

The Flat on Clementina

The fog crept off San Francisco Bay and into the warren of narrow streets in San Francisco's South of Market district. I glanced into the oversized rearview mirror outside the window of my pickup truck parked by the crumbling curb. "End Clementina" was reflected back at me from the corner street sign. I peered out the windshield. The building beckoned me from across the street. There it sat, shrouded in afternoon fog. Chunks of its cement-gray stucco façade had fallen away. It beckoned me like the gap-tooth grin of a two-bit hustler.

What a Dump.

When Bette Davis uttered her famous epithet in the 1949 film *Beyond the Forest*, she hadn't seen the flat I had just leased near Folsom Street, in San Francisco, California, U.S.A., on May 1, 1976.

The derelict structure I had bound myself to stood at 766 Clementina, an alley-like street one block north of Folsom, in a district of the City known as South of Market, South of the Slot—for the cable car slot that used to run down Market Street—or sometimes just Folsom.

South of Market in the 1970s was composed of various interlocking communities. There were pre-World War II rundown residential buildings usually composed of two or three flats. These low-rent, often absentee landlord buildings, lined the secondary alley-streets and were home to the Resident-People who lived there. Mom-and-pop corner grocery stores and cheap diners were scattered throughout this grid of grungy structures.

Rumor had it these streets were named for the Gold Rush good-time gals like Dore, Minna, and Natoma. It was an area that Baron Georges Eugene Haussmann, who directed the rebuilding of Paris during the 19th -century, would have razed.

Then there was a mixture of small light industrial businesses,

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such as a sandblasting machine shop, a scrap gold-and-silver recovery plant, or a redwood knickknack factory that wholesaled souvenirs to the National Parks. Most of these small businesses were located on the secondary alleys, some on major streets. Along the thoroughfares, such as Howard, Folsom, and Harrison, there were starting to be seen a few trendy to-the-trade outlets, featuring such items as display mannequins, industrial office furniture, or high-tech lighting. These were most often housed in former warehouses. They were interspersed with buildings that still were warehouses. Here worked the Day-People. Most left before dark.

Also along the thoroughfares, especially Folsom Street, were leather bars and bathhouses that catered to that sense of naughty danger sought by men who came into the district after dark. They were the Night-People. Threaded throughout this entire grid in both non-gentrified warehouse lofts and walk-up rundown flats were not-quite-yet-discovered-artists. They were mostly male and attracted to the masculine sense of blue-collar-place. And yes, they were also attracted to the cheap rent and the easy sex.

The place I leased was in an Edwardian-style post-earthquake/fire building. It was the entire top floor of a stacked two-flat. Sometime in the 1930s the outside had been resurfaced with cement stucco applied over chicken wire. By 1976 the chicken wire had lost a quarter of its stucco skin.

The flat had been vacated in a hurry. Piles of dirty clothes and discarded junk littered the seven rooms on the second floor. An old refrigerator was filled with rotting hamburger, rancid rice, and at least four generations of cockroaches. Windows were cracked and painted shut. Large chunks of plaster had fallen away revealing aging wooden lath. Both inside and out, the building looked abandoned. *What a dump!* I stared at the lease I had just signed for the top-floor flat: \$150 a month. *What a steal!*

When I first moved to San Francisco, October 1, 1975, I lived with Jack Fritscher, a great friend, who had “sponsored” me to the City by introducing me to his circle of friends and the most interesting bars and bathhouses I could imagine. As a carpenter-in-residence, I turned his cellar into a bedroom and all-purpose

playroom. On March 1, 1976, I moved into the Castro, San Francisco's expanding gay neighborhood. I shared an apartment on Noe Street with Sheldon Kovalski, an expat from Brooklyn, who had recently relocated up to San Francisco from Los Angeles. That apartment was within walking distance of 18th and Castro Streets. Sheldon soon left and moved in with a lover. I couldn't afford the place by myself. I had to be out by the end of the month. I wasn't sure where to look for another place.

