

The Shapeshifter

I was sitting in the Ambush one afternoon enjoying the crowd. It had been running hot and was still ramping up for Saturday night. My legs spread, my engineer boots propped on the boot rail of the meat rack, I felt hot. I was nursing an Oly, my favorite beer, when I felt my foot being moved. A dark-haired man with a short full beard and mustache was licking my left boot. He was on his knees directly in front of me. He looked up at me with big brown eyes, the whites showing under his dark irises.

“May I clean your boots, sir?”

“Clean ‘em up good,” I ordered.

Great pickup line! He looked familiar. I thought I had seen him gathering empty beer bottles around the bar and stocking cold ones on ice for the bartenders. Bottle boys, they were called. His dark complexion brought to mind the exotic Mediterranean dives in Marseilles or Tangiers. His accent was French. I thought of a younger, thinner, more handsome Peter Lorre, lurking not around Rick’s Place, but the Ambush.

Then he was gone. So much for my boots. I saw him at the bar, talking to Larry Beach, the bartender. Larry looked in my direction. I’d last seen Larry in his Langton Street apartment on the floor with his legs over my shoulders. He had prepared an excellent meal of fresh clams steamed in white wine for the two of us. Larry scowled a dirty look, retrieved something from under the bar, and handed it to my would-be bootblack. The bottle boy came back.

“Bear Grease, sir?” He held out a round tin of non-polish boot dressing for oiled leather. His sinewy hands had already started massaging my foot through the boot. They seemed almost double jointed in their dexterity.

“If you do it right.” It’d been awhile since my boots had been properly dressed. The last time I had done it myself.

His hands worked on my boots, massaging my feet through the leather. Finished, he cleaned his hands on a red bandana pulled from his right hip pocket. Those talented hands slowly started up my legs while gently rubbing the top of his head in my crotch. I pulled out a couple of dollars and handed them to my new bootblack.

“Get us a couple of beers,” I said.

He was back in a minute with a couple of Olympia longnecks. I nodded to the space on the meat rack next to me. As he hoisted his tight ass up onto the well-worn wood, I noticed his keys hung from the right side of his Levi’s. Mine hung from the left. I had a feeling we were headed for a hot night in The Other Room. We finished our beers and went back to my place on Clementina Alley. I was right. Luc instinctively knew what The Other Room was for.

LUC WAS a moveable feast. Like truffles, a musky scent of mystery hung about him. One day, not too long after we met, he wanted to go to a little hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese restaurant called Cordon Bleu, on California Street. We got in the pickup and headed north.

“I was in Vietnam, once,” Luc said, as we watched well-groomed gents window shop on Polk Street. We stopped for a light. A small framed antique oil painting displayed in an art gallery window caught my eye. It depicted a pair of crossed hands bound with a leather thong. Circling the hands was half a halo. The whole looked part of a much larger work that suggested St. Sebastian.

“Hot,” I said as I looked at Luc. He too had spotted the painting. He crossed his hands above his head and rolled his eyes heavenward in homage to the beautiful soldier-saint shot full of arrows. The luminescence of the skin on Luc’s delicately strong hands did indeed look like they might belong to a third-century martyr. My Nikon waited. The light turned green.

“So how did you end up in Vietnam?” I knew the French had been routed from Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Luc would have been about eight at the time.

“When I was 16 my father was killed in an auto accident. My mother emancipated me. I dropped out of school in Switzerland and decided to travel. I went to Thailand, but ended up on a jungle boat tour that strayed into Vietnam. We were shot at but I learned to love the food.”

I did some fast mental calculation. That would have been a couple of years before the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, and the start of the American buildup of the war. Maybe it was possible. I spotted a parking slot on California and maneuvered the truck into the tight space. We got out and headed back to the Cordon Bleu.

It really was a hole-in-the-wall. It was long and narrow, with the door on the far left, and a large window on the right that allowed you to see the entire interior from the sidewalk. Inside was a long counter, with stools mounted on the floor, along one side. It seemed a smaller, scruffier version of Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*. It was nearly noon. The sun was out. Behind the counter, flames leaped up as chicken fat dripped on the fire below the grill. It was a sideshow for the diners.

