

Traveling Without A Passport

San Francisco, March 1976

It was later in the morning than I originally had in mind before I got around to calling Claire. Wasting time was not a concern. I was good at it, certainly better than most.

Holding the base of my what you might call avocado telephone like a container in one hand, handset in the other, I dragged the extra-long cord behind me as I paced in front of the bay win-

dows. The morning fog had broken up, melting into billowy chunks and creating an illusion of multiple directions while evaporating, one from another, until it was now a brilliant, sunny day. The rich green entanglement of trees out front deepened against a bottomless blue and the disappearing patches of pure white. The sun, still at the winter slant of the northern hemisphere, splashed everything decisively.

I'd rented my second floor studio on Ashbury Street, three blocks up the hill from Haight, and lugged the last of my stuff to the third floor on the first day in March. The neighborhood was quiet and middle class and, for all I could tell, always had been. Impressions created by the mass media are often exploded when you actually make the scene. Only occasional cars drove up the hill. A few people passed on the sidewalks; none congregated. If I leaned forward over the shelf under the windows and craned my neck, I could see Sutro Tower's red lights blinking all night, eerie and distant like indifferent spacecraft. Sometimes, the lowest tier barely penetrated the fog. There was always uncertainty about what morning would bring in San Francisco.

On the day I drove my rental car to the building owner's office in Pacific Heights, Sam stayed in the passenger seat long enough to make sure I turned my wheels in the direction of the curb and pulled up the emergency handbrake once I'd backed into a parking spot. He'd accepted responsibility for being sure I understood the exceptional nature of parking in hilly San Francisco before letting me go inside to sign the lease and pay my first and last deposit.

He and Mom had always considered me amusingly reckless, but as my stepfather of sorts, he might've felt obligated anyway. He was a wise, naturally amused guy who'd had few opportunities over the years to perform any of the rituals with me.

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That happened late in the afternoon on a chilly day when the setting sun streaming between the trees and colorful Victorians was no longer having much influence. Beyond rooftops to the north and below cliffs rising up over the steely blue waves on the far side of the Golden Gate, the Japanese current pushed a bank of fog under, over and through the orange bridge. It made me think of what I imagined the greatest of the glaciers must have been like, slowly, persistently and gigantically chewing up land. The brown, steep-sloping Marin highlands were already lost in it.

“If your brakes loose their grip on the hill,” Sam explained, “you’ll only roll into the curb, not out into traffic where you’d eventually hit something. Or somebody.”

“Hit something like what?”

“Like that truck over there.”

“It’s a rental,” I shrugged, looking sideways at Mom’s third husband who often seemed pre-entertained, confidently anticipating my next quip.

Sam grinned.

“It’s cold,” I added as he pulled his lanky frame out of the car and came around to the sidewalk. “Jesus! I heard it never really warms up here. I can believe it.”

“San Francisco,” he shrugged, sharing a general concession.

The last time I’d had to deal with radical hills like this was on a delayed honeymoon trip with Maggie through the Adirondacks. After exiting the State Thruway and cutting north after Syracuse, we drove all afternoon through late summer forests where shining lakes were tucked between villages. Each little town that had sprung up in a notch challenged me to pop my clutch without stalling or rolling backward into whatever car, truck or motorcycle waited behind me. There was also the hazard of late arriving pedestrians hurrying into

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crosswalks to beat a light. The repetitive stress and self-doubt exhausted me. I was eager to set my feet down in the gravel parking lot as soon as my very pregnant wife and I found a place to eat. For a change, Maggie hadn't offered to take the wheel. She was, briefly, practicing a patient demeanor within our partnership and was sparing with advice. Later, during a visit to Pittsburgh to introduce our baby, my brother-in-law taught me the trick of simultaneously releasing the handbrake while easing off the clutch, going ahead with more control. He also showed me some clever foot-play. I picked all that up in a single Sunday afternoon but had no such success in gaining competence with Maggie. Consequently, mishaps ensued.

The hippie thing was over by the time I came to live in The Haight, and most of the residue had been swept away, leaving the district with a relaxed, numb feel soon to be soothed by boutiques intended to make visiting more agreeable for tourists surveying the remains of the wild times. On Haight Street, not far from Stanyan, a free clinic still served the special ills of the community. At the entrance to Golden Gate Park, hairy human relics loitered as if not yet able to dispatch disbelief, unrelieved hippies stuck and bloated with murky time. When I went out, I walked invisibly by, and they relaxed in private, personal hazes on the grass. The park itself, its huge, ancient trees sagging over the Panhandle entrance, looked extreme as cars edged by on characterless Stanyan. I'd persuaded myself to regularly go out into the green fields, towering trees and still pools that separated neighborhoods all the way out to the Pacific. Awash in general reluctance, I walked to give the open air a chance to rinse the uncertainty in my head. Maybe I'd stumble into a direction, a purpose, a way back in. Marcie racked my brain. I didn't understand the collapse of my affair with her and trying had put me in a tailspin. There was something I was missing, and it kept everything else out

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of kilter. I imagined fresh air might help along with some public exposure. As often as not, the couples moving slowly by the ponds and talking while idling in the fields were likely to make me feel distressed and isolated. Isolated was way worse than lonely. Isolated had implications I preferred not to think about.

