

Back from The River

Paul, an early computer geek from Vancouver, British Columbia, worked for Bank of America. He offered his place as a crash pad until I got my feet back on the ground in the City. His apartment, on the seventh floor of a 1920s vintage building on Scott Street, overlooked Alamo Square.

Because of the elevation, his living room windows framed the famous row of Matthew Kavanaugh Painted Ladies lined up on Steiner Street, the other side of the square. With the financial district, the Transamerica Pyramid, and the big black Bank of America building behind them, these are probably the most photographed houses in the City.

Many a man might have offered his left nut to live in a place with this view. Me? I missed the grit of Folsom Street.

I rode the elevator up to the seventh floor one night after returning from a “house call.” Dressed in full leathers, I was carrying an old Gladstone bag filled with toys. My “doctor’s bag.” One toy, a quirt presented to me by a monk, was just a little too long to fit in the Gladstone. It hung enticingly out of the slightly unzipped bag. A mature, but still young, woman shared the elevator as it ascended. After a couple of floors passed in silence, she looked from my doctor’s bag to me and back again to the quirt.

“Looks like somebody’s going to have a good time tonight.”

“Already have.”

She smiled knowingly, and got off on the sixth floor.

Allan Lowery’s old bar, the Leatherneck, at the corner of 11th and Folsom Streets, was open again. This time around it was owned by John Embry, who also owned *Drummer* magazine. The cesspool in the courtyard had been returned to its pristine beauty as a swimming pool during the place’s short interlude as a straight bar.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

The bar soon returned to its gay Folsom roots, and was called the Compound. While the bar was open to the public, a private membership allowed after-hours pool use. I heard on the street Embry was looking for a carpenter to build a cage to showcase rough customers. I got the job building the cage. When that was finished, John Embry kept me on as a backup bartender.

It was better than hanging out by Flagg Brothers shoe store with hustlers nearly half my age. Soon I was managing the leather shop in the back. By the end of the second month, photographer/porno star/bar manager JimEd Thompson quit as manager, after a falling out with John Embry. I became *de facto* manager.

It was a time-consuming job, despite the dismal turnout at the bar. I rarely made it back to Alamo Square at night. Those nights I wasn't invited to somebody's place, or I didn't end up at the baths, I crashed on an army cot in the upstairs office at the bar.

By the end of the month, I officially moved out of Paul's place on Alamo Square and into the office above the bar. It was a tight fit, but I managed to squeeze in an antique walnut commode my great-grandmother had bought in Detroit around the time of Lincoln, plus a few other pieces of furniture not in storage. Taking pride of place was my growing art collection, including a Chuck Arnett, a Tom Hinde, and a Go Mishima.

Ron, a trick from Buffalo, New York, who I brought up to my lair one night after the bar closed, looked around in amazement. His eyes sparkled with cocaine we had shared on the bar downstairs. He looked over my faux military officer's uniform of undeterminable origin, the antique dresser, the art work. In an awed voice he whispered, "Save the Fabergé eggs." For the rest of the night we were a czarist officer and his serf who had fled the Bolsheviks to a garret in Paris. Several times before the sun came up we saved the Fabergé eggs.

Living in the bar proved a continuous high from which there was little downtime. While a dwindling "members only" crowd frolicked poolside late into the night, something else was afoot in the bolted bar. Word soon got out that a private *pas de deux* was often played out there after hours. Once the doors were locked

and the lights off, many a fantasy happened in the cage, on the pool table, or over the pinball machine. Afterwards, I would crash on the narrow army cot in the upstairs office. It was still *La Bohème* South of Market in the City of Saint Francis, but time was running out. It was early 1981.

One day Dan Gibson walked into the bar. Dan had worked at the Ambush on Harrison for years. He had been to my Double Exposure show back in 1978, and had been equally impressed with my photos and the flat on Clementina. He'd heard I was "roughing it" at the bar.

"I live in a flat I renovated over on Kissling," Dan said. "I'm looking for a roommate, somebody who can put up with my coke snorting and scotch swilling."

"What's it like?" I said, as I drew us each a beer from the tap. I knew Dan, but not intimately.

"What's it like!" Dan said. "I heard you know all about snorting and swilling."

We both laughed out loud in the empty bar and eyed each other over the top of our beer glasses. This might be interesting. John Embry was getting nervous about my living in the bar. He also didn't like my old Volvo parked outside. Didn't think it lent the right ambience to the bar.

"Come over at noon tomorrow," Dan said, "and I'll show you around." He gave me the address on Kissling.