We spotted two stools with a man sitting between them. He saw our dilemma, slid his plate and water glass to the left, and graciously gestured toward the two stools now together. We smiled and sat down. A tiny gray-haired woman behind the counter asked us something in a *lingua franca* I did not know. It seemed a mixture of Vietnamese, French, and maybe English. Luc smiled, nodded his head, and replied in kind. He turned to me.

“Do you want the five-spice chicken? It’s really good and a good price. It’s always their special.”

I did.

Luc replied to the woman behind the counter. She grabbed two oval platters from a stack under the counter and scooped what looked like dirty rice onto each. Still holding both platters in one hand, she turned to the grill behind her and, using a pair of tongs, lifted two grilled half chickens off the back of the grill and placed one on top of each of the rice platters. The chickens were small, a bantam breed, but the breasts were large. A dozen or so grilled chicken halves remained on the back of the grill. On the front of the grill, soft white chicken skin puckered as it stretched

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over the cooking birds. It slowly began to blister and shrink and then hissed when the chicken halves were turned over by a tiny aged man.

The woman turned back to the counter, set the platters in front of us, and, as if by magic, produced a small wicker basket with sourdough baguettes which she set in front of us. This all in less than a minute. She asked Luc something.

"*The*," he replied and then turned to me. "Do you want tea?"
"Yes."

The woman understood my *yes* and set a small steaming vitreous-china pot and two small handleless cups in front of us. The smell of oolong tea mingled with the rich five-spice aroma that infused the tiny space.

The chicken was delish. The sweet star-anise reigned. Cinamon, cloves, and lemony ginger supported the licoriceness of the anise in an exotic fusion. The place, the food, and our hostess, conversing in pidgin French and chattering in Vietnamese, all combined to take us on a trip, while we never left the narrow confines of the hole-in-the-wall.

I was whisked off to some pre-war Saigon side street, seduced, and died a little gourmand death in a city once known as Paris of the East. If fusion be the food of love, eat on. A denouement of beer-battered fried bananas sprinkled with sugar rounded off our repast. The sun was still out as we left the Cordon Bleu.

"Let's take a drive over to Marin County."

"Let's."

I continued west on California to Divisadero, then north to the Marina, where I picked up Highway 101 to cross the Golden Gate Bridge. I glanced down at the old Civil War fort, Fort Point, far below at the south end of the bridge. *Vertigo*, I thought, where Jimmy Stewart once jumped into the bay to rescue Kim Novak from a fake suicide.

Once over the bridge, we headed west, out by the old World War II bunkers on the Marin Headlands. They were the bunkers Jack Fritscher once showed to Robert Mapplethorpe. He shot his leather hood and piss pictures there. I pulled the pickup into an unofficial dust lot, where the adventurous often parked. The fog had come in for the afternoon. Although we were less than a mile

from the Golden Gate Bridge, we could only see the very tops of the two towers.

“Want to go down the path there to the bay?” I said. Like the parking lot, it was unofficial, dusty, and eroded. I knew it was easy going down, harder coming up. You had to be careful where you placed each step and look for scrubby wild bushes to hang on to in case the ground gave way.

“Yes,” Luc said. “I’ve never been down there.”

Luc knew where to find that little place in Chinatown where you ate in the kitchen, or the little bar that survived both the Gold Rush and the earthquake and still drew San Francisco’s lonely men. He knew the best off-Broadway performance art in the City. I knew the wild places, the rambles of bushes in Buena Vista park, the trails at Lands End. Places that had not yet been tamed and controlled by some recreation department or community committee. Places where you could commune with nature *au naturel* while you got it on with your fellow man.

I also knew Ringold Alley, Dore Alley, places for the best impromptu sex after the bars closed at 2:30 a.m. I knew Hallam Alley had a door that led straight into the Barracks baths. Yes, I knew the wild places where you met the wild men of San Francisco in the 1970s, before neighborhood watchers with cell phones reported indecent exposure and lewd acts. You weren’t there if it wasn’t for lewd and lascivious acts.

We slowly made our way down the eroded path in the fog. No mishaps. No one was there on the narrow dirty beach. Despite the cool air from the fog, we stripped and frolicked in the bay. Muffled foghorns played a coastal score as we made the two-backed beast against a gnarled driftwood tree and died a little death. We heard applause. Ever the actor, Luc stood and bowed. I saluted, with a sheepish grin, to applause and whistled cheers. A fishing boat, returning with the catch of the day, had cut its motor and drifted, silently in the fog, close to shore for the entertainment of the three fishermen onboard.