In early April, 1976, I drove out to Lands End. It was a wild place then, out by the Pacific, southwest of the Golden Gate Bridge. It would later be tamed and developed as a National Recreation Area, but back in the day, it was visited mostly by adventurous men who went there for nude sunbathing and sex. Prides of once-domestic cats that had become inconvenient for their owners were dumped there to live free. It was a good place to watch the tides and think about life and the future or to contemplate which of the hot raw hunks on the beach there might follow you behind the rocks for a private session.

I had been wandering most of that afternoon on trails that were natural, carved out by hikers rather than the Parks and Recreation Department. The area seemed abandoned. Native vegetation reclaimed old cellars and foundations of long-demolished shacks. It could be dangerous there, what with the feral cats, wild men, and nude sunbathers. There were also predatory hustlers out for whatever they could get. I spent the afternoon admiring the wildlife, the Pacific, and wondering where I was going to live.

I returned to Merrie Way Road where I had parked my pickup. Before I reached the parking lot, I noticed an extremely muscular man wearing army pants and an army cap. It was the old-style cap, the kind that seemed to snap to attention and make you think of either the young Fidel Castro or the French Foreign Legion. Or both. Its shirtless wearer was pissing against a tree. I followed suit against a tree near his. He nodded acknowledgement of my presence and a smile broke his bearded face. His blue eyes joined his grin. I had just met Bill Essex.

After trading afternoon quickies in a nearby acacia copse, I followed Bill's mustard-yellow van to the Café Flore on Market Street. The café was near my soon-to-be-vacated apartment on

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Noe Street. I had been by the funky place several times before but had never stopped there.

"You've been here before?" I asked Bill as we entered the café. It had the look of an elegantly scruffy greenhouse abandoned decades ago and only recently turned into a shabby chic café. Plants were everywhere. Ferns hanging from the ceiling competed with huge pots filled with rubber plants and ficus. Well-worn folding chairs and tiny tables that looked like immigrants from the cafés of Paris formed intricate patterns on the uneven floor through which waiters wound their way. Non-obtrusive disco music—was there ever such a thing?—could be felt as much as heard just above the din of diners.

"Yeah, I've been here before. A couple of years ago when they first opened," Bill said, as we waited for a table.

Seated, our drink and food orders taken, we entered the tentative world of conversation that often seems awkward after sex with a stranger.

"I'm looking for a place to live," I said. "I have to get out of my place up the street here at the end of the month. I don't suppose you know of any place that's cheap, do you?"

"As a matter of fact I do," Bill said. "A friend of mine, David Hurles, lives on Clementina Street. I sometimes stay with him when I come up from Pomona. He said there's been a For Rent sign on the place across the street for six weeks or better."

"Where's Clementina?"

"South of Market, near Folsom."

"What's it look like?"

"It's a dump. I don't know what the rent is but it can't be much the way the building looks."

"I want to see it. Is there a phone number to call?"

There was. Bill drove me over to Clementina Street after we finished at Café Flore. He was right. It was pretty run down. I copied down the landlord's name, Clarence, and his phone number. It wouldn't hurt to find out how much the rent was and what it looked like inside. Maybe inside it wasn't as bad as outside.

David Hurles' place was across the street. Bill Essex evidently had known him for some time. We went over and knocked. He was home. Hurles had just started a new mail-order photo and

audio tape business, *Old Reliable*.

"I figured people will feel they can trust a place called *Old Reliable*. Don't you think it sounds like it has been around forever; that you wouldn't be ripped off by *Old Reliable*?" Hurles asked.

"I've never been ripped off by my old reliable," Bill Essex said.

We all laughed as Bill spread his legs and leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head so we could get a better view as his old reliable thickened in his army-surplus pants.

"How long have you been living here?" I said. "What's it like living in the Folsom area?"

"Jim's thinking of moving South of Market. He got the number for that place across the street," Bill said.

"I like it here. Chuck Arnett lives just above me, you know. I sometimes hear him. He's quite a sexual athlete."

Chuck Arnett worked at the Ambush, a bar on Harrison Street. Lean and quiet, in his 40s, he indeed had the look of a sexual athlete.

"So you feel safe here?" I pressed David. I had always felt safe visiting the bars and baths in the Folsom. The neighborhood here seemed quite different, however, than either Noe Street or 25th Street where I had lived with Jack Fritscher and David Sparrow.

