

The Trouble with Clarence

In the fall of 1975, I hauled ass along I-80, across the Great Plains, over the Rockies, and on into the City by the Bay. I got to cruise cowboys in Cheyenne and get it on with Mormon missionaries in Salt Lake City. Meanwhile, Clarence Thompson had closed a deal on a two-flat on Clementina. Clarence got the run-down dump South of Market in San Francisco for \$24,000. Cash.

“Why cash?” I asked him.

“Well, the girl I bought it from, Elena Gonzales, said she wanted cash. I didn’t have it sitting around, so I went to my bank. They gave me a loan for the \$24,000. I gave it to her. Counted it out for her right there in the bank, all in one hundred dollar bills, at her request. She signed a quitclaim deed over to me. It wasn’t until later I found out why she wanted cash.”

I sensed a good story was coming. Clarence, I found out, was good at stories. He was a Minnesotan who married a Guatemalan beauty. Clarence’s graying blond hair, which he wore combed straight back from his forehead, in the manner of men his age, and his pale blue eyes, gave him a Midwestern-Scandinavian look. He was not quite short and not quite fat and had passed the big five-oh.

Clarence lived in a 1950s ranch-style house out in the Sunset District, not far from the Pacific Ocean, with his wife, mother-in-law, and 16-year-old daughter. Like many straight men, he needed to get away from his womenfolk once in a while. He felt comfortable South of Market. It was a man’s place.

“Why’d she want cash?”

“Well, what I didn’t know at the time was she didn’t really own the place.”

“She didn’t own the place! I thought you said she gave you a quitclaim deed.”

“Oh, it was in her name, alright. Everything was legal. The

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thing is, her brother thought he still owned the building. She sold it out from under him.”

“How’d she do that?” I was warming to his story.

“Elena’s brother, George Gonzales, bought the house on the GI Bill sometime after World War II. About 10 years ago he had a heart attack. He was afraid he wasn’t going to make it. If he died, he knew the building would go to his wife. That was fine, but he feared her brother would somehow get it away from her. He hated his brother-in-law. He signed the house over to his mother, who was living with the sister here, in the upstairs flat.” Clarence’s arm swept out in a wide gesture to include the whole upstairs.

“So how did Elena get title to the place?” My head was starting to spin.

“Well, it seems the old lady, shortly before she died, signed it over to Elena so the son, George, couldn’t kick his sister out. Elena had never married. The old lady thought she was looking out for her daughter.”

“Looks like Elena was able to take care of herself, after all.”

“Looks that way. The problem is, Gonzales still thinks of this as his place. He doesn’t think he has to pay rent. Mrs. Gonzales told me what happened.”

“What are you going to do about it, Clarence?”

“I told him he could stay here six months rent-free. After that I’d have to charge him.”

“That’s pretty generous. What’d he say?”

“Nothing. He just went back inside the flat. His wife nodded her head and followed him.”

“It’s not a language problem is it?”

Clarence laughed. “No. It’s not a language problem. Elena told me they were Californios. They’ve been here since before the Gold Rush.”

“Their six months must be about up, aren’t they?”

“Two months ago.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

Clarence and I were standing in the kitchen surveying the empty room. Spraying Raid and laying down Combat traps had brought the cockroaches under control. For now. They were

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probably lurking elsewhere in the building, waiting to return as soon as the lights went out.

“How’d you happen to come across this place? Was it through a realtor?” I said.

“No, it was actually at an office party.” He chuckled.

I knew more of the story was coming.

“Last Labor Day we had an office party out at that old beach house at the end of Golden Gate Park, near the Great Highway. The Beach Chalet.”

“Isn’t that the place that has some great WPA murals?”

“Yeah, there are old paintings on the walls. They might be from the 1930s.”

I made a mental note to check out the place. WPA murals were part of Roosevelt’s New Deal program and had always intrigued me. I wondered if these murals showed sailor boys in tight-assed bell bottoms the way Paul Cadmus’ WPA murals do.

“Anyway,” Clarence continued, “I was talking with Elena, just shooting the shit. She was a secretary at work. A nice girl. A good secretary. When I mentioned I was looking for some investment property, she asked if I wanted to buy her place.”

