

Up At The River

Everybody needs balance in their lives, between urban and rural. Sometimes the City can become overwhelming. The need to get back to nature asserts itself. I moved up to the River. The River referred to a seedy string of dilapidated resort towns along the Russian River. There were vineyards, redwoods and rednecks. Migrating gays, exiting San Francisco, were gentrifying the area.

In the spring of 1979, after the Camille show at the Ambush, I got a job at the Russian River Lodge on River Road in Sonoma County. It was a gay country campground with farmhouse rooms, cabins, and a pool for nude swimming. I would be the general handyman, remodel some of the cabins, fix up the rooms in the old farmhouse, and enjoy the sights around the pool when I wasn't busy. What a chance to get away from it all.

One afternoon we were building a redwood deck around the pool area. It seemed really hot. All of us were working without shirts. I checked the thermometer. It read 114 degrees. I consulted with Lee, the owner.

"Alright," I said. "We're knocking off early. Into the pool if you want." We all stripped naked and got in the pool. When I got out I dried off and headed for the house. My hair was still wet. I needed a haircut.

"Jaime," I said, "did you bring your clippers with you?" Jaime was a hairdresser who lived at the Russian River Lodge that summer. He lived naked except for his brown shorts and a tan nearly as dark. He sported gold hoop rings in both ears and both nipples. He brought to mind a chest of drawers by Salvador Dali.

"Got them right here," Jaime said. "Ready for a haircut?"

"Got that right," I said.

"Meet me on the front porch."

I met him on the front porch. I wore black, not-quite-bikini Speedos that I'd picked up in a bargain basement at some department store over a decade ago. I was ready for my haircut.

Jaime dragged out a 1950s kitchen chair, his clippers, and a soft barber's brush. No combs. This was going to be a short-short haircut. It didn't take long. As soon as I got up, Lee sat down.

"Give me the same," he said. Jaime gave him the same.

"Next," Bob the manager said. He sat down on the chrome and yellow plastic chair. The pile of hair on the porch floor was growing.

"Anybody else?" Jaime said.

"You might as well do me too," Wes said. I had found Wes sleeping on my front stoop on Clementina Street one morning. Joe, the leather worker who lived below me, thought he was a wino sleeping it off. Wes was the ex of an ex who hitched from Michigan to San Francisco to meet me. Wes took off his T-shirt and sat on the chrome chair. Off came his long hair. It joined the pile on the porch floor.

There we all stood, wearing various configurations of facial hair, but sporting nearly shaved heads like Nazi collaborators in liberated Paris.

The next day was rodeo day in Guerneville. Wes and I jumped in my pickup and drove into town. The sun was out. The thermometer hovered near 90. Not a cloud in the sky. The horse and rider parade started down Main Street at noon. We had our place on the crowded sidewalk by 11:30.

The bars were all open early. Drinks were served in paper cups so you could take them outside to watch the parade. Wes and I stood in front of the Rainbow Cattle Company, drinking Olympia draft beer.

The Cattle Company was a gay bar on Main Street. It was owned and operated by an ex L.A. cop and his partner. Some of the straight rowdies from the bar down the street used to hassle the gays when the bar first opened. That had pretty much settled down after the sheriff had been called in a few times.

"Have you picked out which one you want?" I said. Four young cowboys in rodeo shirts reined in their horses right in front

of us. I lit up a Marlboro. Sweat stained the armpits of their fancy shirts. I focused my Nikon on a boot with elaborate leather tooling that the closest rider had stuck in his stirrup. Click. I was building a collection of Russian River wranglers. I took another swig of beer. A light breeze wafted the sweet smell of man sweat and horseshit our way." Which one I want?" Wes said.

"Yeah, which buckaroo you want to fuck the shit out of you?" I said.

Wes blushed. Or at least I thought he blushed. Then I realized he was sunburned. Especially on his nearly shaved head. "You better cover your head up, Wes, or you're going to have one hell of a burn."

"That's all right," he said. "I don't have anything to cover it up with."

I took off the Stetson I had picked up in Rawlins, Wyoming a few years ago on my way cross country to Jack Fritscher's place on 25th Street. I didn't wear it often, but it was a nice prop now and then. I plunked it down on Wes's red skull. "There," I said. "That ought to help."

"Thanks," Wes said. "What about you?"

"I still have a trick or two up my sleeve," I said. "Or rather in my hip pocket." I pulled a neatly folded dark blue hanky from my left hip pocket, shook it out, then tied it do-rag style around my own nearly naked skull.

