Culver City to Venice Beach currently occupied his entire time and space continuum.

Red lights stared from the back of the cars queued across the expressway, five lanes like tentacles stretching out towards their respective destinations. Each car contained a separate world, disconnected and ignorant of each other.

Hodge podge of plants and shrubs made appearance along the barrier: dry and rocky patches of dirt that ran both sides of the expressway without particular form or pattern, seemingly out of place and neglected.

The air-conditioning in his car was giving off a strange smell. He turned it off and put his window down for some fresh air pollution instead. Bass was thumping from a luxury car nearby, its windows tinted black which made Adam wonder whether it was 'someone famous'. The novelty and curiosity of Hollywood had yet to wear off.

Adam's engineering mind always took notice of luxury cars. The sheer wealth emanating from these cars could be debilitating for others with more sensitive ego; wondering who could be in it, what they were doing, or how much better their lives were. But Adam was more interested in the mechanical capability and technological genius poured into these cars. One day his engine would be in one of those cars.

Adam was developing a water-based engine. It was sitting in his home workshop right now. Adam pondered on it as he sat in the car. He was waiting for some batteries to arrive from Switzerland. Then it would be ready for testing. He was proud of building something with his own hands where he could input all his creative energy, and the freedom.

He paid the bills by working as a taxi driver part-time. He had been driving around LA for three months now but the city still felt very much foreign to him. There was a spiritual disconnect between Adam and the city. One example of this for Adam was the numerous tarot readers, fortune tellers, and palm readers that he saw dotted throughout the city. He had never seen so many before. There were tarot readers back home, Ohio, but they were hidden in the shadows at a market stall, curtained off, temporary and casual. But in LA they were like clinics, in a proper building with neon signs and a car park out the front. Spiritual Clinics, Adam thought. But to what end?

Adam watched an interview with a famous comedian the other day, someone he admired and thought of as a philosopher of sorts, but Adam was disappointed to hear the comedian attribute his success to a charm he bought from a fortune teller who told him that he would be the greatest there is and that no one would be able to take him down once he got to the top. Adam couldn't understand why someone talented like that would denigrate his own self and work to a charm.

The traffic relented and Adam turned off the expressway into Louis August Boulevard, one of the newer developments in the city lined with fancy eateries and shops. The sterile cleanliness of the development infected its occupants with self-consciousness and intimidated others. Beautiful and fashionable people strolled on clean and well-paved sidewalk. People seemed nurtured and healthy; nice skin, coiffed hair, and no one overweight. There was a certain glow about them, a shell that provided protection, made people feel respected and dignified. But the shell was a fragile and sensitive one. It made people fret with anxiety and despair even at the slightest discomfort that naturally arose from time to time in the workings of the universe. On such occasions there were furrowed eyebrows, rigid posturing, aggressive gesticulation and incessant grooming. Adam used to look at these people with curiosity. But now, his eyes glazed over. They became part of the cityscape and the mundane aspect of his daily life.

These human beings were exposed and vulnerable to the meanness of the universe.

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Older parts of the city still boasted the iconic palm tree-lined boulevards. Their trunks reminded Adam of Brachiosaurus, one of the largest dinosaurs to walk the earth, perhaps slightly emaciated Brachiosaurus as the trunks tapered off thinner the taller they grew. Adam felt oddly humbled by these palms, the glitz and glamour they once represented had worn off and now they watched over the city with an ancestral spirit. Adam imagined the things they would've seen: people come and gone, their hopes and dreams satisfied or destroyed, flowing through time like the blood cells in Adam's own body.

People who didn't belong on Louis August Boulevard could be found under the expressway bridges or in patches of abandoned industrial areas about town. Their tents appeared forlorn of their natural habitat, parks, forests and the like. Their vehicles, supermarket trolleys, were filled with everything they owned tightly packed into some kind of order that wasn't obvious to a passer-by. One sat in a wheelchair with a million objects hanging from its handle bars like a hermit crab with a shell on its back. Another one had nothing but what they were wearing and without shoes.

These human beings were exposed and vulnerable to the meanness of the universe, the sickness of mind and body, and the abuse of power by the rest of human civilisation. The dry and warm climate of southern California provided some consolation.

