

Smoke Signals

Smoke. Down on my knees laying carpet, I smelled smoke. I glanced toward the bay window facing the street. The small glass ashtray on the window sill held two cold cigarette butts. No smoke there. Outside it was sunny. This was unusual for San Francisco. By 2:30 in the afternoon fog would generally start to drift in from the Pacific. A slight breeze would pick up.

I went back to stretching the carpeting across the floor, hooking it onto the carpet tack-strips nailed around the edge of the room. I had never laid carpet before, but knew it couldn't be too difficult. I had done the reverse; ripped it up.

The carpet was sage green and textured like moss with no visible signs of wear. It had been taken from a much larger room in a much finer house out in The Avenues. Clarence, the landlord, said it had been a bargain.

The hard part of the bargain had been cutting it to match the irregular outline of the floor. This outline included a bay window, a fireplace, a light well, and several doorways. I was starting to get the hang of it: cutting, stretching, hooking.

The smell of smoke was stronger.

I glanced toward the bay window again. It looked like fog had started to come in. It smelled like smoke. I got off my knees and stood up. Bet I have carpet burns, I thought as I went to the bay window and pulled down the top sash on the left. I stuck my head out. To the east the street was shrouded in smoke. I couldn't tell where the fire was. The distant sound of sirens came closer.

I grabbed my camera bag from the kitchen table and slung it over my shoulder. I retrieved my bank books from the oak desk I'd trucked over the Rockies. The truck with my carpenter tools inside was parked on the street.

I double-timed down the inside stairs, closed the door and ran across the street to where Bill Essex lived. Smoke still hid the

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street to the east.

Bill and I had lived together, briefly, after he moved up from U.C. Pomona, where he was working on a master's degree in landscape architecture. He, along with Jack Fritscher, had applied for positions as deputies under the gay outreach program of Sheriff Richard Hongisto. Bill was waiting to hear on the status of his application. He had moved into David Hurles' old apartment across the street.

"Bill," I shouted through his door as I pounded on it. "Bill!"

I fumbled on my key ring for his apartment key. We had each other's keys for just such situations. I found it. I unlocked his door. He was sleeping naked on his king-sized bed. Bill pumped iron. I looked down at his body in repose. A scattering of hair covered the defined pecs and washboard belly Bill had worked so hard to develop. He was covered with a fine film of sleep-sweat. I had shot photos of that body in the woods in Marin County. They were hanging in the Ambush now, as part of my first show there, "Men South of Market." Later they were published in *Drummer*, the mag that Jack Fritscher, as the San Francisco editor-in-chief, turned into the 20th-century icon of the leather community.

"Bill, wake up," I shouted as I shook him.

Bill woke up.

"What the hell..."

"Do you know what you want to save?" I said.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he mumbled as he pulled a pair of army surplus fatigues up over his naked butt and wrestled into a white wife-beater shirt.

You could smell the smoke through Bill's closed windows. He pulled on his combat boots and we went onto the outside stair landing that ran through the middle of the building. We stuck our heads out past the railing to look down the street. The smoke was really thick now. Sirens sounded much louder. They were at the other end of the street.

Just as we looked to the east, we heard an explosion, and flames shot a couple of stories into the air.

"Holy shit!" Bill hollered. "What the hell was that?"

"Don't know," I said. "Could be that brick warehouse at the end of the street."

The afternoon breeze from the Pacific had finally made its way down Clementina Street and was pushing the smoke back in the direction it had come. It was fanning the flames at the end of the street. Fire trucks pulled up below us as we looked down from the second floor landing. No possibility of moving either my truck or Bill's van at this point. We raced down his stairs and up mine and into my bedroom where the bay windows hung out over the sidewalk and provided the best view.

The smoke had cleared as the flames shot straight up through what was left of the roof. Bill and I looked down and saw the sidewalks lined with neighbors. There was Enchanted Mary, the New Mexican artist across the street whose husband had left her for the proverbial younger woman. Chuck Arnett, who lived in Bill's building, was on the stair landing. The sleeves of Arnett's khaki Marine shirt were rolled past his elbows. His right forearm, with the aging tattoo, was slick with a thin film of white grease. Crisco? The hot young Hispanic from El Paso, who had moved into the building, came out and stood next to Arnett. He was barefoot and shirtless.