"What's a blue hanky on a shaved head mean?" a gay *vaquero* shouted, as he whizzed behind me on roller skates.

"We'll have to wait and see," I shouted back, but he was gone.

"Get us a couple more beers," I said. I handed Wes some bills.

When he came out of the Cattle Company with our beers, I noticed Wes had rolled the brim of my hat to form a more elongated shape. It fit his head better. It looked hot. Gave him a little character. A little attitude.

We drove over to the sunburnt field next to the Russian River Rodeo grounds. Shirtless attendants signaled where to park. Clouds of dust rose in the hot afternoon air as beat-up pickup trucks, rundown vans, and used cars way past their prime pulled into the shade-less lot. The weathered wooden bleachers were

packed. Horse trailers were unloaded at the far side of the arena. Rodeo cowboys and attendants gathered in knots on the early July afternoon.

Wes and I managed to squeeze onto the bleachers between a family with two kids dressed as cowboys and a middle-aged couple that looked bored. Sometime between the barrel races and the bucking bronco contest Wes left for the field toilets at the far end of the grounds. He was gone a long time. I maneuvered through the crowd and up as close to the arena as the public was allowed. I was getting some great shots for my River wrangler collection. Wes finally came back.

"I got a ride," he said. He looked down at the dust by the end of the bleachers where I stood in the shade from the spectators. "Uh, I'll see you back at the lodge," he said. "Uh, I might be late." He looked out from under the now thoroughly re-shaped brim of my cowboy hat with a shy little smile. I knew the Stetson was Wes's now.

"So," I said, "I guess the hat worked."

"Thanks," Wes said. He started back toward the parking area where I saw a white van, its engine running, waiting by the exit.

After the last race was run, and the final prize awarded, I started walking back to Nelly Belle, my pickup truck. I pulled the do-rag off my nearly shaved head and wiped the sweat and dust from my face and neck.

"Hey Slim," someone called from behind me. "What happened to your hair?"

I turned and saw a shirtless guy with a single black braid down his brown back. He was half running to catch up with me.

"Hey, how you doing?" He looked familiar but I couldn't place him.

"How about a ride?" he said.

"Where you headed?"

"Wherever you want," he said.

We reached the pickup. "Hop in," I said.

I might have lost my Wyoming Stetson, but I gained a whole camera full of cowboys, and the hottest Indian I'd ever seen was sitting next to me in my truck.

Life at the River, I soon found, revolved around lots of booze, pot, a little cocaine, and a gay roadhouse on River Road called the Rusty Nail. Owned by three lesbians, it was the social center of the gay community. The sheriff's deputies kept a close eye on it. They didn't want to bust the place. The deputies wanted somewhere to take their girlfriends when they were stepping out on their wives. It seemed a win-win situation for everybody. Life at the Rusty Nail revolved around booze, disco dancing, pickups, and more booze.

There was a special drink at the bars the winter I spent at the River. It was called a teeny-tiny. A teeny-tiny was half a shot of Stolichnaya vodka topped off with peppermint schnapps. People would buy themselves a teeny-tiny. They would buy others a teeny-tiny. They would buy the whole bar a teeny-tiny. People would play "liars dice" at the bar for a teeny-tiny. Allan Lowery once came up from the City for a visit. At the Rusty Nail a hot man squeezed in next to Allan at the crowded horseshoe bar.

"Wanna play 'liars dice,' bud?"

"Liars dice?" Allan said. "I don't even know how to play honest men's dice, but I'll go home with you if you're into bondage." They left together.

I ran into Allan another time at the Rusty Nail. He was up at the River with a friend from the City. They were sitting at the bar when I walked in late one Saturday night.

"Jim," Allan called out. He motioned for me to join them. Allan was in full leathers. So was I. The place was packed. "Jim, this is Karl," Allen said. "Karl, Jim."

I shook hands with Karl. He had a firm grip. He wore a pair of faded Levi's and a snug white T-shirt that showed off his trim body. Dark hair with a little gray peeked out of the top of the T-shirt. His short hair also displayed a little gray at the temples. Early 50s, I thought. Buff early 50s.

"What'll you have?" Allen asked me. "Karl's buying." I looked at Karl. A rascal's grin danced about his lips. The bartender grinned at me, waiting.

"Gin and tonic with a squeeze," I said.

“Another vodka martini?” the bartender said to Allan. Allan nodded.