I'd lost my touch with women while I was still living in Buffalo, even though it returned briefly with Marcie. One day, rather over a sorry series of days, it just occurred to me that it was gone. I didn't know where it went, but it was gone enough that I'd fallen back in with my wife, Maggie, after a while—unofficially, of course. Even liberated women liked to see a man with something more impressive than a declaration of freedom to show for himself, and I was in full failure mode. Every trapping was coming down. I didn't know where it would end. Maybe I didn't look so good after all the materials I'd discarded. Maggie still seemed to like me okay, after all. She had history to improve her perspective. She'd known me to have gotten into some unappealing situations, but she'd also seen my successes and knew I had resilience. Still, she'd never seen me in a hole as deep as this one.

"The situation we were in," Marcie had tried to explain, waving her long fingers in front of her face as if clearing cobwebs, "wasn't real."

"So, what was it? Like, a cartoon? It sure as hell felt real to me," I objected.

"It wasn't," she insisted with conviction. "We couldn't be like that in normal circumstances, in everyday life."

Marcie was nervous, believing what she said and disbelieving it at the same time. I didn't let her off the hook. Nothing that took place could ever be re-categorized as "not real." We both knew that, even with our gap in recognition.

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“Maybe you’re just saying what other people want you to say. We can have it all back. I don’t care what anybody says. It wasn’t any magic. All we have to do is make a decision for it. You’ve got to admit, it was better than this.”

“Fuck,” she sighed and looked away.

She was beautiful, even in refusal. Her black hair shined in layers. Her soft, but well-defined features were subtly animated, never quite fixed.

“That is, if you really want it back,” I added. “Maybe you’d rather live in a place where it’s all safe and routine, but I thought that was something you wanted to get away from and start over. That’s what we both said on the bus.”

“I don’t know,” she countered in a way that suggested more evasion than doubt.

Of course, I knew I should give up. Loving her hadn’t lowered my IQ that much. It had only increased my reluctance.

I walked all around Golden Gate, wondering why I was continuing to wrestle with the inevitable. I didn’t need the supplemental misery. Let her go ride off into her own fucked up sunset, I thought momentarily. It was never mutually intense anymore. The sex was relatively chilly. She was exasperating. She wasn’t going to circle back, not to me and, if she did, sure as hell not for long. And, I’d discovered that I had no powers of persuasion with her, nothing that jostled her position. While I continued the radical process of becoming unglued, I also enjoyed the perilous position of wanting her more than she wanted me.

“Boo, forever,” as Richard Brautigan once wrote.

Trying to score some connections, I’d marched in the Second Annual Haight-Ashbury People’s Parade, congregating with a hundred or so others, mostly younger, “under the golden arches,” at the

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intersection with Stanyan, as directed by a flyer I saw on the street. The whole scraggily band of us, fifty or so cracking jokes and chanting whenever someone initiated a sequence, followed the organizers passed the Grateful Dead's old place near Waller and Janis's on Page, but I never felt hooked in. Small groups were playing volleyball at nets temporarily set up in the Panhandle, reminding me of all those perfectly wasted days with my summer friends in Delaware Park. There was an inexplicable gap that couldn't be bridged—not that I ever expected it, but alone in this place, I kept noticing.

Living in Haight-Ashbury ten years too late seemed at times like admiring the red surface of Mars after my spaceship had already whipped by, accepting that I'd missed the target and was now hurtling on to who knows where.

At the moment, however, I was standing near my bay windows, my seldom used telephone in hand, and staring across the Panhandle, able on this dreamily clear morning to catch a glimpse of one of the bridge's orange uprights between the trees. I still wondered, in the style of Poe with just a hint of Jimmy Clanton, if it was all just a dream and did my circumstances prove I'd done a shitty job of it or was I simply in a lull?

I was pretty much the only person recently to take in the view from here. Under a freshly washed sky, the green of the Panhandle swelled. An orange pillar from the bridge poked through and, beyond it, awash with light, rested the brown-tinted highlands around Tamalpais. Some legitimate hippie, a decade ago, must've seen the same things and imagined a new world in the birthing, fools that we all were. Say what you will about coherence and history, my now disbanded team had consisted largely of optimists.