A few minutes past noon the next day I was knocking on Dan's door. Kissling was an alley street. It dead-ended a couple of houses past Dan's place. Around the corner, at 10th and Howard Streets, the bells of St. Joseph's Church had just finished ringing. Aromas from the handmade burrito shop at the corner wafted up the short street. The place had a foreign feel to it, and only a block and a half from the fever and pitch of Folsom Street.

Dan opened the door.

The flat was a shotgun, laid out like many in the warren of alley streets South of Market. A hallway with rooms on the side led to the kitchen in back. What Dan had done here was magic. Dan was from the South, and had been a professional interior designer. It showed.

His personal space was two rooms at the front: a sitting room with double sliding doors to his bedroom. A fireplace anchored the space with a twist on traditional furnishings. Although wing chairs and a four-poster bed lent elegance to the rooms, a mid-20th century Ames chair and ottoman of molded wood and black leather kept the place from looking prissy.

Dan had done an equally superb mix-and-match job in decorating the rest of the flat. What became my room was in the back, off the kitchen, and close to the bathroom.

What sold me on the deal was the enclosed courtyard off the dining room in the back. It was landscaped as if hidden in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans. The apartment had the only door to this oasis. The only windows besides Dan's that overlooked the courtyard were those of the gay neighbor above Dan's flat and a bank of windows in an empty loft above the burrito shop. The other two sides were windowless brick walls three stories high covered with flowering vines.

"Well, what do you think?" Dan said, as we sat down at the kitchen table. He laid out four lines of blow on a mirror and got out the bottle of scotch. The place was perfect, Dan was a great guy, but still I hesitated. The place seemed more like a "home" than a "flat." I was not interested in a relationship. Not now. Dan must have picked up on my hesitation. He started to laugh.

"No strings attached," he said. "I have my space and entertain in the front. You have your space and entertain in the back. The rest we share. Everything is strictly platonic."

"A done deal," I said. We proceeded to snort the coke and sip the scotch to seal the deal.

The Compound needed something to revive it. It needed a hook to bring people in. John Embry made an arrangement with Chuck Renslow, the owner of the Gold Coast leather bar in Chicago, to rename the bar on the corner of 11th and Folsom the Gold Coast West. This was early 1981. I went to John with some further suggestions.

"What's needed here," I said, "is something to really draw men into this bar. A name change alone won't do it."

"Well, do you have something in mind?"

I did. “What musical is really drawing in the crowds right now?”

“Annie?”

“Try *Sweeney Todd*.” The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, after conquering London’s West End and New York, was on the road, and had just opened in San Francisco. People were flocking to it. “Remember ‘Inside Sweeney Todd’s,’ the spread you did in *Drummer* a couple of years ago, on the specialty barbershop on Christopher Street in New York? Well, what about opening our own Sweeney Todd’s barbershop right here in the bar?”

“Do you know a barber we can get?”

“As a matter of fact I do.” Ron, the Fabergé egg man from Buffalo, was a trained barber and beautician. He was looking for work. He had managed to stay in the City by winning go-go boy contests and scouting out free buffet spreads the bars offered to draw in hot young men. I was sure he would work for a small salary plus the big tips he could pull in. It was a go.

We closed the bar for a week. When it reopened, one former storage room featured a used barber chair, with a restraint table in another. A screen hung from the ceiling in the main bar room. Patrons could watch live action being filmed from a new sex toy, a video camera suspended over the barber chair. It showed the haircuts and shavings being done in Sweeney Todd’s barbershop. A second video camera hung over the restraint table, for similar live “broadcasts.”

The reopening night of the Gold Coast West saw lines of men down the sidewalk, waiting to get in. A spread of meat pies, both chicken and beef, depending on your taste, was offered. It took a while for many to realize they could watch a BDSM scene or a body shaving on the screen and then walk a few feet and see it live. The bar was off to a great new start. I gave it six months.

About 2:30 one morning in July, after work, I was walking home to Kissling Street. I heard several sirens racing down Folsom. They sounded as if they were headed east. I looked in that direction. The sky was lit with flames. I ran back to Folsom Street. An army of men, mostly fresh from the recently closed bars, had gathered and was headed east. I joined them.

"What's burning?" I said, to the man in the leather chaps and open vest next to me. He wore no shirt. I think I had served him a couple of beers in the bar before he had headed back to the Sweeney Todd barbershop over an hour ago. He still wore a mat of dark curly hair on his chest and displayed a steel gray jarhead hair cut. I had a good idea what had been shaved.

