

Voodoo

When Allan Lowery opened the Leatherneck bar at 11th and Folsom he hired Rocky as a barback. Barbacks are like sous chefs. They make the bartenders shine. Barbacks make sure the beer coolers behind the bar are well stocked, they give the bartenders breaks during slow times, and pretty much anything else they might want. Bartenders were stars who couldn't shine without good barbacks. Barbacks were like sous chefs.

Before Allan opened the Leatherneck, I constructed meat racks, restraint structures, a cross, and other accoutrements that turned the space into a leather bar. I was the Leatherneck's carpenter. As the crowds grew, and the lines waiting to get in got longer, a second serving bar was needed. Allan asked me to build it in the back room.

It was small. There was just enough space for a couple of washtubs full of ice to chill the longneck beer bottles, a service counter, and a cash drawer. It would take pressure off star bartenders at the main bar and keep the men coming back. If customers wait too long for a beer, they leave. I designed and assembled a hot little bar. It was similar to the four-poster beds for bondage at The Slot. It was done in a day. There was one problem. Allan had no bartender lined up to man it.

"Want to tend bar in the back room tonight?" Allan said upstairs in his office when I told him the project was done.

"Sure," I said. I'd never tended bar in my life. It was just a beer/wine bar, I thought. How hard could it be?

"I'll give you Rocky as your barback," Allan said.

If there had been any doubts in my mind about being a bartender, they vanished at the thought of Rocky being my barback.

Rocky was a poster boy for a Folsom Street bar. He'd celebrated his 21st birthday but not his 30th. He sported close-cropped dark

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

wavy hair and a perpetual five o'clock shadow. He worked without a shirt. Standing next to him, you could feel the heat radiating from his sculptured body. He was a prince from *West Side Story*.

Most men like Rocky come with attitude. He didn't. He was a photographer's dream. I know. I snapped a dozen shots or more of Rocky in nothing but a studded black leather dog collar.

Jack Fritscher and I joined forces for a spread on the Leatherneck in *Drummer* magazine, Number 18, 1977. Jack wrote of the hardass cruising at the Leatherneck. It was San Francisco's ultimate bar of the 1970s, he wrote. After reading that the "Leatherneck ain't exactly fantasy," and that the "Leatherneck trip is real," you knew you better get your ass over there or you'd miss the whole last quarter of the 20th century.

Just in case anyone still had doubts, I photographed the entire staff partying in the Leatherneck after hours. Although the bartenders, Chris and Ron, were hot—especially the shot I got of them pinching each other's nipples—Rocky was the real star of that photo spread. In just three photos, Rocky stole the show. I shot him from the rear, polishing boots. He didn't grovel. He was standing up, to show the perfect muscle-V where his back meets his bare butt. I shot him hanging from the cross I'd built at the end of the bar. Later, for my Double Exposure photo show, I flipped the negative of Rocky on the cross and printed two Rocky malefactors facing each other across a leather-bound crucifix. A triptych for the 1970s. The photo that brought the Rocky fans to the Leatherneck, however, was the one I shot of him buck naked behind the bar. His uncut cock was laid out along the bar next to his thumb. Guys brought steel carpenter tapes to the bar just so they could measure Rocky's thumb and calculate the length of his tool.

A client of mine, Father Jack from San Jose, became enamored with Rocky when he saw him in the *Drummer* spread. I took Father Jack to the Leatherneck one night. I covered for Rocky at the front bar while the priest tongue-polished the malefactor's boots in the back toilet. Rocky received an extra generous tip for allowing the good father to express his admiration.

I arrived at the Leatherneck fifteen minutes early my first

night of bartending. I was to open the back bar at 11 p.m. When I picked up my cash drawer in Allan's office, he had something special for me.

"Want a little toot before you go on?" he said.

"Sure, why not." I'd snorted coke once before, with Bill Essex, when we'd first met. It didn't make me feel hazy the way a joint did. I just felt great, only better. Allan laid out four lines on a mirror tile on his desk top. Two for each of us. He handed me a rolled-up hundred-dollar bill. Since it was his treat, I got to pick which two lines I wanted. I chose the two shorter ones. I was new at this.

"You'll need this if we're as busy as I think we'll be in that back room."

Allan was right. We were busy as hell in the back room. If it hadn't been for that toot, and Rocky keeping me stocked with beer and ice, I never would have made it through to closing time at 2:30 a.m. My tips came out to twice as much as I got paid for the shift. I shared them with Rocky, as was the custom. There were bonuses better than tips, however. I met a man with a shaved head called Tuffy Turtletail. He was a super-realist artist who drew jockstraps hanging on clotheslines. I met a poet from England who taught at Berkeley. Thom Gunn wrote about sex at the Geysers in Sonoma County. I wanted to go.