When evenings fell—and they fell hard that winter in San Francisco—the surging fog raced in over the leafy top of the Panhan-

dle, then sunk to consume it, filling the still active city with its uniquely gray soup. In my apartment, I thought I could see the chilly clouds seeping in through the walls and windows, but that might only have been my imagination dressing up the cold.

One night not long after I'd rented the place, Jack had climbed the winding front steps with me. We'd been cruising the city all evening, looking for clues about Marcie. After that, she'd been the only person to visit. The look on her face when she saw the few pieces of furniture I'd been loaned straining to make my space less barren was classic. To me, my apartment appeared suspended in that familiar moment of partial vacancy when the movers pause for a break before carrying in the rest of the stuff. I had myself convinced that the rest of *my* stuff was symbolically halfway up the stairs, but I could only guess at how impoverished the place must've looked to her.

"It's what I've got," I told her, "so far."

Marcie's face was softly angular, achingly beautiful, her frown well-disguised in it.

There was the daybed extracted from a set Mom no longer needed that I'd been pushed against a wall near the door. This was where I hoped to get Marcie to park her bare ass soon. I'd positioned my table and chairs near the windows, my kitchen being too small for anything but appliances. Whenever I got stuck while writing, which was mainly what I used the table for, I looked out at the city and coaxed the view to untangle me. On the shelf in front of the windows, my telephone and clock radio were next to each other along with organized stacks of index cards with gags typed on them and lined paper covered with sloppy handwriting.

"If I knew..." Marcie said, then paused permanently.

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Later, I realized how much more was loaded into that phrase than I knew at the time. It may even have marked the point, although we had some rambunctious sex on the daybed a few minutes later, where things between us took a wrong turn irretrievably. Her broken off sentence had additional content. It was a breach of faith between us.

“It’s okay. It’ll do for me,” I assured her. “All I do is write, read and sleep here anyway. I’m not throwing any parties.”

I was so resolute and determined, I imagined I could carry it.

My studio must’ve seemed discouragingly interim to her. If so and if I had any inclinations toward building or reinforcing an impression, showing her this was a huge strategic blunder. Most women needed at least a semblance of stability, a symbolic anchor or two, and it must’ve looked like I could pack up and be gone at the flip of a switch, which was close to what eventually happened.

The night I brought Jack up to see the place after we’d wasted an evening burning the gas in Mom’s tank, the studio was still empty. Not a single chair had been carried in, and our voices echoed off the bare surfaces.

We were both beat from riding up and down the dramatic hills at the crazy behest of Jack’s intuition while the residual effects of a couple of reefers dwindled. Now, his longish blond hair tousled and his eyes bloodshot, Jack said he was also drained psychically. We’d started out determined to find Marcie and ended up with an impromptu lecture about *feng shui* and his theories on how to organize the few things I’d soon have to sit on.

“Always sleep East to West,” Jack advised, “and keep a view of the opened door.”

This wasn’t helpful as I had only two doors, one leading to the communal stairway and the other to the toilet.

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“I lock up at night, Jack, and as for the bathroom, I’ve gotten out of the habit of closing it from living alone. Nobody to hide from, you know?”

I liked Jack, but his spiritual guidance hadn’t helped with any Marcie sightings or clues about her disappearance—or, more correctly, her non-reappearance. We’d blown a lot of energy on what now seemed insane speculations. Jack thought she might have been enraptured by a cult, for example, an idea marginally plausible only because San Francisco, a city seasoned with outliers, was the best location for craziness generally.

“I don’t get it,” I told him.

I probably hadn’t recovered enough from our useless search to grasp anything new anyway.

Jack was my increasingly familiar, younger half-brother, emerging in my life as an engaging, if not especially reliable, exotic. He seemed too taken with arcane teachings and tooled up with wisdom from times so ancient they preceded the flush toilet.

We were sitting on the shelf by the windows and sharing one last weed before making the long drive back to the East Bay. Fog hovered over the Panhandle, making the lights beneath eerie as if indicators of a city submerged in secrets. A woman in a long coat, maybe a raincoat, walked briskly up the hill, an umbrella at her side, even though there hadn’t been a prediction of rain.

To the day I hopped a flight out of San Francisco International, I didn’t get what Jack was trying to teach me about feng shui. Had I, I might’ve manipulated my life with it to generate better luck. Scratch that—*other* luck. I no longer believed in any kind of luck that had to be tagged with judgments as good or bad.