

“In the Land of Roses”

A Memoir

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Part I. Silver Lake (July 27th, 2013)

Los Angeles is a bizarre, sprawling mass of apartment buildings and restaurants. Of houses clinging to steep hillsides, held up by wooden posts. Of endless traffic and a faint, smoky haze that forever blots out the horizon. Simply put, it's a complete culture shock for a Midwesterner such as myself. Being there for the first time, I felt a little like what I think Nick Carraway must have felt in *The Great Gatsby*: living alone in West Egg, feeling like a foreigner in his own country. During the four-day period in which we took in the sights and attempted to absorb even the smallest fraction of L.A. culture, I kept on thinking about how, even though we were technically still in the United States, a person from a West Virginia coal mining town would have no clue what to do in Los Angeles. Or a person living in the Mississippi River delta. Or a person living in rural Montana. In the end, it's just a very....*different* place.

As such, I found myself having breakfast with a group of Midwesterners in a "typical" L.A. breakfast place. I say "typical" because, having been there twice now, naturally I'm an *expert* on all things L.A. The walls were sparsely decorated, our waitress was a kooky hipster, the coffee was organic, fair trade, free range, open sourced, etc. Oh , and the restaurant was also across the street from a large Church of Scientology building.

There were five of us huddled around the table: Devin, Brandon, and myself (three proud marching band alumni and close friends ever since) and Aaron and his friend from home (neither of them were in band but we didn't hold it against them). Aaron's friend was the only one of us currently living in L.A. and, although he was from Michigan, he has already adopted the kind of lifestyle I suppose you must have when living in Hollywoodland. He was currently producing a web series and working on some scripts for kid's TV shows that he was pitching to various networks. In Michigan, we would say he was *unemployed*. Here, he was a *creative freelancer*. Our conversation brushed on several topics: what living in L.A. was like, how do you make it in the film business, how long until you give up and move back home, and so forth.

One of the topics we brushed on was of the utmost importance: what were we doing that day. We had already seen a myriad of different things around L.A.: the Getty Museum, Griffith Park, Santa Monica, the Chinese Theater. We were tourists after all. And we were doing tourist things. I was there in the first place because I had always wanted to go, and so I did. Never before in my life was I able to say something like that and have the means to back it up. One of the perks of having a career, I suppose.

There was one thing I had on my mind, one thing that I felt very strongly that I needed to see during this trip; something that I felt that if I didn't see it, the trip would

seem incomplete. Therefore, I nudged it into the conversation. Somewhere between some discussion about the problems with children's television and eating my pancakes that came with a side of rhubarb (I'm not kidding) I just floated it out there, attempting to be casual and making a vague suggestion, but secretly feeling a burning desire deep within. Mercifully, it stuck.

So, after paying our check to our waitress, (I think her name was Starfire or some nonsense like that), we piled into the car, plugged the address into a smartphone, and began the crawl across L.A. We were in Silver Lake, a neighborhood nestled between Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles, rather nondescript in my opinion, but apparently a very hip area, according to our L.A. webisode producer/tour guide. L.A. reminded me a lot of suburban Detroit, in that these cities blended into each other without any discernable features. Why was it called Silver Lake? There's a reservoir there. Sounds picturesque, right? No, it's a slab of concrete filled with water. There are no lakes in Los Angeles. Anyway, we meandered through several intersections and eventually made it on to the highway, bound for our destination. And, for the first time on the entire trip, it seemed, traffic was moving rather smoothly.

By this point in the trip, we as a group figured we had figured out exactly why there was so much traffic in L.A. It had something to do with how many restaurants there seemed to be, and how they all seemed to be packed at all times of the day. You see, people got up in the morning, went out to breakfast, then drove to brunch on the other side of town, then to the beach in the afternoon with their laptop or tablet to do some "work." But they couldn't stay there long, because they had dinner reservations at a place that was at least a half an hour away (and that was with good traffic), and then after that they went out for late night cocktails, then skipped going to bed, because it was time to drive to breakfast again. So, I guess we caught traffic at the right time, while everyone was at brunch but hadn't finished yet. As such, we zoomed through the various enclaves of LA, while gray clouds hung low; spitting occasional short bursts of rain on us as we proceeded. As we wound our way through the hills, we eventually found ourselves exiting into a grove of low, tropical trees leading down into a valley. Houses were nestled in shady glens, tucked away from view by large gates, shrubs, or inconspicuous walls. It seemed like a nice place to live, certainly not as densely packed as some of the places we had encountered so far.

Moments later, the road opened up into a massive park and, across on the other side, rising out of the ground, supported by man-made mounds of earth and concrete beams, was IT.

I've seen my share of famous landmarks in my lifetime: the U.S. Capitol Building, the White House, the Grand Canyon, Big Ben, Stonehenge, the Hollywood sign, and so forth. Each time, I have the same feeling. I first have a tremendous urge to (I'm not kidding) rub

my eyes to make sure what I'm seeing is real. I think the experience of seeing something so famous is just so surreal that the mind cannot fully process the experience. Seeing the Rose Bowl for the first time was a similar experience. However, there was something different about seeing this particular landmark. The difference stemmed from how I would have reacted to seeing this landmark five years ago. Five years ago I would have said "So what?" I probably would not have even cared if we saw it during the trip.