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dam pulled over. A woman in a velvet track suit with a handbag the size of her hand jumped into the back seat.

“Going to Weho?”

Weho, which was written WeHo, was a lingo for West Hollywood, a term Adam had picked up after he arrived in LA.

Adam pinched a palm-sized alumina silicate screen attached to the dash. The screen zoomed into a map of the surrounding area. Adam was marked on the map as an upside-down blue arrow. A green line started from the tip of the blue arrow on the screen along the road which Adam had to take, requested by this woman via her mobile phone a few minutes earlier.

Adam was never allowed to veer off the line. He had to follow the green line at all times so as not raise a public safety alarm that could lead to getting charged with a Metoo offence or a fine for an Intending to Trigger offence. Adam found such rigidity difficult to handle. It made him feel dumb and mean after a while.

Adam was marked on the map as an upside-down blue arrow.

“Going to Weho?” The woman did not say anything but remained on the seat which Adam took to mean as affirmation. Adam wasn’t sure whether she didn’t hear him or was ignoring him, treating him like a horse that merely pulls the cart.

Just as how the aristocracy treated those born to the peasant class differently, social hierarchy based purely on financial wealth meant that people treated the poor like beasts, undeserving of propriety in manners and communication. Acting according to one’s conscience or moral principles no longer mattered, and people spent their energy on trying to look less poor than each other. People gauged each other by how they dressed; how they wore their hair; what personal electronic devices they carried; what kind of car they drove; which cafes and restaurants they frequented; where they travelled overseas.

Sometimes indicators of wealth were introduced into society more surreptitiously. It could be as subtle as whether an article of clothing had a particular logo or not or a colour of a particular electronic device. It was a marketing strategy designed to uplift the prestige and people scrambled to get a slice of the action. Adam met only a few people in his life, generally those with more thoughtful souls, who could transcend what the hierarchy dictated. But they were certainly few and far in between.

He knew he could be paying more attention to learn about these indicators and adopting whatever he could so as to appear less poor, but his mind liked to work on engines and machines: solid things that lasted the test of time and force. They weren’t transient like the indicators.

His mother and aunts were constantly telling him to buy some new clothes, or new phone, or try out some of the fancy restaurants in LA. "Live a little!" they told him. Adam saw it as a waste of time and deterioration of physical body. He didn't enjoy feeling bloated or sluggish, which come from over-indulgence. He was more attracted to the idea of transcending the social hierarchy and being able to treat everyone that came his way equally. But such intention was difficult to implement when others did not reciprocate. Adam did try a few times to treat everyone with courtesy and respect, even a beggar on the street, and act according to his conscience. He ended up becoming the victim or martyr to the hierarchy depending the particular interpersonal dynamic or being ignored or ridiculed in some way.



Adam was driving along the green line on the map and remained silent for the rest of the way. The woman's destination was on the border of WeHo and Beverly Hills. The delicate design feature of the street lamps, lush gardens, and leafy tree-lined streets signalled they were entering into one of the residential zones in the upper echelon of the city. The green line on the screen ended and Adam pulled over.

"Thank you! See you later!" Adam said to the woman's back as she got out of the car. He felt that he ought to remain courteous in case he got a negative review. He saw the woman open a rococo-style black wrought-iron gate. It led to a large mansion partially visible behind surrounding tall hedges and other planting. She walked up some white marble steps and disappeared behind two corinthian columns.

He knew that she didn't give a fuck about the hierarchy.

Back on the road to pick up his next passenger, Adam looked around at the pedestrians and other drivers: the humans of this city, all carrying their anxiety over their state of wealth and power over one another. He saw an old, fragile-looking woman in a wheel chair by the pedestrian crossing. She didn't appear to be waiting for the light, just observing the traffic, feeling the flow of the city. She was holding a joint between her fingers, her skin was thin around her bones, and wrinkled like the plastic bags hanging from the handle bars. She was tanned golden brown from the gentle Californian December sun. A sun tan; an indicator of wealth in different context. And with a glorious mop of snow-white hair, she painted a more dignified picture than most. Smoking a joint in public was prohibited but she flaunted it. Adam felt a kind of respect for her. The rules of the hierarchy dictated that she deserved no such thing as respect but he knew that she didn't give a fuck about the hierarchy.