"I feel as safe here as anywhere," David Hurles said. I caught a brief exchange of slight smiles between him and Bill Essex. Only later would I understand the significance of that exchange. David Hurles often picked up ex-cons and other marginal men for sex and photos. It was how he built *Old Reliable*.

That night Bill and I picked up where we had left off under the piss-trees out by Lands End. I had my first snort of cocaine. I took a series of photos of Bill in the shower. I concentrated on the superb musculature of his body. Although *Pumping Iron*, the bodybuilding photo book published a few years earlier, had been a hit with gay men, few gays at that time worked out and developed their bodies the way Bill did. I got a great shot of Bill emerging from the shower.

Despite his prematurely bald head and dark beard, with his college football-player body and broad infectious grin, he looked the epitome of the All-American Boy. In the background of the photo, hung over the toilet tank, was a framed picture of another

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American icon, the Marlboro Man. In the morning, Bill left to return to Pomona, near Los Angeles, where he was working on a master's degree in landscape architecture at Cal Poly. Before the summer was over, Bill too had heard the siren call of the City and moved north to San Francisco.

Without realizing it, I had laid the foundations for my life as a photographer South of Market. I would move into the dump on Clementina. David Hurles would lend me an extensive mailing list for a photo mail-order business. And I had taken the first photos of Bill Essex. He would prove to be the top model for my Keyhole Studios mail-order business.

The first thing I wanted to do after leasing the flat on Clementina, before I moved in or took one load of garbage to the dump, was take pictures. They would function as “before” pictures in contrast to whatever “after” pictures I might take once I had rescued the place. They would not be *Architectural Digest*-style “before” pictures. I wanted the flat to first function as a dangerous-abandoned-wrong-side-of-the-tracks place, for suggestive blue-collar sexual fantasy photos. These first photos would be self-portraits. My only prop was a used yellow hardhat I found in a thrift store. The pictures would entice viewers to enter at their own risk. Don't try this at home. You can try it here, however. It was a personal performance piece. Pure theater. High-contrast black-and-white photos. It was the 1970s. It was *Art*.

The series included one of me, naked, wearing a hard hat, and sitting in an old clawfoot tub; Man Ray surrealism South of Market. Another photo in the series allowed the viewer to voyeuristically observe the naked hardhat exhibitionist through the narrow opening of a nearly closed door to a room filled with trash. I spent an entire Sunday afternoon in the flat by myself, setting up floodlights, positioning the tripod, and arranging the camera angles. I would focus on the spot where I would be, set the timer for the delayed shutter speed, then quickly pose for my own Nikon.

The afternoon sunlight, streaming through the streaked filth on the cracked windows, provided a new interpretation of the Venetian-blind-shadow-ladder-across-the-room technique, long a favorite of mine in the old *film noir* classics of the 1940s. It was

San Francisco South of Market. It was 1976.

When I finished I was exhausted. The creative energy I had put into the photo shoot had peaked in a total body climax. I packed my camera and equipment into the cab of the pickup truck, locked the door to the flat, and headed over to Harrison Street and the Ambush for a cold longneck beer and the camaraderie the place provided.

I got a beer at the bar and started up the stairway to the second floor. At the top of the stairs a man behind the counter in the leather shop looked up.

"Hi," I nodded as I rounded the landing and came up the last couple of steps.

"Hi." He nodded back.

"It smells good up here," I said.

"It's all the leather and poppers."

I laughed and inhaled deeply. "I'm Jim Stewart," I said, offering my hand. He had a firm grip. Just as I was letting go, his hand slowly collapsed into an elongated fist not much bigger around than the butt-end of a beer bottle.

"Chuck Arnett."

"I know," I said. "I'm moving into the place across the street from you on Clementina."

"I know," he countered with a shy grin.

My eyebrows arched in question marks.

"David Hurles."

This master artist of the leather scene, whose mural of manly men in the Toolbox bar had been published in the June 26, 1964, issue of *Life* magazine, when I was still an undergrad, smiled up at me revealing the whites of his eyes beneath their brown irises. Although in his late 40s, he still had the hard lean look of the dancer I'd heard he'd once been in New York. He wore a close-clipped mustache and chinstrap beard. His still-dark hair was cut short, military style. A longsleeved khaki shirt, worn Levis, and a black leather vest complemented his tight body. His sleeves were rolled to the elbow to display sinewy, nearly hairless forearms decorated with fading long-ago tattoos. His nails were clipped short.