The widow in her 60s, who lived in the upstairs apartment next to the woodworking shop, was also out on the street. I watched her for a few minutes. She was dressed in a padded-shoulder pale green gown, with suede slingback heels: Joan Crawford come-fuck-me pumps. Right out of the 1940s. What an odd outfit to wear to a Saturday afternoon fire. But then again, one saw all sorts of fantasies played out here, on the streets South of Market. As I watched I noticed she would drift off the sidewalk and into the street. A young fireman would gently take her by the arm and say, "You'll have to step back on the sidewalk, ma'am." A few minutes latter she would drift out into the street again, where another young fireman would likewise pay attention to her. Who wouldn't love to play that game?

Through the center of the street, long hoses snaked their way toward the fire. Water, spraying from the hasty couplings at the fire hydrant, soaked the legs of the curious as they tried to get through the crowd. Firemen were everywhere, their protective clothing and helmets doing little to mask their strength and fitness. From our vantage point, Bill and I could easily pick out the

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bosses from the muscle. There were those who shouted orders and those who carried them out. All seemed to have mustaches.

A city cop car now blocked the end of the street. "Go home," I heard one young cop, also wearing a mustache, tell a group of the curious. "You can see more on the news tonight than you can here."

I looked toward the west end of the street. A mobile TV news truck was parked just behind the cop car. The field reporter, with his mike in hand, was backing his way through the crowd to take best advantage of the flames as a background. His cameraman was trying to keep up with him. He seemed more interested in filming the firemen and cops than the reporter with the flames behind him. It would make great footage on KPIX-Channel 5's news tonight.

I sat at the counter in Hamburger Mary's on Folsom Street eating chili. I liked the way it was served. A gob of grated cheddar on top would melt and run down among the beans. It was then thatched with a fistful of chopped raw onions. A full basket of saltines sat on the side. With a mug of black coffee my supper was under a buck.

I had walked the few blocks here since my truck was still boxed in by fire engines. The last of the big hoses were being rolled up when I left. The dark funkiness of Hamburger Mary's provided a hangout for all: men, women, straights, Folsom Street Daddies, Castro Street Boys, Polk Street Queens, hippies, and artists of all sorts who were trickling into this bargain-basement section of the City, South of Market.

Two guys in well-worn tweed sports jackets and faded Levi's sat next to me at the counter, discussing the fire.

"That wasn't much of a fire today, in the whole scheme of things," the one with the full beard said.

"You're right," the one with the clipped mustache agreed. "This whole area burned during the 1906 Earthquake," Mustache informed whoever wanted to listen.

"It was actually the fire that did more damage than the earthquake," Full Beard added.

“There was a bathhouse that burned right near here, at 10th and Howard, I think.”

“Yeah, the James Lick Baths,” Full Beard chuckled.

“I don’t think it was that kind of bathhouse, not in 1906.”

“Don’t be so sure of it,” Full Beard insisted.

Grad students in philosophy? Assistant profs of history, slumming from Berkeley? I finished my chili and headed over to the Ambush on Harrison.

Like Hamburger Mary’s, the Ambush was funky. It was a cross between a hippie hangout and a leather/western bar. It was a beer-and-wine bar. It was not, however, a *wine* bar. Wine at the Ambush came from two jugs, red and white. You wanted rosé, they’d mix it right there for you. In the afternoon and early evening it was laid-back cool. Joints were shared. The heavy cruising mode wouldn’t kick in until after midnight.

The Ambush was still in laid-back mode. I ordered a beer at the bar and headed for the meat rack.

“That was some fire today,” the guy next to me said as he sucked on a joint and passed it my way. I shook my head.

“No thanks,” I said with a slightly suggestive smile. “It’s early yet.”

“Whatever.” He passed the joint over to the guy on his left, who greedily inhaled. Both were lean and lanky, sported dark wavy hair, sparse patchy beards, and needed a shower.