Best of all, I had Rocky waiting on me all night. He worked stripped to the waist. Sweat poured down his torso as he made his way through the packed mass of male flesh, keeping my bar stocked. I discovered the high one gets being a bartender in a hot bar. I liked it. It was better than a runner's high.

San Francisco in the 1970s was home to hordes of expats from around the world. Many hung out South of Market. These expatriates were quite different from immigrant families from Mexico and the Philippines or the Vietnamese boat people.

Expats usually arrived in San Francisco unburdened with family. Often they brought independent incomes. Most were single. A lot were gay. Some were leathermen. They found San Francisco a better place to live than where they came from.

Tony Baker was such an expat. Luc, himself an expat from Belgium-Switzerland-France-the-World, introduced me to Tony. He spoke with a British accent.

“Are you from England?” I said.

“No,” he said, with a charming smile, as if playing a pleasant joke on me.

“Australia,” I said in triumph. “I bet you’re from Australia.” There were lots of gay Australians who made their way to the City for a vacation and stayed.

“No,” Tony said again, as he gave Luc a sly wink.

“You have some sort of accent,” I said, becoming frustrated. “What do you speak?”

“I speak Empire,” Tony said, then laughed.

“You speak Empire?”

“I grew up in Kenya. We left when it was given home rule.”

Tony was not the only one who spoke Empire. Bill Essex introduced me to a friend of his, John. He and his sister, Anne, had left Rhodesia after Ian Smith had declared its independence in defiance of Britain. The family left Rhodesia, but had to leave part of their fortune behind. They had already transferred considerable sums into British banks before their move. Anne settled in London, when it was the place to be in the 1960s. John came to San Francisco.

Once a year the brother and sister would meet in what was still Rhodesia and spend as much money as they could in a month, entertaining friends still there. John maintained a suite at his sister’s place in London. At John’s place on Church Street there was Anne’s Room.

One day I got a postcard from John. It was postmarked San Francisco. It looked like it had been torn from the Personals section of the want ads. Sandwiched between more salacious ads, circled by a red pencil, was the announcement: “GWM commands you to celebrate his big four oh.” A date and address on Church Street were given. “Activities begin @ 11 p.m. Be there. That’s an order.”

An offer I couldn’t refuse.

One of the bartenders at the Leatherneck was caught with his hand in the till. It was very clever how he pulled it off. Since he was a star, no one thought to watch him. He brought in lots of business. That was the tip-off. He had a lot more customers than were indicated by his register tapes. There was no smoking gun.

Allan decided to hire a private investigator. Right out of Dashiell Hammett. San Francisco, fog, the seedy side of the City. This private Dick didn't wear a threadbare trench coat and weather-worn fedora. He wore black leather chaps and a motorcycle jacket. Those who saw him lusted in their loins for this bad boy. He sat at the bar. Always paid for his own drinks. At closing time he left alone. After a week he reported to Allan what he had discovered.

The beautiful blond bartender from Appalachia had used the principle of the abacus to shortchange the till. When two customers would order a drink of the same price, he would ring it up only once. This wasn't hard in a beer/wine bar. Each customer assumed what he saw rung up was for his drink, if he bothered to look at all. Money for both drinks was put in the till. To keep track of how many drinks were not rung up but money put in the register, a crude abacus was used by stacking quarters from his tips. When coins got low in the till, he would "sell" quarters to the till for fives or tens, which would then go into his tip jar. He knew how much extra to take from the till for the drinks not rung up by the position of his silver-quarter abacus. At the end of the shift his register tapes always matched his cash drawer to the penny. The other bartenders' tapes and cash drawers never matched to the penny.

With the blond bombshell gone, Rocky was promoted to full bartender at the front bar. I lost a hot barback but not for long. Juan was my new barback. He was of the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico. Georgia O'Keeffe had once hired him as a houseboy. She liked young men to work naked around her estate. He was studying to be an opera singer.

"Did you ever try peyote?" I said one night, during a slow period at the bar.

"You mean mescaline?" he said.

I nodded. I guessed they were the same.

"I did my vision quest with peyote buttons I had collected in the desert. I went up in the mountains for three days," he said.

"What happened?"

"I discovered my special gift." He looked up at me with a soft innocent smile.

Dare I ask? "What is your special gift, Juan?"