All other qualities of human existence that were once considered good in their own accord, like kindness or intelligence, had long ago been subverted to being wealthy. Wealth had a tendency to increase exponentially and become concentrated in a few. Those few exerted their influence all over the city. Like an octopus with its tentacles in mucus texture spilling over out of its cave.

Octopuses had historically contributed significantly to the city's architecture, public museums, and art galleries. Like pre-revolution era Russian oligarchs who used to build hospitals or schools on their estate for their peasants. In the modern world where everyone is out for themselves, such gestures, if ever made, were seen at best as a puzzling level of generosity or at worst, egotistical grand-standing.



adam picked up a couple of tourists outside the Getty Museum. A young guy, likely in his late twenties, jumped into the passenger seat and a woman about the same age who seemed to be his girlfriend or wife got in the back. Their destination came up as Venice Beach on the dashboard screen.

“Hi mate howzit going?” The guy had an antipodean accent, cheerful and inviting.

“Not too bad” Adam said. “Going to Venice Beach?” He asked the obvious. It was a non-threatening way to start a conversation with a passenger: agreeing on the obvious facts. As the conversation progressed one must avoid conflict by changing the subject or not offering any opinion. Despite globalisation and connection amongst people via internet all around the world, people remained closed and their cyber existence remained with other like-minded people, in an echo chamber. Trying to change or influence another person's opinion or belief, no matter if it's incorrect, was considered an offence against that person and the offender could be fined. This rendered genuine discussions impossible and people merely mimicked what they'd seen in old movies and television shows. They said things out loud, pontificating and questioning, feigning enthusiasm

He felt good giving helpful information to his passengers.

and curiosity, to maintain the façade of discussion without having any care or concern for the ideas or what was being said. “Yeah, have you been there?” The guy asked with gusto.

“No I haven't, but I've been to LACMA which was pretty cool,” Adam said.

“What's LACMA?” the guy asked.

“Oh, LACMA, it stands for Los Angeles County Museum of Arts, I think,” Adam replied. He added: “I really liked their contemporary art collection.”

He felt good giving helpful information to his passengers, like a proper member of the LA city, welcoming guests into his community. It made him think about his environment from a fresh perspective and feel like he was performing a civic duty. The joy and satisfaction Adam felt at that moment was something that no amount of following the green lines could provide. He didn't understand this consciously, he was just in a good mood.

The woman, the guy's wife as Adam found out, leaned over into the front and joined in on the conversation. She spoke fast and sparkled with laughter. “We're going there tomorrow, I'm so looking forward to it!” she said.

I really like how you can move around freely in museums and galleries in America without security guards and ropes.

“The Getty Museum is pretty cool too,” the guy said. “I really like how you can move around freely in museums and galleries in America without security guards and ropes.”

Adam thought that this was an interesting observation. He wanted to reply with an equally meaningful answer but couldn't think of any particular response so he just said, “Oh, ok.” Immediately feeling foolish.

But to Adam's relief the guy continued, “Last year we went to Rome and the Vatican museum was horrific. You got packed in like sardines,” he said.

“Yeah!” his wife said. “You couldn't stop and take your time. There were all these beautiful paintings and sculptures but you had to keep moving with the crowd.”

“I see,” Adam replied. He thought to himself that this couple must be quite wealthy if they travelled to Europe last year and to America this year, therefore a few steps higher up than Adam in the social hierarchy. The small piece of information that Adam received about the couple's trip to Rome expanded into resentment in Adam's heart. This created distance between Adam and the couple as human beings.

“So, are you here for pleasure or holiday?” Adam asked in a polite artificial tone. If his guard was lowered earlier it was certainly back up to the level appropriate for a driver and passenger role play. He was going to say “work or pleasure” but he remembered that they seemed like they were a couple therefore unlikely to be travelling for work, so he ended up saying: “pleasure or holiday”.

