

Encounters on the Exit Ramp by Optimus Outcast

On Saturday morning, there was a person waiting at the busy exit ramp of the freeway. The shoulders were hunched and a nervous, almost painful, rocking on the feet suggested to any passerby that this person had been occupying the space for quite some time, imploring for donations. This could have been another trivial occurrence of the day, another detail soon forgotten, except the person standing there — that was me . . .

As a development executive at a film studio, I am fortunate to work at a great company, surrounded by incredibly talented individuals. We make movies. Movies that everyone in the world wants to see (or at least, that's the goal). My life has a paycheck, a house, nice car, and people who love me and I can count on in any circumstance.

My biggest fear is that I lose my ability to see, to connect, to be in touch with the world around me. If this were to happen, I would not be able to do the thing I love the most: tell a story. Being able to transport an audience to worlds never experienced before or follow characters who have little hope of redemption is like charting maps through the mysteries of humanity. And what is the essential compass of every good story? A different point of view.

When I leave the office, the exit I usually take off the 101 Freeway is Laurel Canyon. It's one of the busiest intersections in Los Angeles with four entrance and exit ramps. Each ramp with three lanes of cars backing up to the freeway — that's about 25 or so cars. Frequently, there is a person in need at the exit, hoping to collect money from the clot of traffic. If I'm close enough to the person, I will grab some bills from my wallet and offer them as I'm rolling past on my way to some fun evening.

As this happened more and more — the person at the exit, my rolling past in my awesome little fortress — I started to wonder if I wasn't rolling through my life in the same manner. Was I staying in a bubble, waiting for the next distraction, and maybe missing the point of it all? While I was concerned with the night ahead, forging the next alliance, or forgetting the day over drinks and dinner, perhaps the very thing I sought was passing right by me. Or rather, I was too busy rolling past. It is said that a singular moment can live forever. But not if I was driving by it.

One morning while I was preparing for the day, the thought came to me that I should go to the exit ramp and stand in that spot. The thought didn't actually just come to me, it struck me down. I immediately conjured tens of reasons why I absolutely could do no such thing. But it was the kind of realization that, once it lands, looms at every synaptic pathway that one is trying to swerve around. It swelled inside of me in the way that one at first deals with loss, the consequences of choosing wrong over right, or falling in love — the

thing we try to deny only gives it more power.

That day during my lunch hour I went to a thrift shop in Burbank. It was packed with clothes and individuals—both seemed to have been worn a little bit too much. People were pushing through rows and rows of hangars, examining the white price tags hanging on strings. Next to me, a six-year-old girl asked her young mother to buy her a pink t-shirt but the mom shook her head. Can't afford it. I waited in a deep line to purchase my items: a man's t-shirt for \$1.99, flannel shirt for \$3.99 and pants for \$4.99. The clerk who rang up my purchase had plastic gloves on her hands, as if to touch all of the worn out-ness passing through the doors might be abrasive.

On Saturday, June 8th, I put on those weathered clothes from the thrift store. Then I went and stood at the Laurel Canyon exit ramp off the 101 Freeway. There was a cardboard sign in my hands that read, "Can you spare a moment? Blessings appreciated." The California Penal Code, Section 647c, states that it is a misdemeanor to "solicit alms" and, therefore my request for "blessings" instead of money. I wasn't sure what would happen if the police arrived.

In the spot I had seen those people, carrying out the sentence of circumstance, I now held my own sign and braced myself as the cars were coming towards me. The hot sun was making the world too bright. And, my throat was drying up with humiliation. Everyone was going to notice. They were going to make judgments.

But no one looked at me. No one looked at me. I stood there, non-existent. Surrounded by the world, yet, in complete isolation. Everything that was familiar was now wholly displaced by my being on this corner. I could have gone home at any moment and, yet, this location had just made an announcement to me: in a multitude of realities, we are all so close and yet so far away . . .