"Singing," he said. Again with that innocent smile. "That's why I'm studying voice."

After the bar closed, the cash register banks counted, the coolers stocked and the floor swept, I asked Juan if he would like to come over to my place. It was nearly 3:30 in the morning.

"I have to go home now. I have voice lessons in the morning. I need sleep."

Any vision quests of my own would have to wait.

Allan was on a much-needed vacation. He had promoted me to bar manager before he left. One evening, while I was in the upstairs office preparing the cash drawers for the bartenders, I heard somebody unlock the front door and enter the bar. I quickly put the cash drawers back in the safe, closed it and spun the dial. I turned out the office light and slipped out the door. There were three rooms on the second floor. The first two were toilets. The one at the end was the office.

I stood in the dark on the narrow balcony that was the passageway for the three rooms. The cavernous room below was lit by just a few dim lights near the sinks under the bar.

Somebody was walking around down below. I saw him go to the meat racks, pull out a beer case and remove a bottle. It was full. It was room temperature. Why would anyone want a warm beer? I watched as he opened the bottle, put his thumb over the top and shook it.

By now my eyes had adjusted to the dark interior of the bar. I could see who it was. It was Rocky.

I watched as he walked to first one corner of the room and then the others. At each corner he shook the beer bottle and then

slightly lifted his thumb and allowed some beer to spray out. He was moving his arm in some configuration while he did this. It wasn't until the third time I realized what he was doing. Rocky was spraying the sign of the cross into each corner of the room.

I was intrigued.

I didn't want to disturb him during some personal religious rite he might be performing. On the other hand, I was curious. He headed for the double front doors that were below the balcony. I crept down the narrow curved stairway that wrapped down to the main floor. I heard the hiss of warm beer as it was released against the front doors.

I didn't want to startle Rocky, so I stomped my boots rather loudly on the last three steps as I came down.

"Hello?" I called out as if I wasn't sure who it might be.

"Hi," Rocky said, sounding only a little surprised.

There was a long moment of silence as I looked at his glistening torso in the dim bar light. Some of the beer was running down his naked chest. Had he sprayed himself with a cross as well? I couldn't wait any longer.

"What were you doing," I said, in my best nonjudgmental tone.

"My grandmother told me to do it," he said in a perfectly level tone, as if that explained everything.

"Why?" I said, hoping yet to get an explanation.

"The crowds here haven't been as large as they used to be. I think that new bar, the Black and Blue, over on Howard, is drawing a lot of our customers away."

I nodded agreement.

"My tips are way down."

Again I nodded my understanding.

"I asked my grandmother if she could do anything about it. She told me to spray the cross at the door. It would attract more people. I thought maybe the cross in the corners would help too."

"What is that, Rocky?" I said. "A religious rite?"

His eyes lit up and he smiled showing his perfect white teeth in the dim light.

"Yeah. Santeria."

I felt the same excited uneasiness I had one night years before when I was an undergrad. Then, I'd had two different dates on the same night. One with a good girl, one with a bad girl. Now it was Saturday night again. I was slated to attend a Puerto Rican Santeria ceremony in the Mission at eight and a rich white Rhodesian's 40th birthday party at eleven.

Rocky met me outside the double storefront on Guerrero in the Mission District about a quarter to eight. He was dressed in white, wearing sandals. A small crucifix hung in the open V of his shirt and winked at me in the streetlight. I had on my "dress" black leather pants, a midnight-blue longsleeved police shirt, and a black leather vest. I wore black engineer boots. No crucifix. We went inside.

The wall between the two storefronts had been removed to provide one large room. The walls and ceiling were painted white. The narrow maple flooring had been sanded and refinished. It was patched in the middle where the wall had been removed. Heavy white drapes were pulled across the street windows. Near the back were two doors that must have led to the back rooms and yard.

A wooden table between them held a collection of candles. Candlelight gleamed off small statuettes and a bottle of Bacardi Gold. Beside the rum lay a large cigar. Above the table hung a faintly foreign picture of a saintly woman. Was it the Madonna or perhaps some virginal martyr from the Caribbean? I couldn't tell.

When we entered, Rocky was immediately greeted by several extremely handsome and beautiful young people, of both sexes. All wore white. Everybody seemed busy preparing for the service. A young man, every bit as handsome as Rocky, but perhaps a little older, hid a large machete behind the floor-length drapes.

"That's my brother," Rocky said. The room had started to grow hushed.

"What's the machete for?" I said.