I’m sure Luc and I provided them all with great fisherman’s tales that they traded for free beers and shots wherever they hung out.

In the fall of 1976, President Gerald Ford visited San Francisco. Again. A year earlier, on a trip to California, the unelected-appointed President from Michigan had narrowly missed assassination. Twice. On September 4, 1975, Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme was wrestled to the ground in Sacramento when she tried to take a shot at the President. In San Francisco a couple of weeks later, on September 22nd, when Ford left the St. Francis Hotel by a side door, Sara Jane Moore tried her hand at assassination from four feet away with a .38. Billy Sipple, a gay man still in the closet, deflected Moore’s shot and most likely saved the President’s life. The press outed Sipple.

California was important to Ford. The state’s ex-governor, Ronald Reagan, had tried to steal the GOP nomination from the sitting President. Ford won the Republican Party’s top spot. He returned to San Francisco for a GOP fundraiser. The local politicians held court for the President at a fancy downtown hotel, the Sir Francis Drake. My landlord, Clarence, had two tickets to the affair.

“You’re from Michigan, aren’t you?” Clarence asked me one day.

“Born and bred.”

“Are you a Republican?”

My Michigan family’s ancestors had voted Republican since Lincoln, probably since John Fremont, if truth be known. I had broken over a century-long family tradition by voting for Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964.

“I guess you could say I’m an Independent,” I said. I had actually registered in San Francisco’s City Hall as a Democrat, so I could vote in the primary.

“What do you think of Ford?”

I wasn’t sure I liked where this might be headed. There were those who hated Ford for pardoning Nixon. Some thought if you were from Michigan, like Ford, it was somehow all your fault that Nixon hadn’t ended up in prison. Clarence must have seen my dilemma.

“The reason I asked,” he said, “is that I have two tickets for a Ford fundraiser at the Drake. The President’s going to be there.

Now, I wouldn't give that son of a bitch two bits," Clarence continued, "but I hate to throw away the tickets. You can have them if you want. I'm sure there'll be a big buffet and probably an open bar."

"Sure. It might be interesting."

Clarence handed me a small envelope much like a wedding invitation. I pulled the card out of the envelope and ran my finger over the script. It was engraved.

"I don't have to give them any money, do I?"

"They'll give their pitch. Just say no."

"Thanks."

Luc was delighted when I asked him if he would like to meet President Ford. As an actor he had never played a role where he met an American president.

"Do I bow or anything, like meeting the Queen?"

"Only if you want to. You can curtsy if you like."

Luc did a fake curtsy with his best Peter Lorre smile. We both burst out laughing. We decided we should get dressed up a little, even though the occasion was not formal. My old reliable tweed jacket would stand in again. Instead of the Levi's, however, I found a pair of gray flannels that would lend me a certain young professorial air, as if I were on the faculty at Berkeley, or at least San Francisco State.

Luc arrived. He was dashing in an Edwardian Norfolk suit from a smart boutique on the Right Bank in Paris. At the last minute I grabbed my Nikon. We took a cab to the Drake Hotel. We were fashionably late.

There were no lines out the door of the hotel. Inside, when we inquired, we were directed to a side door off the main lobby. Security was everywhere. We were told to wait in a little hallway while our invitation was checked.

"Where did you get this invitation?"

"A friend gave it to me. Is there a problem?"

"Just a moment, please," said a man in a black suit with a suspicious bulge under his jacket. He started to leave the room when an idea struck me.

"I'm from Grand Rapids, Michigan," I raised my voice a little, "and he's on a mission from France." I nodded towards Luc.

Grand Rapids was Gerald Ford's home town. In a few minutes Black-suit returned.

"What's that?" Black-suit asked, pointing to my camera.

"A Nikon," I said, "I'm a photographer from Grand Rapids, and I want to get some pictures of our hometown hero."

Black-suit nodded and took the invitation. We went on into the ballroom. As soon as we were through the door, I realized what part of the problem had been. We did not look like Republicans. Most of the men and the few women in the room had the look of confidence, of privilege, and of the grooming and tailoring that wealth and power convey on people. They did not look at all like the rural Republicans I had grown up among.

