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## SPARKY'S DINER

A Story of San Francisco

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I'd arranged to meet him at Sparky's diner on Church midway between Market and 18th Street. We had lunch there last year and so, when we tried to set up a meeting point again, it seemed a natural choice as it was near the metro line and, more importantly, we both knew the location.

There was a certain charm to the place - a sort of 50s, laid-back retro with a community feel. I recalled the waitress last time was a young woman straight from central casting - an overly made-up Hollywood type but not obnoxiously so. Bright red lipstick, heavy mascara, jet black hair like polished ebony fringing a teenage mug of pure white porcelain - it could have been grotesque except on her it was like dressing up a doll. She had the aura of forbidden fantasy. So meeting there was stepping into another world and made for a curious reunion of old-time radicals. But ensconced in a padded booth with Formica tables, we felt comfortable as it provided some distance from that temporal zone we knew each other last. It was an artificial venue, a neutral space where we could detach from time's arrow and focus on each other's narrative - tracing a hesitant line of reconnection that wiggled like an anxious worm overseen by two tired old birds.

I arrived early, having walked around the Castro for a while. But the weather was awful, a driving rain and chill wind that made my pocket umbrella useless - unworthy as it was of anything beyond a minor drizzle. So I took refuge in Sparky's about a half hour earlier than the time we had set.

It had changed. No China doll this time. Just a young kid who had the appearance of a Castro rent boy working out his shift to pay for drugs. He was pleasant enough - though the pleasantness might have been weary stoicism had he been old enough to understand his escape here from Kansas, or wherever it was he escaped from, was merely a stopping off point on his slow road to ruin. The diner, itself, was a mess. They were in the process of remodeling, he explained apologetically. Where we sat last year the flooring was now torn up and the booths uprooted. At this point, I might have left except there was a kind of seedy allure and, as no one else was there, I had the place - what there was of it - to myself. So I settled into one of the remaining booths that had survived the cyclonic wrath of unseen workmen, ordered a beer from the waiter hovering sadly over me, took out the free paper I had plucked from a street rack moments earlier, and perused the feature story that took up the entire front cover.

The story was about Dan White, the young supervisor who back in November 1978 shot the mayor, George Moscone, and Harvey Milk, the first gay activist elected to the city board. The reason this lurid story was being rehashed had to do with a film that was being made about the life of Milk who had become an icon in the historical annals of San Francisco's movement for Gay Lib. In fact the Castro district was abuzz with tales relating to the film, as this was a major Hollywood production and, therefore, the cause of much excitement. Castro Street had been made over as a movie set (much to the dismay of the shops which all had large signs outside trumpeting that they were open for business during the filming). But the story in the free sheet had to do with what the paper considered serious historical inaccuracies in the script that, somehow, had come into their possession.

The article was essentially an interview with the guy who had managed White's election campaign back in '77. What disturbed him was that the film made White out to be homophobic which, he claimed, wasn't the case. In fact, even though White represented a Catholic working-class neighbourhood and had once been a policeman, he was fairly open-minded, as the election agent could attest since the agent, himself, was gay. What's more, he claimed, White actually befriended Milk and even admired him - that is until he came to feel Milk had betrayed his trust. The film script, however, sought to make White into a sexually obsessed maniac who killed Milk because he couldn't come to terms with his own repressed demons.

I thought about this as I drank my beer, occasionally looking up to see whether my old friend had arrived. San Francisco wasn't the city I once knew. There was a time when I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. It was a place where anything was possible, where candy-coated dreams were nourished and nurtured (albeit in a haze of cannabis fumes). But then things began to change. I wasn't sure when it happened or how, but change it did. And so did I. Now coming back was tough - like meeting an old lover after a great passage of time. You still recognise her and see what attracted you but the embers that once simmered have transformed into dust and the flame in your heart has grown tepid.

That's why the article about Dan White struck me, I suppose. I'd been thinking about the change that took place, when it happened, why it happened and what it meant. Could I put my finger on the time, the cause? Was there an event that made everything different then on? No, I doubt if there was. But if I had to put a date on it, I suppose it would have been sometime in that period of '78 when the world seemed to crash down on us and innocence, like the waxen wings of Darius, had melted in the heat of the midnight sun.