“What’d she say about it?” I said, thinking of the mess it had been in.

“She just said her mother left it to her when she died, that she didn’t want anything in her flat, she just wanted to walk away and leave with the 24 thou in cash. Walk away clean, as she put it. When I saw her apartment I knew why she just wanted to walk away. I would too. She was always neat at work, well-dressed. I never understood it. But boy, 24 thou is a steal, even if the place is a mess.”

I nodded my head in agreement. “Is she still at work?”

“No, she split for L.A. as soon as she had the money. Never told her brother she had sold the place. Just up and left.”

“Did she tell you anything about her brother?”

“No, she just said the first-floor flat was rented.”

Clarence liked to surprise me. When I least expected it, he would show up with a load of salvaged supplies for the renovation

of the flat. It was part of the deal, of course, but I had envisioned buying the supplies and giving him a receipt for reimbursement. Clarence had a friend who was a construction contractor. I think most of what he brought to the flat was leftovers from construction jobs. A lot of things were top quality. It was just his unannounced delivery system that made me jumpy.

The day I officially left the apartment on Noe Street and became a resident on Clementina Street was a jumpy day. Clarence's contractor buddy had installed new copper plumbing in my flat. He had lifted some of the floorboards in the kitchen, bathroom, and toilet room, cut notches in the joists to accommodate the new pipes, and then replaced the old tongue-and-groove boards.

I nailed down pressed-board subflooring over that tongue-and-groove in the bathroom in preparation for laying those great French floor tiles Clarence had brought over. The bathroom arrangement was very European. The stool was in a small room by itself, the toilet. The clawfoot tub and lavatory were in a larger separate room, the bath. Both were just across the hall from the back bedroom, The Other Room.

I took a break, had a cigarette and some Gatorade in the front parlor. It was hot. My shirt off, I stood in front of the open bay window, catching the afternoon breeze. The street was empty.

The faint smell of redwood sawdust and the low drone of a table saw drifted in from the shop next door. Across the street, in the open stairwell, I saw a man knocking on an apartment door. It was the building where Chuck Arnett and David Hurles both lived. There were four apartments in the building. All were accessed by the open stairwell in the center of the building. No one answered the door.

The man came back down the stairs. He was wearing faded Levi's and a plaid flannel shirt open halfway down his hairless chest. His sleeves were rolled up past his elbows to reveal well-developed biceps. There was a black leather thong tied around his neck. His dark hair was clipped short. He wore a mustache. He looked like he had found his way here from Castro Street.

He stepped out from between two parked cars next to the narrow sidewalk; looked in both ways up and down the street.

It was still empty. It was sunny, although a light wind had come up. He must have glimpsed me when I drew on my Marlboro and exhaled a stream of smoke out the window. The breeze carried my smoke across the street. He looked up. I smiled. He smiled back and rubbed his crotch suggestively. I did the same in the open window. He crossed the street. In a minute I heard my front door being slowly opened. Footsteps started up the long flight of wooden steps.

I was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. Neither of us said a word. I turned and nodded toward the open door to the small toilet room. He entered. The room wasn't much bigger than the pay stalls at the Greyhound Bus Station. He unbuttoned his beltless Levi's, took out his dick, and sat down on the toilet. There was just room for me to stand in front of him as he started to undo the metal buttons on my Levi 501s. Without a word we soon reached the rhythm and pitch brought by the thrill of danger that's the excitement of anonymous sex in a public toilet. But it wasn't a public toilet. It was my flat on Clementina. It was performance theater for two. It was Art.

I heard the entrance door at the bottom of the stairway open and someone step in. I shot my load to the thrill of being caught in *flagrante delicto*.

The sound of a heavy box being set on the bottom step was followed by retreating footsteps on the outside cement steps. The door had not been closed.

Without a word, I stepped out of the small room, closed the door, and buttoned my fly. I was waiting at the top of the stairs when Clarence reached the landing with a box of small blue and green glazed tiles.

"For the kitchen counters," he said, only slightly out of breath.

"In the back," I said, not offering to take the box. "There's something I want to show you on the back porch."

We walked past the closed door of the toilet and back to the kitchen. Clarence set the box on the floor. I led him out the back door onto the decrepit enclosed porch dominated by an old laundry sink.

