

The Naked Wine Thief

The Chalk Police would arrive on Clementina Street most weekday mornings between 9 and 11. The police scooter would slowly drive the wrong way down the one-way street. Using a long rod with chalk on the end, a mark was made on the bottom of a tire. In an hour unmoved vehicles were ticketed.

Retail shops in the 700 block of Clementina might have explained the “One Hour Parking: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.” signs. There were none. The street was one of small industries where shop owners or workers needed to park all day. It was home to those who could not afford the tony neighborhoods in other sections of San Francisco.

Clementina Street was “South of Market” long before real estate agents or gallery owners invented the term SoMa. SFO once called to say they found my lost luggage at the airport but they wouldn’t deliver to that section of the City after dark.

“Chalk Police!” Bill Essex, a deputy sheriff, would call out as he got in his old yellow van and moved it to a vacant spot on the other side of the street. Bill was one of the first openly gay deputies hired by the County of San Francisco. He saw no conflict of interest in alerting his neighbors to the City of San Francisco Chalk Police.

“Chalk Police!” the owner of the small sandblasting operation across the street bellowed out. He came to work early once to sandblast some plate glass I found in the dump. It was perfect for the light table I was building from scrap lumber I found in the alley. The Sand Blaster slid his new Mercedes into the spot Bill had just left.

“Park here, park here,” Mary, the artist from the Land of Enchantment called out, as she moved her sun-faded red Datsun with expired New Mexico plates to the space vacated by the

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

Mercedes. “I don’t care how many tickets I get,” Enchanted Mary said. “This old heap is still in my ex-husband’s name. Let them haul it away, I don’t need it, but somebody can use this space.”

And so it went.

Joe Taylor moved into the first-floor flat under me shortly after Larry Beach, part-owner of the Balcony Bar on Market Street, had moved out. Larry moved in when the Gonzales’s left. He had a deal with Clarence, the landlord. For a low rent, like mine, he was supposed to fix up the lower flat.

Larry thought he could convince his friends to stop by, and for the price of a good meal, they would work on his place. It didn’t happen. The place was still a mess. Joe Taylor had the same deal with the landlord. The first thing Joe did was set up a leather craft shop in the front of the apartment. He was DBA Taylor of San Francisco. It fit right in with the other small businesses on Clementina Alley.

Here he made leather belts, cock rings, armbands, some wrist and ankle restraints, and the occasional braided cat-o’-nine-tails. These he sold at night in The Brig, a leather bar over on Folsom Street. Joe hoped to support himself this way. At the time it was not an altogether impossible dream. The rent on the flat was cheap. He sold his car for a small grubstake. The need of a car in the City was low. The demand in the City for leather fetish items was high.

Joe Taylor was from Tennessee, but had been working in South City for awhile. He quit his job because he felt hassled by the other workers. Joe was tall and lean, with a large dark mustache. He had a less than aggressive chin. There was a certain Scots-Irish Appalachian look about him that some guys found a turn-on.

Allan Lowery, owner of the Leatherneck bar on 11th Street and Folsom, was over to my place late one afternoon. Allan had grown up on a ranch in Wyoming and owned a Best Western Motel in the City. He sold it and opened the Leatherneck. At the time, he was my boss. I bartended at the back bar I had built for him. Allan and I were discussing the future of the Leatherneck

over a few lines. We seemed to get our best ideas that way.

About five after five Joe pounded on my door.

“Come on up,” I hollered out. “It’s open.”

When I was home during the day and not entertaining in The Other Room, or working in the darkroom, I always left the door unlocked. I was on the second floor. It saved a lot of steps. Joe came up and stuck his head in the door to the kitchen, in the back of the flat.

“Allan, don’t you drive a green and white El Camino?” Joe said.

“Yeah,” Allan said.

“Didn’t you park it on 9th Street about 15 minutes ago?”

“Yeah. Why?” Allan said, standing up from the table.

“Well, they just towed it away. Don’t you know you can’t park there after five?”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me that 15 minutes ago when you saw me park there?” Allan looked ready to explode.

“I thought you already knew.” Joe went back downstairs to his leather work.

“That’s the same guy that came in the Leatherneck the other night and told Ron Clute, the bartender, that the cops had ticketed everybody parked outside after midnight. That the tow trucks were pulling up.”

This had been outright police harassment. It had finally been resolved.

“Why doesn’t he let people know right away when he sees something like that is about to happen, rather than after the fact?”

It was a rhetorical question.

“As far as I’m concerned,” Allan said, “he’s Bad News Joe.”

He laid out more lines on the mirror for each of us to snort.