As I watched, he finished a stylized ink doodle. It covered

the lower half of a cardboard back from a yellow legal tablet. The doodle was of a well-filled condom. He folded the cardboard in half and set it on the counter. Next to the drawing of the used rubber it read "Scum Bags Three for \$1.00."

"I like that sign," I said. "Can I buy it?"

"It's not for sale."

He must have seen the disappointment in my eyes. He reached into the waste basket at the end of the counter and pulled out a cardstock ad for the Ambush. It had been printed with a script of the word Ambush and an Arnett drawing of leathermen's heads. There was a whole stack of them next to the cash register. He laid it on the counter. I looked at it questioningly.

"Turn it over," he said softly.

I turned it over. On the back of the card were preliminary doodles of several used rubbers, each slightly different. *Scum Bags* was drawn in a couple of different scripts. Arnett made a little mark in the corner that looked like some stylized zodiac sign.

"It's yours," he said as he slid it across the counter top toward me.

As I picked it up, I noticed a stain of some sort on the left side of the card. It spread across the drawings of the unrolled prophylactics. Probably spilled beer, I thought. I put it carefully in the inside pocket of my brown leather Harley jacket. I had just acquired my first original Chuck Arnett.

Removing the piles of dirty clothes, assorted junk and broken furniture that had been left behind in the Clementina flat was daunting. Thank God for heavy-duty yard waste bags and my pickup truck. There was a dump just out of the City in South San Francisco. Going there proved an adventure. Since I was not a professional trash hauler, most of the guys at the weigh-in station waved me through at no charge. My load looked light compared to the big-guy trash haulers and dumpsters that frequented the place.

As a bonus, I was directed to an area for household trash, not raw garbage. I love trash. What a treasure trove. Leftover building scrapes were often available. These went back to the flat for future

use. One trip netted enough two-by-fours and two-by-sixes to build a small deck for potted plants in the lightwell off the middle room. Another time I found sheets of heavy plate glass. One was used as replacement glass for the original front entrance door. Another was sandblasted by a neighbor and used in a light table I built to view photo negatives.

Going to the dump was like going to the thrift store. Sometimes you hit paydirt, sometimes you didn't.

Finally the small trash was gone from the flat. The cockroach-infested refrigerator and grease-encrusted stove remained. Among the tools I had brought with me to California was a hand dolly for wheeling light loads. It would work fine for getting the appliances down the long flight of stairs. Once on the recessed porch, I could load them into the bed of the pickup. I strapped the refrigerator to the hand dolly with clothesline rope I had bought for a different purpose. The cockroaches and rotting food remained inside.

By fancy footwork I was able to get the bulky load out of the kitchen, down the hall, down two steps onto the landing, and started down the long flight of stairs. There were skids on the back of the dolly that would slide over the edge of the steps. I was halfway down when I heard the front door open. The mass of the refrigerator prevented me from seeing who it was.

"You need a hand there?"

"Yeah, thanks." Who the hell was that?

"I brought over some ceramic tile for the bathroom."

It was Clarence, the landlord. I wondered what sort of tile he brought for the bathroom floor. I pictured titty-pink squares with a gold scroll around the edge. He had said he would provide all the supplies for the renovation. A buddy of his was a building contractor with lots of leftovers. I would supply the labor. It was part of the deal. It was why my rent was only \$150 a month.

"I can't see very well where I'm headed with this thing," I said. "Can you help me guide it toward the front door?"

I felt the old refrigerator shift slightly as Clarence gently guided it toward the door and out onto the recessed front porch. I let it pivot down as the weight slowly shifted until it was resting on the stoop.

"What are you going to do with it?" Clarence asked.

I wanted to say I'd leave it there on the stoop, in homage to junk that accumulates on front porches and along back roads across America. I thought better of it.

"My truck's parked right there, the GMC," I said, nodding toward Nelly Belle in front of us. "Since it's Saturday, and the street's not too busy, I think I can maneuver the truck crossways in the street. I can put the tailgate down, back up against the street steps, and load it right here from the stoop."