So what happened during those five years to change my perception?

The Michigan State University Spartan Marching Band.

I was in marching band in high school. I loved every second of it. But I was not in band to support the football team. Football games were a mild annoyance that prevented me getting an adequate night's sleep the night before a competition on Saturday. We usually talked through them, occasionally having our conversation interrupted because the team scored a touchdown and we had to play the fight song. We were given a break during the third quarter, the *entire* third quarter. Truthfully, I don't even think I understood the rules of football, or cared to learn them.

Given this information, my eighteen-year old self would have laughed at my twenty-five year old self for getting this excited about seeing a football stadium. Being in a college marching band changed that perception greatly. In so many words, I was *conditioned* to care about football. The value system in college band was extraordinarily different from that in high school band. The football team was peripheral to the greater scheme of the high school marching band experience. In college it was everything. Like Pavlov's dogs, I was trained to get excited every time the team was doing well. Over the course of four years in the SMB, I developed a profound emotional connection with the university and the success of the football team in particular. During my time at the university, I watched the football team transform from one of the laughingstocks of the conference to one of the most respected in the Big Ten. Every season was capped with a trip to a bowl game, a coveted prize for the football team and members of the band alike.

And the Rose Bowl? It was legendary, elite, historic, a far-off dream that any Spartan faithful pined for like an imaginative, wild, pie-in-the-sky fantasy. For members of the band, it meant TV coverage during the halftime performance (unheard of at any other bowl game), a national audience, a fancy new bowl game patch that you proudly displayed on the chest of your band jacket, and, of course, making that famous turn on to Colorado Boulevard in the Rose Parade. In short, it was the apex of college band geek-dom. And, during my four year tenure, the dream of going to the Rose Bowl started as something

unrealistic and completely intangible and gradually became a very real possibility, so much so that in my fourth and final year, we were a few variables away from going.

Alas, it was not meant to be, and as I graduated from the SMB, I knew that at some point in my lifetime, if MSU ever attended the Rose Bowl, I would plunk down whatever amount of money needed to ensure that I got to see the Spartans play in Pasadena...in person. In a few short years, it had gone from something that I couldn't have cared less about to something that I thought was absolutely necessary to see before I died. What a difference a few years makes.

All this was swirling around my head as I gazed upon the structure itself. The towering pillars with banners flung here and there, the cream colored stucco with a slight tile roof, reminding one of a Spanish monastery, or a religious temple of college football. And of course, the large, elegant cursive neon sign, with the long stemmed red rose draped above it.

The sight was profound and awe-inspiring, but there was a tinge of melancholy laced with it as well.. For this was July, and there were no screaming fans crowded at the gates, no college football pageantry or euphoria, just a solitary security guard who wouldn't let us inside because they were setting up for a Justin Timberlake concert. Physically standing at the gate and being denied entry. Yet, it was still just out of reach.

To make matters worse, a light, uncharacteristic drizzle began to fall on us and our brief visit was about to become decidedly briefer. Thus, right before we left, Devin and I posed for a picture outside the gate and uploaded it to Facebook with the caption "The closest we'll ever get."

Oh, the irony.

Part II: Old Town Lansing (December 7th, 2014)

It was a chilly December evening as I sped my way along Interstate 96 toward East Lansing. This familiar stretch of road was, for many years, the major artery connecting the two separate parts of my life: my hometown of Milford and my college life at Michigan State. On this particular evening, the wind was swirling outside. Icy gusts buffeted my car and the sky had a wild, mysterious look about it.

Fall had come and gone and, with it, one of the most spectacular season of Michigan State football had unfolded before my very eyes. At the outset, the season looked grim. So grim that I did not purchase season tickets and only actually attended two non-conference

games. In early September, the season was beginning to look disastrous: a classic MSU season full of dashed hopes and disorganization. But somewhere in mid-October, things began falling into place. I watched Michigan State topple foes effectively and efficiently: Iowa, Nebraska, and archrival Michigan, they all crumbled under the crushing weight of the seemingly unstoppable Spartan defense.

As such, I was driving to Lansing to watch Michigan State play in the Big Ten Championship game. To hear me say that sentence two months previously would have seemed laughable, a ridiculous notion. Now though, it was very real.

I parked my car on Turner Street and made my way to the door of Devin's apartment while an icy wind cut through me. At the door, I was greeted with a warm hug and we chatted until Carson and Jordan, two other friends from the SMB, arrived.

As we settled down to watch the game, the tension in the air was palpable. The air in that small apartment was stifling, and I felt a shortness of breath for no apparent reason. My whole body was tense and my thoughts were a confused jumble. In short, I had already begun to prepare myself for disappointment. I knew this, as an incontrovertible fact lodged deep within:

We were going to lose.

