

Epilogue

The westbound California Zephyr No. 5 from Chicago was due into Emeryville at 5:10 p.m. Pacific time. It arrived at 9:08, nearly four hours late. Ken, my partner of 25 years, and I detrained and boarded the Amtrak bus. The bus came off the Oakland Bay Bridge and entered the City. I'd kept the promise I'd made to myself over a quarter of a century before. I'd come back to San Francisco.

As I'd planned, I returned to grad school and earned another master's degree, this one in library science. For the next 20 years I lived in Chicago. I worked for the Chicago Public Library, first as a government documents librarian and then as head of the history department.

I'd done doctoral work at the University of Illinois Chicago, with emphasis on American migrant groups. I'd started work on my dissertation, *The Detroit French in the Early Republic*. But I had retired with an ABD, all but dissertation. After retiring, Ken and I moved to the West Shore of Michigan and a restored mid-19th-century farmhouse that has been in my family since it was built.

Now, back in San Francisco, at night, the City seemed different. From near the renovated Ferry Building, once a rundown hulk left from a pre-bridge era, brightly lit high rise buildings hid the distinctive shape of the Transamerica Pyramid, as much a symbol of San Francisco as the Golden Gate Bridge.

Finally, an empty cab on busy Market Street took us to our reserved boutique hotel on Bush Street near Powell, the cable car street. It was after 11 p.m. We went out for a late supper.

I looked west on Bush Street and saw the brightly lit marquee of the Nob Hill Theatre. It enticed you to visit their video arcade or see an all-male strip show. A few young men were standing

around in a knot by the entrance. As we crossed Powell Street, a cable car came clanging up the hill. Standing at the corner was a young hustler. He followed us into the Roxanne Café.

“Three?” the Vietnamese hostess said. She picked up three menus.

I turned around. The hustler was striking up a conversation with Ken. Some things in San Francisco never change.

“No, just two,” I said ruefully. It’d already been a very long day.

The Fettuccini Roxanne was delish.

The next day we explored San Francisco, like tourists. We bought Muni Metro passes and rode both the Powell and California Street cable cars. We went to Fishermen’s Wharf and had Dungeness crab cakes. We wended our way through the renovated Ferry Building and browsed through overpriced kitchen wares and bought ridiculously delicious chocolates.

The second day in San Francisco was my day of reckoning.

“I’m sure my flat on Clementina is gone,” I said. “Most likely replaced by a high-rise condo. I’m not sure if I want to look.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t look,” Ken said. “If you don’t look, I’ll hear about it forever.”

We walked south on 9th Street from Market Street. As we crossed Howard Street I saw the Lebanese mom-and-pop grocery store still stood at the corner of Tehama Alley. The liquor sign was more prominent than it had been. I remembered buying a bottle of Courvoisier there with Joelle one Christmas eve after a midnight service at Grace Cathedral. Joelle and her girlfriend had moved down the peninsula, had a baby, and gone MIA.

I glanced in the direction where my flat on Clementina Alley had been. No high-rises reared into the sky. I quickened my pace. Here was the corner. “Clementina End.” The street sign was still there. We rounded the corner. There it stood. The shingles I’d nailed up the summer of 1976 were weathered, but still there. The brown trim was faded, but still there. I started to weep.

“You better give me the camera if you want some pictures,” Ken said. I gave him the camera.

The place had changed a little. Two gigantic dusty jade plants

in weathered pots now stood guard by the steps. A metal security gate protected the doors. The basement window had been filled in with glass bricks.

I thought of my front door I easily kicked open one night when I forgot my keys. I could have knocked since Luc was upstairs. It was easier to kick it in.

I thought of Luc, who had moved to Paris, taken a lover, and got real film roles in French cinema. He had been in a film with Isabelle Adjani, a feat he loved to brag about when he visited me in Chicago in 1989. We had both seen her in Francois Truffaut's *The Story of Adele H.* in San Francisco. Luc died of AIDS the summer of 1991.

My old hangouts South of Market were gone. The Ambush and Fe-Be's had both closed the summer of 1986. Allan Lowery's Leatherneck and the *Drummer* Compound were history before I left the City. The last I had heard Allan was living in Denver. He was now MIA.

A young man opened the security gate, came down the cement steps with a basket of laundry, and entered the basement. What sort of fantasies was he living in my old flat? I didn't want to know. Like unrequited love, sometimes not knowing can be more exciting than knowing and being disappointed.

