

Man About Town

My first photo show had been hung in San Francisco. It was South of Market at the Ambush, a leather/western bar at Harrison Street and Dore Alley. The Ambush actively promoted the work of gay artists in the leather community.

The announcement for my show was a folded handout. The outside carried a drawing by Chuck Arnett of four hot leathermen. It read *Now at the Ambush*. Inside was a full frontal photo of Mike Monroe I had taken at my flat on Clementina Alley. He wore an open leather vest and a cock ring. That's all. It was one of the best-selling photos for my mail-order business. The copy read "Keyhole Studios' Men South of Market: Photos by Jim Stewart."

I saw red "sold" dots on a few of my framed photos. Although the announcement featured the photo of Mike, the hits of the show were the photos of Bill Essex. I had taken them during a private outdoor session in Marin County the summer before.

I was hanging out at the Ambush, posing ever so nonchalantly on the meat rack, hoping to look cool and disinterested and hot and available all at once. The meat racks were made for that purpose.

David Delay, one of the owners of the Ambush, had designed them. They were made of raw two-by-fours polished by hot male ass. Their width, height, and placement of the boot rail were all designed to store two-high stacks of longneck beer cases. The tops of the meat racks were like decking. Narrow spacing between the two-by-fours helped drain off spilled beer. They were a design marvel, faultless. They were soon copied in bars across South of Market and beyond.

Their height was great for posing. Anyone on their knees in front of you would find their face right in your crotch. You could lean back against the meat racks, thrust out what you had to

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display, and look hot. You could sit on top of them, hike your boots up on the boot rail, spread your legs, and look cool. A lot of thought had gone into their design.

“What do you think of the photos?” a man with a short, well trimmed chinstrap beard said. He wore a leather-n-wool letter jacket.

“Interesting,” I said casually. He looked a little past the age to be wearing a preppy varsity jacket. He wore it well. I thought of locker-room jocks, the maturing coach. The Ambush welcomed a variety of fantasies, not just leather. We both looked at my photos. His eyes lingered on the naked Bill Essex, first as baseball player displaying his cock along the length of his bat, then as helmeted football player, airing his balls, after the game. Did he know I was the photographer?

“Where did you take them?” he asked.

“Up by Mount Tam,” I said, “down a little two-track and up over a hill. I’m not sure if I could even find it again.” I knew right where the turnoff was on the way to Mount Tamalpais, but I wasn’t sure where this conversation was headed. Was he about to suggest that the two of us have a similar photo session there?

As it turned out, our conversation that Saturday night headed back to my flat. We had exchanged names and decided on my place on Clementina, a few blocks away. Tom slid his British-racing-green MG in behind my GMC pickup truck as we pulled in front of the building. We had been lucky with parking.

Upstairs in my flat we went right to The Other Room. We explored the sweaty world of locker-room jocks, using the very sports-fetish equipment from my photos.

Tom had tattoos. A lot of small non-related tattoos. Most guys I knew with tattoos were discreet. Jack Fritscher had a bull’s head tattooed on his upper arm that hid behind a T-shirt sleeve. David Sparrow’s stylized Scottish lion was similarly placed. The centerpiece of Tom’s tattoos was a crawling black panther clawing its way down his left triceps, leaving behind red blood drops. It had been clawing Tom’s arm for close to 20 years. Long enough to turn the black panther gray. Decorating the rest of his arm were tattoos bad boys give themselves in high school detention halls

with ballpoint pens. Or later in prison. It would take a longsleeved shirt buttoned at the wrist to hide them. These tats did not belong to the Japanese school of aesthetics. They had not been done by Cliff Raven, the great tattoo artist from Chicago.

At dawn we took Tom's MG to Castro and a bar that opened at 6 a.m. on Sunday mornings. It was packed. Tom introduced me to dozens of men and the salty dog, a greyhound of vodka and grapefruit juice, with a rim of salt. He stuck with tequila sunrises.

Tom called Tuesday.

"I know it's really late, but I have an extra ticket for the symphony tonight." Pause. "Seiji Ozawa is back from Boston and will be conducting tonight." Pause. "Can I pick you up around 7:30?"