I had been in this situation now on several occasions during my short time as a MSU football fan. High expectations, high stakes, a heartbreaking defeat. It was better to make peace with this fact before the game, I thought, to soften the blow later on. I think the tension was felt mutually throughout the room, as we spent most of the game talking. Occasionally we would focus on the football action, but often we simply conversed to provide us with a source of distraction from the reality of the situation.

I can't adequately describe what happened during the game, mostly because my brain was not fully processing what was happening, but I clearly remember this. The game clock was running down in the fourth quarter: MSU had a commanding lead. Quarterback Connor Cook took a knee to run the clock down, and I stood up with that feeling like I was not in control of my legs. In a dreamlike state, I hugged the three of them. Devin and I immediately opened up our laptops to begin looking at airline ticket prices to Los Angeles, which we had previously done before only five months before in that very same apartment. It's funny how life works like that sometimes.

Part III. In the Land of Roses (January 1st, 2014)

I awoke in a hazy fog. The ceiling above me swirled into focus. At first, a vague suggestion of sunlight crept in through the slats in the window, casting linear shadows across the couch I was sprawled across. Then, the light began to grow stronger as my mind began to clear itself.

I had a headache. There was the sour taste of gin in my mouth. I needed a drink of water. I stumbled into the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face, and things became clear. I had that unnerving feeling when I first awoke with a mild hangover of complete disorientation. Questions like “Where am I?” and “Why am I here?” floated through my brain. However, the recollection had begun.

It was January 1st, 2014. I was in Sherman Oaks, California, in Brandon’s apartment (yet another college band friend who had left Michigan just after graduating to become another L.A. creative freelancer), It was the same apartment I had slept in a few short months prior to this night. The trip had already been memorable, and the true highlight had yet to occur. I had already experienced several times the very bizarre feeling of being familiar with a place that I had only once visited before. The terminal at LAX, the 405, Beverly Glen, Ventura Boulevard: these were all oddly familiar sights at this point.

It had already been the true essence of what, in my mind, vacations are supposed to entail. On our first morning there, we had breakfast at a charming little place in Playa del Rey, in which we sat outside while wearing shorts with palm trees nearby. And the sun was out. And it was the end of December. I wore shorts for most of the trip, in fact, simply because of the principal of the matter, even if the weather was a little chilly at times. I was in *California* and it was *ten degrees* back in Michigan and I was going to wear shorts, damn it.

Once I splashed water on my face in the bathroom that morning I collected my things and waited patiently for everyone else to wake up. We left the apartment excruciatingly early, especially for New Year’s Day. As we piled in the car and pulled out on Kester Avenue, it was very clear that we may have been part of a very select group of people that were actually awake at this time.

The air was cool but warming quickly. The sky was perfectly clear and, for the first time ever, I would have described the area as being peaceful. Gone was the oppressive heat, the crowded streets filled with people and cars, gone was the noise. Instead, I noticed the sun reflecting off the Hollywood Hills and noticed the pristine beauty of the desert landscape in a way that I had never quite appreciated before.

We stopped at Starbucks and got some quick coffee poured by a bubbly, effervescent young Californian (aren't they all? They can wear shorts 365 days a year. Again, it was ten degrees back in Michigan) and just like that, we were on our way. In our car it was me, Devin, Brandon, Brandon's friend Shawn (who was not in band with us, but we wouldn't hold that against him), and Carson. Four former tuba players and a random friend. I felt sorry for the guy, because we can all be a little vulgar when we get together. The car ride was painless. Inconceivably, the highway was nearly empty and we zipped along at an almost unfathomable pace. I was still shaking off my hangover but one thing remained firmly in my mind. I touched my hand to my shorts pocket about once every five minutes, just to make sure my ticket was still there. The illogical series of events that had led to this point would not be in vain, and I was not about to have my day ruined by something as silly as losing my ticket that I had paid an irresponsible amount of money for.

I was giddy with anticipation as we sped toward Pasadena and the reality of what was about to happen sunk in finally as we crossed a bridge over a valley and, off to the left, down in the valley, was IT. Seeing IT now, again, had a completely different feeling than when I saw IT the first time. Unlike the first time, when heavy rain clouds hung low overhead, this day was perfectly clear and the sun reflected off the magnificent white structure that stood triumphantly in the shadow of the San Gabriel Mountains. The sign reflected the light dazzlingly, and, even from a distance of over a mile, the structure had an almost magical aura about it. It is difficult to adequately describe that first sight and, at the same time, perfectly capture my emotions, but I was suddenly overwhelmed.

Shortly thereafter, we got off the highway in Pasadena, which seemed to be the only city in the greater Los Angeles area that had any sort of heavy traffic situation on this day. Parking the car was a daunting task, and required an exorbitant amount of money but actually wasn't terrible considering it would be split five ways.