“And another draft for you?” Karl shook his head and looked at his beer. It’d barely been touched.

After a couple more drinks it was last call. Karl was headed for the pisser. “Want to join us?” Allan said. “We’re staying at Karl’s cottage over by Salmon Creek.”

“Sure,” I said. “He’s hot.” Allan and I had worked in tandem with each other before. It was almost a routine. The bar lights came on. The music stopped. We headed for the door. “I’ll have to hitch a ride with you guys,” I said. “I totaled the truck about a month ago.” Allan knew that I said it for Karl’s sake.

“You’ll fit in the back,” Allan said. We were headed for the far edge of the parking lot where some late blooming acacia bushes still scented the night air. There was only one car parked there; a black BMW E21. Last year’s model.

I folded myself into the back. We left the parking lot spraying a modest amount of loose gravel, turned left on River Road, and headed for the Pacific.

Salmon Creek is a wide spot in the road on old U.S. 1, just north of Bodega Bay. Karl pulled up and parked in front of his place. The front door was practically on the old road, the lot was so narrow. When we got out, you could hear the late-night groan of the ocean as it hit the beach behind the cottage, some 50 feet below. The cottage had two loft bedrooms tucked under a cathedral ceiling. The rest was open space, with floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding doors onto a deck facing the Pacific. All was finished with bleached wood that looked like it had washed up on the beach below.

I stepped onto the deck, to inhale the smell of the ocean and clear my head a little. I wasn’t used to so many gin and tonics. I spotted a length of clothes line tied across the deck. It had a jockstrap attached to it with a couple of wooden snap clothespins. I removed it and put it and the clothespins in my pocket. I untied the clothes line, coiled it, and stuffed it in my hip pocket. I stepped back into the room. Allan had Karl naked, down on the floor, licking his boots. I joined them by putting my own

boot next to Allan's.

Before the night was over we had our way with Karl, or he had his way with us. First I tied Karl up with the clothes line in Japanese body bondage. It was a skill Jack Fritscher had taught me years before after a trip to Tokyo. Then Allan tied Karl down to the four poster bed in the loft. Next we took turns disciplining him. I stuffed the jock in Karl's mouth, put the clothespins on his nipples. I alternated my hands, my belt, and a gull feather bouquet from the coffee table, in a drumming tattoo on his back and ass. By sunup we were all blissfully exhausted.

After a nap of a few hours, we were up and revived by some lines of coke that magically appeared. We were out of vodka. I was picked to drive into Bodega Bay on a vodka run. I had only the full leathers I'd worn the night before. The upside? I got to drive the BMW to the convenience store a couple of miles away. I'm not sure which was more titillating for the family daddies picking up the Sunday *Chronicle*. Was it me in full leathers, or the BMW?

Back at the cottage, Karl proved the perfect host. He started with bull shots: vodka and beef bouillon duded up with Tabasco, Worcestershire, lemon and pepper. The perfect way to cleanse Saturday night mouth. An eggs Benedict brunch was followed by feeding the gulls on the deck. Next was a long walk on the beach where we spotted driftwood, sea-glass, and the feathered remains of a brown pelican. After an afternoon nap, Karl again demonstrated his culinary skills by preparing, from scratch, chicken Kiev and a Caesar salad, complete with a raw egg. I filed Karl's cooking skills away for future use.

I was dropped off at my place up Canyon Three Road, in Rio Nido. Allan and Karl returned to the City.

One night, this hot babe walked into the Rusty Nail. She chalked her name on the wall by the pool table and waited her turn. Most of the women in the bar were better pool players than the men. When this babe's turn came up, she beat the pants off dyke after dyke at the pool table. Finally a young sinewy man in a slouched cowboy hat who'd been leaning against the wall

waiting his turn, stepped up to the pool table. He beat the pants off the babe.

“I want ya to know,” he said when the game ended, “that I’m the token straight guy around here.”

“Well, honey, I want you to know,” she said, “that I’m the token transsexual. Let’s go to your place and token fuck.”

They did. I saw her a year later at the Balcony Bar on Market Street in the City. She had a hot hung Hispanic man on her arm. Said they were married. I complimented her on her pool games at the Rusty Nail. She learned to play pool where she grew up in Texas, she said, to keep from getting beat up by the straight bullies.

Thursday night at the River was penny-ante poker and potluck night at Pat Conway’s house. Pat was the major owner of the Rusty Nail. She had a house at the back of the canyon, behind her bar, that was California modern, looked out over the tree tops, and took 78 steps to reach the front door.