“Nothing like that fire a few months ago over on Valencia and 16th though,” he continued. “Now that was one hell of a fire.”

He inhaled his doobie and perfunctorily offered it to me again. I gave a little shake to my head. Grass had never done much for me other than make me sleepy. As it turned out, I was saving myself for a more magnificent obsession.

“That’s where the Gartland burned, wasn’t it?” I said.

I was sure of it, but wanted to hear his take on it. The Gartland Apartments, several stories high, had been a glorified single-occupancy hotel. It was filled with the near-homeless, addicts, artists, prostitutes of both sexes, as well as the general poor, and those on fixed incomes. It was also filled with city building code violations. The city had condemned the building and filed a lawsuit against the owner. In December, 1975, someone had poured

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gasoline down its main stairway and lit it. At least 14 people had died. Within days the building was razed before a full investigation could be launched. The hole in the ground where it had stood for over 60 years became known as the Gartland Pit.

"Damn tootin' it was," he said, "and me and him nearly burned up with it." He nodded toward the younger guy sitting next to him who had inhaled so greedily on the joint.

Now here was a story.

They hadn't been in the City long. Unlike me, they traveled light. They knew no one here when they arrived from Tulsa via Greyhound, sharing a single suitcase. They bunked at the Gartland with a man from Memphis they met at the bus station urinals. He gave up and moved back to Tennessee. They stayed on at the Gartland. No deposit required. The old hotel stood midway between Castro and Folsom. It was an ideal location.

"We was both sleeping. Man, had we partied," the boyish-looking pothead said as he grinned at me.

"Yeah, we woke up to the sound of sirens. There was smoke in our room."

"Never heard no fire alarm or nothing," Pothead Boy told me. "We thought we was cooked," he added, grinning at his own joke.

"What happened?" I urged them on.

"Well," the keeper of the joint went on, "the fire ladders wouldn't reach up to the top floor where we was. There was flames right below us. That damn floor was a-gettin' hot. We had the windows up, and looked down. There was a whole bunch of them firemen standing down there holdin' one of those big round jump things. Somebody was on a bullhorn hollerin' something but we couldn't understand it. Everybody was a-lookin' up at us."

There was a pause as they shared the joint again.

"So what happened?" I said.

"Well, we'd rolled this big joint when we first smelled smoke, so we just finished that doobie and got out on the window ledge and jumped. What a trip!"

"Yeah, we was holding hands when we jumped." There was a pause. "Hope that wasn't on TV back in Tulsa."

"Who gives a shit?"

"You guys want another beer?"

“We might,” Joint-Keeper said, with the slightest of nods to Pothead Boy.

I headed over to the bar for beers.

After a few more rounds from my wallet, we walked over to Clementina Street and The Other Room.

“Man, did we party!” as Pothead Boy liked to say. I learned they were uncle and nephew and had been partying together since puberty.

In the morning they were gone. I had a hangover and an empty wallet. Had I really bought that many rounds at the Ambush last night or merely helped them stay in the City for awhile longer?

It'd been a month since the Clementina Street fire. Vehicles were still being ticketed if you didn't move them before the parking Gestapo arrived. I finally finished laying the used carpeting. It looked great. There was one more room in the flat to recover from decades of neglect. It was The Other Room. Bill had heard from the County Sheriff's Department. They wanted to interview him at his home. That was still listed officially as my place. I told him I would disappear during his interview the following week.

I locked the door and descended the six steps to the sidewalk. I was headed to lunch at Canary Island, a bright yellow streetcar diner over on Harrison with great burgers and dogs. I heard a siren. It was the braying of a fire truck warning all out of its way. I inhaled deeply. No obvious smoke. I looked east down the street. Already a crowd of neighbors had started to gather.

A thin trail of smoke was coming from an open second-story window a couple of buildings away. It was the upstairs apartment next to the woodworking shop. The widow-who-liked-firemen lived there. The fire truck nudged its way down the narrow street and stopped in front of the widow's building.