After seeing IT from afar and finally parking the car in Pasadena, the significance of what was about to happen set in. Naively, we thought we could weave our way through the crowds and find a nice, cozy spot on the curb on Colorado Boulevard. Instead, as we approached the street, we found ourselves flattened up against a building, elbow-to-elbow with other anxious parade watchers. We were nowhere near the street, and I had to stand on my tiptoes and crane my neck to get an unobstructed view of the street. You see, there was only one thing we wanted to watch, and we would stand there patiently among the tangled mass of humanity until we saw it.

The sheer spectacle of the Rose Parade is almost indescribable. To begin, I had never seen that many people flanked along a parade route before. In addition, everything seemed

immaculate. From the parade workers dressed in their pristine white suits, to the floats that shimmered and sparkled as onlookers gazed in awe at their incredible detail, everything was given to excess. Finally, the scores of marching bands to filed past us all marching in lockstep with each other made me realize that this was no hometown Fourth of July parade.

We had been standing for almost an hour when I first heard the familiar sounds echoing off the buildings: the deep boom of the bass drums, the cymbals crashing, the peal of trumpets ringing throughout. Suddenly, a float was passing us by filled with Michigan State cheerleaders. Then, two members of the SMB carrying a banner. The sounds grew louder as the crowd began cheering wildly. For you see, although this was an incredibly large parade with many participants, over half of the people standing around us were there for the same reason we were. And, as the drum major high-stepped past us and the first rank of trombones was in sight, the crowd grew even more excited.

My heart swelled with pride at the sight. Even though I was no longer a member, I felt a sense of accomplishment seeing the sharp precision of the militaristic unit that filed past us. In many ways, I felt as if I had contributed to the band getting to this point. The band looked flawless and I expected nothing less. Every horn flashed in perfect synchronization, every step was perfectly in time, the rows of marchers were perfectly straight, and every horn and uniform looked immaculate. I expected nothing less because I know that band held itself to a high standard when I was a member and I know for a fact that that standard has not eroded in the slightest since I left because each new generation of band members is instilled with that same sense of pride, tradition, and honor.

As such, I could not have felt more proud as the SMB marched past us and I heard the familiar MSU fight song. While the marchers file past us in the clear morning light, I began to feel that familiar surge of anticipation bubbling up from deep within. It was that same gut-wrenching feeling that I had as I drove to Devin's on that night of the Big Ten Championship game, although this time the feeling seemed even more intense. For this was not simply a matter of plopping myself down on a couch to watch a football game after a 45-minute drive to Devin's. I had flown to California to watch this. I had paid an incredible sum of money to be here. We just watched the SMB march down Colorado Boulevard. We were mere hours away from *watching Michigan State play in the Rose Bowl*. The enormity of the entire situation suddenly weighed upon me.

These thoughts I pushed out of my head as we milled around Pasadena for a bit, looking for something to eat. It was a nice morning from a stroll, but all we wanted to do was sit down someplace after standing outside for so long. We settled on a bar which seemed to be the only place open.

After killing time in the bar we decided that perhaps it was time to start heading to stadium, which left only one question: where were we supposed to go? The answer, as it turns out, was incredibly simple. Follow the endless mass of people clad in green and white and cardinal red and white as they surely knew where to go. We joined the endless procession on Walnut Street, crossed the highway away from central Pasadena, and soon found ourselves in a quiet residential area. It was quiet except for that fact that there were crowds of people swarming throughout and Rose Bowl merchandise vendors placed at even intervals throughout. These people knew what they were doing. They were camped in an area that was sure to get tons of foot traffic and were surely making a ton of money. One guy was selling Italian sausage, which Devin bought. Some girls were standing in front of their house selling freshly baked cookies.

Since we were simply following a crowd, it was very difficult to tell where we were or how far we had to go. At one point, the crowd turned left on to Rosemont Avenue and the road began gradually sloping downward. The street was lined with lush trees, and houses were obscured from view by low walls and shrubs. It was clearly an affluent area, and it almost felt like we were intruders passing by. Gradually, the road began to level out as we approached a clearing that was filled with seemingly more people. And across the clearing was IT.

I don't think I fully appreciated the dramatic nature of the location of the Rose Bowl when we first saw it six months prior. The low hanging clouds and fog obstructed most of the view. Today, though, under a perfectly clear sky, I was almost completely awestruck. The Rose Bowl lies at the bottom of a basin, flanked on either side by triumphant mountains that jut proudly skyward. The closest mountain was dotted with those classic California homes-on-sticks: houses that cling impossibly to the steep edge of a cliff but surely give a perfect view of the valley below. To the far east and north stood the mighty San Gabriel Mountains, gleaming proudly in the afternoon sun. In front of us was an open field, thousands of people, and the stadium itself, looking like a postcard.

This was how I imagined the Rose Bowl the first time I saw it. Not a gray, drizzly day but an immaculate day without clouds. Not in the middle of July with two or three people around, but on January 1st, surrounded by Michigan State fans. We were here, we made it, the dream was a reality.

