

# THE JOURNEY

## A STORY OF LOS ANGELES BY ADAM ENGSTRÖM

*There in the distance I could see it: the city I had tried so hard to make great again, shining brightly as I was leaving the desolate, dark outskirts behind.*

*The following video message by Carlos Sanchez recorded on April 18th, 2061 has been confiscated and banned from online platforms on the account of its anti-environmental nature.*

*The video recording cuts in on a middle-aged man, staring blankly into the camera.*

“Ever since I was a teenager, I had always cared deeply about the environment. This was most likely an effect of the age I grew up in. I mean, hell, I was not the only one. There was only so many documentaries I could watch about how the polar caps were melting or news reports about how we were polluting as a species before I had had enough and felt that something had to be done. It was a great time, this environmental awareness had grown over the years and was finally reaching and becoming the opinion of a large part of the general public. My friends and I were enjoying seeing something finally happening.

The city was finally sorting itself out. It was great to at last get a decent public transport system here, I felt as if I could go anywhere. I felt free. Of course there was still lots of places where these new bus and rail lines did not go. For these places I still had to drive or hitch a ride from someone else. As much as I hated riding in these gas-guzzlers and felt somewhat disappointed in myself when doing so, there was just no other way.

Even if loads of us were enjoying these new pieces of infrastructure, there were still cars everywhere (I mean it is still LA after all). No matter what the city did the number of cars would just not go down. Though I did not like it, I had come to terms with the fact that LA would never be car free. As much as I loved the idea of the city following suit of other cities and making areas car free zones (I mean just imagine lounging around on the middle of the Boulevard), I knew it was never going to happen.

These endeavors the city had been involved in had raised awareness greatly however and we could sense that people were starting to believe in LA’s ability to become green. This all snowballed and soon we had Charles Tyson and his “green team” running for office. His promises of a carbon free, zero footprint Los Angeles was something we could all get behind. Of course I got caught up in this and helped by campaigning and doing things such as picking litter from the side of freeways with some of my friends.

I met Tyson on several occasions. He was a strong-willed and charming character so full of ideas and passion for the environment. It was safe to say that I liked him from the very start, and he seemed to like me too. He said he wanted me to become part of his green team if he was voted into office. I told him that my grades were not the best but he said it did not matter and he was certain he would be able to find me something to do.

Tyson led a very aggressive campaign. He was criticized by the other running members for being naïve. That his agenda was just not feasible. He argued that big changes were needed and everyone would have to make sacrifices in the name of the environment. We should have been more careful with him but everyone was just too swept up in the green movement. What we wanted more than anything was change. Man, did things change.

Tyson ended up winning, by a slim margin sure but what did that matter? LA was going green!

This was such an exciting time, so much promise. My friends and I would be out celebrating many nights during this time, getting into talks about the endless possibilities for the city we loved so much.

Changes could be seen soon enough. He actually created a couple of car free zones in the center of town which was amazing. It caused some congestion at certain points but that was the point, a way of punishing the drivers for using this form of transport. Hating cars, I was all for it. This change got for the most part a positive response. Same could not be said about some of his other endeavors. It had been evident that LA could not maintain some of its consumer behavior. One of the more visible changes was on the allowance of water. Soon enough all pristinely kept lawns around the city were reverting back to a dry brown. Things like this was hard for a lot of people but as Tyson had said before “We all need to make sacrifices for the environment”.

These types of minor changes and adjustments went on for months without much of a hitch and Tyson’s stock rose. He won over many doubters and people opposed as reports were coming in of pollution levels dropping in downtown areas and water availability seemed to have stabilized. The environment was on every person’s mind and we felt that by following Tyson, there was not anything we could not do. It was safe to say that he had made himself a great platform to build upon. He soon announced that it was time for Los Angeles to undergo some big changes to truly become green.

To achieve this, he set his sight on the cars. The object that had shaped the city and the symbol of everything wrong with it. To combat the car he introduced a law stating that all old “dirty” cars were now illegal to drive and had to be replaced with the new ultra-efficient models.

I graduated high school around this time and was having a slight existential crisis. All my friends were going to go off to college while I was left, alone, without any real plans. I had neither the grades nor money to go anywhere. This was about the time Tyson contacted me, he had not forgotten me. He wanted me to be part of his new task force in charge of enforcing this new Clean Car Act. I could not believe my luck! Not only had I secured a job, I was also finally help rid the city of, in my opinion, its greatest blight. I was going to help make this city great.

So here we are, 30 years later. Still stuck at the same job.... maybe not for much longer. I had had so much optimism for my work, now I cannot even look myself in the mirror. I do not like the man I see there.