"Do you want pictures of anything else?" Ken said. I was back in the present.

"Yes," I said. "I want a picture on Howard Street where Robert Opel's Fey-Way Studios used to be." We hiked back up 9th Street to Howard. I squinted, trying to visualize the first homo-masculine art gallery in San Francisco.

Yes. There it was, back from the corner a little, 1287 Howard Street. It was no longer the leather art gallery created by Robert Opel, the Academy Awards stalker. Wild opening night invitation-only parties were a thing of the past. It was no longer a crime scene where Robert Opel had been mysteriously murdered and Camille O'Grady and Anthony Rogers threatened. The yellow crime tape was long gone.

The post-earthquake building was now a renovated four-flat at a tony address in SoMa. I wondered if the people living there

now were ever visited by the ghosts of the building's past. Less than a year after my San Francisco trip I was visited by such a ghost. Robert Oppel, Robert Opel's nephew who spelled his name with a double "p," was filming *Uncle Bob*. I was filmed in an interview recalling my relationship with Robert Opel over a quarter of a century earlier. Little did I know then, that the ghosts of Fey-Way Studios would visit me yet again. In 2010, photos I had taken of Camille O'Grady with skull, and Robert Opel with skull in 1979, were picked by San Francisco Camerawork, a major SoMa gallery, as part of a retrospective show, "An Autobiography of The San Francisco Bay Area Part Two: The Future Lasts Forever."

The Castro was next on my list. We walked back to Market Street and took a restored green and cream antique trolley up Market to 17th Street and Castro. The first time I lived in San Francisco, the summer of 1965, these cars had been for real. Some of the seats then were still upholstered in real leather, frayed at the corners. Replacement covers were Naugahyde. Riding those trolleys then I learned to recognize real leather, a skill that proved useful. I picked up a black leather tuxedo couch once at an unclaimed freight warehouse South of Market. It was marked and priced Naugahyde.

When Ken and I got off at the end of the line, he spotted the Twin Peaks sign. The same sign had been there close to 30 years.

"Is that the same place we saw in the Milk film?" Ken said.

"The very same," I said. Three times we had watched Sean Penn portray Harvey in *Milk*.

"And the Castro Theatre," Ken said. We'd rounded the corner onto Castro Street and there stood the queen of gay theaters. "Well, what do you want to do?" It was early afternoon.

"Let's just walk around for a while," I said. "Get a feel for the place." We walked down Castro to 18th Street. After we had passed the Castro Theatre, nothing looked familiar. We started up the hill towards 19th Street. Although it was a warm sunny afternoon, as is often the case in San Francisco in September, something was missing. No hordes of shirtless, forever-buff men displayed their well-endowed crotches for admiration. No disco

music blasted from the bars. No one tried to sell us dope.

As we neared the intersection of 19th Street, I glanced up Castro Street and spotted the building where Sheldon Kovalski had last lived. I called Sheldon in 1989, after the earthquake. We talked for a long time. He had AIDS. He said he was going to stop taking his meds. I never heard from him again.

“Let’s get an ice tea,” I said. We were now men of a certain age. We settled ourselves into café chairs on the sidewalk outside a small desert shop on 19th Street.

“No sugar,” I heard Ken tell the server. There was one other couple at this small sidewalk café. A middle-aged lesbian was very seriously going over some organizational plans with an extremely handsome young Hispanic man. No, I thought, this can’t be the Castro.

Walking back down on the other side of the street, we saw a couple of young Asian men holding hands.

“Let’s cross over and go in the bookstore,” Ken said. We were nearly up to Market Street. It was close to the Castro Theatre. We crossed over and went in. After 20 years as a librarian, the first thing I did was look for the book organization scheme. I couldn’t find one.

“Can you tell me if you have a certain book?” I said. Two guys talking at the counter looked at me slightly annoyed. The one from behind the counter came over. “Do you carry Jack Fritscher’s new work, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*?” I said.

“I don’t know,” the sales clerk said. He went back to the counter, consulted a computer. “Yes,” he said. “We have one copy.” He turned back to his friend and resumed their conversation.

“Could you show me where it is?” I said.

Without a word he left the counter, looked in three different places, finally found the book displayed with only its spine showing. He pulled it from the shelf, and without a word, handed it to me. He went back to his friend at the counter.