"I think I can set the tile cutter up in this sink and fix up a hose for a fine water spray when I'm cutting tile."

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He agreed. "I'm parked right out front. I need a hand with the tile cutter."

We headed down the hall toward the stairs. The door to the toilet was open. As we passed I glanced in. A large wad of cum floated in the old stool. The Castro Clone had also shot to the thrill of almost being caught.

I headed to Folsom Street for lunch at a place David Hurles told me about. It was run by young men with beards and shaved heads. Sounded hot to me. It was a noontime meditation meal. Your dollar donation brought silence and seconds of brown rice, tofu and tiger's milk.

When I walked in I saw at once how the saffron robes clung to the young men with the shaved heads. They were naked beneath all that gauzy orange. I knew I wasn't allowed to say anything. I sat down. A somewhat warm glass of tiger's milk was set in front of me. Had it just been milked from a tiger? An earthen bowl filled with dollar bills was passed around. I added my dollar to the collection. A plate with sticky brown rice and bean curd was set in front of me. Filling, but short on flavor. What the meal lacked in flavor was made up for by the sensuous movements of the naked men under the saffron robes. The usual kitchen smells were replaced by those of sandalwood and male sweat.

I returned several times for a noontime meditation meal. Then one day they were closed. I read in the *Bay Area Reporter*, a free gay newspaper, that it had all been a drug front. They had been busted.

I spent the remainder of day-one residency continuing to nail down the pressed subflooring in the bathroom. I mentally planned my order of attack on the place. The toilet was usable, though in need of a little work. I had just proved that. The kitchen was a large project. It would involve tearing out a wall shared with the dining room, installing new cabinets, tiling countertops and floors, and patching and painting old plaster walls. Dining at a variety of cheap restaurants in San Francisco in 1976 was not a deprivation. The kitchen could wait.

The bathroom involved tiling, restoration of the clawfoot tub, installing frosted glass in the window, jury-rigging a shower, and finding an old pedestal sink. The tiny corner lavatory was past restoration. In its place Clarence had left a baby-blue 1950s wall-mount porcelain monstrosity. The bathroom would take some time. It too could wait.

In the meantime I could wash up at the old laundry sink on the back porch. Showering at any of the bathhouses South of Market was a delightful depravity.

The room that would be given top priority, I decided, was the small front bedroom with the bay window. It was over the recessed front entrance. I could hear anyone coming or going from either flat. By completing it first, I would have a great get-away oasis. I could escape there from working on the mass disaster of the rest of the flat. It would also provide a civilized area in which to entertain, or repair to after more vigorous sessions in the wreck of the back bedroom, the room I thought of as The Other Room. Yes, the front bedroom would take top restoration priority.

As I washed up on the back porch, in the old laundry sink, I thought of the “whore’s baths” I used to take in my sleazy room at a fleabag hotel on the Isle St. Louis in Paris the summer I was 21. Just the essentials. Face, pits, and crotch. I wiped my wet hands on dirty Levi’s, pulled on a clean black T-shirt, and donned my brown leather Harley jacket. I was ready.

I did a walkthrough of the flat. The back door was locked, the windows closed. As I headed past the bathroom I noticed a small wet spot on the pressed subflooring I’d been nailing down. Must be I’d spilled my Gatorade. I was becoming addicted to the stuff.

I was lucky. I found a parking place for my truck on 18th Street in the small lot around the corner from Castro Street. The afternoon crowd was off the street. The night cruisers hadn’t come out yet. Still I got “the look” and “the nod” from half a dozen or so hot men between my truck on 18th and the Norse Cove Café on Castro Street. I entered the domain of Dragon Lady, the mystery woman. Maybe she was French, and her name was Germaine. Maybe she was an Egyptian Jewess who inspired

Lawrence Durrell's *Justine*. Whoever she was, Dragon Lady, with her husband, ran the Norse Cove Café.

The food, Scandinavian and French bistro fare, was served cafeteria style. You went through the line, picked your entrée and sides, found a table, finished your meal, and paid at the counter. No waiters, no check. A great meal could be had for a buck. Dragon Lady was known to chase you down the street if you failed to pay. She saw all. She knew all.

"Jim!"

I looked around.

"Over here."