"Looks like it's the old Barracks building," he said, as we passed 9th Street. The crowd grew bigger as we hurried east along Folsom. "When did the Barracks shut down?"

"A few years ago," I said. "It must have been sometime in 1976, because it was after all the Bicentennial celebrations."

The old Folsom Street Barracks bathhouse had been on the south side of the street between 7th and 8th. There it stood now, the four-story blazing remains of what had once been an enticing labyrinth welcoming both Theseus and Minotaur to the mysteries of fantasy sex.

Now fire trucks, their sirens silent while their red lights continued blinking, blocked Folsom Street. Young firemen dragged hoses as close as possible to the flaming structure, shooting water into the inferno. Buildings next door were watered down to contain the blaze. Men holding hoses were hoisted high into the night sky on ladders to spray down into the blaze.

"Do you remember your first time in the Barracks?" the hirsute leatherman next to me said.

"I was here on Bastille Day 1975, for vacation. I had never been in an orgy room before. The minute I was dragged into the room the aroma of male musk overcame me. I was intoxicated. I went wild. I..." I turned back to the leatherman. He was gone. With a great roar the roof of the old Barracks collapsed into the building, sending a display of fireworks high into the night sky. I turned back toward the street.

News vans were parked near the intersection of 8th and Folsom. I walked toward them, stepping around puddles and over leaky fire hoses. There, in the flashing lights, former supervisor—now mayor—Dianne Feinstein was being interviewed.

I walked back toward 7th Street. The flames from the rapidly disintegrating bathhouse painted surrounding buildings with the

flickering flames of hell, born in the mind of Hieronymus Bosch. Fantasy sex scenes from long ago were released and flew with the flames into the night sky.

I went into the Stables, a leather bar on Folsom, past the burning Barracks. Joe, a redheaded friend of mine from Michigan, was behind the bar. He had lost weight since moving to the City. His forearms were no longer decorated with heavy coin-silver and turquoise bracelets, gifts from a former sugar daddy. His bloodshot eyes and the slight tremor in his hands when he poured my scotch suggested he might have pawned them for drugs. He was working shirtless in a leather harness. His hippie long red hair was now a crew cut. He looked hot. How long will he last, I wondered.

“Double scotch on the rocks?” he said.

“Sure,” I said. How long will I last, I wondered.

Less than a month after a meager celebration of the 1982 New Year, the bar closed. I’d been right. I’d given it six months after the grand reopening the previous July. I was out of a job. Again.

I sat at the bar in Fe-Be’s, the old man’s leather hangout. I was sipping my second scotch on the rocks when a familiar-looking leatherman straddled the stool next to mine.

“Jim Stewart,” he said. “I’d heard you were back from the River.”

“Lou Rudolph!” The name came to me in the nick of time. “It’s been ages.”

I hadn’t seen Lou Rudolph—leatherman, painter, performance artist extraordinaire—for nearly three years. I’d shot a special promo photo session with Lou and Sybil, also a performance artist and actor, at my place in early 1979. Lou had been impressed with how I had captured Camille. He wanted to see if I could capture him as well. The shoot went great. We were all pleased with the results.

“Yes, I was at the River. For 18 months. I came back a year ago this month.”

“Any photo shows lately?” Lou said.

I drained the last of the scotch from the ice in my glass. “Well, no,” I said.

“Get us a couple more,” Lou said to the bartender. We were the only customers in the place. “Here,” Lou said in a low voice when the bartender left to get our drinks. I felt him place something in my hand.

Instinctively I knew what it was. I turned away from the bar, and pushed it up first one side of my nose and then the other. “Ahhh. Thanks,” I said, and put it back in his hand just as the bartender arrived with our drinks.

“Are we ready to talk?” Lou said with a grin.

“We’re ready to talk,” I said. I snorted my nose and lit up another Marlboro.

“Ever hear of 544 Natoma Performance Gallery?”

“No. That must be down a ways on Natoma.”

“Between 6th and 7th. It’s a performance gallery that Peter Hartman set up.”

I wasn’t sure who Peter Hartman was. Lou signaled the bartender for another round. I shook my head no, but it was too late. I felt the little plastic coke bullet in my hand again. What the hell.

“Sounds interesting. Where do I fit in?” My performance pieces had always been one-on-one in The Other Room on Clementina. That was all gone now. My lease had expired while I was at the River. Taylor of San Francisco had moved his leather business and personal performances up one floor into my old flat.