“Thanks,” I said. I thumbed through it, admiring my own photos Jack had been so gracious to use in his magnum opus. I looked up. Ken was waiting on the sidewalk. I laid the book, cover up, on a table prominently labeled “New Books” and walked out.

“Hungry?” I said. We turned the corner and started down 17th Street. I hadn’t noticed when we got off the trolley but now I saw it was still there. The big red and white Coca-Cola sign hung out over the sidewalk.

Orphan Andy’s opened sometime after I moved to San Francisco in 1975. Alice Waters was just launching the local and seasonal food trend at her Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley then. Except for the Norse Cove, Castro Street eateries had been pretty much home cooking and comfort food. Orphan Andy’s still is. We each had a Monte Cristo from the 24-hour menu. They were delish.

We decided to take the Muni Metro back. We got on the inbound M Ocean View line at the Castro station in Harvey Milk Square. We got off at Powell Street and waited with our three-day passes for the cable car to return us up the hill to our hotel on Bush Street.

In the morning I picked up the Ford Escape Hybrid I’d reserved at the Budget car rental across the street. We crossed the Golden Gate Bridge. The rainbow above the tunnel was still there.

“Are you nervous?” Ken said.

“A little.” I knew what he meant. We were headed north on Highway 101 to Sonoma County.

We were going to visit Jack Fritscher and his spouse, Mark Hemry, who lived in the country outside of Sebastopol. After nearly three decades, Jack Fritscher and I had reconnected via the internet. In August, 2007, I had emailed Jack: “While doing research for a project I came across your *Drummer* review, ‘Introducing Jim Stewart.’ I’m flattered. Thank you.” My project was this book.

Jack emailed back: “You make me so happy, to know you are alive and not lost, and that you are doing well, and partnered, and creating. Thank God.” For a year we emailed regularly. Now we were meeting again after 30 years.

After so many years, nothing looked familiar on Highway 101. Then I saw the Marin County Courthouse.

“Look,” I said. “Frank Lloyd Wright.” Ken swiveled his head

around to see the last building designed by the 20th century's master of American architecture. I had pointed it out as a distraction. We both knew it. We rode on in silence, observing the northern California countryside. We left the highway. Ken went into high gear as co-pilot and map reader. We arrived.

My worries about such a reunion were all for naught. The visit was splendid. We were wine and dined and squired around Sonoma County in Volvo style. On Monday morning, Jack and Mark drove us to Santa Rosa, where they were both our witnesses and our photographer as Ken and I were legally married. This was during that small window of California legal sanity from May 15, 2008, to November 4, 2008, when Proposition 8 was passed, outlawing further same-sex marriages in the state. That's another tale.

We drove back to San Francisco. Lunch at the Beach Chalet on the Great Highway near the end of Golden Gate Park was superb. The WPA frescoes by Lucien Labaudt in the Chalet captured the spirit of 1930s San Francisco as much as the wild mushroom pizza with local goat cheese and truffle oil captured the California Slow Food movement. After lunch we walked along the Pacific and listened to the breakers.

We drove out to Lands End. It was no longer a forbidden enclave of feral cats, abandoned cellars, naked men, and wild sex. The parking lot was paved, the grounds groomed. We sat on a bench and watched an octogenarian being fawned over by her middle-aged sons. All were dressed as if for bit parts in a Bernardo Bertolucci film.

A Chinese freighter, piled high with containers of foreign goods, passed under the Golden Gate Bridge and headed east toward Oakland. Lands End had been tamed.

We dropped off our bags at the small Amtrak station on the Embarcadero, dropped the Ford off at the car rental place on Bush Street, and caught the cable car down Powell. We had a disappointing supper on Geary Street at Max's, the former Pam Pams, where streetwalkers, drag queens, leathermen, and theater folk had all once gathered after the bars closed. The place now displayed a weak attempt at elegance and manufactured atmosphere.

We strolled down Market Street toward the Ferry Building. Where Market meets Bush and Battery Streets, we came upon the Mechanics Monument. This 1899 bronze work by Douglas Tilden of five nearly naked workmen driving a punch through a metal plate stopped us in our tracks. I thought I had photographed this once, only to discover the film had not advanced in my Nikon. Again we were out of film.

At Justin Herman Plaza, by the Ferry Building, we rested in the dusk, and watched shirtless boys casually competing on their skateboards. We saw the 1940s-style F-line yellow-and-gray streetcar with green stripes pass on the Embarcadero. I felt again as if in a foreign country. We walked across the street and boarded the Amtrak bus for Emeryville.