I saw Sheldon Kovalski eating by himself. I hadn't seen him since he had moved out of the apartment we shared on Noe Street, and in with his lover, John Ely. I went over to his table, squeezed his shoulder, and started to shake hands.

"Oh, give me a kiss. This is the Castro."

I did.

"How's your place on Clementina coming?" Sheldon hadn't seen it yet.

"Fine. Let me get some food and I'll tell you all about it."

I asked for a plate of *pommes a l'huile*. I added a smoked sausage and one of Boudin's sourdough rolls to the warm French potato salad. As I put Dijon mustard on the sausage, I noticed Dragon Lady watching me. She knew exactly what I was eating, what I was drinking. Black coffee.

"Where's John?"

"Out somewhere, having a good time, I suppose. So, you're all moved in?"

"Yes sir, I'm an official denizen of Folsom, as of today." I told him about the flat, sparing none of the gory details. Sheldon looked intrigued. He had grown up in Brooklyn and lived in Los Angeles for a number of years. LaLa Land he called it. We finished our meals and remembered to pay.

"You headed back to Folsom Street?"

"Yeah. Want a ride?"

"It's a little early but why not, as long as I got a free ride."

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to nine. It was early.

"How about the Ambush?" I said as we got in my truck.

“That’s pretty laid back this time of day.”

There was a parking space right in front of the Ambush on Harrison Street. Sheldon bought me a beer. We talked for a while and then each wandered off as we ran into other friends who had begun to drift into the bar. After midnight I left, by myself, and drove over to Folsom Street. No parking spaces were left. I circled around onto Clementina. Lady Luck smiled on me. A space was waiting right in front of my flat.

I walked back to Folsom Street and Playland, a leather bar across the street from The Slot, that infamous bath-house where I’d had my head shaved by Sheldon a month before. For nearly a year Playland, named for the long-gone amusement park out near the ocean, had hibernated. Tonight it was awake.

A line of men, waiting to get in, led down the sidewalk from the open door. Music boomed out of the bar. At the door a shirtless man, wearing a leather body harness, crossed his huge arms over his barrel chest. When a man came out of the bar, he would let another one in. The men in line were hot. It would be worth the wait. I got in line.

Some stood in spotless leathers practicing their S&M, standing and modeling. Others were in Levi’s well-worn in the crotch. A whiff of poppers drifted down the line as disco blasted out the open door. A fist holding its thumb over a small brown glass bottle was shoved near my nose.

“Here. Want some?”

I took the bottle of poppers and held it just under my mouth and inhaled the fumes deeply before doing the same under each nostril. I started to hand it back to Well-Worn Crotch in front of me.

“No. Pass it along. It’s from the doorman. He doesn’t want us to get bored and leave before we get inside.”

The effect of poppers doesn’t last long, but the rush can be intense. The rush hadn’t peaked when I saw an apparition. A short man with full black beard was coming down the sidewalk. He was dressed in gypsy-hippie rags. His long robe and wide-brimmed hat were complemented by dozens of dangly necklaces and spangled bracelets. A skinheaded tambourine hung from a cord around his waist. His dirty feet were bare. A miniature collie,

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wearing a red bandanna around its neck, trotted on its little legs, attempting to keep up. As he neared us, he picked up the collie. His jewelry rattled. He leaned in toward me.

“Pot?” he whispered.

I shook my head.

“Hash?”

I shook my head again. He moved on down the line. Ahead, I saw someone pull bills from a wallet and hand them to Gypsy-Hippie man. My poppers rush was gone, but the little collie and its master were still there.

“Who is that?” I said to the man in front of me.

“That’s Jesus Christ Satan.”

“Who?”

“Jesus Christ Satan.” He laughed. “He’s sort of an urban legend around here. Rumor has it he used to be a lawyer in New York. I think he came here in the 60s,” he said, as if that explained everything. “He goes all over selling his drugs. The cops just leave him alone.”

“Is he homeless?”

“I don’t think so. I heard he declared his apartment’s independence from the United States and applied to the U.N. for aid to developing nations.”

“Nice if you can get it,” the man behind me said.

We all laughed.

We were nearing the door. The music was louder. I saw Jesus Christ Satan cross Folsom Street. He had put the collie down again and it was working its tiny legs in a frenzy to keep up. They headed for The Slot.