“I’m their ‘artist in residence,’” Lou said. “I do nightly performance pieces. We usually hang some artist’s work there for a month. It’s not much, but it does provide exposure.”

“I see...”

“I showed Peter some of the work you had done of Sybil and me. He was impressed. Are you interested in hanging a show there?”

“I might be.” Boy, might I ever, I thought. This was just the sort of thing I had hoped might come along. “What’s the setup?”

We discussed percentages, printing, framing, and setup costs. We came to a mutually agreeable arrangement, shook hands and Lou left. My hands were shaking as I drained the last of my scotch

from the glass.

Would I be able to pull it off? I no longer had my darkroom. My last photos were of anonymous cowboys at the Russian River rodeo outside Guerneville. I did have some shots I had done of Luc and Linda, a dyke I met at the Balcony Bar a few years ago. The pix of Lou and Sybil had never been hung, as well as a few other odds and ends that had never been on public display.

Of course, I could pull it together. This was only the middle of February and the show wasn't due to open until the 3rd of March! I walked home and pulled out my big brown leather suitcase, home to my negatives and contact prints.

I realized later I should have given more thought to the title of my show. Since it would include photos expressing both urban grit and rural guts I called the show "Town and Country." Wrong. The very words suggest a night at the opera followed by a morning fox hunt.

The 544 Natoma Performance Gallery was a cutting-edge space that showcased the emerging urban trash punk scene. I picked the right lead photo for the fliers and posters. It was a high contrast black and white tableau of a dominatrix pulling a chained, bound, male arm from a black plastic trash bag. "Trash" would have been a better title for the show. I should have talked with Lou a little more about his performance piece, "Cheap Hotel." We could have merged the two concepts to present a raw, gritty, urban environment.

I also should have examined the hanging space before choosing the photos. The space was not a formal gallery. Viewers could not get close to most of the photos to examine them. Fewer, but larger, photos would have stood out better.

Lastly, since I no longer had my darkroom, I had to have the prints done by a professional studio. The printer on Folsom Street I had used for the large blowup of Camille was out of business. I chose a place on 18th Street near Castro. While they could print perfectly acceptable prints of your vacation, no matter how graphic they might be, they could not deliver the quality of print I needed for a show. Even matted and framed, the difference was obvious.

Maybe some miracle would pull off the show. There had recently been the case of a show in a gallery on Market Street where buckets of red paint had been splashed on the paintings because some group or another had deemed the works politically incorrect. The news hit the art world. Out of the debacle the artist got a show in New York. My hopes rose when one of the post card reception invitations was returned in an envelope. The bare breasts of the dominatrix photo had big red Xs drawn on them. On the back in angry red letters I was castigated for bringing such "Trash" to a Filipino family neighborhood. I sensed the writer was not Filipino, but rather another advocate of political correctness. I really should have titled the show "Trash." Alas, there were no buckets of red paint. No show in New York.

The night of the opening reception, 544 Natoma was packed. Lou wrote "Cheap Hotel" backwards from behind a sheet strung across the stage. Some feat! His stage performance paintings were greeted with great applause. So were the drag queen performances and Kabuki theater pieces.

By the end of the month I hadn't sold enough works to cover my expenses. I wasn't sure what to do with the stack of matted and framed photos.

Henry, an All-American Boy from Wisconsin, came into Febe's one afternoon as I sat nursing a scotch on the rocks.

"Have you seen this?" he said, as he held out a copy of the *Bay Area Reporter*. He was shaking the weekly bar rag so much for emphasis that nobody could possibly have read what he was pointing to. "It's lifted from a New York gay rag. It says right here, 'Gay pneumonia' is hitting the New York community. Have you heard of this? Gay pneumonia?" He looked first at the bartender who had come up to take his order, then at me, then back again. The bartender shook his head and raised his eyebrows at Henry.

"Draft," Henry said to the bartender.

"Gay pneumonia? How could there be such a thing? Pneumonia can't know if you're gay or not," I said.

"It says right here, 'gay pneumonia,'" Henry said as he stabbed his thick forefinger at the weekly issue of *B.A.R.*

"There was an article last week on 'gay cancer.' I thought the same thing," the bartender said, as he set down Henry's beer. "How can cancer know if you're gay or not?" He glanced at me. "Another?" he said, as he looked at my empty glass. I nodded.

"Let me see that," I said to Henry. "Where are they getting this from anyway?"

The bartender set down my fresh scotch on the rocks and returned to washing glasses.