"Yeah, that sounds great." I looked at my watch. It was nearly 6:20.

"Don't worry what to wear. It's Tuesday, so it's skirt and sweater night." Pause. "I'll see you at 7:30. I'll just honk and you can come down."

The phone went dead.

Skirt and sweater night? I got out my all-purpose Harris Tweed jacket, clean Levi's, and a blue chambray shirt with a black knit tie. The tie I bought years ago at a flea market in Florence, Italy, for a couple of lire. It went with anything, could live forever in your jacket pocket, and never looked wrinkled. I had been wearing variations of this ensemble to events that required a jacket and tie for at least a decade. I could still get away with it.

At 7:25, I heard the muffled vroom of a sports car down on Clementina Alley, followed by the foreign honk of its horn. I was off to my first night at the San Francisco Symphony. Who the hell is Seiji Ozawa, I wondered.

Tom pulled the MG into a reserved parking space behind the War Memorial Opera House. The Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall would not open for another three years. A prominent sign stated "Reserved for Civic Center Staff Only: Violators Will Be Towed." I looked at Tom and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Aren't you worried you might be towed?" I asked.

"I know my way around," he said, as he gave me a lopsided

grin. The parking lot light reflected a faint gleam of gold in his mouth. The night was beautiful. We walked to a back door and entered the Opera House.

I discovered who Seiji Ozawa was. Not only did he have his own unique conducting style, he also championed modern classical music. Ozawa wore a white turtleneck with his swallowtails, rather than waistcoat and white tie. It was San Francisco. It was the 1970s.

Tom was right. He knew his way around. In his 40s, he was the quintessential man-about-town. His light brown hair was worn in what was once called a Kennedy Cut, after the President and his brothers. The ghosts of smiles past crinkled around his brown eyes. Tom was what once was classed as an “eligible bachelor.” North of Market Street, he was Boston-Lace-Curtain-Irish, a son of Harvard. South of Market Street, Tom was Chicago-Southside-Irish, alumnus of the school of hard knocks. There were tattoos to prove it. He was a native San Franciscan.

A pair of season tickets to almost anything lived in his pocket. I would often get a call on the spur of the moment offering a “spare” ticket to the symphony. Sometimes I was sorely in need of sleep when Tom would call. One night I dozed off during the soothing sounds of the symphony. A slight poke awakened me. During intermission Tom gave me his lopsided grin.

“I give good symphony elbow,” he said.

He never told me who usually used the extra ticket. Tom did mention a recent breakup with a longtime lover and a custody battle over the cleaning lady. Had he also won a custody battle over the season tickets? Or did Tom have a “culture buddy” who sometimes couldn’t make it? An allusion to escorting single society women of various ages to events also slipped out. I never found out who the primary second ticket holder was. In fact I never found out much about Tom-the-Boulevardier. It didn’t matter. The mystery was part of his charm.

My left ear had been pierced by Jack Fritscher when I was visiting

him in San Francisco, before I migrated west. It was July 14th, Bastille Day, 1975. I was waiting to be picked up at Jack's place on 25th Street by a sailor from Mobile, Alabama, who I had met a couple of nights before at the Barracks, a hot and heavy bathhouse on Folsom Street. The sailor was going to drive me to the airport for my flight home.

"Are you coming back?" Jack asked, as I waited for the sailor to arrive.

"Yes," I said without hesitation. I had already made up my mind to move back to San Francisco. A decade earlier I had lived in the City the summer after I finished my undergrad work at Michigan State. It was time to return.

"When?" Jack said.

"The end of the summer."

"You're sure?"

"I swear."

"We need to seal that oath."

"Pierce my ear," I said in a flash. I had seen several guys in San Francisco with pierced ears. It was long before the big piercing craze hit the country. "Just leave a thread in it."

"I can do better than that. I have a fine gold wire. It's a nipple ring. It's my gift to you, so you'll return."

I sat on a chair in Jack's kitchen while he held a cork behind my earlobe and pierced it with a darning needle. With great patience on both our parts, he inserted the tiny gold wire hoop through the piercing. The hoop was about the size of my little fingernail. We had just finished when the sailor arrived and drove me down to SFO and my flight home.