Once inside I saw it was well worth the wait. The crowd, half-naked, swayed to the beat of throbbing and pounding music. The DJ built the pulse as the closing hour of 2:00 a.m. approached. By then, many of the sweat-drenched men would be gone, heading for the baths or home, having peaked during the mass orgy of sucking and fucking in the back room. The back rooms were what could make or break a bar in the Folsom.

I fought my way through the mass of bodies, groping and being groped, until I reached the bar for a cold one. With beer in hand, I headed for the back room.

The smell of booze and cigarettes, weed and poppers, sweat and testosterone, enhanced the dark scene of men moaning and grunting like rutting pigs. Soon I was part of the critical mass of male flesh, grinding its way to the ecstasy of Revelations. I was. I am. I am to come. I came. My body sang.

The din of disco music stopped.

“Repent, you motherfuckers, repent!” The metallic sound of a shaken tambourine could be heard above the grunting and moaning in the otherwise silent back room. Again. “Repent, you motherfuckers! Repent!”

Silence.

“We’re not *motherfuckers*. We’re *fatherfuckers*!” a deep voice from the dark bellowed out in passion.

A small dog barked.

Oh God, Jesus Christ Satan, I thought.

“Last call, gentlemen. Last call. You have ten minutes to drink up. It’s time, please.”

The lights slowly began to brighten. Most men stumbled out the exits and toward the baths. It was Saturday night, South of Market, San Francisco, 1976.

I headed back to the flat, threading my way in the dark down 8th Street and along the narrow alley-like confines of Clementina Street. Fog hung in a soft halo around the one dim streetlight that was still lit. An alley feline, searching in the remains of someone’s supper, tipped over a galvanized garbage can, sending its lid rolling and clattering into the gutter as the cat ran across my path. Silence again.

My engineer boots on the concrete rang out in the early morning stillness. I made my way along the narrow sidewalk with its dark tunnels of unlit doorways. I stopped. I thought I heard footsteps behind me. Silence. I proceeded again toward my flat. Again I heard footsteps behind me. I stopped again, my heart beating, as if in sympathy with its earlier popper rush. Nothing. Then I heard a fountain splashing. I laughed. Some late night reveler, like me, had stepped into a darkened doorway to piss.

I reached the flat. My recessed stoop and steps were dark. A

faint light found its way through the filthy glass in the old paneled door of my downstairs neighbor. It was close to three in the morning.

My first night in my new place. Why was I jumpy? I managed to fit the key in the lock. I entered and closed the door behind me. I locked it. I reached the top of the long wooden staircase in the dark. I found the light switch in the hall and pressed it. A 40-watt bulb, at the end of a braided cloth-covered cord extending down from the ceiling, came on. I stepped into the toilet room, took a long beer-piss, and flushed the toilet. The tank did not fill up. Great.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Someone was pounding on my front door. The short hair on the back of my neck bristled. Who the hell was knocking on my door at nearly three in the morning? I was no longer jumpy. I was pissed. I thudded down the long stairway, unlocked the door, and flung it open.

“What the hell do you want?” I bellowed.

A middle-aged woman with gray unkempt hair and wearing a worn-out chenille bathrobe, a relic of the 1940s, was standing in front of me.

“I’m sorry to bother you. My husband and I live downstairs and water started dripping through our bathroom ceiling. You weren’t home and we didn’t know what to do. We called Mr. Thompson. My husband said he could shut the water off in the basement so Mr. Thompson wouldn’t have to drive all the way over here. So that’s why you don’t have any water.”

“Oh.” Before I could introduce myself or apologize for yelling at her, she slipped back into her apartment.

I went back upstairs. At least that explained why the toilet tank didn’t fill up after I flushed. I checked in the bathroom. What I thought was spilled Gatorade when I left, had turned into a wet circular stain on the new subflooring I had nailed down that afternoon. I had nailed into the new copper pipes that were laid high in the floor joists. Clarence would be over tomorrow. I’d have some explanation by then.

I striped and lay on the thrift store mattress I had thrown on the floor in The Other Room. The odor of male sex still clung to my naked body. I’m going to like it here, I thought. I slept.