A handsome young fireman rode the truck ladder up to the open second-floor window. The thin trail of smoke had almost stopped. The widow, in pale pink negligee and peignoir, was leaning out the window. Her long gray hair hung around her shoulders in a style Hepburn would have been proud of before the Big War.

“Fire, fire,” the widow was repeating. “Help me, oh please

help me,” she said in a barely audible voice to the hot young fireman on the ladder.

He helped the lady in distress out the window and into his arms. She clung around his neck as the ladder was lowered. She was passed off to another fireman.

The widow promptly, and very properly, swooned against her rescuer and slide down his body toward the sidewalk where she sat leaning against his big rubber boots. She was crying softly. The neighbors, who had all gathered on the sidewalk, started to applaud. Was it for the firemen’s heroism or the widow’s great performance?

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” someone whispered in my ear. “Have you ever seen anything so ridiculous?”

I turned. It was Enchanted Mary from New Mexico. The fire was now out. The hero was descending the ladder with the culprit, a metal wastepaper basket filled with charred newspapers. A pair of partially burned barkcloth drapes had been ripped from their rod and flung to the sidewalk below where they were quickly extinguished.

“You know her husband was a fireman?” somebody said, as much to herself as to anybody in particular.

I turned. It was Mrs. Gonzales, the woman who still lived in the flat below me.

“No,” I said. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah.” Mrs. Gonzales paused. “He was killed in a fire.” Another pause. “They said it was arson.”

“When was that?” I asked her.

“A few years after we moved here.” She thought for a moment. “We both got our houses here about the same time. Her husband and mine both had the G.I. Bill so it must have been 1946 or 1947. No, it was probably 1948.”

“She never remarried?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “The house was paid off. She rented out the first floor and kept to herself. She’s never been quite the same since then, you know.”

I hadn’t known.

Clementina was abuzz again. This time it was real Hollywood. Complete with movie stars. Or at least *a* movie star. Raymond Burr. The star of the early TV courtroom drama *Perry Mason* was filming a hopefully comeback TV series, *Kingston: Confidential*, on our street. Burr now played an investigative reporter out to solve crime. The crime on Clementina he hoped to solve? The burned-out warehouse fire at the end of the street. It was a perfect location. A real burned-out building, an industrial neighborhood in San Francisco, and lots of locals as extras.

The street was blocked off at both ends. Temporary signs posted the night before warned residents that their vehicles would be towed after 7 a.m. This was serious stuff, not just the whim of the parking Gestapo. This was Hollywood.

About mid-block a white van, with a stylized globe sandwiched between “Universal City” and “Studios” on its door, sat squarely in the middle of the street. Near it were several canvas folding chairs. “Raymond Burr” was boldly printed on the back of one. A handsome 20-something gaffer sat in it, tinkering with an electrical gang-box. Further down the street Raymond Burr, in a three-piece suit and top coat, was signing autographs.

It wasn't the Hollywood crew that caught my eye but a tall bearded local man. When he walked, you knew he was naked under his grease-stained dark blue jumpsuit. Dark chest hair curled out of it at his neck. A dirty white paper facemask rode high on his head, where a black watchman's cap barely contained unruly hair. The oval name badge sewn over his heart read Joe. I had seen him before on the street. He worked at the sandblasting place.

Big black rubber-encased electrical cables snaked down the street from portable generators, imitating the fire hoses of a few months ago. Two motorcycle cops, sporting the seven-point star on their gas tanks, were parked crosswise at the end of the street. One cop stood nearby, in his black leather jacket with SFPD emblazoned on its sleeves. His white helmet, with the same emblem, was pulled snugly over his head, its padded chinstrap dangling down suggestively. He wore a bemused smile beneath his smartly clipped blond mustache.

“Local lady!” a bearded guy in a faded blue golf jacket with *Rich Man Poor Man* printed on its back called out. “We’re ready for the local lady!”

Two bag ladies, their handled shopping bags brimming with stuff, rushed forward. They both wore several layers of clothing. One had a faded scarf tied over her head. The other wore a green knit cap pulled down over her ears.

“Which of you’s the local lady?” Bearded Guy said.

“I am,” they both said at once.

“No, she’s not,” Faded Scarf said.