I thought I was part of the fight against our old environmentally destructive ways but all I have become is a glorified repo man. Tyson’s plan to get rid of all the old cars around the city was effective but problematic to say the least. The only allowed cars were of a very new technology and therefore very expensive. Most people could not afford them. The city’s government saw this as a bonus, “Oh perfect, in that case they will use our new and expanding public transport system!” This was all well and good, except for the fact that this system was nowhere near large enough and it was just not expanding at a fast enough rate to meet this new demand. As a government employee, I had been given one of these new cars so I did not have to use public transport. Thank God. Every day when driving to work I would pass a massive queue at every stop. It could get pretty ugly at times, for many it was a daily fight to manage to get on a ride. Many were not successful in making it to work every day. My job consisted of driving out to people’s homes and take their old cars from them. It was pretty difficult, basically condemning these hardworking citizens to having to endure some hardships as a result. I was able to convince myself however that it was for the greater good. We all had to make sacrifices to save the environment. Mind you, I had not really had to make any yet.

Things seemed to start improving after a while. But then we were hit by the recession, hard. Still have not recovered fully. This is when things really started hitting the fan. All funding for the public transport expansion ceased, which created all kinds of problems. With money tight and jobs hard to come by, people could not afford

to miss any days off work. Those who could had already left the city. At work we started noticing that those who could not afford to leave the city, started reverting back to their old ways, using cars.

They knew it was illegal but that is how desperate they were, they were willing to risk it. To combat this, Tyson beefed up our task force. We were repossessing cars at an unimaginable rate. For every car taken it got harder and harder for me to carry on. People would be breaking down and pleading for us not to take their cars away, knowing that the consequences of this would be grave. We were ruining their lives, taking peoples' jobs and leaving them deserted far from the center of town with no way of getting there anymore. Without cars, the people were left stranded. The city had become too big to travel without a car.

People started doing one of two things. Either they moved to just outside the city limits, where cars were allowed forming little enclaves or they tried their luck leaving their old homes and moving closer into the city. Most of the latter group did not succeed in finding a new place and ended up living on the street. The old issues of downtown LA being full of homeless people was nowhere near anything witnessed now. The streets were packed but still relatively safe but as we continued repossessing cars more and more people started flooding in and life became even more difficult and soon violence and crime seeped in. Even though there was so many bad things happening out in the wide open Tyson did not care. Sure many citizens were suffering but the city was moving in the right way in terms of environmental sustainability. He still thought however that the homeless were an eyesore that he wanted to get rid of.

Tyson had the police department start relocating them, first during operations under the cover of night but after some time they started running during the day and becoming more aggressive. He stated that while living on the streets, these people were littering and releasing harmful emissions from burning anything they could find to keep warm. If they were not going to abide by the city's new environmental laws and not embrace and conform to this environmental mindset, they did not deserve to stay. They were harming the city and standing in the way of progress and most people agreed with him, he had the support. I could see the police load hoard after hoard of citizens onto busses and ship them away to just outside the city limit to fend for themselves. They set up little colonies there, to be honest I am not too sure about the happenings out there. I tried to avoid thinking about that area and instead tried to focus on the positives of all these changes. We were all experiencing difficulties and changes in our lives, some more than others, but at least it was for the greater good.

As the city decreased in population by quite a bit, it changed a lot. As people started moving out, those who could afford to stay cast their old suburban lifestyles to the side and moved more centrally. The city became a dense little place. Large parts of the city had been left deserted. Tyson spun this as a positive, seeing it as a blessing. He did not have to dilute the city funds to improve the entire city. Instead he could concentrate all funding on the tiny portion of city where people lived.

This area underwent huge changes, barely recognizable from the city of old. Tyson lived up to the changes he had promised. It is in many ways now a little haven, a utopia.

It is great, and you can tell that the rest of the population feels likewise.

It is kind of ironic that most of the people still here are here because of the fact that they could afford the new cars. Most of these cars have now either been let go of by their owners or just sit in parking lots gathering dust. Who can blame them when the transit lines run so smoothly? With nearly no cars on the streets the bikes have taken over, making the most of the beautiful LA weather. People seem to be outside more, I know I am. At every opportunity, I will take my wife Sara and daughter Jodie out on a bike ride or go to the beach. It is a great place to

raise a child, with the city being virtually crimeless and with such little traffic we feel safe for Jodie to play out on the street and explore her surroundings, something that was unheard of when I was growing up.

Life has been pretty good here but one can see the “outside” looming in the distance. I have heard many stories and though most of them sound fake, there is probably some truth in them. With us having been in a large drought the past few years and us using water sparingly, the abandoned areas of town have become a dustbowl. In the city we built barriers to ensure these sandstorms would not reach us but out in the outskirts I do not think they were so lucky. I am not sure how they are dealing with them out there. On certain nights I would be looking out towards the horizon and spot clouds of smoke, apparently certain areas were being ravaged by massive forest fires.

We knew life was tough out there. What really bothered me was the lack of empathy shown by the people living in the city to these outsiders.

