

LIGHT IN THE ASPHALT JUNGLE

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I had a dream
And I saw a city,
A city that rose up out of the crust of the earth.
And its streets were paved with asphalt,
And a river of dirty water ran down along its curbs.
I saw a city
And its people knew no hope.
They were chased and herded from place to place
by the churning jaws of bulldozers.
They were closed up in the anonymous cubicles
of great brick prisons called housing projects.
They were forced out of work by the fearsome machines,
And by the sparseness of their learning.
They were torn in many pieces by the hostile angers
of racial fears and guilt and prejudice.
Their workers were exploited,
Their children had no parks to play in,
No pools to swim in,
No space in crowded rooms to learn in,
No hopes to dream in.
And the people knew no hope.

Their bosses underpaid them.
Their landlords overcharged them.
Their welfare workers despised them.
Their churches deserted them.
And all of life in the city seemed dark and wild,
like a jungle,
A jungle lined with asphalt.
And the people sat in darkness.

II

I had a dream.
And I saw a city,
A city clothed in neon-lighted darkness.
And I heard men talking.
And I looked at them.
Across their chests in large, golden letters--written by
their own hands--
Across their chests was written the words:
"I am a Christian."
And the Christians looked at the city and said:
"How terrible... How terrible . . . How terrible"
And the Christians looked at the city and said:
"That is no place to live,
But some of our people have wandered there,
And we must go and rescue them.

We must go and gather them, like huddled sheep
into a fold;
And we will call it A City Church."

So they built their church.
And the people came,
And they walked past all the weary, broken, exploited,
dying men who lined the city's streets.
Year after year they walked past,
Wearing their signs: "I am a Christian."

Then one day the people in the church said:
"This neighborhood is too bad for good Christians.
Let us go to the suburbs where God dwells,
and build a church there."
And one by one they walked away, past all the weary,
broken, exploited, dying men,
They walked fast,
And did not hear a voice that said: ". . . the least of these
. . . the least of these . . ."
And they walked by, and they went out, and they built a church.
And the church was high and lifted up,
and it even had a cross.
But the church was hollow,
And the people were hollow,
And their hearts (their hearts?) were hard as the asphalt streets
of the jungle.

III

I had a dream.
And I saw a city,
A city clothed in bright and gaudy darkness.
And I saw more men with signs across their chests.
And they were Christians, too.
And I heard them say:
"How terrible. . . How terrible. . . How terrible.
The city is filled with sinners;
And we are supposed to save sinners
To save sinners
To save sinners
But they are so unlike us,
So bad,
So dark,
So poor,
So strange.
But we are supposed to save them
To save them,
To save them."

And one man said:
"Can't we save them without going where they are?"
And they worked to find a way to save and be safe
at the same time.
Meanwhile, I saw them build a church,
And they called it a Mission,
A City Mission;
And all the children came by to see what this was.
And the city missionaries who had been sent to save them
gathered them in.
So easy to work with children, they said,
And they are so safe, so safe.
And week after week they saved the children
(Saved them from getting in their parents' way on Sunday morning.)
And in the dream the City Missionaries looked like Pied Pipers,
with their long row of children stretched out behind them,
And the parents wondered if Christianity was only for children.
And when the missionaries finally came to see them,
and refused to sit in their broken chair,
and kept looking at the plaster falling,
and used a thousand words that had no meaning,
and talked about rescuing them from hell while they
were freezing in the apartment,
and asked them if they were saved,
and walked out into their shiny car, and drove off
to their nice, safe neighborhood--
When that happened, the parents knew:
This version of Christianity had no light for their jungle.
Then, soon, the children saw, too; it was all a children's game;
And when they became old enough they got horns of their own,
And blew them high and loud,
And marched off sneering, swearing,
into the darkness.

IV

I had a dream,
And I saw the Christians in the dark city,
And I heard them say:
"We need a revival to save this kind of people."
And they rented the auditorium,
And they called in the expert revivalist,
And every night all the Christians came,
and heard all the old, unintelligible, comfortable words,
and sang all the old assuring songs,
and went through all the old motions when the call was made,
Meanwhile, on the outside,
All the other people waited impatiently in the darkness
for the Christians to come out,
and let the basketball game begin.