What an idiot. Adam lashed at himself mentally, tearing away what little self-confidence he held. He had long forgotten about the moment of happiness a couple of minutes ago. Its warmth had been concreted over, cold and solid.

As the guy babbled away half towards Adam and half towards his wife, Adam found out about where they were from, who they were, where they were going. Adam noticed that the guy was very good at talking about himself and his life and he admired that quality. The guy sounded smart. His speech was entertaining with enough jokes and witticisms dropped here and there to make the whole thing seem very pleasant. Adam usually got embarrassed and bumbled out a few simple sentences if ever there was an occasion to talk about himself. In his mind, his life was boring and no one was interested. He was also paranoid about appearing arrogant which is an easy thing to do while talking about oneself. He also didn't want to impose himself on others, take up their time and space, and that also contributed to his hesitation. Adam was mulling over his thoughts, driving on the green line, trance-like as the guy's voice droned on.

Yeah you don't really see that kind of generosity any more.

The guy and his wife were now talking between themselves about the history of Getty. "Where did he get all his money from?" the wife asked, then she answered herself, "Oh he owns rights to all those photographs doesn't he? All those photos you see in the articles and magazines with Getty images reference."

"It seems from Wikipedia originally it was oil, they got rich off oil," the guy was staring down at his mobile phone, looking up Getty while his wife was talking.

"Oh really? Oil?" the wife became thoughtful and sat back and looked out the window.

"Yeah it says that Getty Oil was founded in the forties and had lucrative dealings with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait."

"These big old families ay?" the wife said, looking out the window.

"Well it's great that he gave it back to the city, the amazing museum and the architecture," the guy said.

"Yeah, and that location on the hill! It really is the jewel of the city up on the hill," the wife said.

"Yeah you don't really see that kind of generosity any more," the guy said.

"It would be interesting to see whether anyone contributed to anything out of all these celebs that live here!" the wife said, adding a cheeky sounding laugh at the end. "Woah!" she said quietly, almost like a sigh, still looking out the window.

The taxi passed by rows of tents along the concrete footpath on a random block of neglected factory buildings near downtown LA. The guy and his wife went quiet, amazed at the sheer volume of "the homeless", disgusted at the failure of society, and filled with a combination of sadness and guilt.

Adam dropped them off outside a Mexican restaurant at the new Third Street development in Venice Beach. It was Adam's first time in the street since it had been developed. It had the feel of Louis August Boulevard.

Shop windows displayed expressionless mannequins of various levels of minimalism. Most did not have heads these days Adam noticed. The culture of people taking photos of themselves at every moment of their awake day; the selfie culture; made it easier for people to picture themselves in third person, living the fantasy that had been painted by marketing.

Marketing messages via a multitude of channels stimulated different sensory receptors on any particular human body. It was no longer possible to discern clear meaning from these messages as marketers realised that being consciously aware of a product and its meaning could lead consumers to rejecting them if their life views did not agree. Marketing was now designed to enhance addictive behaviour, to make the population continually want something they didn't have. Businesses just made whatever

they wanted, at a maximum profit margin, only with the slightest of changes in each iteration. The population, twisting in a void, lapped it up year after year as new and better things came out continually.

There were still signs of the old school marketing. They could be found in deserted parts of the city, on vacated buildings yet to be torn down, areas where the homeless congregated. They lingered on faded billboards and broken neon signs; their language naively explicit and subtly meaningless. Adam thought that they were quite sweet in an innocent kind of way.

He noticed the banners hanging from lamp posts along sides of the roads near Hollywood and Beverley Hills celebrating the upcoming film festival attended by celebrities world-wide. The banners were fresh and clean as they were recently put up for the occasion: vast contrast to the state of the roads they hung across which were worn and tired; the asphalt had faded into a light grey colour, potholes and uneven patches which the citizens drove on day after day. Pedestrians on footpaths appeared like ants.

They were dwarfed by gigantic shopping malls; by the monolithic exterior, white and windowless. The shopping malls sat silent, like gigantic mother ships, waiting to feed human vanity and desire.