A larger-than-life marble statue of Hercules, draped in a lion skin, that she’d had shipped from her father’s estate in New Jersey, guarded the steps. Her hot tub seated 12 naked people at a time. She had a regulation slate pool table in her living room. It was here that I learned to play poker, improved my pool game, and exchanged potluck recipes.

The job at the Russian River Lodge ended for the season. I moved into a cabin up a canyon near the village of Rio Nido. One rainy night I was following Torch, a Janice Joplin wannabe baby dyke, in her VW bug to an isolated cabin to take publicity pix of a budding River rock group.

As we started up a private mountain road, with no guardrails, I saw a large limb in the road that the storm had taken down. The VW easily went around it. I followed, thinking the road was wide enough for my pickup truck. It wasn’t. If I hadn’t been playing liars-dice for a teeny-tiny or two I would have seen that. But I had and I didn’t.

My truck slid off the road, flipped over, and landed 50 feet down the embankment with the horn blowing. Old Nelly Belle was totaled. I walked away with my camera and a cracked sternum.

I was left without wheels. That meant hitchhiking.

I got a job in the kitchen of the River Village, a cozy gay resort that wanted to extend the season into winter's rainy weather time. River Village was in Rio Nido, within walking distance of my canyon cabin.

I started out as a dishwasher, graduated to salad man, general food prep, learned how to shuck oysters, and within a couple of months I was sous chef. The kitchen tried to follow the mantra of Alice Waters' *Chez Panisse* restaurant in Berkeley, with seasonal and local ingredients. Sometimes they made it, sometimes they didn't. The "Catch of the Day" on the menu really had been pulled from the Pacific hours earlier by two handsome fishermen the manager knew. The job sparked my lifelong interest for local and seasonal cooking.

Michael Palmer, another refugee from the City, moved in with me for a while. One night we decided to hitchhike to the Rusty Nail, about seven miles down River Road. Just off the shoulder of the road, at the bottom of a deep gorge, is the Russian River. The shoulder, where we stood in the dark with our thumbs extended for a ride, was only a few feet wide. I saw a carload of young rednecks, hooting and hollering, headed the opposite direction. They slowed down, then turned around by the postal substation. They started back toward us.

"Michael," I yelled. "Get back here by the edge of the bank."

"Why, what are you talking about?" He hadn't seen the car turn around.

"If we stand here and they try to run us down, we can jump out of the way and they'll plunge their car over the bank and into the river." He still didn't get it until the car was almost back on River Road.

The car came roaring back down the road from Canyon Three Road. It stopped in the middle of the road when they saw where we were standing. It was right under the lone overhead street light at the intersection. I could almost make out their license plate number.

"Get out of Dodge, faggots," somebody yelled out the window.

To their surprise, as well as my own, I started toward the rear

of their car. Now I could make out the license plate number.

"079-RNB! 079-RNB! 079-RNB!" I kept yelling their license plate number as loud as I could. There were a few cabins nearby. At least one of them had lights on. Would anybody hear me? The redneck boys finally figured out what I was doing and squealed off toward Guerneville.

"Michael, we have to remember that number!" We both kept repeating it out loud while cars going in our direction whizzed past us. "079-RNB, 079-RNB." Would anybody stop? Finally a pair of headlights slowed down as they approached us. Were the redneck boys back? The lights were so bright we couldn't tell what kind of car it was. It stopped just before it reached us. Then I saw a Mercedes hood ornament. I heard the soft sound of a window being lowered.

"Would you boys like a ride?" a culture-aged voice asked. Would we? You bet your sweet ass we would!

We climbed into the back seat as two perfectly coiffed and immaculately dressed gentlemen turned their smiling faces toward us. They looked in their 80s. Thank-god for rich old ladies of any gender. When we reached the Rusty Nail we invited them to join us for a teeny-tiny. After just a hint of hesitation, they declined.

We called the sheriff's department in Guerneville with the 079-RNB number. We learned later the deputies had stopped the car and talked to its occupants. Since they had not actually done anything to us, except call us faggots, they couldn't arrest them. The boys were warned that if anything happened later, they would be on the top of the sheriff's shit list.