The gathering was not nearly as large as I had expected. We helped ourselves to the buffet laden with jumbo shrimp, imported cheeses and what looked like South American grapes and other sundry finger foods. No Cesar Chavez fruit here. Evidently Alice Waters' "local and seasonal" mantra held no sway here either. There was neither California nor imported wine on the table. There was an open bar with mixed drinks and a bartender who I'm sure expected to be well tipped. He exuded that smart, snappy courtier edge-of-gay that causes Republicans to tip well and gays to snicker.

We made our way across the room looking for the President. He was not here. At last, a rising in the volume of the crowd noise gave a clue he had arrived. People started moving toward one end of the room where Ford had evidently entered. We followed them, leaving our plates on some empty chairs. There he was, bigger than life, the President of the United States, POTUS.

Dodging Republicans and black suits I was able to get off a few pictures of the President. I wasn't really satisfied with any of the shots I got, due to the crowd and the black suits that kept within a close circle of POTUS. Black suits kept watching me, as if they thought my Nikon might be Sara Jane Moore's snub-nosed .38.

I ran out of film. I looked around for Luc. Where was he? Then I turned back to the President and saw Luc shaking hands with him. He let go of Ford's famous big football paw and executed a smart stage bow, exactly like the one he had given the

voyeuristic fishermen who had caught us *in flagrante delicto* on the beach in the fog a week before. Luc had played his role of meeting the President of the United States to perfection and then taken his bow. He didn't curtsy, any way. He spotted me and came over.

"Here," I said. "take the camera. I haven't shaken hands with him yet." I made my way through the crowd and did just that. Somehow it seemed anticlimactic. The true theater had been gaining entrance and Luc's perfect stage bow in front of the President. I had pictures of POTUS. And we both had shaken the hand of the most powerful man on Earth.

We left the Drake Hotel and took a cab to the Ambush. Luc, the Parisian dandy, soon left with a Francophile. They were off to do what? Something French? Perhaps sip Armagnac, smoke hashish, and read Rimbaud while lounging naked on an Aubusson carpet? I stayed, feeling overdressed at the Ambush.

"Hey dad!"

I looked up. Looking down was a youth, no more than 21 or 22. He had let his dark hair and beard grow, untrimmed. He looked a hippie leftover from The Haight a decade ago.

"Want to buy a starving grad student a beer?"

"Get us two," I said. I handed him two singles. "Tip the bartender," I said. "He's a friend of mine."

He returned with a couple of beers.

"So what are you doing your grad work in?" I said as he squeezed his young butt onto the meat rack next to me.

"Poli sci, at San Francisco State."

"Poli sci. You might be interested in this hand," I said.

"You're right there, dad." He grabbed my right hand. He didn't shake it but rather wrapped his fingers around it as if measuring its girth. I made a fist with my fingers pointing out. He started stroking it.

"Do you know what this hand did just an hour ago?" I said.

"Tell me about it," he said. I could see by the growing bulge in his Levi's he was interested.

"This hand shook the hand of POTUS," I said.

"Who's POTUS?"

"President of the United States," I said.

"Not Gerry Ford! Not the man who can't chew gum and

walk at the same time? The most powerful man on Earth? Not the POTUS who fathered those hot sons who go camping nude?"

"The very same." President Ford had been caught on camera stumbling down the steps from Air Force One. Despite the fact he had been captain of the University of Michigan football team in his youth, and still kept his athlete's body buff, he had earned the reputation of clumsy. The press had also caught the First Sons on a camping trip, where one appeared to be naked, in the bushes.

"Have you washed your hands since you shook his?"

"No." I realized where this was going. The young hippie continued to caress my right hand with his while he reached over for my left hand and brought it down to his now very evident hard-on.

"We'll go to my place," I said. "It's only a couple of blocks away."

It didn't take us long to get to The Other Room. I told him to strip. I stepped out of the room and removed the Harris Tweed jacket. I replaced it with a dark blue pinstripe vest. I kept on the gray flannels, oxford shirt and black knit tie. As I came back into the room I saw my young hippie naked, on the floor. I lifted his head up by his long hair.

He watched as I slowly rolled up my right sleeve to my bicep. "There are those," I said, "who believe that great power can be transferred from male to male just by body contact." I paused while I formed an elongated fist with my right hand and slowly stroked it with my left. "You know when I shook hands with POTUS I absorbed power from him. Right through this hand," I said, as I held up my right fist.