Politicians labeling them as dirty and against progress, an opinion commonly held by the population. People just feel so self-righteous as if they are the chosen ones, making the world a better place. This type of thinking is only strengthened by the daily pollution updates shown on the big screens around town or received on our phones daily confirming that we are moving in the right direction. We can not forget that we have been doing it at the expense of the outsiders. Those who did not experience old LA do not realize this however, and when learning about the anti-outsider material Jodie was being taught in school I was truly bothered. I felt I had to teach her the real story about the outside, but truth was I did not know much either. That is why, today after work, I decided to go to the outskirts for the first time and see firsthand what life, that I had been partly responsible in creating, was like.

While working, I had always managed to suppress my feelings of guilt when taking peoples’ cars, I was able to distance and convince myself that I was doing the right thing. During my visit today it all came out. After having done my days work I had gotten in my car and headed for the city limits. We are nearing the finishing stages of repossessing all cars, who knows what will happen to our department after that. We will probably be cast aside, like those who did not fit into the mold of the new city previously. Though his legacy still lives strong, Tyson is no longer in office so I cannot count on any favors from him. Anyways, so I was driving through the suburban desert, further from the city than I had ever been. What soon struck me was how dusty it was, as I was driving I could only see a couple of yards ahead of me.

Soon I could see the outskirts appearing before my eyes. What a dump, there was just no other way of putting it. Garbage flying around everywhere and houses (if I can even call them that, more like shacks) in such disrepair. I barely saw anyone when driving around, it was almost like a ghost town. I drove for as long as I could until the road ended, blocked off by some broken down cars. I continued my journey on foot. It was not long after being outside that I started catching a cough. The dust was just too heavy. I passed by an old roadside bar which with its neon sign still lit seemed to be open. The place was a real hole, with the windows boarded shut allowing no daylight to seep in. I sat down and ordered a drink. I tried to start a conversation with the bartender but he was giving me nothing. In fact, I could sense the whole bar staring me down, letting me know I was not welcome here.

I was just about to admit defeat and head back home, when a man came up to me. He recognized me and I him. He was one of the people whose car I had taken, maybe a year ago. He had stood out from the other thousands of people I had done the same to. Unlike so many others, breaking down and blaming me he had just stood there calm and understanding as we took his car away. I panicked as I did not know how he was going to react but again he was calm. We got to talking and he told me a little about life here in the outskirts.

Life had been hard out here. So many people in a place without any jobs, fighting for survival. With no schools or police, there had been constant warfare for control of the neighborhoods, with these gangs having control of all supplies coming into the area and making a massive profit off of the people there. This was a couple of years back now however and they were nowhere to be seen. With the dustbowl, these younger people had all set out to look for greener pastures elsewhere. Apparently, some areas within the city limits had been reclaimed secretly. All that was left were the old and weak. I was in complete disbelief as he was telling me all this. How did we back in the city not know about what had been happening in the outskirts? "Truth is", he said, "no one around the country cares. We are "un-environmental", there is no place for people like us anymore".

This journey and encounter had shook me to the core but it only got worse. I had heard enough and wanted to go. Before I went the man asked me to come with him, there was something he wanted me to see. He gave me a cloth to wrap around my face to cover my mouth and then we stepped outside. He took me about two blocks of derelict shacks away before there in front of me stood a field stretching as far as the eye could see of crosses made of whatever makeshift material available planted into the ground. He explained that this was graveyard from the first few years. Since then the number of dead people had just become too great and they had resorted to mass graves instead. It was not getting any better either with the dust around, people were dropping like flies. It took a while before this all sank in but when it did I broke down completely. This was my fault! I had sent these people here! I had killed them! The man tried to console me and tell me it was not my fault. He wanted me to see it to fully understand what Tyson had done, a man so many of us had looked up to. He told me "Tell our story, make sure the world sees these eco-cities for what they really are." I was so distraught, I hugged the man and gave all the money I had on me whilst tears ran down my cheeks.

I hopped in my car and raced home, not thinking straight. Even though the man had told me it was not my fault I could not stop from blaming myself. Flashing before my eyes were the thousands of faces whose cars I had taken away. It had finally hit me after thirty years, I had ruined these people's lives. There in the distance I could see it: the city I had tried so hard to make great again, shining brightly as I was leaving the desolate, dark outskirts behind. As I got within city limits my phone regained signal. Three missed calls from Sara and a text saying that Jodie and she were over at some friends for dinner.

So here I am, sat all alone with my thoughts. The more I think about it all, the more convinced I am that I cannot go on. I cannot do more harm to any more people. I just hope that this message manages to reach out so people of this city finally see the truth. I am sorry Sara and Jodie, I hope that one day you will be able to understand and forgive me."

*The video cuts out. Minutes later, a loud bang rings out across the neighborhood.*