The seventies in San Francisco was a time of hope and struggle. Joy and I had returned late in '71 from a year in Europe bringing back with us a baby girl and settling in Noe Valley which was just beginning to shift from generations of mainly working-class Irish and Germans to a more mixed neighbourhood of students and young professionals. The city, which had become a magnet for disaffected youth from Poughkeepsie, Kalamazoo, Baton Rouge and Pocatello was in its prime. The welcome mat was out and people poured in by bus, plane and rag-tag automobile

- refugees from mainstream America still trying to shake itself free from post-50s traumas where girls wore dresses of crinoline and boys married their childhood sweetheart, stuffing her and their 2.4 children inside a faux-gingerbread bungalow situated in a place called 'Nowhere'. These kids who flooded into the port of San Francisco wore flowering hempseed in their scruffy unwashed hair and had exchanged their dreams of a house in the suburbs for an overcrowded, acid-drenched commune in the Haight. It could have been a recipe for disaster and sometimes it was. But, amazingly, mostly it wasn't. These were kids who wanted to remake the world and San Francisco, circa 1971, provided the venue to do it.

The years of early to mid-70s were monumental in scope and operatic in a sort of surreal grandeur. Along with hippydom there was a growing political fervour against the perceived hypocrisies and injustices that measured up the ideals of America with the brutalities of the war in Vietnam and the growing demands for economic and political justice by people of colour. The great marches in the South during the sixties gave way to mass movements in the North led by fiery orators like Malcolm X who were somehow able to embody and articulate the pain and suffering of generations and harness them as a mighty cry of outrage. On college campuses throughout the country mass uprisings took place and hardly a month went by without a bloody confrontation.

Along with the war in Vietnam there was a growing war at home. The fervency of youth was pushed to extremes. For every exhortation to 'turn on, tune in and drop out' there were others, even louder, to stand up and be counted - to declare which side you were on. The nation was polarised as never before. But beyond the rhetoric and the banging of war drums there was a conviction that change was possible and that untethering the mind and empowering the imagination would transform the world in ways we could hardly dream of as dreams, themselves, had only just been liberated.

We stood poised before a great plateau so immense that we could only see the vastness and we believed that what lay beyond our line of sight was the stuff that these newly liberated dreams were made of.

I was recalling those days, not specific moments as much as the feelings and the strong sense of destiny that had been such a part of our lives back then, when I saw my friend walk in through the door. I'd seen him periodically over the years. And, over time, he'd become my informant, so to speak, as he stayed in San Francisco when I left. And I had come to feel that he was my vicarious presence - my alternative eyes to view the transition of a city I had much loved.

We greeted each other as always, shaking hands, exchanging pleasantries, asking about wife and kids. We spoke of projects, of the constant struggle to break through the invisible barrier that stood in the way of some ill-defined notion of success which had less to do with financial rewards and more with a sense of personal fulfilment.

After catching up on news about the shrinking list of friends we had in common, I showed him the article I'd been reading before he arrived - the one about Dan White and the assassination of Harvey Milk and the mayor.

'White was an interesting character,' I said, 'maybe more interesting than Milk, himself. But it sounds as if they're using him simply as a foil.' I pointed to the paragraph that questioned the motives of the film's writers.

He replied by saying that Hollywood and history might both begin with 'h' but the similarity ended there.

I had the feeling he was speaking from experience.

I asked him how he imagined life had changed here over the years. He thought a bit and then said that some of his friends were finding it hard to live on the edge as they had for so long. If you didn't have a nest egg, when you reached 60 it wasn't so easy to scrape by - what with unaffordable health costs and rising food and housing prices. And how many of us were thinking of nest eggs back then?

How many of us even thought we'd grow old?

He told me he had several friends who were being forced to move because the flats where they lived were being made into condominiums to be sold at extraordinary prices. How would they ever afford a place in San Francisco after being detached from rent control?

Where would they go? I asked him.

He shrugged.