"Would you like some of his power too?" I said, as I arched my eyebrows and stared into his dark eyes. Young Hippie nodded his head affirmatively. It sent ripples cascading down his long dark hair. I gently pushed him back onto the mattress on the floor and knelt between his legs. He placed them on my shoulders. I spit in my right hand and gently began to massage his hairless pink male-bud. We started our own inaugural ball and the transfer of power from man to man.

By beating a drum roll with my left fist on my right arm, the vibrations carried the power of POTUS from one man into

the very core of another. Sometimes men are totally unaware of the power they pass on through just two degrees of separation. Perhaps that's why ancient chiefs sometimes buried their excrement in secret holy places to prevent their enemies from stealing their power.

Christmas was coming. It was my second Christmas in San Francisco. The previous Christmas, from a house in Marin County that overlooked the Pacific, I had watched whales migrate south. A black leather cat-o'-nine-tails played over my bare butt and back. After moving to San Francisco, I'd learned of endorphins and the pleasures of pain. It wasn't unlike the runner's high I had experienced while jogging. Receiving pain, I learned how to give it. Because it was Christmas I got to keep the cat-o'-nine-tails. I also got to keep the grand gift of knowledge it brought.

This year, Christmas would be more traditional. I already had my wrapping paper and name tags. The paper I found in the printer's dumpster on Clementina Alley. It was a roll of rejects: large sheets of sepia-tone photos of run-down motels, mom-and-pop diners and other roadside attractions in Arizona along a stretch of what was once the Father Road, Route 66. Half were printed upside down to the others, so when folded in a folio, they all turned out right. They made great giftwrapping paper.

The nametags came from the 1941 Alameda County Fair. I bought a box of blue ribbons for a buck at the flea market. Everyone's a winner this year, I thought. It was 1976.

A friend of mine from Michigan had moved to San Francisco. Joelle, like me, had been in a straight, child-free marriage. She divorced and moved to San Francisco, to see what else life had to offer.

She was single. It was her first Christmas in the City. While I did not plan to introduce her to the pleasures of pain, or even watch migrating whales with her, we did want to do something special; something neither of us had done before. Joelle, Luc and I would go to Grace Cathedral for Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

Grace Episcopal Cathedral sits atop Nob Hill in its neo-*Notre*

Dame de Paris splendor. Although it took over half of the 20th century to build, it exudes the mystique of what Luc called the “old stones” of Europe. The services there are noted for their inclusion of universal extra-Christian beliefs.

Rampant rumor had it, a secret Christian cannibal cult inhabited the nether regions, as well as the soaring vaulted rafters of Grace Cathedral, in a sort of *Hunchback-of-Notre-Dame* meets *Phantom-of-the-Opera* fantasy. The Cathedral boasted, in the centuries-old Anglican tradition, one of the finest men’s and boys’ choirs this side of the Atlantic.

In short, it was perfect for a special Christmas Eve in San Francisco. Midnight Mass at Grace Cathedral would be the best show in town.

Christmas Eve Mass started at 11 p.m. The three of us took a cab from Clementina Alley. Luc and I wore the outfits we had worn to President Ford’s fundraiser: Parisian dandy and elbow-patch professor. Joelle wore a slightly dyke-y navy linen suit with white jabot and sensible librarian shoes. Her short blond hair and whisper of makeup said she’d been around and could go down. Elegantly.

We arrived at the cathedral on California Street a little after 10 o’clock. The main entrance was closed. Off to the side, a not-so-long-line was filing through a small door. We followed the line and soon were inside. The nave was packed. We were able to squeeze in on the end of a pew by a side aisle. As our eyes adjusted to the dim interior that seemed to be lit solely by candlelight, we started focusing on who was there.

People-watching is a great pastime anywhere, but in San Francisco it is a fine art. There were scores of handsome young men dressed in their Sunday best. Most came in pairs, accompanied by a well-groomed matronly woman. Mothers, I thought. Mothers here to visit their gay sons for Christmas. Were they the ghosts of musical comedies past?

Joelle leaned over and whispered in my ear. “I hope nobody thinks I’m your mother!”

Luc, sitting on her other side said, in a very French-accented stage whisper, “Mama, are you enjoying San Francisco?”

