City Lights

Summer 1963. Warm air flows in through the open back window of my father’s white Mercury. The street lamps positioned every hundred feet light up the night sky. Cars zoom past, off to who knows where to do who knows what on a Southern California Saturday night. My brother, Butch and I chew on our penny candy—tootsie rolls, malt balls, jaw breakers—that Dad let us pick out at the liquor store and stare in fascination at all the city lights. We pass Bob’s Big Boy restaurant with the giant boy, wearing the red and white checkered overalls, standing out front. He’s carrying a plate with a big hamburger on it, smiling and winking his eye. We drive through street after city street, lights blinking—blue, red, green, orange, yellow—everywhere I look colored lights flash. Dad just drives and doesn’t say a word. “California Dreamin’ ” plays on the radio. We drive for hours as if we have nowhere to go. The excitement of the night dances inside of me, so much to see. We drive through the Watts District one year before the famous Watts riot. I have no fear inspiring images of blazing fires, angry faces, and shattered store windows. My young innocent mind has no reason to be afraid in the safety of my dad’s car, moving through the endless maze.

Stocking us with plenty of candy and soda pop, Dad parks the car and says, “I’ll be right back. You guys be good. Lock the doors.” I watch as Dad walks toward a a big red brick building and disappearing inside. The radio is on, playing Hermon’s Hermitts, “there’s a kind of hush all over the world tonight, all over the world tonight of lovers in love. . .” The neon lights flash, blinking on and off, over and over again. Music playing, lights flashing, and sweetness seeps down my throat. I try to take everything in and make sense of the words constantly flashing, imprinting in my brain during this warm humid night. It doesn’t occur to me that I’m normally in bed by this time. It’s as if time stood still in this delicious moment of being seven locked in the confines of Dad’s car under the protective care of my nine-year-old brother.

Tap, tap tap… We startle at the sound. We look over at the window and see a policeman standing so tall and official-looking in his sharply pressed navy blue uniform. He shines his flashlight into the car, spotting my brother and me. Timidly, my brother rolls down the window. “Hi,” the policeman says. “Are you okay?” he asks. Why wouldn’t we be okay? I wonder as I look up at the big man. “Who is the driver of this vehicle?” My brother freezes in silence. Then, I burst open as if I have nothing in the world to hide.

“It’s my dad’s. He went in there,” I say pointing to the brick building I had watched him go into.

“Okay. Roll up the window, and I’ll be right back,” he says. We watch as he walks toward the building where Dad had gone inside.

“Karyn! You big mouth! Why did you have to tell him? You’re going to get Dad in trouble! They might take him to jail!” My brother screams at me. It did not occur to me that Dad had done anything wrong. I sit in silence wondering if Dad would be as mad at me as my brother, my eyes fixed on the building waiting for Dad to come out the door. The neon sign above the building flashes first red, then white the word Topless.