"That should work."

Thank God, I thought. Clarence wasn't going to give me a list of reasons why it wouldn't work.

"Want to give me a hand with the old stove?" I said.

He did. The stove was much lighter and easier to maneuver onto the stoop. I backed up the truck and we loaded the stove and refrigerator. I left Clarence to pull his maroon Ranchero into my parking spot. He said he would leave the boxes of tile for the bathroom upstairs. It proved easy pushing both the stove and refrigerator out of the pickup at the dump.

On the way back from the dump I debated with myself whether the tile would be like I first envisioned it, or maybe baby blue with a cluster of violets in the center. They were neither. They were French tiles, like the ones I had seen in the fleabag hotel I stayed at on the Isle St. Louis, in Paris, the summer I was 21. Their shape, of square-circle-triangle in chocolate, caramel, and cream, looked very *ancien régime*. They were perfect for the bathroom with the clawfooted tub. Maybe Clarence would be an easier landlord to work with than I had thought.

The transformation of the stage set had started; when finished, the flat would be changed from a dangerous-bad-side-of-town-abandoned-derelict-building to a mysterious personal performance space embracing sex, art, and the at-home salon. All would be secreted away, on a far-from-forlorn alley, in burgeoning SoMa, the South of Market district of San Francisco. It was 1976.

My stomach told me it was time for supper. It was almost dark. I was tired. A trip to the Norse Café in the Castro was out of the question. Then I remembered. It was Monday. The H. Salt Esq., a couple of blocks away on 7th Street near Howard, had a Monday night special. For 99¢ you got "authentic English

fish and chips,” complete with malt vinegar. True, they weren’t wrapped in the *London Times* but for 99¢ they weren’t bad.

I parked Nelly Belle just back from the little chain outlet, went in, and laid down my 99¢. I scooped up my two cod fillets and French fries, doused them with malt vinegar, went back outside, and hopped into my pickup for an English picnic. The overhead streetlight was burned out. That’s probably why I noticed the candle burning in the top floor bay window of a rundown two-flat across the street. The flickering light was casting shadows. They were moving with a certain regularity, would stop and then start again. I stared long at the shape in the window. A man was jacking off in candlelight, by the bay window.

He stopped. I quickly turned the pickup’s parking lights on, then off again. The masturbation continued. I unbuttoned my 501s and pulled out my cock. I paced my jerking rhythm to that in the candlelit window. It felt great. I wanted him to know how much he was appreciated. I turned on a small light on the dashboard and increased my pace. The phantom exhibitionist also increased his pace, to match mine. Voyeur and exhibitionist merged, became one. We each licked the warm sticky results from our hands for the benefit of the other. Not bad. Dinner and a show for 99¢.

I looked at my watch. It was 9:30 PM. I switched off the dashboard light and looked up at the bay window. The candle had been extinguished. The show was over. The following Monday I returned at 9:15 for the fish special. I also got a repeat participatory performance in the candlelit bay window. This continued for a month. Then I missed a Monday. The following Monday the window was dark.

Moving day was a bitch. The contents of my GMC covered wagon I had moved to California, a little over six months before, were scattered between two locations. Nearly half of my stuff I had left at Jack Fritscher’s house on 25th Street. The rest was at my apartment near Castro, on Noe Street. The most important items to move, of course, were my camera and equipment and my carpenter’s tools. They were the instruments of my livelihood.

My goods also included an assortment of mismatched mid-19th century walnut and cherry furniture, well-worn Middle Eastern tribal rugs, old theater spotlights, odd mirrors, modern paintings, a variety of old steamer trunks and ancestral pine primitive chests filled with frayed volumes of leather books, vintage photographs, and an assortment of woodland Indian baskets, salt-glazed stoneware jugs, as well as odd items of chipped china, tarnished silver, and pewter that pique one's interest when viewed in low light.

There was more. I had to move a collection of clothes that alluded to military men, lumberjacks, cowboys, jocks, farm boys, hardhats, and other blue-collar males. Then there were the leathers, including a couple of motorcycle jackets, chaps, leather pants, and vests. With all this was a hooded handwoven wool burnoose from my visit to Tangiers, my academic gown complete with hood striped with bright colored silks, a black Edwardian suit I bought in Paris, and other dapper duds. And of course my old Harris Tweed sports jacket.