The piercing worked. I returned to San Francisco in the fall of 1975. The small gold nipple ring in my ear had been replaced by a gold stud, half of a pair I had shared with Sheldon Kovalski when he moved up from L.A. and we lived together on Noe Street. That passion had not lasted long. We remained friends. He shaved my head one night at the Slot, that infamous bathhouse on Folsom Street. I kept the gold stud in my ear and the nipple ring in a black plastic film canister. It was now time to do something with the nipple ring. Tom was the man to do it.

With great ritual we prepared for my piercing. It was a rite of passage. Like urban satyrs, we were nearly naked, wearing only black leather chaps and steel cock rings. Tom brought a bottle of Korbel Brut. We entered The Other Room. It was lit by dozens of votive candles that drew dancing Picasso-shadow-gods on walls and ceiling.

A special audio tape compiled by Max Morales lent low mystic chords of music, like sea sounds in a cave. We alternated the champagne with lines of cocaine, laid out on an antique ivory mirror. All was enhanced with poppers, amyl nitrite. The ceremony spanned the night. During that hour that belongs to neither yesterday nor tomorrow, I received the gold ring in my left nipple. I was South of Market. It was San Francisco, 1977.

One afternoon, when Tom called, it wasn't to see if I could join him for an evening at the symphony. This time it was opera. I had been to an opera. Once. When I was 21, I saw Verdi's *Aida* at the ancient Baths of Caracalla in Rome. A team of four horses had galloped onto the stage pulling a chariot and a nearly naked charioteer. An elephant, leading a procession of young Roman soldiers, had followed. I didn't remember who the singers were, but for 49 cents worth of lira it was hard to beat.

"Do you like opera?" Tom asked on the phone.

I told him of my one experience.

"You'll like tonight, then. It's Massenet's *Thaïs* with Beverly Sills. We'll have dinner first. Pick you up 5:30-ish." The phone went dead. I brushed off my Harris Tweed jacket.

Tom was running late. The Thursday night rush hour traffic had been heavy. Fog had settled over South of Market, bringing a fine mist. I was thankful for the wool jacket as I waited at the corner of 9th and Clementina for Tom's MG. When it finally pulled up I jumped in and Tom took off with that British vroom as we headed north. The traffic had started to thin. We raced to Jackson Square and pulled up in front of Ernie's Restaurant on Montgomery, near the edge of the Financial District. We scrambled out as a uniformed valet appeared.

Inside I felt as if we had stepped back to the days of the

Barbary Coast. Massive mahogany pieces with beveled mirrors, stained glass, red walls hung with gilt-framed oils, and mounted game heads all lent the place a Victorian-bordello gentlemen's-club atmosphere. It somehow seemed familiar. I was sure I had never been here before. We walked to the black velvet ropes, where the maître d' stood in all his forbidding formal arrogance. Tom approached. The maître d' consulted his reservations list.

"Chop-chop. Opera night," Tom told him as he glanced around the room to see who might be there.

A barely perceptible nod brought a waiter to lead us to a table. I saw Tom nodding to several men already seated. He was smiling his lopsided grin all the way to our table. Tom, that devil, was showing me off.

"Does this place look familiar?" Tom asked.

"Yes, but I don't know why. I've never been here before."

"Did you see Hitchcock's *Vertigo*?"

Of course. Another, more famous, Jimmy Stewart had once dined here.

We opened with lobster bisque. Next came Kentucky limestone lettuce. Our final course was Normandy scallops with apples and Calvados. All was à la carte. Tom's treat. Dessert came after the opera. My treat.

We made it to the War Memorial before the lights dimmed. Beverly Sills, as Thaïs, beat *Aida* at the Baths of Caracalla, hands down. It hadn't even cost me 49 cents. Tom had some pictures he'd taken of Sills the last time she had been in San Francisco. He wanted to show them to her. To my amazement, we were allowed backstage, right into her dressing room. It was small. It was packed. Voices were jumbled, all talking at once. Bouquets of roses lay everywhere. Only one bouquet had found its way to a vase.