Back then, back when I was still living here, right before all hell broke loose, there was a movement to have the residents of San Francisco take power into their hands - what power there was, what hands there were - in an attempt to probe the limits of the possible. The strategy to achieve this was based around the fight for community control through district elections. Up till then, the city's supervisors had been elected at large which meant, according to those who were behind the district elections campaign, that only candidates with big money and corporate backing could ever hope to be chosen as the city's decision-makers. A referendum was held and won and the first district elections took place in 1977. It was those elections that brought Harvey Milk and Dan White onto the board.

I asked my friend what he remembered about Dan White; what he had thought of him, not now, but then.

'It's not hard to understand why White was chosen to represent the Sunnydale district. He'd grown up there - was part of the staunchly conservative Irish working-class whose kids became either teamsters or cops or firemen and, probably still

went to church every Sunday ...'

'In a city that prayed less to God than Mammon,' I interjected.

In those days the cultural divide was immense - it would have been easier to leap over the Grand Canyon than the chasm that separated the gay community in the Castro from the straight-as-an-arrow Irish-Catholic bastion in the outlying neighbourhood of Sunnydale. But some political organisers, like my friend, took a different view.

'Remember, Sunnydale was a blue-collar San Francisco neighbourhood that, itself, was divided between union men and union busters,' he said. 'The same church-going Irish-Catholics could have cut their teeth in the struggle to organise the San Francisco docks - or they could have been the bull-headed policemen who roused them. And the gays of the Castro sometimes used the cause of sexual liberation as an excuse to clear the area of the old working-class culture that was there before them. Who profited?'

He left the question hanging in the air. And, yes, it wasn't simply 'us and them'. It never is. The city divide was artificial but the symbols - exemplified in part by the election to the board of Dan White, a former policeman and Harvey Milk, a gay activist from the Castro - had been etched into everyone's minds back then. They were as different as guns and acid-laced butter.

'I read that White was a paratrooper in Vietnam during the Tet offensive,' I said. 'It was the worst job you could have in the worst days of the war. Nobody survived it without fucking up their head. Forty years on guys are still waking up terrified at night, still sweating out the horrors. They left as boys and came home zombies. And no one fuckin' cared. The war was over. It was time to move on. The Vietnam vets became a lost generation.' Having been a soldier myself, albeit a reluctant one, I had special sympathy for the boys like Dan White who had been dropped into a nightmare world light years away from their boxy pink Sunnydale homes. The Vietnam War had come to a screeching halt when the NLF entered Saigon in April of '75 and the American Embassy was unceremoniously evacuated. TV screens visually screamed with agony and humiliation as 7000 American and Vietnamese personnel were helicoptered out of their final compound and transported like panicked cattle to aircraft carriers waiting offshore, where the human cargo was dumped aboard in such haste that even those who despised the war watched in awe the shameful abandonment of those who, for whatever reason, had taken refuge under America's tattered star spangled banner.

By the mid '70s, we were nicely ensconced in the corridor between Noe Valley and the Mission. Positioned over the hill from the Castro and jutting up against the city's large Latino neighbourhood, the mix was alphabet soup with salsa on the side. It had energy, charm, diversity - good food and cheap housing. But already there were rumblings of what was to come. The economy was in free-fall recession with an unemployment rate reaching double digits while interest rates soared into

the stratosphere. The docks which had been clogged with war cargo five years before were now relatively moribund. The great warehouses along the waterfront stood empty, seagulls nesting in the berths where once giant freighters were tethered while gangs of burly longshoremen quickly dispatched the cargo to make room for the next in a queue that stretched from there to Japan.

Ever since WWII, there had been a realisation by large business interests that San Francisco would have a special role in the post war world. Not as a drop-off point for Pacific goods - inland docks with cheaper frontage would better serve the super-sized container vessels that were on the drawing boards. As trade with the orient began to grow, the city had come to be visualised as the New York of the West - the repository of the bureaucracies that would oversee the new wealth pouring in from the Far East, positioned as it was midway between Los Angeles and Seattle. This idea of restructuring the city to fit its destined role - the fight around what was termed the 'Manhattanization' of San Francisco - was a struggle played out over the course of the decade pitting community activists on one side and large real estate and corporate heavyweights on the other.

