

DEATH WISH IN TRAFFIC

By Michael Ventura

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It may have been the night I said to Mayer Vishner, "Every morning of my life I wake up angry and afraid."

"That," said Mayer, "is a terrific lead."

A "lead" is the first sentence, the sentence that leads the reader into an article. I probably wouldn't have remembered the line without a Mayer Vishner verdict of "terrific." Mayer is a precise editor who never idly employs a word. We were working for a paper in the place I call "a city by the sea," but Los Angeles is also a city by the desert, a city crisscrossed with fault lines where no one is more than 5 miles from an epicenter of a looming quake. The sea facing the desert with L.A. teeming in between, upon ground ever likely to shake -- that expresses all the extremities of the city's character. In those days most people I knew were trying to be as extreme as the city. Certainly we'd have been extreme anywhere, but Los Angeles gave us a fantastic arena for fucking up.

On the night in question Mayer was insisting that L.A. is "unredeemed."

A bit of context: This was one of those nights when Mayer and I were having a noisy sit-down with our editor-in-chief, whom we'll call simply "J." We were in a Mexican joint on Sunset Boulevard in Silver Lake (long before its gentrification), east of Hollywood. These sit-downs had a definite form. One of us (usually me) was very angry (usually at J); one of us (usually J) was upset and confused about the one who was angry; and one of us (usually Mayer) was trying to cool things down. But our roles rotated. This night, I think it was Mayer who was angry with J, while I tried to cool things down. In those days, you knew a situation was worse than bad when it fell to me to be the moderating influence.

Which leads to more context: Cut to the paper's first office, on a seedy stretch of Sunset Boulevard, on the second floor of what had been a residence. An editorial meeting. No one remembers precisely which meeting, *except* that it was the meeting I ended by throwing the chair. Actually, I threw the chair out the window. The window was closed at the time. But that may not be the truth. We lied a lot in those days, then believed and repeated our lies. Several stories came out of that meeting -- all agree as to the flying chair, none agree as to where it landed. There were lots of meetings at which that, or anything else, might have happened, and not with only me playing it crazy. To steal a usage from Jean Shepherd, our staff worked in "crazy" as sculptors work in clay. One of J's talents was finding such people and bringing out their worst as well as their best. (Not that he's to be blamed. We were quite happy to find an excuse to be at our worst.)

One final bit of context: As I wrote last time ["Letters at 3AM," Dec. 5], becoming a semifamous writer in Los Angeles stirred up all my terrors, and I did my best to mess myself up any way I could manage, except for the actual writing on the page. Doing stuff I should have been fired for. Or quitting -- so I could be wooed back, a prime prima donna, drama queen to the max. The Death-Wish Kid, except I was no kid. I was also having a grand time. As I wrote for *LA Weekly's* 30th Anniversary issue (Dec. 4), "The good times, bad times and stupid times weaved together so tightly that even the best

times were a little bad and a little stupid, and the worst were at least interesting.” Alas, “interesting” is lame word-choice; “flavorful” would have been better.

Cut back to the Mexican joint, circa 1985, three born-and-bred New Yorkers at odds in LA -- Mayer so much a New Yorker he’s never learned to drive. Our original intention was to have our sit-down, settle what had to be settled, then head to a Hollywood club where we’d get drunk while viewing a band formed by some of the young grunt-workers at the paper, thereby demonstrating that the paper’s elite respected its proletarians. As Mayer has said, “We got a little ahead of ourselves.” We were already drunk. Very drunk. And Mayer was saying that L.A. is “unredeemed.”

J told Mayer he’d dig L.A. if he wasn’t afraid to drive.

“I’m not afraid to drive. If you want, I’ll drive us to the gig.”

“Not in *my* car,” said I. Said J, “We’ll take mine; it’s a rental.”

And, just like that, a suggestion that hadn’t been at all serious became a plan. Drunk Mayer, who’d never driven in his life, would drive us to Hollywood.

J’s rental was a tin can, two seats in front, cramped in back, *and* it was a stick-shift. Mayer sat where he had never sat: in the driver’s seat. I sat beside him. Mayer remembers J: “Sprawled out in the back as if he’s on a couch – he puts his feet up on the back seat and he’s lying back there.” Also, come to think of it, a safer position in case we fuck up. (J was good at that.)

Mayer said to me, “I’ll work the pedals and the wheel. If there’s anything else that’s gotta work, you gotta work it.”

We were on a steeply sloped driveway. Mayer would have to navigate down the driveway, cross two lanes of eastbound Sunset Boulevard traffic, then turn left into the westbound lanes. I gripped the stick with my right hand, put my left on his thigh, just above his right knee, and kept it there, saying, “Do what I tell you when I tell you to do it.”

We started down the slope. As Mayer remembered, “We roll down to Sunset and I can feel the *car* sober up.” By now we knew this was nuts. Any of us could have said, “I’m not doing this,” and stopped it. But, as Mayer now says, “We’re good Americans! Once we commit to a stupid, harmful plan, we stick to it.”

We made it across the eastbound lanes, into the westbound. I kept talking, telling Mayer things like, “The pedals are more responsive than you think; you don’t have to press so hard.” My grip on his thigh tightened or loosened in sync with my instruction to press the gas pedal, ease off, hit the break *gently*, press the clutch, there, we’re in first, there, we’re in second, lots of traffic, keep in your lane, there’s a red light, foot off the gas, ease on the brake, press the clutch, I’m shifting to neutral, “I don’t understand,” “You don’t have to, just do what I say.” A metaphor for L.A.: Three fortysomething drunks in traffic on Sunset, and the guy who never drove is driving.

Mayer: “You were talking to me constantly, and I’ve told people it was like making love. You were very gentle and explicit.”

J popped up from the back seat, “Michael, what are you worried about? What are they going to do, take his license away for drunk driving?”

At which Mayer and I exchanged a look. The look said it all. J (as often happened) didn’t get it. We were endangering lives, strangers’ and our own. What we were up to was great fun and drastically idiotic. If it went wrong, we’d go to jail. If it went greatly wrong, innocents would pay for our stupid excess. Mayer and I were conscious that we’d

stepped over the precipice and were engaging in what was, in fact, an immoral and criminal act. *Yet we still didn't stop.* As for J, he seemed oblivious (which was not unusual). And he could always plea that he was in the back seat and not responsible. He was good at that. (And good at making stuff happen. He made my career happen. J was a package deal: opportunity, inspiration and insanity.)

Mayer, his one time behind a wheel, drove, oh, two miles on Sunset, at night, in traffic, all the way to Vine. I guided him to curbside at a bus stop, then took over and parked. We got drunker. The band bored me to death. I don't remember how I got home.

"I'll write it funny," I told Mayer earlier tonight. Always precise, he edited: "If you stop at funny you miss the point. We really did a bad thing, and we were lucky to get away with it."

It's a dangerous world and you never know, not really, who the most cruelly dangerous people are. Some nights it may very well be you.

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