As we approached the stadium, my only thought was how excited I was to be there. As with the Big Ten Championship Game, I had resigned myself to the fact that we were going to lose, and I had made peace with that concept. It was thrilling enough standing in

the shadow of the stadium on gameday, and watching the Spartans play in the Rose Bowl Game was exciting enough. I was just glad to be there.

We shuffled around the fan area for a bit before heading over to take pictures in front of the stadium. Then our group, which now comprised seven or eight people, split up so we could each go to our respective seats.

This was perhaps the only uncomfortable part of the whole day. I have mentioned now many times how many people were converging on the stadium. Now, those innumerable masses were all clustering near the entrances to the outer perimeter. To make matters worse, the stadium was flanked to the west by a concrete runoff river with a few narrow bridges spanning the river at intervals. Essentially, the crowds were bottlenecked at these points and you had no choice but to shuffle amongst the hordes of fans, all clamoring to get in line. The heat was oppressive, I was thirsty, and I was beginning to panic slightly. I was panicking because we had gone perhaps fifty yards in ten minutes and I was worried about not getting into the stadium in time to see the band or worse, the start of the game.

Finally, we reached the outer gate nearest (we thought) to our seats. I had yet another anxiety attack as I quickly thought of the worst case-scenario: the ticket that I had purchased online would somehow have been a fake and I would be denied entry. This, if you know me, is fairly typical behavior. I'm a textbook overthinker, and I imagined the horrible possibility of the ticket scanner lady scanning my ticket and hearing some sort of beeping sound and not being allowed to watch one of the most important events in my life. The crowd parted and I was at the gate. I removed the ticket from my plastic souvenir case and handed it to her, trembling slightly. The red scanner found the barcode, the machine beeped, and on the screen flashed the word "Go!" I was in. I quite literally jumped in the air at that moment, relieved and finally allowing myself to get excited.

However, the celebration was premature, because we quickly discovered that the teeming masses outside the gate were actually much more dense once everyone found themselves in a confined space between the outer fence and the stadium itself. Our snail's pace procession somehow became slower and worse yet, we were nowhere near our tunnel entrance.

I was tired, hot, concerned I was dehydrated, and panicking. Panicking about how far we had to go and how little time we had. Panicking about how many people were around in either direction. I had never felt agoraphobic before but I felt very close to it at that point.

Suddenly, an opening in the crowd. A nimble, weaving maneuver and we were moving at an accelerated pace. Images of people on either side blurred as we began moving with a purpose.

My tension alleviated a bit, and I could see our objective in sight. We joined a cluster of energetic supporters in the tunnel, a soft cream-colored tunnel, perfectly smooth on either side. The light in front of us was dazzling. The brightness reflected off the walls was almost blinding. Gradually my heart started beating rapidly in a crescendo of elation. The jubilant cheers on either side of me fueled the feelings within, and at that moment I had that intense, surreal feeling that I was not in control of my legs, that I was being propelled forward by some otherworldly force. Presently, the mouth of the tunnel opened and I held one of the most magnificent sights my eyes had ever seen.

It really could have been a scene from a movie. Walking out of a tunnel into a brightly lit stadium bathed in sunlight, hearing a roaring crowd filled with fans cheering for your team, seeing the field laid out and painted in anticipation of today's event. At the far end zone was painted *Stanford*. At the closest end zone: *Michigan State*. In the center of the field: *2014* and, below that: *100th Rose Bowl Game*. The mountains were clearly visible on either side, standing watch over the scene in front of us. Trees flanked the north side of the stadium. At that moment I felt like Rudy's dad in the movie *Rudy* when he walks into Notre Dame Stadium for the first time and says,

"This is the most beautiful sight these eyes have ever seen."

We found our way to our seats, spotting a few people we knew along the way. This clearly wasn't just an essential trip for me, but for many Spartan faithful across the country as well. In Pasadena we spotted several cars with Michigan license plates, people who drove across the country to see this. Facebook had been filled for days with posts about everyone's trip to California.

And now we were here, ready to witness this seemingly sacred event which seemed so unattainable just months prior, and for the past 25 years as well, since 1988 was the last time MSU attended the Rose Bowl (six months before I was born). We settled in and awaited the pre-game festivities.

It would seem logical at this point to provide a detailed description of everything that happened during the football game, as this is very clearly the climax of this story. However, I feel as if that would be rather boring. Instead, here are some very vivid memories of specific moments during the game:

I remember seeing the Spartan Marching Band file onto the field in the pregame block and cheering wildly as they played the opening chords of *State Fanfare*. I remember the opening kickoff and feeling that familiar lurch of anxiety in my stomach as I tried to reassure myself that, even though we were going to lose the football game, I was just excited to be here.

I remember chatting with Carson at several points about key plays and strategies to win the game.

I remember thinking about how bizarre it was that just a few years ago, Carson was a freshman in the SMB and I was a junior and how weird it would have been if I went back in time and told myself that I would end up sitting next to him at the Rose Bowl a few years from now.

I remember having a clear view of quarterback Connor Cook throwing an interception in the second quarter and feeling a sinking feeling within, like a tremendous weight was sitting on my shoulders.

