

Foreword

Writing about the past is like exploring a photographer's darkroom. You never know what might develop. There is a time when secrets once kept in the dark must be brought to light. Now is the time to reveal them.

Unlike many gay archives that were secretly scrapped by embarrassed families or discarded by unsympathetic landlords, mine were cached in an old suitcase at the back of my closet for over a quarter century. The brown leather suitcase my folks gave me when I left home at 18 had morphed into a traveling repository inhabited by secret negatives, contact sheets and prints. From this archive, bolstered by 20 years as a research librarian, the recollections of friends, and current electronic data bases, I have developed the story of my life as a gay man in San Francisco's SoMa district in the 1970s. That place, at that time, is a necropolis I hope to resurrect with this memoir. Come, take a peek in my darkroom as I develop my story.

At the time, my life was part of the "secret" San Francisco some considered unsafe to enter, especially after dark. Graham Robb, in *Parisians: An Adventure History of Paris*, said of Napoleon III that "He might wonder how much of Paris he has really seen, and how anyone can be said to govern a city so full of secrets." San Francisco of the 1970s was full of secrets and half-secrets alluded to at A-list parties and in newspaper columns. Mayor George Moscone was said to wander the Tenderloin at night with his bodyguard pals, looking for secrets. In the end he too was unable to govern a city so full of secrets. It killed him.

A gay critical mass was reached in this "Baghdad by the Bay", as *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen called the City, between the Summer of Love in 1967, and the summer of 1982, when we realized gay pneumonia, gay cancer, and a number of

other non-treatable diseases added up to AIDS.

Anthropological, political and medical papers, studies, theses, dissertations, and screeds have been written about gay San Francisco in the 1970s. They can be consulted for the study of gay movements and trends, collectives, statistics, politics, and theories. I've written how I recall myself as a gay man then, living my life as a fanatical moderate. I've written of others I knew then, too. Some show up in the papers and studies. Some don't. Others should be in the history books, but have been forgotten.

It was a time before political correctness, personal computers, and cell phones directed our lives. "The past is a foreign country," L. P. Hartley wrote in the prologue of *The Go-Between*. "They do things differently there."

San Francisco itself seemed a foreign country then. The things we did then were in the time and the place in which we lived. Like actors in film classics, we smoked cigarettes. We drank too much. We did drugs. We had unprotected sex because a quick trip to the V.D. clinic and a shot in the ass would take care of anything we might pick up. A joke at the time has the first man in a bar asking, "Where do I know you from? Do you work in a bank? It's somewhere I go all the time." The second man replies, "I work at the V.D. clinic."

It was a time and a life that crushed some. Many gay men took drugs, fucked until dawn, joked about the squalor they lived in, hung out on the street corner, and lost their youth. Some took their youth to the pawn shop, hoping to redeem it some day. Others buried their youth and we mourned. It was a time and a life that gave still others an inner strength that lasted a lifetime.

San Francisco in the 1970s drew men from across the United States, Canada, Mexico, Europe, Australia, and the world beyond. If you were a gay man and lived in San Francisco, the City, during that marvelous decade, you didn't need to travel. The world came to you. A drifter from Tulsa, Oklahoma, living in a single-occupancy hotel room, went home with a man from London who was living on trust funds from his family's diamond mines in Africa. A farmer's son from North Dakota crashed with the son of the president of Ford Motor Company Europe. When

somebody asked you what you did, they didn't mean your job. They meant what were your sexual talents, your specialties, the fantasies you wanted to explore. Gay San Francisco of the 1970s was democracy's poster child. It was part of the gay migrant/immigrant experience.

The gay community within itself was segregated. There were three geographical areas that attracted gay men. There was the older gay quarter centered around Polk Street. Perhaps as an homage to gay Berlin between the World Wars, as depicted in Christopher Isherwood's *The Berlin Stories*, the street was fondly referred to as Polk Strasse. Others called it Polk Gulch. It catered to queens, gentlemen of a certain persuasion, some disco dollies. There were the all-American boys who flocked to 18th and Castro streets, the area called simply the Castro, or Castro Village, or the Village. And then there were leathermen and bad boys who gathered along Folsom Street, South of Market, the area that morphed into SoMa. Of course there was the Tenderloin and the Flagg Brothers shoe store on Market Street, where rough trade could be picked up. For a price. There were no hard and fast lines drawn. The whole City was fluid. The whole City, in fact the whole Bay Area, became our playground.

This is the story of men who worked with each other, and for each other. It tells of men who shared with each other. It recalls men who exchanged the art they had created, who told each other where the hot esoteric films were being screened. It paints a picture of men who picked up their tools and built playrooms in their homes and in their bars. The reader learns of men who exchanged ideas and partied together. And yes, it's a story of men who had sex together. In as many different ways as possible.

Some may ask if this is really how lives were lived then. It is. But not by everyone. I've written this account as creative nonfiction, literature's fourth genre. Some readers who did not live at that time, and in that place, may think this a work of fiction. There will be those who did live then and there, but have chosen to forget. There will be those who insist the Cordon Bleu restaurant never served Vietnamese Five-Spice Chicken, or that the Cento Cedar Cinema never screened *Salò*. So be it. Everything

written here really happened. The dialogue approximates the original dialogue. The story is not linear, but represents the multifaceted lives lived at this specific time, in this specific place. It is a collection of anecdotes of gay life South of Market in the San Francisco of the 1970s.

It's my hope that *Folsom Street Blues* sheds light on a great experiment, one that made life an art form in that once upon a time City by the Bay. Those of us who lived in that San Francisco of the 1970s, like those who partook of *A Movable Feast* in Hemingway's Paris during the 1920s, find that wherever we go for the rest of our lives, that time and that place stay with us. All three components—time, place, and self—were essential parts of that whole, of that total experience. This is the story of that convergence, of my experience.