I sat sipping scotch at the kitchen table in the back of the flat one afternoon, wondering what direction to steer my life. I was 39 and out of a job. There was a loud pounding on the door. I crept to the front and peeked out the drapes. It was Jim Moss.

"Come in, come in," I said. How you been?"

"Busy," Moss said. Jim Moss was a fantasy photographer whose work had been published in *Drummer*.

"I bet," I said. "I've seen a couple of issues of your new magazine, *Folsom*. Hot."

"Thanks," he said. "That's what I came over to talk about."

I hope it's not photos, I thought. After the disappointment of my show at 544 Natoma I wanted to lay low in that department for awhile. I had nothing new to offer.

"I want to show you something," Moss said. We headed for the kitchen table. "Slide that over here," Moss said as we sat down at the table.

I slid my beveled antique coke mirror with the single-edged razor blade on it across the table in front of Moss. He opened a bindle and scraped a quarter of the white powder onto the mirror with the razor blade. He carefully refolded the bindle and laid it on the table. He proceeded to divide the blow into four equal lines.

"You first," he said. I picked up a silver straw by the side of the mirror and snorted two of the lines.

"Ahhh. Great," I said. I handed Moss the silver straw. He snorted the two remaining lines. We both lit a cigarette.

"Scotch?" I said.

“No. No alcohol. I’ve quit drinking,” Moss said. “It was getting out of control.”

I glanced at the melted ice and pale scotch in my glass on the table. I left it there.

“Now, what I wanted to show you,” he said, as he opened the manila envelope he had brought with him. He pulled out three fine-point ink drawings and laid them on the table. They were various angles of a leather-clad motorcycle rider. One was reflected in the mirror of the motorcycle. I had once done a photo of Ron Clute like that, under the Leatherneck sign, as a promo piece for Allan Lowery’s bar.

“Hot,” I said. I looked at the signature. It rang no bells. I wasn’t sure where I fit into all this.

“What I need,” Moss said, “is someone to write a story to go with these drawings. I want it as hot and crisp as the drawings. No more than six pages, double spaced.” He drew on his cigarette and slowly French-inhaled. “Can you do that?”

I eyed the watery scotch and French-inhaled my Marlboro. “Yes.”

“I’ll pay you \$100. If I like it. You’ll be published in the next issue of my *Folsom* magazine.”

“And if you don’t like it?”

“You’ll be out your time but free to publish it, without the drawings, wherever you want.”

“Deal,” I said. We both stood up and shook hands.

“Oh, keep that to get you started,” Moss said. He nodded at the generous remains in the bindle on the table. “No charge.” He left.

I dumped the watery scotch in the sink, put two fresh ice cubes in my glass, and filled it with Cutty Sark.

Two days later I’d snorted the rest of the bindle, emptied the bottle of scotch, burned through three packs of Marlboros, and had a six-page story about a young biker’s initiation into fist-fucking in a hunting cabin in Michigan. I walked the story over to Jim Moss’s place on Folsom Street.

Jim Moss had a bright green parrot at his place. As soon as I came in the bird flew freely about the room several times before

returning nervously to its cage. Piles of parrot shit decorated the newly refinished hardwood floor. I sat on a lone high metal stool, hoping the bird liked me. Moss sat reading my fisting tale at his metal army desk, the only other piece of furniture in the all-white room. He finished and stood up.

“Well, to tell you the truth,” Moss said.

Here it comes, I thought, the verbal rejection slip.

“It’s the best damn piece of writing anyone’s ever submitted to me,” Moss said. He laid the manuscript on his desk and unlocked one of its drawers. He handed me a 100-dollar bill. It was curled slightly and I detected a white residue along one edge. The parrot emerged from its cage, then flew around the room a couple of times before leaving its deposit near the cage.

“Can I make a copy?” I said, nodding at the copier on the desk.

“Sure.”

By the time I finished copying my fisting story Moss had four lines laid out on a mirrored tile on the desk. We completed the usual ritual. I headed for Fe-Be’s.

Henry was at Fe-Be’s. By the time I sat down at the bar there was a scotch on the rocks waiting for me.

“Remember that article on ‘gay cancer’ that was in the B.A.R. last week?” Henry said.

“Who could forget?” the bartender said. He lit my cigarette. I tipped well.

“Well, there’s more to it than we thought,” Henry said. He lit his own cigarette. I sipped my scotch. “The mainline press has picked up on it,” he said. “‘Gay’ pneumonia turns out to be something called *Pneumocystis pneumonia* and ‘gay’ cancer is something called Kaposi’s sarcoma.”

