

THE CITY OF COMMERCE (noir)

by Frances Roberts *LA Noir, Omnilore*, 7/23/14

It was a day like any other day in San Pedro—dishwater dull, without much of anything in the way of consequence. Somewhere the Croatians were inventing invectives against the Serbs in town, and the Serbs were lying low inventing counter insults against the Croats, but wisely not showing their gobs in public. At least that day they hadn't as yet broken into anything that made noise in the streets. As for me, I was trying to stay in bed as long as I could, attempting to ignore my Omni class assignment that was hanging over my head like a ton of yesterdays' hangovers.

We were to research all the towns in L.A. and report on them. I got the City of Commerce, for cryin' out loud. Commerce, where business is never what you think of as commerce. The City is very full of it, certainly, but it's the kind where people win and lose poker money with an attractive rapidity—usually my kind of town. Only I wasn't carrying at that point: I think I must have had a buck three eighty tops. I needed to scrape up a few greenbacks to finance the outing, so I went to my pal Joey's car next door where I knew he kept some cash in that little box under the dashboard. I could always pay it back later, right?

His stash was pretty stingy with its contents, but at least I got enough to get the few gallons I would need to head east and later get back to the harbor. So I packed some snacks in case of roadside starvation—you know, a couple cans of soda, some stale corn chips, and an aging burrito I thought was still okay from the fridge. I put on my baseball cap facing backwards with the sparkly "Curves" logo on it, stepped on the gas and headed for the Vincent Thomas Bridge and the Long Beach to the 90 aiming east to the big 5.

Commerce was all-new unexplored territory to me, but I was determined to sink my teeth into its history and get the smell of the place so it would seep through whatever I found to say about it. I could sense the approach of delicious sleaze. It fit in totally with my grunge-seeking mood. I had been in Las Vegas and Laughlin—how much lower could the City of Commerce go?

When I got there, I had no trouble finding the Crowne Plaza Hotel, where I knew my destination lay. It's so big that the town looks too small for it. The casino where the action would be was not only next door, but attached to the hotel. I had my old Nikon camera (who can afford one of those fancy I-phones?) and it was ready for whatever prey I could focus on there. I wondered if there'd be any in-house dicks hanging out to prevent my getting the goods on the place, so I hid the camera in my tote bag. Then I opened the front door to the flashing lights and pounding racket. It sounded good to my ears.

Well, the rest is history. I got a lot of compromising shots of the place and was doing okay, until a couple of big swarthy guys came gallumphing toward me, obviously working for the management. They swooped in and lifted me up by the elbows to escort me out. It was all I could do to persuade them to let me keep the camera, but I guess they figured I was too small potatoes—after all, I’m only 5’2 and 125 pounds dressed—so they dumped the camera with me when I landed on the sidewalk outside the front door. Unfortunately, it popped open, ruining my shots. Then, they gave me some advice I couldn’t ignore, so I got back in the old dented Camry and hightailed it out of Commerce, glad to be headed home in one piece. I did check to see if anybody was tailing me but if they were, I lost them on the 110.

And that’s my report on The City of Commerce.

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