"There's a goat in the back that will be sacrificed if things go right. People are starting to sit down. Let's find a seat."

A goat in the back, I thought, that will be sacrificed if things go right? What kind of "things," I wondered.

About 25 old wooden folding chairs formed an open-ended circle in the room. Everybody was to have a front-row seat. We found two chairs together about in the center of the circle. The Spanish-whispered chatter ended. A young girl of about 16, again dressed in white, brought in a clear glass bowl filled with water. Flower petals floated in it. She set it on the table and sat down. I thought of Vestal Virgins. There were three empty chairs near the table. One of the doors opened and a middle-aged man and woman helped a hobbling old woman with a cane to one of the empty chairs. All three sat down.

"That's my grandmother," Rocky whispered very close to my ear. His warm breath made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Another part of my anatomy was getting the same idea.

A low Spanish chant slowly filled the room. The young virgin picked up the water bowl of petals and moved around the circle as she dipped her finger tips in the water and, like a priestess, flicked it on each person, as she made her way around the circle. When she came to me, she hesitated for a very fraction of a second. I saw Rocky give a nearly imperceptible nod, just before she anointed me too. When she was finished she sat down.

The middle-aged man who had escorted Rocky's grandmother into the room, retrieved the cigar from the table. He didn't smell it, or crinkle it between his fingers near his ear, as I have seen many cigar smokers do. He didn't trim the end with tiny special scissors. He simply lit it with a large wooden match he scratched on the end of his thumbnail.

Once lit, he passed it to Rocky's grandmother. She inhaled deeply and passed it down the line. Each in turn inhaled the strong tobacco smoke. When it was my turn, I was glad I had practiced smoking cigars. It had preceded a special interlude in The Other Room on Clementina. I French inhaled. No cough. Show off, I thought. I passed the cigar along to Rocky. I exhaled, remembering my previous cigar session. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. But then sometimes it isn't.

Next came the rum bottle. It too made the rounds of the circle. Most took tiny sips, reminiscent of consecrated wine from a communal cup. Others gulped thirstily from the bottle. More

Spanish chanting now of an individual nature.

Suddenly, the young girl who had anointed us with the flower water gave a high-pitched Spanish trill, spun around a few times in the center of the circle as if she were a misplaced ballerina from a Degas painting, and collapsed in an artful heap on the maple floor. As if one, three young men in white, who looked like they could be cousins, leapt from their folding chairs and covered her body with theirs, in a parody of a multi-headed two-backed beast. Lucky girl.

“What’s happening?” I whispered to Rocky. I felt I was watching an opera and didn’t know the score.

“A dark spirit entered her. They are driving it away.”

The girl seemed to come out of her trance. She sat up on the floor, and looked at the three young men. It no longer seemed decorous for them to be in such an intimate pile on the floor. Too bad. They all returned to their folding chairs. Low Spanish chanting resumed. I felt I should applaud. I didn’t.

Suddenly a deep profundo voice boomed across the room. All fell silent.

“That’s my grandfather,” Rocky whispered, again very close to my ear. Again I experienced the same results from his warm breath in my ear.

I looked around the room to see where the grandfather was. Again the deep voice spoke in Spanish. I had no idea what it said, but was it possible? The deep male voice seemed to come from Rocky’s grandmother. I looked at Rocky with raised eyebrows in a silent question mark.

“He’s speaking through my grandmother,” he whispered.

“What’s he saying?” I asked. This time my lips were very close to Rocky’s ear.

“He says the dark one in the room must be cleansed.”

I looked around the room. “Who’s that?” I said, nearly putting my tongue in his ear.

“He means you,” Rocky said.

There was much Spanish whispering in the room. Why hadn’t I taken Spanish, I thought, in a sudden panic. What good were Latin and French now?

“He’s calling for you,” Rocky said, in a normal tone.

“But I don’t know Spanish,” I said, as I looked toward the floor-length drapes. I couldn’t tell if the machete was still behind them. Sweat trickled down my back.

“I’ll translate,” he said, as we both walked toward his grandmother.

I squatted rather than knelt in front of the old lady. Her dusky face wore a set of wrinkles like a fine mask of Georgia O’Keeffe. She spoke in her old-lady voice again. Rocky no longer whispered but told me quietly what she said.

I had three friends, she told me, who were false friends. They meant me harm. She would give me power to protect myself. This came out in short Spanish sentences that Rocky translated in what seemed a very formal and old-fashioned way. The advice was interspersed with sips from the rum bottle. First she would sip and then offer the bottle to me and I would sip. Then she took a small “dead” cigar from her pocket. Some more Spanish. Her voice was the only sound in the room.

