

You Are Here

You want a bite to eat before you meet Karen and Donald in Westwood. The nice thing about your neighborhood is that there are so many fast food places within walking distance. Your mother always laughs at you for calling this a neighborhood. No place in LA is a neighborhood like the one you grew up in, where you knew all the neighbors. Here, you know all the kids who work at McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King and Hot Diggity Dog.

So you walk to Taco Bell, only superficially noting the group of people clustered together under one of the orange metal umbrellas, clustered around a round, rusted white table, at the edge of the outdoor dining area. Ten or twelve people sitting and staring at the service windows of the Taco Bell.

You ignore them and walk to the order window, thinking only of a Macho Burrito and a Diet Pepsi. At each of the four windows, a young employee stands, staring out at you. In their plaid uniforms and name tags with the chipper message, "Try Taco Light!" they look like the goofy painted ducks at a shooting gallery, set up straight and even and identical. They all stare at you and a voice from behind you, from the crushed group of people, is going "psst, psst." You approach the window and the girl behind the counter, you know her as Suzie, is very slightly, almost imperceptibly shaking her head no. As you get nearer, you see her eyes are damp. Big brown eyes and full of tears . . . a tear slides down her cheek as you open your mouth to order.

A motion catches your eye in the back of the Taco Bell. A red knit hat . . . no, a ski mask. You forget about ordering and realize that there is a man in a red ski mask holding a

gun against the head of a teenage, skinny, plaid-clad boy who is frantically trying to stuff dollar bills into a white Taco Bell paper bag. Ever so slowly you back up. The ski-mask man is not looking toward the window and you inch backward until you become part of the group at the table.

A heavy-set woman in a purple floral polyester blouse whispers at you.

It's a stick-up."

This you know. This you finally figured out. You watch the stand, gaping at the bright interior, as fascinated with the scene as the ten or twelve people around you. Fascinated to see t.v.-like action right here in real life. The Taco Bell kids up in the front stare back at you, mute fear in their faces, yet they look so perky in their uniforms, it is hard to connect them with the strange drama behind them.

The boy opens another door, shakes his head and closes it. The ski-mask man shakes the boy's shoulder, waves his gun as if he is unhappy. The boy's mouth forms an "O" and even from this distance, you can all see his distress. It is obvious he is pleading. Perhaps there is no more money. Perhaps there is a safe he cannot open. Whatever it is, the ski-mask man is angry and the boy is visibly shaking.

Purple-Polyester says to you, "There's something wrong."

"He looks mad," says a very blonde girl, peering over your shoulder.

Her boyfriend, fashionably crew-cutted and dressed in bright surf shorts, puts his arm around her shoulders and says, "How much money did he think there'd be at a Taco Bell?"

A man in a grey business suit says, "If he wanted a lot of

cash he picked the wrong place.”

“I think . . .” you start to speak but there is a loud explosive noise and you see the young boy’s face disappear into a mass of red, just before he slips out of your sight to the floor. Purple-Polyester grabs your right hand. Blondie gasps in your ear and puts her hand on your shoulder. You reach to the side and grasp the elbow of the business man and feel the deep trembling that started in you is also shaking through him. There is a general compression of the ten or twelve bodies around the white table as everyone pulls in trying to make contact, get reassurance, share fear.

The ski-mask man turns to look at the service windows. He holds up his gun and fires. One of the boys facing outward drops. He fires again and Suzie, the girl with tears in her eyes, the girl who warned you away, she drops and you cry out, “No!” The gun turns so that you can look right down its barrel, though you are maybe fifty feet away. As a group, as a mass of skin, bones, breath and fear, everybody falls to their knees at exactly the same second that the gun fires inside the Taco Bell and milliseconds later, you hear an odd metallic noise and you realize the orange umbrella is quivering, reverberating, shaking the pole and shaking the white table that all of you are clinging to, and the reverberations go right through your already trembling bodies.

The metallic ringing noise is drowned out by distant sirens that hurry nearer. You huddle together, until the business man strains his neck and looks, then stands up.

“He’s gone,” the business man says, and slowly, helping each other, the rest of the group stands up. Purple-Polyester is still clutching your hand, and you pat it.

The two remaining Taco Bell employees are hysterical.

One is screaming in short bursts, echoing the siren that you can hear in the distance. The other is draped across the counter, her body shaking as she cries.

You and the others move forward to the windows. You see over the counter and realize that the brown and red thing on the floor is the girl you had almost spoken to. You back up a few steps.

In no time, the police are jumping out of black and white cars and running past you. They swarm around the taco stand, some running down the alley, others gathering inside and hovering over the kids on the floor.

One officer comes to your group and asks if you will all stay for a few minutes so they can take reports. You say yes.

You go back and sit at the white table. Purple-Polyester, Blondie and her boyfriend sit around it with you.

"I can't believe it," says Blondie, shaking her head and crying silently.

"He just blew 'em away, bang, bang, bang, just like that," says her boyfriend. His face is white and shocked and he looks as he must have looked when he was ten years old. A child, really, not a grown-up at all.

"Why kill those kids, why?" says Purple. "It's not their fault, it's not their business. They can't help it if there isn't any money."

You all agree. Purple holds your hand on top of the table, and Blondie takes your other hand. Her boyfriend is wrapped tightly around her, his head against her shoulder.

The police are busy and you talk quietly with these three people for about half an hour. You re-live it over and over. Blondie says, "I can still see the kid, shaking his head." You say, "I could tell he was apologizing, that he was pleading." The boyfriend says, "The way he raised his

gun." Purple says, "The way the umbrella shook when the bullet hit it." You all agree that when he turned the gun toward your group, you each thought you would die. You swear that you looked down the barrel, that you knew it was pointed at you, that you could see the bullet in the chamber, the finger tightening, the slow cruel heartbeat in the chest behind the hand behind the gun. You knew you were dead. "If you guys hadn't pulled me down with you..." you shake your head, and the hands holding yours squeeze and console.

The police finally talk to you. They talk to you all together, then talk briefly to you alone. Finally, they say you can leave. You go over and hug Purple-Polyester. You hug Blondie and her boyfriend together as if they were one person. You walk up the street, heading back to your apartment. The last thing you need is a movie, so you call Karen and beg off. Instead of the movie, you spend the night watching stupid sit-coms on tv. You long for the company of Purple, or Blondie and the boyfriend. You want to discuss this one more time. You've shared something with them that you never shared with Karen and Donald, and even though they are your best friends, they can't possibly know you or help you like Purple and Blondie and boyfriend. You think, "This must be what it's like in war, this must be what it's like after a plane crash." Sleep overcomes need, and you toss fitfully the whole night on the couch.

Two weeks later you walk past the Taco Bell. A heavy-set woman in red pants and a blue sweatshirt is at the white table, looking at you from under the orange umbrella. She eats a taco, holding it carefully in two hands. You wonder, "Is that Purple?" But her face is not clear in your memory and you walk on past.