George Cory and Douglass Cross, gay lovers, remind us in their famous song that when we leave, we leave our hearts in San Francisco. But then sometimes we do leave. Sometimes we leave because our lives change. Because places change. Because times change. I had changed. When I left San Francisco in 1982, I was no longer the man who arrived in 1975. I had ripened into middle age, with no regrets. I could see beyond my magnificent obsession with the fever and pitch of the immediate hour. The City itself had changed. The most open and liberal and beautiful city in American had been plagued by assassinations and murder. Discord had come with pestilence and death. In 1982 the very zeitgeist had changed, not just in San Francisco, but across the country, as California's former governor settled into power in Washington. San Francisco had been a place in a time that had given me inner strength as a gay man. By 1982 it was time to test that mettle in a wider world. I left my heart in San Francisco. Decades later I returned. I still loved San Francisco, but knew I was no longer in love with San Francisco. San Francisco was a once-upon-a-time lover. One I remembered fondly, but one whose name I no longer called out passionately in the heat of the night. Better still, San Francisco had become my *Moveable Feast*, one that still nourishes me and that I will carry with me always.

Jim Stewart (b. 1942) grew up on a farm in Michigan. He earned his undergraduate degree in history at Michigan State University, master's degrees in history and librarianship at Western Michigan University, and completed course work toward a Ph.D. in American history at the University of Illinois Chicago. He taught history and English before managing a foreign-and-art-film theater in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He spent the late 1970s in San Francisco where he lived South of Market. There he practiced photography, founded Keyhole Studios, and was much published in *Drummer* magazine. He had five shows and various group shows in the early SoMa galleries of the late 1970s. In 2010, his work was represented at SF Camerawork gallery in "An Autobiography of the San Francisco Bay Area Part 2: The Future Lasts Forever." He returned to the Great Lakes area where he was head of the history department at the Chicago Public Library. He now lives with his partner of over 25 years on Michigan's west shore. He is currently working on a mystery novel.



Jim Stewart and Ken Warner

photo by Mark Hemry at the Fritscher/Hemry home
Sonoma County, September, 2008

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK



End — Clementina Street

2008: photo by Jim Stewart

Folsom Street Blues

“Like Christopher Isherwood, Stewart is a camera.”

Jim Stewart, a survivor of the *Titanic* 1970s, has written a wonderful memoir revealing how South of Market became hip SoMa in San Francisco. Leading a lusty life surfing the first wave of gay liberation up to HIV, he is an uninhibited writer spilling personal tales of sex, art, and friendship during that first decade of Gay Liberation after Stonewall. As carpenter, he designed and constructed the sexy interiors of Folsom Street leather bars as well as of Fey-Way Studio, the first gay art gallery in San Francisco, where as photographer he exhibited his work on the walls he built.

A pioneer settler in SoMa, he was fast friends with poet-singer Camille O’Grady, the leading lady of Folsom Street leather; with Oscar-Streaker Robert Opel who was murdered in his own Fey-Way gallery; with author Jack Fritscher and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe; with painter Chuck Arnett and porn mogul David Hurles; and with many other talents creating gay culture in San Francisco’s influential *Drummer* Salon. As early as 1977, *Drummer* magazine published Stewart’s leather photography. *Folsom Street Blues* continues his gift for words and images with manic, funny, and heartfelt profiles of real people who lived as if 1970s San Francisco were 1930s Berlin.

Like Christopher Isherwood, Stewart is a camera. *Folsom Street Blues* is a picture-perfect portrait of the author as a young man among men experimenting with new identities in the sexual underground during the Titanic 1970s before the speeding first-class party, cruising on, crashed into the iceberg of HIV.

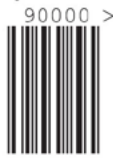
Veterans of the 1970s party will applaud Stewart’s humorous nostalgia. Younger readers may enjoy a safe peek into how 20th-century leatherfolk, dancing on tables and swinging from the chandeliers, helped found and form 21st-century diversity.

Keep this book bedside with Edmund White’s *My Lives*, Felice Picano’s *Like People in History*, Jack Fritscher’s *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*, Justin Spring’s *Secret Historian*, Patti Smith’s *Just Kids*, and Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City*.



PALM DRIVE PUBLISHING®
San Francisco
www.PalmDrivePublishing.com

ISBN 978-1-890834-03-6



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