Adam drove down an alleyway at the back of one of the shopping malls. A few people were hanging around outside, presumably workers at the mall on a break, some in uniforms, some vaping, some smoking. Each and every one of them was alone, on their mobile phones, connected to elsewhere, to escape and take a breather from the chains of working life.

Adam parked his car in the alleyway. He got out of the car and stretched. The air had a sharp chill of somewhere that was permanently in shadow. He took out his lunch bag from the boot and ate sitting in the car with the window down. It was quiet in the alley with a breeze coming through the wind channel. Adam no longer bothered going home on the outskirts of LA. This saved gas.

OK, imagine if all the roads and the streets in LA were completely empty.

He browsed some news on his mobile phone as he ate. His favourite was the technology section which he went to first. He started a video clip of an interview with Amov Khalid, trillionaire Californian native technology entrepreneur, announcing his long-anticipated transport project using self-driving electronic vehicles called GoPods. He had that blasé way of speaking that lots of people in LA had: slow, laid back, and confident.

“OK, imagine if all the roads and the streets in LA were completely empty. And there were no vehicles. We want to have enough GoPods so that everyone can be picked up within 15 minutes but not too many so it would create congestion. GoPods will vary in capacity up to six passengers. And it’s completely free and it’s a door-to-door service. People will be incentivised to leave their cars at home. What I’m asking the politicians to do is to exempt GoPods from road taxes and that it makes more sense to recoup taxes from private vehicles based on their size and emission. If there are just as many private vehicles as GoPods, the 15 minute timeframe will be unlikely to be

met.” The interview cut into an animation that showed a map of LA and its main roads. Little dots, presumably representing GoPods, flowed along evenly spaced out, without congestion. The voice over said: “Self-navigating and interconnected, GoPods will allow people of LA to travel freely without having to worry about driving or being stuck in traffic. You can read or work or just sit back and relax!”

Adam paused the video. He felt uncomfortable at the thought that he would be losing his livelihood. It did sound nice: free door-to-door public transport, but driving was a perfect job for Adam who couldn't handle personal politics at a workplace hemmed in with strangers and meetings. He tried to repress this slight sense of doom and scrolled down the screen for other technology news.

It's not that he particularly liked driving but he couldn't help feeling the frustration of being constantly pushed about this and that way by external forces and have his living situation changed. “Hopefully some day I can be in charge of my own destiny. Become autonomous,” he thought. He had a vague notion that his water-based engine would be his get-out-of-jail card, from the serfdom of merely getting by in life.

Abolition of the class system and slavery worldwide in the later part of the first millennium brought hope to many for a more free and egalitarian society. The new era of enlightenment encouraged the belief that people were born free and that with enough hard work people could lead whatever life they wanted as dignified and free individuals. The most difficult part, it was considered, was figuring out what to become in a world where “you can be anything you want to be”. But alas, while individuals may be born free, human ego demanded competition and the need to be better than one another. In the new era social status was no longer determined by birth but by acquiring a particular mode of life and various

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material goods. Individuals climbed to various rungs of hierarchy by gaining university qualification, management position, house with a large yard, big wedding, private schooling for children, latest vehicles and appliances and the like.

Children were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, solidifying their destiny early on to get ahead of others on the track of life laid out before them. The idea of human being as an end in itself, that each person had equal value deserving respect, grew faint.

It was also forgotten that all humans came from a black woman called Eve once upon a time, that they were all descendants, connected to one another, to nature and other earthly beings, and that they were all on top of this sphere called Earth spinning on its axis by unseen force, floating in vast darkness.

Ideas like integrity, morality, and conscience came to be seen as something ethereal and irrelevant in the world. Those who spoke of it were met with condescension. Instead, people celebrated ego, power, and greed that the animal in them sought by natural compulsion, unhindered by existence of thought or reason.

He was becoming more and more unsure of his water-based engine idea.

The old hierarchy provided certainty of pre-determined status that made people feel secure in some way: one was born a peasant or a prince and wasn't made responsible for that status. The new era required materialism to be pursued by everyone in competition with each other. Those who dared to veer away from the prescribed mode of life: college, work, marriage, house, children, were seen as abnormal, a failure, incompetent, or just strange.