There was an energy-high in the room. It was not from drugs, but the energy from *Thaïs*, and especially the energy from Beverly Sills. She effervesced. Tom showed her the pictures, then laid them on her dressing table. He held her hand as he introduced me to her. Then he kissed her hand and we backed out of the room as

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more fans entered to worship the diva. I felt like a little stage-door Johnny in her presence.

Some time later, I heard an interview with Beverly Sills on TV. There was talk of filming *Thaïs*. The host of the talk show thought Sills would be perfect for the film.

"You've got to be kidding," Beverly said. "When *Thaïs* opens she's only a teenage girl. Do you know how old I am?"

"Well," the host continued, nonplussed, "it, uh, it could always be filmed through cheesecloth."

"Cheesecloth!" Beverly laughed. "Linoleum would be more like it!"

We left the War Memorial Opera House and made the rounds of a few bars. Instead of returning to my place on Clementina Alley, we drove to Tom's place. I had never been there before. He owned a two-flat near Cow Hollow on Green Street. He rented out the top flat. There was a two-car garage under the building. When we entered the flat, it seemed smaller than mine on Clementina. Its subtle elegance was writ large. The traditional tones of cream and gray, the fine Federal-style furniture, and the not-quite-cutting-edge mid-20th century art, all mirrored a setting from Woody Allen's *Interiors*. What caught my eye was a camelback couch upholstered in pale yellow-on-yellow silk stripe. We didn't linger there.

Tom confessed to scatological fantasies. There was a book out at the time, *End Product: The First Taboo*. It was the history of shit. For my birthday Luc had sent me a copy from New York. I was always interested in history and society's taboos. I loaned it to Tom. He was intrigued and wanted to explore that frontier. Some journeys beyond the Pale are enlightening. Some are not. Tom gave this voyage a yeoman's try. The end product, however, had not been enlightenment, but merely dirty sheets. Even though I had played Mentor to Tom's Telemachus, he asked if I would get rid of the evidence.

"Do you want me to burn the sheets?" I asked, half-jokingly.

“No, no, no,” he said, as he emerged from the shower. “Could you just take them down to the basement and put them in the washing machine. I’ll take care of them in the morning.”

It was 4 a.m. Buck naked, I made my way down to Tom’s basement. It was also the garage. There was now another car parked next to Tom’s MG. It had not been there when we had pulled into the garage around midnight. I found the laundry area and stuffed the shitty sheets in the washer and went back upstairs. We both fell asleep.

We got up around 11 a.m. Tom got the coffee started. He went downstairs to see what he could do with the sheets. A couple of minutes later he came back upstairs. He had the sheets. They were clean, dry, and neatly folded. Even the fitted sheet was folded properly.

“Did you do all this?” Tom asked, as he showed me the stack.

“Are those the sheets from last night? No I just put them in the washing machine. I didn’t even start it up.”

“Oh my god,” Tom said. “I think I know who washed the sheets.”

“Who?” I said, as the image of the second car parked in the garage flashed through my mind.

“It must have been my tenant. Nobody else has access to those machines.”

“Better call him and thank him,” I said.

Tom called his tenant. I could hear only part of the conversation.

“What did he say?” I said, when he hung up.

“He said he was glad to see somebody had a good time last night!”

We went for breakfast at a café in the neighborhood. Large Boston ferns were hanging from the ceiling in the entrance. We were led to an interior courtyard garden, where wrought-iron tables and chairs were set on flagstones. Large jungle plants and vines provided semi-secluded spaces.

When we walked over from Tom’s place, the sun was out.

Just when the waiter brought our quiche, the fog drifted in. A fine mist settled down into the courtyard. There was a creaking, mechanical sound. I looked up to see a folding glass ceiling slowly cover the courtyard. The quiche was delish. When the bill was presented, there were two handmade chocolate bonbons on the tray.

“Get those out of my sight,” Tom whispered through clenched teeth.

They too were delish.

One morning around ten, the phone rang. It was Tom. Did I have a few hours free? I did.

“I’ll send my driver around to pick you up. He has a small something in an envelope for you. It’s very mild and doesn’t last long. If you want, you can take it when he picks you up. It should be coming on by the time you get there.”

“By the time I get where?” I asked.