“Cancer and pneumonia can’t know somebody’s gay,” I said.

“Well, health officials seem to think so. They’re lumping the two together and calling it GRID.”

“GRID,” I said. “What’s that mean?”

“Gay-Related Immune Deficiency.”

Henry signaled for another round of drinks. The bartender obliged.

“What’s this?” Henry said, picking up the manila envelope with the copy of my story inside.

“It’s a dirty story I wrote.”

“Oh, a dirty story. I love dirty stories. Can I read it?”

“Maybe. What’s it worth to you?”

I felt a little plastic coke dispenser being slipped into my hand. “Just don’t lose it,” I said. “It’s the only copy I have.”

About a week later, Jim Moss dropped by the house to show me the printer’s galley proof for my story. The print was curved to follow the shape of the ink drawings of the biker. It looked very professional. It looked hot! It was my first story in print. Well, almost in print.

We shared a couple of lines at the kitchen table in celebration. Moss spotted the Cutty Sark bottle on the counter. He said he had to leave. He was still on the wagon. I headed for Fe-Be’s. Henry was at the bar.

“You look pretty glum,” I said. “What happened?”

“My roommate found a couple of spots on his chest this morning.”

“You don’t mean...”

“They’re not sure. They did some tests. We should know by next week sometime.”

“Henry, I’m so sorry...” I didn’t know what more to say. I bought him a drink. This time it was my turn to slip a little plastic dispenser into Henry’s hand.

“Something else. You’re going to hate me,” he said.

“What?”

“I left your story on the bus. I’m sorry, but there was so much on my mind.”

“Don’t worry. It’s going to be published soon. Then there’ll be copies everywhere.”

A week later I ran into Jim Moss. He looked pretty glum too. “All right,” I said. “What happened? You fall off the wagon?”

“I’m broke. I don’t even have the rent.”

“What about *Folsom* magazine?” I said.

“Dead. I have no money to put out the next copy. The last issue was the last issue.” The afternoon wind came down Folsom Street with fog and a chill. “Don’t worry,” Moss said. “I’m not asking for the hundred bucks back I paid you for your story.”

I snorted a laugh at the idea he would ask such a thing. I nudged Moss into the sheltered doorway of an empty building there on Folsom Street and pressed my plastic coke dispenser into his hand.

“Thanks,” he said.

I’d been out of work since January. My finances were in shambles. I’d turn 40 in less than six months. My last photo show had been a flop. My first short story to be published was not going to be published after all. I lit up a cigarette, laid out two lines on my mirror, and freshened my glass with Cutty Sark. By the time the drink was finished and the coke was gone, I’d made up my mind.

In the past I’d always sought solace in academe during times of personal change. Both when my marriage was disintegrating and when I was coming out to myself as a gay man, I had headed for campus. Grad school provided structure with a certain bohemian zest.

By 1982, my life had shifted. My 18 months at the River was a line of demarcation. Although they were hard to pinpoint, there were subtle changes in my post-River life South of Market. Like Hemingway’s Paris of the 1920s, my existential San Francisco had been a specific place, during a specific time, and populated with specific people. Then things changed. The very zeitgeist of that life changed.

I was on the cusp of being a newly minted 40-year-old man. A man I wasn’t sure of yet, but one who was suddenly concerned with job benefits, health insurance, and a retirement pension.

After much letter writing, phone queries, and filling out of forms, it was settled. I would return to Western Michigan University for a second master’s degree. This one in library science. It was time for a mid-life career change.

Train travel intrigued me. I had ridden many trains in Europe. My rail travel here had been limited to a few trips

between Kalamazoo and Chicago. Now I wanted to experience a cross country train trip. I packed up what was left of my goods and shipped them via motor freight to Michigan. Two suitcases I'd take on the train. The smaller one held a few clothes and a toothbrush. The larger rather ratty brown leather suitcase held my camera, photo negatives, and contact sheets. I was taking no chances it would be lost en route.

How do you say goodbye to San Francisco? You never can. I wanted to leave town quietly, promising myself I'd return. My last night in the City I spent at the Caldron, a piss palace a couple of blocks away on Natoma. In the morning Wil Rutland, a lanky North Carolinian I'd run into several times at the Caldron, drove me in his 1959 red Cadillac convertible to the Transbay Terminal at Mission and First. The sun was out. The top was down. I boarded a bus that took me over the Oakland Bay Bridge to the Amtrak station and a train bound for Chicago.