“She just came over here this morning because she heard you’d be here,” Knit Cap said.

“No, I didn’t. I’m here all the time. This is my street.”

“No, it’s not. She’s crazy. She doesn’t even know where she is.”

“Whore!” Faded Scarf said, as she pulled the green watch-cap off the other’s head, threw it to the ground, and spit on it.

The motorcycle cop with a neatly trimmed steel-gray mustache started toward the two women. Before he reached them, a man with overly stylized long hair, wearing a billowing white silk shirt with faded tight Levi’s, stepped up to the ladies. He quickly took two 20s from his wallet and gave one to each local lady. The matter was quickly resolved by the Hollywood Fixer.

I walked over to Hamburger Mary’s for lunch. The place was packed. I ordered a bleu-cheeseburger with sprouts and swiveled my counter stool around to people-watch. Hamburger Mary’s was always a good place for people watching. Two women surrounded by tattered, overflowing shopping bags at a nearby table caught my eye. One wore a headscarf, the other had a green knit cap pulled down over her ears. Both were drinking drafts and wolfing minestrone as they chortled in glee at putting one over on the Hollywood Fixer.

I wondered if they were from the homeless colony that had sprung up underground between Mission and Howard. A square block had been razed in preparation for a new convention center. The huge hole sat waiting for the project to start. It would be years before the Moscone Convention Center was built there.

Along the north side of the hole, on Mission Street, were a number of underground rooms. They were the kind of rooms glimpsed through purple glass circles in the concrete as you scurried along the sidewalk. These underground rooms always intrigued me, but generally housed nothing more mysterious than a barber shop. With their buildings gone, they stood as an urban version of ancient pueblo cliff dwellings. Homeless people had moved in, organized, and elected their own mayor. I could picture these ladies as members of an ad hoc board of supervisors.

I often ran into homeless people South of Market. One day, before Hollywood came to Clementina Street, I went into a small blue-collar bistro on the corner of 8th Street and Natoma. It was in one of those old stores where the corner of the building was cut off at an angle with a double entrance door. Both doors were wide open that day.

I took the small table closest to the doors, in order to catch whatever breeze might be headed that way. You paid at the serving counter and went back for seconds. The diners were mostly workmen in sweaty clothes. I fit right in. I had steel-toed work boots, torn Levi's and a green work shirt with a red and white name tag sewn above of the chest pocket. "Jimmy" it read.

The special of the day was all the fried chicken you could eat. I had settled into my fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and canned peas when I sensed someone standing close by. There were no waiters but maybe it was someone I knew.

"Yimmy."

I looked up.

"Yimmy," a whispered voice said, "give me your chicken." An ancient-looking but once handsome man, probably no more than 40, stood in the doorway next to my table. "You can get more." I hesitated. "It's all you can eat," he said. He gave me a faint smile filled with bad teeth and swollen gums. He was still outside on the steps.

"Get out of here. I told you not to come in here again." The irate owner of the bistro pointed his finger outside and repeated "Out!" My newfound friend left.

I went back for a third helping of chicken. I carefully wrapped it in paper napkins when the owner's back was turned. I slid it

inside the *Chronicle* I carried as a lunch companion and left it on the sidewalk a few feet around the corner. I headed for my pickup. By the time I pulled Nelly Belle into the flow of traffic, the chicken and newspaper were gone.

Walking back to Clementina Street from Hamburger Mary's, I was stopped by the Don't Walk sign at 9th and Folsom. There was another pedestrian waiting for the light. It was Raymond Burr. We stood there in silence for a moment. Just before the light changed he nodded at me. Maybe he would invite me to his private island in the South Pacific. Would I go?

"Know of any good bars around here?"

I waved my hand down Folsom Street. "Almost anywhere down this street for the next couple of blocks you'll see leather bars," I said. "Or if you want something more mellow, walk over a block to the Ambush on Harrison." I gave him directions to the Ambush. When the light changed he turned and headed for the Ambush.

The Gartland Pit at the corner of 16th and Valencia remained as a monument to eviction by arson. The sub-sidewalk Colony of Cliff Dwellers between Mission and Howard continued to demonstrate the tenacity of the homeless.