Three heavy lanes of cars crawled to a stop at the red light. I held my breath. My eyes searched the drivers' faces . . . it seemed as if the earth rotated several degrees, cruelly tilting the axis on which I usually walk with such confidence. I saw a window go down and a dollar bill come out. It was a young woman in her 20's. I slowly walked over, accepted the bill, thanked her softly, and went back to my spot. Waiting. The waiting was dreadful. Another three lanes of traffic was coming at me. And so it began, over and over.

I did not walk up to the folks in their cars. I just stood there. And, yet, it was clear that people were very uncomfortable with my presence on the exit ramp. In the lane closest to me, the first car would always pull just ahead, jutting into the opposing street, so that they would not be in tandem with my position. And the second car that was following up would stay at least one car length back. Eye contact was avoided at all costs. I cannot presume to know what other drivers were thinking, but it was certain that pulling up right next to me violated their sense of safety.

I learned to watch for the window that rolled down. It's funny how quickly one learns the rules of the corner. Who ever thought an exit ramp could have its own inherent reality? Any presumptive judgments that existed about the way others live were dissipating now that I was standing in the spot.

Suddenly, I had a deep reverence for the courage and strength of someone who simply chooses to survive. And, not until now, did I quite so appreciate the immense power of the smallest act of kindness. I have never been so grateful as I was in those occasional moments when someone would simply make eye contact and offer a smile.

The donations were few but they were offered in equal measure from men and women, both young and mature. More than one dude in his work truck offered pockets of change. A handsome young fella handed me the bills as if I was a good friend. And one cool guy, rocking out in his car, donated possibly because it was just that kind of day. Shuffling between lanes, headed back to my spot, I noticed that his bumper sticker read, "spiritual gangster." I wondered what he rocked on other days. One lady passed me three nutritional bars and a pamphlet about Christianity. Another SUV full of kids handed me a packet of pretzels from their back seat. A gentleman pointed his finger directly at me and emphatically shook it. Two girls stared at me for a prolonged moment, said something to each other, and busted out laughing. If I look at my situation in a certain light, I could consider all of these as donations of a sort.

And in regards to those who didn't look at me at all, I began to wonder why we need to feel so protected. Why is it so hard to make eye contact with someone in less fortunate circumstances? Why is it so scary just to look? We lock ourselves away in our fortresses with the openings sealed tight. A you-can-sleep-peacefully-at-night guarantee that the outer edges will be kept safely at bay. We will never be required to be uncomfortable. Our cars, our houses, our offices all offer these qualities. But, then if you think about, so does a coffin.

Maybe the scary part isn't just to look. The scary part is to look and then look away. A reminder that, in all of our professed capabilities, sometimes we are still helpless to change things. If we look away, is this our own cardboard sign that reads, "I have given up."? Maybe, for some, this isn't the case. Maybe the daunting question is, "Where do I begin?" In the wake of the experience on the exit ramp, I would have answered, it begins with a smile. Kindness is everything. And the effort to understand is evidence of our capacity to reach out. What kind of wealth would be possible if our financial accounts were measured by our deposits of understanding? Would this have an effect on the global economy? Okay, admittedly, this is a society that doesn't exist and a highly improbable, borderline ridiculous concept. Maybe we can make a science fiction movie about it. The story of us. I hope it will be good.

On Monday night, as I am heading home, the pit in my stomach grows as I approach the Laurel Canyon exit ramp. As I crest the hill, sure enough there is a person standing there. It is an older woman, long white hair, hunched over, with a sign. These two points of view simultaneously occurring could not have had a starker contrast. And neither was right or wrong. Just different. I didn't roll through the moment this time. I can't pretend to have all of the answers to the questions above. Or that I have one clue how to navigate the map of humanity. But I know that I want to see into the dark corners and the hard to reach places, unseal the windows, drive up the wrong end of a one-way street, admit that I'm afraid, and then make some impossible wishes.