“St. Mary’s Cathedral.”

“You mean the Mary Maytag Cathedral,” I said. The new Roman Catholic cathedral on Gough Street, constructed in the form of a cross, was more reminiscent of a washing machine agitator than a crucifix.

“That’s the one.”

“Why are we going to Mary Maytag?”

“We aren’t. You are. If you want to.”

I wanted to. I wasn’t sure why.

“My driver also has a ticket to get you in,” Tom said, and hung up.

A ticket? Drugs? St. Mary’s Cathedral? What was going on? And what did Tom mean by his driver? I got out the Harris Tweed jacket.

I was waiting on the front steps of my building when a black Ford sedan turned down Clementina Alley. On the door was the official circular seal of the City and County of San Francisco. It pulled over to the side, in front of me. I walked over and smiled at the driver. He wore a dark suit with a white shirt and nondescript

tie. His dark hair was cut Marine-jarhead style. He was hot and young.

“Are you Jim?”

I nodded. He leaned over and opened the front passenger door. I got in.

“Here’s something from Tom. He says if you take it now it should just be coming on by the time I get you to church.”

He handed me a tiny double fold of paper. Very carefully I unfolded it. A miniscule teal-blue translucent square fell into the palm of my hand. I touched the tip of my tongue to it and drew it into my mouth.

“Here’s the ticket,” the driver said, as he handed me an envelope.

I opened the envelope. It was a ticket alright. It was a ticket to the installation of the new archbishop of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, John R. Quinn.

“What’s with this car, and who are you?” I asked as he drove down Clementina and turned right onto 8th Street.

“Well, as you know, Tom, as director, has his own city car. I’m Mark, by the way.” He stuck out his hard hand for me to shake as he turned left onto Folsom with his left hand spinning the steering wheel. “I’m in the driver pool. Tom always asks for me. When he can. We ah, understand each other, you might say,” he said with a lopsided grin not dissimilar from Tom’s. I didn’t know, but I understood.

Tom was right. By the time his driver reached the cathedral my eyesight had improved. Things sparkled. It was a beautiful day. I felt very in control. Not jumpy. I followed the crowd toward the main entrance, my ticket in hand. Somewhere, somebody must have taken my ticket, because I realized I no longer had it. I also realized I was inside a giant beehive. The bees were all dressed in medieval robes as the hive ascended into the bright blue sky. Cameramen buzzed about on electric golf carts, their cameras whirring.

It was then I realized that Tom had not really given me a ticket to the installation of the archbishop. He had given me a ticket to the filming of a Fellini movie. Clouds of incense perfumed the

set, as men in long robes of white and gold proceeded at a stately pace down aisles toward the center of the universe.

Off to the side, I found a pew and sat down. Suddenly other people on the pew with me arose, and then knelt on a padded prayer bench. We were in the cathedral, after all. I knelt too.

Modern. Medieval. Tradition. Ancient ritual. Golf-cart media. Spaceship cathedral. Ecumenical. Roman Catholic. Orthodox. Greek, Russian, Latin. Episcopal. Lutheran. Sit stand kneel. Stand kneel sit. Kneel sit stand.

More clouds of incense, as the white and gold robes returned the way they had come, back down the aisles. People were standing up now, but they weren't kneeling or sitting back down. They were flowing out into the aisles. They were leaving. It was over. John R. Quinn was officially the Archbishop of San Francisco. My translucent teal-blue transporter was gone. Its time had run out. The beehive spaceship had landed firmly back on Gough Street. Fellini had packed up his cameras and left. I walked outside. It was still a beautiful day, but it no longer sparkled. Yellow cabs were parked along the street. Crowds of people were standing around in front of the cathedral. I got in a cab at the front of the line.

"Ninth and Clementina," I told the cabby. He took off with the obligatory screech of tires. Fog had started to drift in from the Pacific. I looked at my watch. In the four hours since Tom had called, I had passed through millennia.

My mind drifted back to what the city driver had told me, while he drove to the cathedral. So Tom works for the city, I thought, as the cabbie pulled up in front of my place on Clementina. He's a director for the City and County of San Francisco. Director of what, you old rogue, I thought.