“She needs something red from you. A red ribbon to tie around the cigar,” Rocky told me.

A red ribbon, I thought. Not exactly stock-in-trade for a South of Market leatherman. I did have something red, however. I pulled a handkerchief from my left rear pocket. Very carefully I tore a narrow strip from along its edge and placed it in the old woman’s hand. It was wrapped deftly three times around the cigar stub and tied in a knot. She lit the cigar, inhaled, and passed it to me. This time I did not show off. I merely inhaled. This was repeated three times. It was alternated with sips of rum. Finally, Grandmother put the still-lit cigar stub backwards into her toothless mouth. She took it out again. It was no longer lit. She placed it in my right palm and closed my fingers around it. She patted my hand, as if to say that everything would be all right. The cigar was not even warm. While she was doing this, she kept speaking in Spanish. Rocky kept translating, phrase by phrase, almost as quickly as she spoke. He could have worked at the United Nations.

“She says that if you ever find yourself in trouble, if you ever

need help, just ‘turn on’ the cigar, think of her, and she will be there to help you.”

“Turn on the cigar?”

“Light it,” he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

The ritual ended shortly after my salvation. I was embraced by Rocky and several of the young women. They were all very chaste embraces. They reminded me of church-women embraces I received the summer I was 11, when I found salvation in the baptismal waters of Bass Lake. Neither time did handsome young men embrace me. Just as I was leaving, I saw Rocky’s brother remove the machete from behind the drapes and head toward the back door.

When I left the Santeria ceremony I headed for John’s place, to help celebrate his 40th birthday. A large Klieg light swept the sky as I neared Church Street, a couple of blocks west of Guerrero. As I got closer I realized the Klieg was parked in front of John’s house. Of course, I thought. It was searching for secrets, in hidden places, known only to the cognoscenti of San Francisco.

The convivial rumble and chatter of a crowd enjoying itself greeted me as I ascended the outer steps of the Edwardian town-house. A high-pitched laugh pierced the air.

I knocked, but doubted anyone could hear me above the din of good times. I opened the heavy paneled door, stepped in, and looked around. An all-male cocktail party was in full swing. I spotted Bill Essex. He wore no shirt, the better to show off his bodybuilder physique. He headed my way.

“The bar’s over this way,” he shouted.

I followed him through the crowd to one end of the long living room, where a temporary bar was set up.

“What’ll you have, sir?” the young bartender said, with a slightly British accent. Did he speak Empire too, I wondered. He too wore no shirt.

“Gin and tonic,” I told him, “with lots of ice.” I didn’t want a tepid English gin and tonic. He had a swimmer’s build. I noticed his long graceful hands, as he gave me my gin and a sly smile.

There was plenty of ice, and an unspoken promise of more.

"You've never been here before," Bill said. "Let me give you the grand tour."

I got the grand tour. I could have been in a London townhouse. The elegant interior contrasted well with the shabby chic of the exterior.

"The exterior's meant to discourage cat burglars," Bill said, as if reading my mind.

As we came out of "Sister Anne's Room," Bill pulled me into the bathroom off the upstairs hallway. An antique clawfoot bathtub, the exterior painted forest green, sat at an angle in a large room filled with tropical plants. Potted palms and hanging ferns gave the feel of a private conservatory. Multi-mullioned French doors led to a private roof deck. It was not for a quickie, but for a snort, that Bill had dragged me in there.

"I need to freshen my drink," I told Bill, as we came down the stairs.

"The bartender's name's Mike," Bill said. "I should have introduced you."

Sharp.

"John was receiving in the library, the last I knew," Bill added, as he headed for the front door. Another guest had just arrived.

I entered the library to give my congratulations to John for reaching his 40th. There was a marble bust of a youth on his desk.

"That's an exquisite *puer*, John. Where did you get it?"

"An old friend of mine, in London, gave it to me the last time I was there. It's from Roman Britain."

"Do you know who it is?"

"It's thought to be Antinous, Hadrian's lover. He drowned while still a youth. The emperor deified him."

A little after midnight, I left John's place with Mike the bartender's phone number, and headed back South of Market.

Sometime later, during the waning months of the Leatherneck bar, Rocky arrived at work one night driving a new red MG. He told Allan he was quitting his job. His new lover, a doctor in

Marin County, didn't want him getting home so late. The bar closed at 2:30 in the morning. The new MG had convinced Rocky his future lay in Marin County, not on Folsom Street.