I stifled a laugh as a matronly woman in front of us turned

and glared.

The organ music shifted as regal strains of “O Come All Ye Faithful” sounded throughout the cavernous sanctuary. Male voices in holy harmony filled the cathedral with Latin verse, as the Grace Cathedral Choir of Men and Boys slowly made its way past us on the side aisle, before they turned into the central aisle to approach the altar and the choir stalls beyond. As they passed, I inhaled deeply. The slight smell of seminal musk filled my nostrils. Their voices rang out in harmony.

*Adeste fideles
laeti triumphantes;
Venite, venite in Bethlehem.*

In its ecumenical way, the Episcopalian cathedral must have considered Latin still acceptable for Christmas mass. I joined them under my breath for the chorus.

*Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus,
Dominum.*

That was about all I could remember from high school Latin. Incense (once thought to purify the air and drive away the evil spirits from the unwashed medieval masses who packed the ancient basilicas on high holy days) followed the clean-sweat smell of the all-male choir.

It mingled with the smoke and beeswax smell of holy tapers, whose light glinted off the rich gold and silver embroidered stoles and white lace surplices, as all proceeded through the ancient rituals proclaiming the glories of an immaculate birth. It was indeed the best show in town.

When it ended, we took a cab back to Clementina Alley. We had the driver let us out at the corner. Luc headed down Clementina to the flat. I needed cigarettes from the Lebanese mom-and-pop store on the corner. Joelle came with me to the store. Mom and pop had two incredibly handsome eastern Mediterranean sons.

Even though it was well past midnight on Christmas Eve, the store was still open. It would probably stay open until 2 a.m. when liquor sales were cut off by law.

The younger son was behind the counter, in front of the cigarettes and liquor. I had flirted with him several times and when he was alone he would flirt back.

"Merry Christmas, Amiel," I said. They were Lebanese Christians. "Two packs of Marlboros, please." I smiled at him and he smiled back fetchingly.

"Jim," Joelle said, "Let's get a bottle of Courvoisier. It's Christmas Eve."

"And a pint of Courvoisier cognac," I added, pointing to it on the shelf behind the counter.

Amiel looked at Joelle, then back at me, then smiled at Joelle.

"Are you sure a pint will be enough?" he said, with a devilish smirk.

"It's Christmas," I said. "Give me a full bottle. There are three of us."

"Three!" Amiel laughed. "You naughty man!" He reached behind him for a full bottle of Courvoisier. "Merry Christmas."

Joelle burst out laughing as we left the store and headed for Clementina Alley.

LUC was an actor. He had studied acting at a private school in Switzerland. He played many roles in his travels, including that of a young lover for a Bedouin chieftain, during a caravan trip across North Africa.

When he settled in London for awhile, when it was the swinging capital of the western world, he formally studied acting again. After he moved to San Francisco he had trouble finding parts. He was once asked if he would like to join Our Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of "drag nuns," just to keep his hand in some sort of acting. He declined.

Luc did keep abreast of off-Broadway and experimental theater productions in the Bay Area. He auditioned for anything he thought he had a chance at. As a result, we ended up attending a lot of small theater productions.

Long before Derek Jarman's film, we saw Marlowe's *Edward II* in what seemed a leatherman's dungeon. There were benches for about 30 people. We all sat packed and sweaty with anticipation

as the play unfolded from a stage set of the ass-end of a semi-trailer parked on a foggy loading dock. Welded chain curtains, like those found in such rigs, divided the space for various scenes.

After this Teamsters' production, we returned to the flat on Clementina to reenact the roles of Edward and Piers Gaveston. Off-off-Broadway stage and The Other Room melded into our own personal performance space.

Another play, *Wolf Lodge*, I believe, perhaps in honor of Jack London, took place in an isolated B&B lodge under the redwoods of Sonoma County. Once the guests all retired and the embers burned low, the "wolves" came out to howl, dance, and play with pulley, hoist, and leather sling. Luc and I also followed this production with an encore in The Other Room on Clementina Alley.

One day, when I was in the darkroom, printing sets of photos of my Keyhole Studio models to send to sexually starving lonely men in the hinterlands, I heard Luc come up the stairs and into the flat.

"I got the part," he hollered through the door.

"Which one?"

"Count Orlov!"

"I'll be right out." I finished and came out of the bathroom I had set up as a darkroom.