I remember feeling very dehydrated because I didn't want to have to get up and go to the bathroom at all. A vendor walked by selling lemonade late in the second quarter and I finally caved; it was the only thing I actually bought at the stadium. It was the best lemonade I've ever had.

I remember the sun beating down on us throughout the first half, and I was excited to potentially go back to Michigan with a suntan.

I remember thinking at the end of the first half, when the score was tied, that we were still going to lose.

I remember the sun beginning to set during the third quarter over the San Gabriel Mountains, which is an iconic part of the Rose Bowl Game. I thought about how truly awe-inspiring it was to consider that people had witnessed that sunset during the third quarter for the past one hundred years.

I remember the only time I left my seat was during the third quarter when I had to go to the bathroom. I remember how much more peaceful it seemed outside the stadium now that everyone was in the stands.

I remember the temperature dropping quickly after the sun had set and wishing I had brought a jacket or something. However, I was in *California* and it was *ten degrees* in Michigan, so I decided to deal with it.

I remember the final minutes of the fourth quarter almost photographically. Michigan State was leading (an impossible feat, I thought). Stanford had the ball, and was trying desperately to score points to win the game. They were on the 25-yard line, coming toward us. They ran the ball three times, each time coming short of the first down marker. They called a timeout to prepare for the upcoming 4th down play, arguably the most important play in Spartan football history from the past 25 years.

The timeout seemed to move imperceptibly slow. There was a tension in the air across the stadium, as if everyone was drawing a collective breath at the same time and holding it in until something big happened. The murmur of fans across the stadium was somehow quieter than it had been during the entire game as everyone surely had the same stomach-tightening feeling that I had.

Finally, the whistle blew and the players lined up. They stood at the line of scrimmage, face-to-face for what seemed like a small eternity, temporarily frozen in time. Then, a flurry of activity, Stanford's quarterback passed the ball to a receiver who ran up the middle into a tangled mass of green, white, and red. Kyler Elsworth leaped over the pile and stopped the receiver in his tracks, just short of the first down.

The crowd around me exploded in an earth-shattering roar of elation. I felt the ground beneath me shake and I was once again experiencing that feeling like I was no longer in control of my legs. I, the fiercely loyal but disappointingly pessimistic Spartan enthusiast had just witnessed something of a miracle. Michigan State had just won the Rose Bowl. I was there, I saw it with my own eyes.

I hugged Carson, actually hugged him. I high-fived strangers standing around us and allowed the feeling in my stomach to settle itself and was immediately swept up in the euphoria of the event that had just occurred. As many football games as I had seen in Spartan Stadium and as many thrilling victories as I had witnessed during my time there, they all paled in comparison to the feeling I was experiencing at this moment.

The final seconds ticked away as red fireworks shot out of the stadium behind us and the team rushed the field, The roar of the crowd echoed and reverberated not just throughout the stadium, but across the night sky and from the sides of the nearby mountains. On the giant screen behind us, we watched our coach receive the game trophy and heard speeches from our beloved Spartans.

I wanted to stay in that stadium forever to at least give myself a chance to soak in what had just happened. However, our group needed to reassemble itself, and no one's cell

phone had any battery life left, so we needed to get going. We joined the masses of elated Spartans just outside the stadium and, in a dreamlike trance, I floated my way back toward the south end of the stadium and our designated meeting spot.

There we met back up with our group under the now illuminated Rose Bowl sign and, for a moment that seems to be lodged in my memory for eternity, I felt the most enormous sense of pride for my university and finally realized exactly why some people care so much about sports. As I gazed upon the sign for the last time, I could feel the electricity in the air and came to the realization that I had just witnessed a once in a lifetime event. For a brief moment, I was utterly and completely transfixed and stood rooted to the spot. It was as if I wanted to preserve this memory for as long as possible, feel and absorb the energy around me, linger for just a moment longer. Although we soon left and made the long trek back to Pasadena, the feeling that I feared I would lose lingered long after, for days, weeks, months. Even as I write, I feel the same sense of elation that I felt at that moment, standing there in the land of roses.

Part IV. The Hollywood Hills (July 27th, 2013)

The night after the day in which we saw the Rose Bowl for the first time me, Devin Brandon, and Aaron met Aaron's friend Marty at this Thai restaurant in West Hollywood. Like the café we had breakfast at that morning, this place seemed to be quintessentially L.A. It was kooky, with weird decorations and strange Hollywood memorabilia around. It was dark with flashes of neon, the bathroom was down at the end of a truly terrifying hallway, and I once again felt that sting of unfamiliarity that I felt upon arrival in this strange land. Marty was perhaps the only person we met on either trip to Los Angeles who had experienced any kind of job-related success in the area. He worked at a company that specialized in *private sector space exploration* and lived in Manhattan Beach, which famously has some of the highest real estate prices in the United States. In short, unlike many of the people we had met, he had not been eaten alive and horrifyingly digested by this beautiful tropical metropolis. He had that effortless, laid-back demeanor that I had expected from Californians, yet had seen none of up to this point. The people I had seen up until this point had been high-strung, struggling to stay afloat, to breathe freely (quite literally, because of the smog).