There was also the mounted deer head of an eight-point buck my dad shot the fall I turned 13. I'm a collector. It was all grist for personal performance theater and photo shoots. It also led to some smoking-hot sex. It was art.

Jack Fritscher and his lover David Sparrow had offered to help me move. I planned the move on a Saturday, when Clementina Street was not as crowded. Saturday had been a good day to take the stove and refrigerator to the dump. I hoped it would be the same for the move. We loaded both my truck and Jack's Toyota for the trips from his place on 25th and Douglass and my former digs on Noe Street. All had gone well. We managed to find parking spaces where we needed them. The move was nearly finished.

"This is the last load from the truck," David said, as he brought an armload of clothes up the long stairway and into the middle room. He laid them across the old steamer trunk my great-Aunt Mae had left behind when she died at the state mental hospital during the height of the Great Depression.

"Did we get everything out of your Land Cruiser, Jack?"

"I think there's a couple of old used jockstraps left in the back if you want them."

We all laughed.

Jack Fritscher, my bridge to the leather world of San Francisco, had been carrying used jockstraps in his Toyota Land Cruiser since his days as a college professor. Whenever he offered someone a ride, Jack would wait for their reaction to the aroma. Some confused it with that new-car smell. Others were surprised they suddenly had secret thoughts of their high school football coach.

“Well, I guess that’s it. Thanks for all your help,” I said as I looked around the room piled high with my possessions.

“Well, don’t we get the grand tour?” Jack said. “All we’ve seen so far is this room and the stairway.”

“The best two rooms in the place,” I joked half seriously. “Of course you get the grand tour.” I walked over to the double pocket doors leading to the front parlor. I got one door open just over six inches when it refused to slide any further out of its pocket. The other door refused to budge at all. There was a nervous chuckle all around as Jack and David eyed each other.

“Well, I think that needs a little work,” I said. “We can go in the other way.” I led them into the hallway and back into the front parlor.

“That’s a beautiful fireplace,” Jack said.

“Isn’t it?” I agreed. “It’s amazing it has never been painted.” It was indeed a handsome fireplace. The old oak surround still had the patina of its original finish. A beveled plate glass mirror, uncracked, was still mounted between two slender Doric oak columns above the mantel. All the tiny green glazed tiles surrounding the fire box were intact.

“Does that heater work?” David asked, pointing to an ancient enameled-metal gas burner from the 1940s that sat in front of the fireplace.

“I don’t know, but it’s going to the dump,” I said.

“We don’t want you asphyxiated,” Jack said.

“I really like the French curve at the ceiling,” I said. “Both this room and the middle room have it.”

Jack and David cast their eyes upward. Nearly a quarter of the plaster from the ceiling was missing, revealing the old wooden lath underneath. The French curve was intact.

“And the bay windows,” I continued, “they’re in the front bedroom as well. Aren’t they neat?”

We all looked toward the front bay windows. Frayed sash-weight cords dangled from all three units. The upper window on the right was cracked. Looking through the streaks left from dirt and rain, the bay windows revealed a panoramic view of overhead wires and several crossarms for both electric and phone wires. A round electrical transformer dominated the view out the cracked window.

“That’s Chuck Arnett’s place right across the street there,” I added, as way of compensation.

And so the grand tour went. Neither Jack nor David seemed impressed with the well-worn 1950s linoleum in the kitchen that displayed grease outlines and rust circles where the stove and refrigerator had sat. They left shortly afterward, but not before Jack had asked me quietly if I was sure I knew what I was doing here, and what sort of papers I had signed. I reminded him of the little workingman’s Victorian I had restored back in Michigan. He hadn’t seen the “before” scenes of that little beauty. It was comforting to know they had my best interests at heart. After they left, I locked up the place and headed for the Ambush. Had I really gotten in over my head? I kept thinking of the East Village roach-infested tenement I had stayed in over Thanksgiving during my last year as an undergrad. At least here the bathtub wasn’t in the kitchen under a breadboard.

Boy, did I need a beer.