"There's only one thing," Luc added as we headed for the kitchen in the back of the flat for coffee and cigarettes. "They want me to shave my head."

"Great," I said. "You'll look hot with a shaved head!"

"I don't know..."

"I'll tell you something about a shaved head, Luc. When I had my head shaved I instantly became so-hot-got-to-have-you for a whole gang of guys that hadn't even looked at me before."

"Well..."

"Of course there were those who acted like they didn't know me after my head was shaved."

"Maybe they didn't. That's what I'm afraid of."

"Luc, I've never known you to be afraid of anything in your life. You're going to be as hot as a billiard ball up Sal Mineo's ass."

"Will you shave it for me?"

"Damn right I'll shave you. We're going to do it in the

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playroom as a three-way. I'm going to take pictures. Who's the hottest man you can think of to be on third?"

"Malcolm," Luc said, without a moment's hesitation.

"Hot damn! Malcolm is perfect."

I had done some carpentry and plumbing work for Malcolm at his house in Bernal Heights. He was about 6-3 and had a natural-muscle body. I saw a picture of him once when he had been on the university rowing team at Stanford. It was one of those sports group pictures. All the crew members were in singlets or shirtless, with their arms around each other, thrusting their baskets in tight shorts toward the camera lens. Malcolm was a standout to say the least. With his dark complexion and short-clipped curly hair, he might have been mistaken for Harry Belafonte's younger brother. Hot.

When I worked for Malcolm, we had always hinted at a scenario. He would come home from the office early one day. I, the carpenter, would be caught in a compromising position. It had never happened. Shaving Luc's head while in a three-way with Malcolm in The Other Room was my idea of perfect personal performance theater, where the performers and audience were one.

"I'll call Malcolm."

It was a perfect performance. To peel Luc's scalp, I used a pair of barber scissors and a World War I army issue safety razor in a khaki kit I found at the Alameda flea market.

The coup de grâce was performed by my great-grandfather's Victorian straight razor. It was sharpened with a leather strop that performed many additional duties that night, and provided staccato sound effects that punctuated the rhythm of the fuck-tape. I was right. Luc looked hot with a shaved head. Not a nick on it. The best photo of the night was one I shot of Luc, very tentatively touching his shaved head for the first time, as if discovering a new self he had never known before.

When John Eli and I had our heads shaved at the Slot bathhouse in 1976, we left the door open. All could see and be turned on by what they saw. Jack Fritscher directed, for those who wanted to participate. In the parlance of the day it was "A Happening." I took photos of the Slot shaving that were published in *Drummer* magazine, Issue 16, 1977.

Luc's head shaving, in the privacy of The Other Room on Clementina, a year later, was a personal piece to embrace the "joy of now." When I shaved David Wyckoff's head on top of a white metal hospital bed, with piss collected in an army canteen in the Leatherneck Bar, in 1978, while Greg Coats shot Caravaggio tableaus in color, it was "performance art."

By 1981, when the Drummer bar, Gold Coast West, opened a barber shop for body and head shaves, done to the soundtrack of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, and videocast live to screens in the main bar room, such shavings had crossed over into the mainstream of leather life South of Market, as it was nudged into what would become SoMa. It all was captured on film.

Luc played his role of Count Orlov well. With his shaved head, he looked and acted the Russian count, ousted by the Bolsheviks, and exiled to British bourgeois drawing rooms between the wars.

It was a vapid play, produced on a small rehearsal stage at the Palace of Fine Arts between the Marina and the Presidio. It got Luc back on stage. I took pictures. Luc kept looking for roles that fit his dark fetching looks and universal European accent. He never found them. We did discover a lot of interesting theater along the way, however.

Fort Mason, built during the Civil War near the Marina, was the debarkation point for thousand of servicemen bound for the Pacific Theater during the Second World War. By the 1970s it had been taken over by the National Park Service, as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. It was converted into an arts center with a view of Alcatraz and the Golden Gate Bridge.