Adam thought that some of his friends were just jealous that he did what he wanted and that he could sleep in as long as he wanted on weekends with no kids to look after. But it also meant that his choices were questioned at every turn by curious strangers, concerned friends, and teased at family gatherings. Notwithstanding sheer annoyance, what pained Adam was hearing resentful tones from those he loved the most who were envious of Adam's relative freedom compared to their lives, demanding to know what he's "going to do with his life?" and discrediting Adam's entire being to feel better about their choices.

Egalitarianism failed to come to fruition as historical wealth and hierarchy allowed the one per cent of the population to maintain their lead. Desire for autonomy and self-determination became unfulfilled frustration, anxiety and depression. While the class system could be said to have been removed, it was far from gone in social conscience.

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Unsurprisingly, the materialist society blamed the inequality on physicality of human existence: face, skin colour, sex, and sexual partners took on new significance as people pushed and shoved each other according to what they viewed as superior characteristics. Human identity became reduced to a set of physical traits and practices. Groupthink and tribalism took hold of global conscience in the early part of the second millennium as different "identities" banded together against one another. Victimhood and martyrdom took control. People no longer thought about how to lead their lives, whether an action was good or bad. Everything was relative.

Industrialisation, mass media, and globalism in modernity propelled consumerism and celebrity as the new religion. Bombarded by marketing messages, overwhelmed and confused, people spent their lives satisfying their material urges. Those in the world holding enormous concentration of wealth, the likes of Amov Kahlid, may have afforded material freedom but to be genuinely free bore too great a responsibility and required people to think independently about how to live rather than merely doing what others do. It required understanding and acceptance of the common good of humanity which some people simply referred to as God. God was seen as something superstitious and backward in the materialist world. People distanced themselves from such a notion, not realising that God was inherent in

all of humanity. The more they forgot about God, the more they felt a void which they had to fill with things. Adam didn't know what he was feeling inside could be described as God but he sought freedom to lead a good life, doing what he thought was right. He wanted to use his skill and passion to create a clean engine that would revolutionise transport and "make the world a better place" (he never mentioned this to anyone for fear of being laughed at). But he was becoming more and more unsure of his water-based engine idea. He wondered whether the future has already raced past him.

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He launched into a soliloquy about his career, highlighting how many celebrities he had met or been near.



short and pudgy man was standing on the sidewalk and waved to Adam. He had long black curly hair which was tied loosely into a low bundle of black frizz. "Hello!" he said as he got into the passenger seat. He sounded a bit tired. He was holding a doggy-bag that contained something with lots of chilli, and the spicy aroma tickled Adam's nostrils. The guy possessed a broad face and an open demeanour.

"Hi, how are you today?" Adam said.

"Hi, hi, I'm great thanks, how are you?" He seemed like someone comfortable with small talk, one of those fast and quick-witted ones, full of one-liners, nothing too controversial or thoughtful.

"Oh, can't complain," Adam replied lazily. The guy must have noticed Adam's accent, the drawn-out vowels reminiscent of the free space and air, and slower pace of life. "Where are you from? Are you from LA?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm from Ohio," Adam replied.

"I'm from Texas," he said.

Adam was glad to meet another immigrant to LA and felt somewhat of a connection.

"I just arrived a few months ago, so I'm still getting used to the roads around here" Adam said.

"Do you do this full time?" the Texan asked. "No, I just do this part time and I've got some engineering work that I do from home," Adam said, his standard line, phrased carefully to obscure the fact that the engineering work wasn't paid and therefore doesn't actually count for anything. "What do you do?" Adam said, aware that it was a cliché but he was keen to change the subject.

"I'm an actor," the Texan said, rather like an announcement, he paused for a reaction from Adam but as there was none coming he launched into a soliloquy about his career, carefully highlighting how many celebrities he had met or been near, as key indicators of his success. He didn't think about whether Adam was interested in celebrities as he didn't doubt for a second the adulation people had for them. He was always ready to promote himself as being successful. How other people thought of him was his *raison d'être* which had become all the more important since arriving in LA and being part of the industry. "I just came back from having lunch with one of my friends, he was recently in a movie with Nathan Bass."