After our very late L.A. dinner (it was nearly eleven P.M., but remember that restaurants are always open and people are always eating in L.A.), Brandon informed us that we were going somewhere. He was intentionally vague on the details, but we all piled in the car and he drove us through West Hollywood, into the Hollywood Hills along a winding road that passed by many gated homes obstructed from view by tall, stucco walls and low hanging trees: a recurring theme of homes in L.A. owned by the super-rich. Like

many canyon roads in the area, it was hard to tell exactly where we were because the road gave no indicator of location other than a steep incline. Finally, the twisting road ended at the intersection of Mulholland Drive, and after a few winding curves, Brandon parked the car seemingly in the middle of nowhere. There were trees obstructing the view on one side of the road, and a steep cliff on the other side that gave rise to more homes on top of it, but otherwise the area was deserted. We walked for a bit along the side of the road until, under the trees, Brandon pointed out a low fence that clung to the dusty hillside. Not wanting to abandon the group, I followed everyone over the fence but had my usual apprehensions about breaking the law and trespassing and things like that. I was disoriented and rather unsure about exactly where we were going, which heightened my sense of alert as well.

Presently, Brandon led us to a series of rough stone steps that led up the hillside and it instantly became clear why he chose to lead us to this strange, deserted area. Below us, stretched out for miles and miles in either direction, was the entire greater Los Angeles area. To the left, the skyscrapers of downtown L.A. stood dazzlingly illuminated against the warm summer night sky. In front of us and to the left was the endless sprawl of collected suburbs that made up the bulk of our view, laid out in a perfect gridwork of lights and sounds. Directly below us was the famous Hollywood Bowl, which was only slightly illuminated, nestled on the side of our hill. To the left of that, the 101 freeway carved a path through the hills and spilled out in the sprawling chaos that was L.A. Cars crawled along the road, a subtle reminder of the persistent traffic that consumed the city. Behind us was the Hollywood sign, shrouded in darkness and standing guard over the scene below.

The view was difficult to process. I was thinking about how beautiful it was, yet how strange at the same time. An entire city, filled with diverse people amidst a beautiful setting. It was perfectly serene and yet infinitely chaotic and terrifying at the same time. It seemed to be a city built on dreams and promises, yet precious few see those dreams come to fruition. Nevertheless, I admired the sheer size and scope of it all. It was truly a grand sight, even if it was filled with complexities and harsh truths.

At this point, Aaron suddenly blurted out “Yeah, this isn’t for me,” which immediately cut through the collective silence and stillness that had hung between us. You see, he had been deciding this whole trip whether he wanted to move out here, and something about this exact moment had pushed him in one direction. Perhaps it was the strange, slightly intense collection of L.A. residents that we had been exposed to at this point. Perhaps it was the way everything seemed so bizarre and foreign. Or perhaps it was that he was slightly unnerved by the view like I was. Whatever it was, something had jarred him to change his mind about Los Angeles.

Part V. Six Months Later (January 1st, 2014)

Once we arrived back in Pasadena after witnessing Spartan history, we found our way to a restaurant recommended by Brandon. Like every place in the area that New Year's Day evening, it was packed to the brim with jubilant Spartan fans, so much so that by the time we got our food, we were forced to eat it standing up. Like the lemonade I had earlier, it was some of the best food I had ever tasted, probably more from the feeling I was currently experiencing rather than the actual quality of the food.

There was a collective exhaustion among our group. Everyone was so excited about what had just happened, but the events of the day had finally caught up to us: the early wake-up call, the trek around Pasadena, the march to and from the stadium, and the wide range of emotions during the game left everyone drained. We were considering just heading home after dinner, but I suggested to Wings one last activity before we headed home to bed.

With that in mind, we got back in Brandon's familiar car and found ourselves headed back up that familiar winding road, parking in the middle of nowhere, awkwardly maneuvering over that low fence, and proceeding up the stone steps.

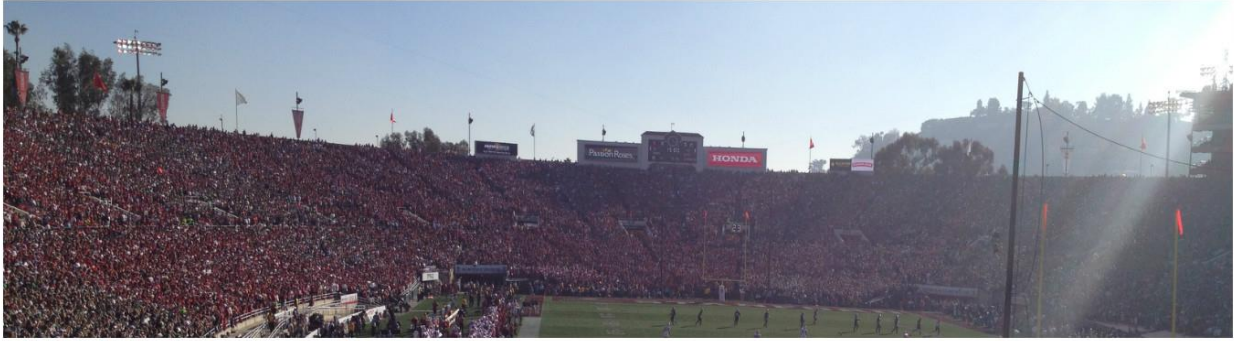
This time, as I looked out over the city, I felt a sense of completion. Maybe I didn't quite understand Los Angeles, but I at least knew what it meant to me. The tangled grid below us seemed less confusing, less daunting somehow. The memory of the day's events still remained fresh in my mind, and I truly enjoyed the beautiful setting as I ran through those memories again.