Bill Essex was accepted as an openly gay deputy sheriff. I now had a handsome set of photos of a genuine, naked, San Francisco County Deputy Sheriff.

Early one evening I heard a knock on my door. I left it unlocked most of the time. "Come in," I hollered down. "It's open." The door opened. I heard heavy boots on the stairs. I came out of the kitchen just as the sandblaster in the grease-stained jumpsuit reached the stair landing. "Want a beer?" I said.



What a Dump

May 1976: auto-photograph by Jim Stewart,
a “before” shot of 766 Clementina Street

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Johnny Gets His Hair Cut I

1976: photo by Jim Stewart at the Slot Hotel, 979 Folsom Street

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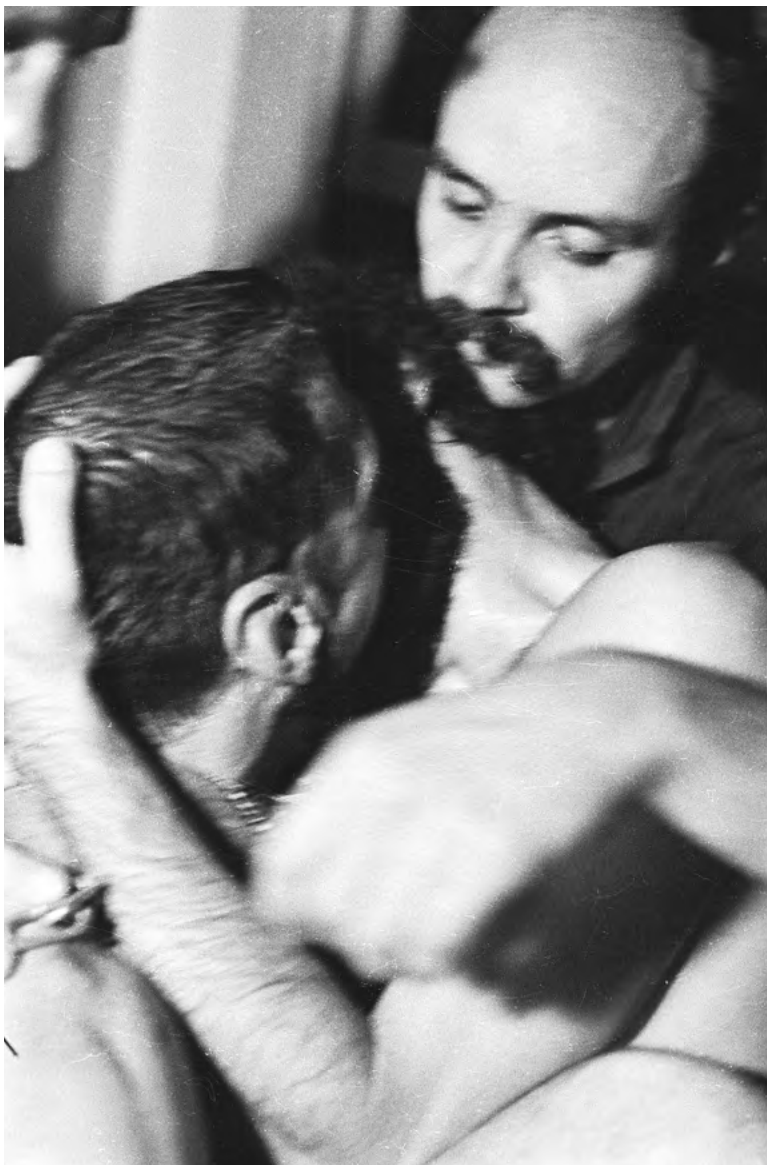


Johnny Gets His Hair Cut II

1976: photo by Jim Stewart at the Slot Hotel, 979 Folsom Street

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Jack Fritscher at the Slot

1976: photo by Jim Stewart shot at the Slot Hotel,
979 Folsom St. for *Drummer* (No. 16, 1977) feature
“Johnny Gets His Hair Cut.”

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