V

I had a dream,
And I saw Christians with guilty consciences,
And I heard them say:
"What shall we do?
What shall we do?
What shall we do?
These people want to come to OUR church,
to OUR church.
And someone said:
"Let's build a church for THEM,
For THEM,
They like to be with each other anyway."
And they started the church,
And the people walked in.
And for a while, as heads were bowed in prayer,
they did not know.
But then, the prayers ended,
And the people looked up, and looked around,
And saw that every face was THEIR face,
THEIR face,
And every color was THEIR color,
THEIR color.
And they stood up, and shouted loudly within themselves:
"Let me out of this ghetto, this pious, guilt-built ghetto."
And they walked out into the darkness,
And the darkness seemed darker than ever before.
And the good Christians looked, and said,
"These people just don't appreciate what WE do for THEM."

VI

And just as the night seemed darkest,
I had another dream.
I dreamed I saw young men walking,
Walking into the heart of the city, into the depths of the darkness.
They had no signs, except their lives.
And they walked in the heart of the darkness and said:
"Let us live here, and work for light."
They said, "Let us live here and help the rootless find
a root for their lives.
Let us live here, and help the anonymous find their names."
They said,
"Let us live here, and walk with the jobless until they find work.
Let us live here, and sit in the landlord's office
until they give more heat
and charge less rent."

They said, "Let us live here,
and throw open the doors of this deserted church
to all the people of every race and class,
Let us work with them to find the reconciliation God has brought."
And they said, "Let us walk the asphalt streets with the
young people, sharing their lives,
learning their language,
playing their sidewalk, backyard games,
knowing the agonies of their isolation."
And they said, "Let us live here, and minister to as many men
as God gives us grace.
Let us live here,
And die here, with our brothers of the jungle,
Sharing their apartments and their pain."

And the people saw them,
And someone asked who they were,
And few really knew--
They had no signs--
But someone said he thought they might be Christians,
And this was hard to believe,
but the people smiled;
And a little light began to shine
in the heart of the asphalt jungle.

VII

Then in my dream I saw the young men,
I saw the young men and women,
Those who worked in the city called Chicago,
Cleveland,
Washington,
Atlanta,
And they were weary,
And the job was more than they could bear alone,
And I saw them turn,
turn and look for help,
And I heard them call:
"Come and help us,
Come and share this joyful agony, joyful agony,
Come as brothers in the task,
Come and live and work with us:
Teachers for the crowded schools,
Doctors for the overflowing clinics,
Social workers for the fragmented families,
Nurses for the bulging wards,
Pastors for the yearning flocks,
Workers for the fighting gangs,
Christians.

Christians who will come and live here,
Here in the heart of the darkness,
Who will live here and love here,
that a light might shine for all.

Come."

I heard them call,

And I saw the good Christians across the country,
And their answers tore out my heart.

Some said, "There isn't enough money there."

Some said, "It's too bad there. I couldn't raise
children."

Some said, "I'm going into foreign missions,
where things aren't quite so dark."

Some said, "The suburbs are so nice."

Some said, "But I like it here on the farm."

Some said,

Some said . . .

And one by one they turned their backs
and began to walk away.

At this moment my dream was shattered
by the sound of a great and mighty whisper,
almost a pleading sound;

And a voice said:

"Come, help me, for I am hungry in the darkness."

And a voice said:

"Come, help me, for I am thirsty in the darkness."

And a voice said:

"Come, help me, for I am a stranger in this asphalt
jungle."

And a voice said, "Come, help me,
for I have been stripped naked,
naked of all legal rights and protection of the law,
simply because I am black in the darkness."

And a voice said:

"Come, help me, for my heart is sick with hopelessness
and fear in the darkness."

And a voice said:

"Come live with me in the prison of my segregated
community, and we will break down the walls together."

And the voices were many,

And the voice was one,

And the Christians knew whose voice it was.

And they turned,

And their faces were etched with the agonies of decision.

And the dream ended.

But the voice remains,

And the choice remains,

And the city still yearns for light.

And the King who lives with the least of his brothers
in the asphalt jungle
yearns for us.