The intersection of my life and the world of the west coast seemed both brief and ephemeral. Although I had only observed the smallest fraction of Los Angeles culture, I felt that I understood it in part. My understanding stemmed from my realization that, although I truly felt like a foreigner, there were certain human elements that connected me to LA. The desire to feel like a part of something greater, the desire to succeed, and the simple joys of experiencing a shared event: all were deeply intertwined with my experiences both in L.A. and my life in Michigan. The west coast doesn't particularly care about marching band, or football for that matter, but everyone values that sense of belonging.

Los Angelianagos might never drive halfway across the state just to watch a game in their friend's apartment, or fly across the country just to visit someone that they once played tuba with in college marching band, but they understand the human desire to want to feel a sense of belonging. Our "creative freelancer" friend from our first trip knew and craved this feeling. Brandon, a former midwesterner himself, knew it and was constantly

looking for ways to assimilate into the deep cultural fabric of Los Angeles. Marty, although he seemed to have already “made it” in L.A., still took time to climb this small hill with us on our first visit just to enjoy the view and participate in a shared experience. These tiny element of completion and connection buried themselves in my memory as I turned my head and gazed back eastward.

A cool wind blew across my face. The night breeze was coming off the ocean. It gently grazed us standing there, taking in the view, before it traveled further, across the Hollywood Hills. And somewhere across those hills the breeze would pass the Rose Bowl and would mix and swirl among the sounds and memories preserved there: memories of a long-sought dream finally realized.



Writer's Memo:

For me, this project spent most of its time in the prewriting stage. Once I had settled on the idea of writing a personal narrative memoir, the difficulty became choosing something substantive enough that I would be interested in writing about. My trip to the Rose Bowl seemed like a good idea, but it didn't seem like I would be able to develop a strong enough theme from just the euphoric experience of watching a football game. That's when I got the idea to juxtapose these two separate trips to LA that occurred within six months of each other to make a more substantial story that was not just about football, but about my attempt to understand the unique culture of Los Angeles as well. Once those two ideas came together in my head, the actual writing went fairly smoothly, although I would get frustrated at times transcribing my almost photographic memories of some of these events into words that would do the event justice. My initial draft was a fairly complete version of the story I had hoped to tell, but based on the comments I received, I did realize that there were some confusing elements such as the disjointed "prologue" that I included, as well as the confusing time shift between the sections. I clarified these issues by removing the prologue and adding dates to the headings of each section, as well as a brief table of contents to map out the timeline of events. Thematically, I also noticed that I rarely (if ever) connected the two main elements of my narrative: the euphoria and camaraderie of watching MSU football and my analysis of LA culture. I added a few paragraphs to my final sections to bring these two ideas together to solidify and reconcile these two ideas, which I thought brought a nice sense of completion to this paper. I also added a few photos to the final page to provide a close to the writing while also actually giving a visual representation of some of the scenes from the narrative.

Overall, while writing this I discovered many surprising things about myself as a narrative writer (and a writer in general). My tone of voice in writing is much like my tone of voice in speaking: sarcastic, with a bit of a dry sense of humor. I found it difficult at first to allow myself to include humor but, once I made the initial step, including it made my piece much stronger. As such, I learned that writing a narrative is a fairly natural, organic process. Although many writers choose to write from the perspective of someone they are unfamiliar with, good writing happens when the writer is familiar with the subject and can discuss it at ease. Writing this piece for me was so easy because I could vividly visualize the scenes I was attempting to portray and could give life to the characters who inhabited each scene because they were people I was familiar with.

Ultimately, this was a positive and rewarding writing experience and I plan to share this piece of writing with some of the people who were in the story, as I'm sure they'll find it humorous and poignant as well. In addition, I would like to try to continue writing narrative pieces, if only just "for fun." I have a few ideas for pieces that I would like to write and I might give them a try this summer. As a teacher, I feel more confident in my ability to instruct in narrative writing as well because, having just written one, I know how difficult it can be to dredge up details and find good words to use. Again, I feel this piece has given me at least a greater sense of perspective as a writer and I look forward to seeing how it influences me in my future writing projects.