The Magic Theatre of Berkeley was one of the first nonprofit groups to move into Fort Mason. Its production of Sam Shepard's *Inacoma* was a must-see for Luc. *Inacoma* was based loosely on the real-life case of Karen Ann Quinlan, a brain-dead woman whose parents went to court to have her life support system turned off. Shepard's play evolved as a joint production of actors and jazz musicians. The musicians would stand behind the actors who

could not act until the musicians would play, and conversely, at times the musicians could not play until the actors would act. Theatergoers left humming the closing song, "Breathing Forever." I left the theater convinced Shepard's work was similar to the personal performance pieces I had begot in The Other Room on Clementina Alley.

I had asked Max Morales to make a tape for me, from his vast and varied music collection. I called it "fuck-tape." I wanted it to build from foreplay to climax within an hour, and then automatically replay at the same building pace. This way I could keep track of the time for those guests in The Other Room who tipped by the hour.

I did not want the popular disco tunes of the day. The more esoteric and exotic and erotic the music, the better. Max, who had been making tapes for clubs and happenings for some time, knew exactly what I wanted. His tapes were superb. I could improvise the trip in The Other Room according to the music and the people involved.

It was what Sam Shepard was doing with *Inacoma*. Max, who had gone to the Fort Mason production with us, agreed with my comparison. The big difference being our productions were staged privately, South of Market, for a more select group.

Shortly before Luc moved to New York, we decided one night to visit a little gay cabaret on Polk near Bush Street. It was a hole in the wall, with a dozen tiny tables at the most. The tables were just big enough to hold drinks for four people. The show had received good reviews in the gay rags. The performers had live music. They were live drag. No lip-synch. And, as in *Cabaret*, "every one of them a virgin!"

Even though there was no cover, no minimum, the place was nearly empty when we arrived in our full black leathers just before 11 p.m. We got a table next to the slightly raised stage. We ordered our drinks. We were both good at nursing a drink.

The first act was almost finished when there seemed to be a flurry of activity behind us by the door. Suddenly the owner was at our table.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “a special guest and his party have just arrived.” I turned to look near the door, but it was too dark. Four figures loomed just outside the aureole of light from the stage.

“If you gentlemen would be willing to move to the table right over there,” he nodded to another small table, further back from the stage but still in a good location, “your drinks will be on the house for the night.”

Drinks on the house for the night? I looked at Luc. He had already stood up and was following the waiter carrying our drinks to the other table. Four men in suits were seated at the tiny table we had just left. My eyes adjusted to the darkness away from the stage while its light illuminated the faces of the “special guests.”

I nudged Luc. “See anybody who looks familiar?” I said.

Luc turned around. “Is that the mayor?” he said.

“In the flesh.” We had just given up our table in a hole-in-the-wall gay night club to Mayor George Moscone and three of his pals/bodyguards.

It was an open secret that the mayor and his pals often prowled the seedy side of the City, looking for secrets of the senses. How could anyone govern a city so full of secrets?

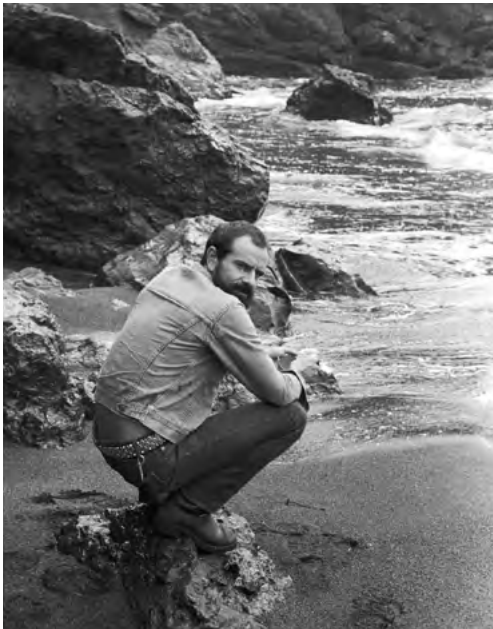
There was no nursing of drinks that night.

When we got back to Clementina Alley, Luc had a gift waiting for me. I carefully removed the plain brown wrapper. There was the antique painting of the bound hands and halo of St. Sebastian we’d seen in the gallery on Polk Street that day we went to the Cordon Bleu for Vietnamese five-spice chicken.



Bound Feet and Bound Hands

1978: model Luc Alexandre, photos by Jim Stewart
shot at the Geysers, Sonoma County, California



Luc at the Pacific Ocean

1978: model Luc Alexandre, photo by Jim Stewart
shot near Jenner by the sea at the Russian River

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