In the end it was no contest. The community activists could win any number of battles because the issues of housing and lifestyle were so very clear, but the moneyed interests won the war. When it came down to it, promises of jobs and economic prosperity trumped whatever a motley band of neighbourhood organisers could say - especially when the various communities were blindly divided by issues of alternative cultures.

For many of us the question of what San Francisco was to become crystallized around the fight to save the International Hotel.

I didn't have to ask my friend whether he remembered. Anyone living in San Francisco at the time knew about the I-Hotel - the struggle to save it and the horrible aftermath.

The old International Hotel was smack in the heart of the city. It had been the home and cultural centre for an important part of the Filipino community. Known as Manilatown, it comprised a single city block at the lower end of Chinatown, not far from the bohemian area of North Beach. More crucially, it jutted up against the edge of the city's financial district which was creeping relentlessly westward along Montgomery Street. To the Master Planners, the I-Hotel was a prime bit of land and a key piece of property in the scheme to restructure San Francisco as a modern and more lucrative Babylon.

The building itself had been decaying for years, along with its elderly residents. But that was part of its charm. 'Manilatown' resided there in that very building. Demolition of the hotel meant obliteration of the last vestige of that historic community. In our eyes - those of us who cared about such things (and we were many) - the planned destruction of the I-Hotel was tantamount to uprooting an ancient tribal village and casting its people into the wilderness. Even more, it focused on

an issue that in many ways summed up our struggle. The question it evoked was as basic as you could get - whose city was it? Ours or those carpetbagging, multi-national moneymen?

After planning permission was given to demolish the I-Hotel, an ad-hoc organisation to save the venerable old structure swung into gear. The tenants, with amazing support from the community, stood firm, barricading themselves inside their tiny rooms. Young artists from the surrounding area set up workshops pumping out thousands of posters and leaflets and a wonderful mural of popular resistance sprouted like a revolutionary call-to-arms on the grimy facade transforming it overnight into an imaginary fortress that gave the brave but frightened dispossessed within a magical cloak of many colours which served as a fantasy shield of miraculous protection.

The spirit of the I-Hotel was stuff of legends. There should have been a song written about it. Perhaps there was. But it lived on in hope and dreams - for a while.

It was the story of Davids and Goliaths - except the Goliaths won. Not easily, not without setbacks. But if winning was the destruction of the I-Hotel, then the Goliaths won.

What they won was a hole in the ground that remained for twenty years with a jagged remnant of the wall still showing bits and pieces of that wonderful mural like a relic of a monument that once was. And, as such, it remained as a memorial to a colossal struggle - a testament to the power of popular resistance, if only for the moment, calling out the promise of hope for the hopeless. But, back then, we could only hear betrayal.

'Hongisto,' I said. 'Remember him?' Hongisto. The son of Finnish immigrants. Hongisto, champion of the liberalising wave that was sweeping through San Francisco. A former cop who fought discrimination within the police force and had stood up against police brutality, he became a popular figure among the community activists. He ran for sheriff in 1971 and, to the surprise of the political establishment, was elected. His moment of truth came in the summer of 77. By that time the fight over the International Hotel had been lost in the courts. An eviction order had been handed down and it was up to the sheriff's department to enforce it. Hongisto refused. People were dumbstruck. No sheriff in living memory had ever refused to enforce an eviction order before. The court was furious. Hongisto was hauled before the judges and thrown into jail for contempt. Then something happened. It's not clear what. Maybe he had an epiphany. More likely he saw his career going down the tubes - and for what? A bunch of crazy old codgers living in a rat-infested building that should have been torn down years before for public health reasons?

I remember waking up that day in August 77, opening the newspaper, and seeing the picture splashed over the front page. Some newsy had captured the moment in an inspired flash. Hongisto, sludgehammer poised overhead, about to smash

down the door to one of the barricaded rooms in the I-Hotel. Inside the paper smaller photos showing, one by one, the residents dragged out, some of whom were well into their nineties, shoved into waiting police vans.

