

Eight

La Dispute

1978 - San Diego:

I'd just come out the other side of a relationship that blew up
I was angry, and disillusioned, and ultimately self-destructive.
I'd lost everything I believed in
I was as utterly, completely alone as I've ever been.
So I began going on walks.

I started taking late-
night walks around the San Diego suburb I was living in at the time.
I'd start walking early evening, and come back close to midnight, sometimes
later
Walking and thinking and chewing over what had gone wrong with my life.

One night, at Fourth and E Streets, I got mugged and beaten by a street gang
Sent me to the hospital with serious intimations of mortality.
When the ER techs asked what my religion was, I refused to answer.
I made my private peace with the universe,
Content with whatever was going to happen, live or die.

Then something happened.
I got angry.
I got angry because I still had stories to tell.
So I fought back.

It took two months to fully recover.
But two things came out of that incident.
First: I have no fear of death. None whatsoever.
Second: As soon as I was well enough, I started walking again.
Sometimes until 3 or 4 in the morning,
Through parts of town that made even street people nervous.

When people asked what I was doing out there that late at night,
the only answer I could give was, "I'm looking for something."
So I kept walking through some of the most dangerous parts of San Diego,
before it got cleaned up,
When it was still home to hookers and drunks and gangs

Finally, one afternoon, I came to the same areas I walked through at night
And I was struck by the dichotomy between that corner at night,
And the very same corner during the day.
In the daylight, there were businessmen and kids and clerks,
Eager to get home to dinner and TV and family.
Then, later, came the night shift - the lost people
emerging from shadows and beds of pain to walk the same streets
In search of fixes, money, and bars,
Gradually fading away with the dawn.

Two totally different worlds,
Sharing nothing but longitude and latitude.
There was the nation in the day, and the nation at night,
Existing side by side but each fleeing the other;
A daylight nation and a midnight nation.

I saw a country bifurcated by more than just the presence and absence of light,
But by lives cast aside and lost and uncared for;

The walked away and the thrown-away on one side, and on the other,
Those who pretended not to see them, because not seeing is easier.

And I saw someone forced to walk both sides of the metaphor,
To learn that the greatest cruelty is our casual blindness to the despair of
others,
That there but for the grace of whatever god you subscribe to goes any of us
.

And finally, I realized that I had found what I was looking for,
Without ever being quite sure what it was.
I found a story that would make my own life make sense again.
This story.

I still take long walks
And I still stop and talk to the people who stand at the corner
And wait for something to happen to them,
Who wait for money to fall into a hat or a cup,
Who wait for someone to recognize their pain.
Because the line between the midnight nation
And the place where I sit right now,
Writing these words, is thin and ephemeral and can be crossed in an instant.
Because the road to the midnight nation can be erased only through compassio
n.

I found my story, this story, on a hazy afternoon in 1978.
Now it's yours.
The keys to the midnight nation are in your hands.
What you do with them is up to you.

J. Michael Straczynski.
Sherman Oaks, CA
July 21st, 2002.