The Texan paused, waiting for Adam to be impressed with the name. Adam had come to realise from the few times he drove these actors, the ones who didn't have their own chauffeur and could only afford cheap taxis driven by someone like Adam, that they could be sensitive creatures who needed reaffirmation. He wasn't aware of who Nathan Bass was, but from the Texan's tone, it sounded like someone Adam should be impressed with. So to be kind to the Texan's ego, Adam replied, "That's cool!" hoping he didn't sound disingenuous. "So you're an actor too?" Adam felt obliged to ask.

"Yeah I am," the Texan replied, appearing assertive with his shoulders back and chin up. Breathing in slightly as he spoke as people do to show that they are leading a busy life, "I've been in a few musicals, I was in that Cleopatra musical on Hollywood Boulevard as a supporting tenor, that was a lot of fun. I would say I'm more of a stage actor but I've been in a few TV shows and movies, I was in that TV show The Swamp acting against Abhikesh Rai (again, Adam said "Oh, OK," as if he knew who this person was), I was playing a terrorist and had this huge beard on," the Texan chatted on, pausing to catch his breath and nonchalant, "I was also in that movie with Cheryl Treep."

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“Oh really?” Adam said, this time more enthusiastically as it was a name he recognised. “What was she like?” Adam said, it was something people asked when celebrities were concerned.

“Oh, I never met her I was just in the same movie she was in.” the Texan said, matter-of-fact.

“Oh OK, what were you acting?” was all Adam could manage.

“I was a terrorist, I get a few of those roles I guess because of my colouring.” An awkward silence descended between them.

The Texan pointed to a concrete cube apartment block on their right. “See that building there? Remember that scene in The Sunflower Fields where Patrizia Romano talks to Chansik Yoon on a roof top? That was filmed on top of that building,” the Texan said with an air of pride, as if he was instrumental in the film somehow which made Adam ask, “Were you in that film as well?”

“No, I wasn’t in it, but my friend lives there,” the Texan said, feeling a bit tired and bored all of a sudden.

“Oh, OK” Adam said. He was afraid that his drab response might hurt the Texan’s ego, but he couldn’t bring himself to continue lying.

“Yeah you have to watch it! It’s a great film!” the Texan said. He thought it was pity how ignorant Adam was on the worldly matters of media and celebrity idolisation which was of great importance in his own mind. It was frustrating that Adam didn’t recognise the signs of his successes. This made Adam a useless person to the Texan: someone who wasn’t going to be helpful in his quest for success. He didn’t need to bother with being nice or friendly to him any more, so the Texan stopped talking.

Adam turned a corner into a narrow street. It became narrower to pretty much one lane and the asphalt ran out. Adam found himself at the end of the street on hardened dirt ground with various cars parked at random.

One car, an old GMC pick-up, looked like it had been dumped there. Its side mirror was broken and there were bits of rust on the body. The surrounding neighbourhood was made up of rundown concrete buildings, with peeling paints. Low hanging power lines zig-zagged across the skyline. It felt very “car jacky, gang shooting-y” a phrase he heard his cousin say to describe Chicago.

“The green line just ends here but this doesn’t seem like an address?” Adam said in a concerned voice. He was reluctant to drop off the Texan here.

“No, no, this is fine” the Texan pulled himself off the seat and got out, “Thank you, bye.” He hurried off in a duck-like walk on his short legs, without bothering to catch Adam saying bye.



JIN AN HIRST

I'm constantly thinking about "the right way to live" and why we are here. I see the divisions in society and the conflicts they create, and hope that we as human beings will eventually elevate ourselves to a bigger purpose and embrace love.

My inspirations come from old wisdom, the likes of Tolstoy and Emerson, and I believe we learn from the past as humanity ties us all together despite how much media and politics try to make us think otherwise.

I try to bring poetic qualities into my stories so certain paragraphs or sentences are crafted to create a particular feeling or resonance.

I'm also interested in technology and how it affects our language and connection with each other so my stories play on technological gadgetry that are actual or imagined and I dabble in science fiction at times.