The show was over. The old Filipinos were evicted. Days later the hotel was razed to the ground. What happened to the I-Hotel should have lived on in the collective memory of community struggles. And it did. But something overshadowed it like a dreadful eclipse that swallows everything in darkness.

There are things that were incomprehensible then and are still incomprehensible now. But for those of us who were involved in campaigning to save the I-Hotel, the incomprehensibility of that aftermath was total.

My mind flashed back to those days right before the end - to the picket lines, each day, getting smaller and smaller. How long could people remain on call? There was a phone tree. Every other morning, the word would go out. This is it! They're coming. And people would congregate, shouting, 'They shall not pass! - No pasaran! - like La Passionara, her voice ringing out that the fascists would never enter the city of Madrid. But how long could we keep it up? How long could people be called upon to forgo their jobs, their kids, their daily routine to save a dilapidated hotel that housed the dying?

And then one day, very close to the end, we had come once more out of obligation and the picket line was small and tired and the word had gone out that, yes, today the police would surely come and we were all feeling shattered by the futility of laying our bodies on the line once again - for what? When suddenly we saw them. First one bus, then another. It was, to our eyes, like the cavalry arriving to save the weary survivors of an abandoned outpost. And as they disembarked, joyful, energetic, black, white, Asian, young and old, those of us who watched in amazement, could only stand back and applaud as tears welled from the dryness of our eyes, so long parched by the dust of crumbling bricks and mortar. Our spirits were lifted like never before. They sang, they chanted, their numbers so great that they surrounded the entire city block. And that morning we felt that victory was within our grasp, such was the power of the moment. And then they were gone. And we were alone again.

A year later, just six days before Dan White exploded, killing Harvey Milk and the Mayor, I was walking down the street in the Tenderloin when I heard the news. Jim Jones and his People's Temple followers, the very ones we had seen just months before, marching with us, rich in celebration, comrades in arms, had committed mass suicide in the jungles of Guyana. Of the 913 bodies that were found, 276 of them were children. I looked down at the paper again, at the story of the Harvey Milk film and the question of how Dan White would be portrayed in it - so out of context, I suspected.

After that week of horror in the summer of 1978, the shift was dramatic. Community elections were shelved. After all, could men like Dan White and Harvey



Milk have been elected by the city at large? City-wide elections might only allow for well-healed candidates capable of raising large sums of cash from special interests who would collect their pound of flesh later, but, it was argued, at least they probably wouldn't be gay activists or mass murderers.

The new mayor was a woman who whipped the city into shape. Within a few years, the skyline had dramatically transformed. Looking down from my favourite vantage point atop Diamond Heights, the evolution of San Francisco Mark II was clear. The skyscrapers might have been modified for this zone of frequent tremors, but the message was the same. The great monuments rising from the sacred downtown soil were banks made of the finest marble which now towered over the puny Barbary Coast businesses that had once survived the '06 quake but now were being levelled to make room for even more glass and steel monoliths celebrating the financial bravado of this even Braver New World.

I suppose, in my head, I had left sometime around then. My body left five years later. But San Francisco, the city I knew and loved as a youth, has always remained with me. And part of it survives, even now.

'There's still an energy here,' said my friend. 'There's still people I can work with. It's changed but you can still find things here if you know where to look.'

Then he paused, finished his drink and said, 'The I-Hotel has been rebuilt, you know ...'

I didn't. But I wasn't sure it mattered anymore except as a heritage site's plastic replica.

We paid our bill and left. Outside, the rain had abated but the street was still wet. We shook hands and promised to keep in touch. Then we went our separate ways, he up Church Street toward the park, me toward Market where I would catch the metro.

Halfway down the street I stopped and turned around. I watched my old comrade walking into the distance with a determined stride. We hadn't talked much about personal things and I wondered what his life was really like here. The world had changed those thirty years and so had we. He stayed and I had left. But the city we had both known in our youth - it had left too, except for the ocean and the hills, the bridges that spanned the bay and a few assorted landmarks. The rest was in the dominion of the mind. And that remained eternal.

*Bob Biderman's latest novel, RED DREAMS, is published by Black Apollo Press (UK) and Hachette Litterature (France).*