Not quite half way between Guerneville and Jenner by the sea is the little town of Monte Rio. Under the redwoods nearby, on nearly 3,000 acres, is Bohemian Grove. Bohemian Grove is the summer encampment of the Bohemian Club, an all-male fraternity of the most wealthy and powerful men in the country. Founded in San Francisco in the 1870s, the club started accumulating redwood acres in the late 1800s. The Grove, especially during the July encampment, is an all-male fantasy land, where

the rich and famous can revert to the adolescent hijinks of a boys summer camp.

As private jets landed at Santa Rosa airport, disgorging the masters of power and wealth, another group of bohemians was quietly converging at the River. They too, came from San Francisco, Los Angeles, and even as far away as Nevada. These modern-day courtesans were part of the fantasy. They knew where the money was.

One night Michael and I decided to hike into Guerneville and out to the Highlands. The Highlands Resort, near the redwoods of Armstrong Woods State Reserve, was a collection of old 1940s-style tourist cabins that had “gone gay.” There was a community room with a bar and dance floor, where guests and locals could mingle. We got there early. It was quiet. We both sorted through our pockets for loose change and ordered draft beers.

A young woman in a summer dress came in. As she approached the nearly empty bar, I could tell by the way she walked that she liked being the center of attention. Out of all the empty stools at the bar, she sat on the one next to me. She was so close I could feel the heat from her body. I tried to ignore her by horning in on the conversation Michael was having with the bartender. Michael gave me a dirty look. He was trying to set up something with the bartender for later.

“Well, are you going to buy me a drink or not?” she said.

I turned in her direction and covertly eyed her breasts. They were way out of proportion for her petite body. “I don’t have any money,” I said. Mammary augmentation implants, I thought.

“Well,” she said, “why don’t I buy you and your boyfriend a drink then?”

“Sure, why not?” I said. At least she seemed to know the score.

“Bartender,” she said. “Get these two gentlemen whatever they want and a margarita for me.”

The bartender pulled two draft beers and set them in front of Michael and me. He proceeded to build her margarita.

“When you’re done, set up a round of teeny-tinies for us. One for yourself, too,” she said.

"You got it," the bartender said. "I'll take mine when I get off."

She reached between her robust breasts and pulled out a rolled-up bill. She unrolled it on the bar. It was a 100-dollar bill. I thought I could see white powder along one edge.

"Can you break that for me?" she said.

"Can do," the bartender said.

For as early and as quiet as it was in the bar, I was surprised. He totaled up all the drinks, including his own teeny-tiny for later, and counted out her change on the bar.

"This is for you, honey," she said. She pushed the coins and a 10-dollar bill toward the bartender. She folded the remaining bills and put them somewhere in her skirt.

"Cheers!" we all said as we downed our Stolichnaya and schnapps.

"Want to dance?" she said, as she stood up, grabbed my hand, and started pulling me toward the dance floor. The sexual energy of the disco music seemed misplaced. Nobody was dancing.

"Want to see something pretty?" she said, when we reached the dance floor. Before I could answer, she unzipped the top of her dress. I realized it wasn't a dress at all but a bustier with a matching wraparound skirt. "Aren't they pretty?" she said. Her mammary augmentation implants were now on full display under the mirrored ball above the empty dance floor. Donna Summers sang on: "Love to Love You Baby." I wasn't sure what to say. She bent over slightly as she danced. Her tits swayed to the rhythm of the music. Then I got it.

"Why'd you come here tonight?" I said.

"Practice," she said.

"Practice?"

"I have an appointment out at Bohemian Grove later tonight," she said. "I always come up here in July when the big boys are at midsummer encampment." She carefully zipped the bustier up around her tits. I felt a little more comfortable.

"But why a gay bar?" I said.

"I'm safe here," she said. "I can try out my act without being hit on."

“And you get yourself turned on for later, out at the Grove?”
I said.

“Something like that,” she said. “Got to go.”

I was just getting interested, not sexually, but in her *modus operandi*. “But what do you do the rest of the time?” I said, as she started toward the door.

“I teach sociology at San Francisco State,” she said over her shoulder as she left.

After 18 months at the River I’d learned to mix a bull shot, make hollandaise sauce, shuck oysters, play penny-ante poker and liars dice, and be wary of a teeny-tiny. As Kenny Rogers says, you got to “know when to fold ‘em/Know when to walk away...” I bought an ancient Volvo 544 that had faded to dusty Wedgwood blue and fled the River back to the City.



Camille and Sybil

1979: photo by Jim Stewart at 11th and Folsom Streets, “Nelly Belle,” Jim Stewart’s GMC pickup truck, parked at curb

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