Robert Opel rented a storefront on Howard Street, the next major street to the north of my place on Clementina. We practically shared a back yard. He turned the storefront into Fey-Way Studios, an art gallery South of Market for gay artists. Robert Opel was putting on a one-man show of Chuck Arnett’s work.

Arnett had hit the national press when *Life* magazine, in its June 26, 1964 issue, had featured his mural at the Tool Box, an early leather bar in the City. Arnett worked at the Ambush now, and lived right across the street from me in the same building as Bill Essex.

In preparation for the opening reception of the Chuck Arnett show, Robert Opel had bought a couple of cases of wine from the Dented Can grocery store a few blocks away. The bottles had Heitz Cellar labels from Napa County. They were packed in smart wooden boxes. It was good wine. Or at least it had been good wine. It had been stored in a warehouse that had a fire. The wine boxes survived but nobody knew for sure what the heat had done to the wine. The wine was a gamble. That was why it was sold at Dented Can for a very reasonable price. It would be perfect for an Arnett show in a South of Market gallery. The show was also a gamble.

One afternoon I decided to drive out to the Palace of the Legion of Honor near Lands End. There was an exhibit on rural Japanese product packaging that I wanted to see. The Pink Section of the *San Francisco Chronicle* had given the show a very favorable review. At the last minute I grabbed my camera. An outdoor sculpture of Laocoön and his sons wrestling serpents on the south end of the museum had once caught my eye. I wanted to get some good close-up shots of it as a foil for a photo set-up of nearly nude firemen wrestling with fire hoses.

As I left, I noticed the Sand Blaster's Mercedes was parked right in front of the house. Looked pretty snazzy there. My beat-up pickup was the other side of the street near Enchanted Mary's studio. I heard arguing coming from Bad News Joe's flat. What else was new? Like many of the places on Clementina, a steady stream of tough customers was usually coming or going. Most of what you heard was indoor street theater. It added an extra ambience of excitement and the thrill of danger to the place.

The Japanese packaging display was worth the trip out to Lands End. What especially caught my eye was how eggs were nestled in a net of raffia bondage and suspended at the market

stall like a fishnet jock. Jack Fritscher had taught me the basics of Japanese body bondage after his 1975 trip to Tokyo. The egg cluster gave me fresh ideas. The exhibit program noted that most of these rustic methods of displaying goods were disappearing. Western concepts of marketing were spreading throughout rural Japan. What a shame.

The Pacific sun highlighted the Laocoön *pere-et-fils* in a sensuous way that was slightly menacing. Perfect. The sculptor of this copy of a Roman copy of the Greek *Laocoön Group* had thought a fig leaf belonged on such a public work of art. Too bad. I hoped I had captured the mood I sensed outside the neoclassical monument to the fallen soldiers of the Great War. I had used up my film trying.

Coming back from the Avenues, on Fulton, I hit the afternoon rush hour. I was about to turn off 9th Street onto Clementina to look for a parking space. A San Francisco paddy wagon was in front of me. To my surprise it turned down Clementina. I slowed to a crawl and tried to peer down the street beyond its bulk. The street was jammed with people. Some had locked arms to form a circle and were standing in the middle of the street. I thought I saw a naked man jumping up and down in the middle of the circle. Now what the hell?

There was no way through all that to a parking space. I looked at my watch. It was after five o'clock. I couldn't park on 9th Street or I'd be towed. I turned right onto Howard Street to circle the block. Once before, I had been able to back the wrong way down Clementina from 8th Street, to an empty parking space. I was in luck. There was an empty slot a quarter of the way down the block. It was in front of a burned-out warehouse. With the ease of a practiced urban parallel parker, I backed my pickup into the space.

As I headed down the street toward the crowd and the paddy wagon, I heard a police whistle. It was being blown repeatedly. The rhythm was not that of a policeman. It sounded more like a rape whistle, that erstwhile attempt to control crime in the City.

Two young cops, their muscles straining against their uniforms, were manhandling the naked whistle-blower toward the

paddy wagon. The crowd had parted for the cops and their prisoner. Why was he still blowing his whistle? Did he think he was about to be raped by the cops? Dream on. Sweat glistened on his naked torso. What a shot. I brought my camera up to focus. Damn. No film. I had used it up on the stone bodies of Laocoön and his sons.

The prisoner was wrestled into the wagon and the doors locked. The crowd parted again to allow San Francisco's finest to leave with their booty. I started toward the house.

Bad News Joe was sitting on the stoop in a pair of well-worn Levis and a seen-better-days white T-shirt. He held his head in his hands and was shaking it side to side. I sat down on the stoop next to him.

"What's the bad news, Joe?"

"Look at that car." Joe was pointing to the Sand Blaster's Mercedes. The one I thought had looked so snazzy when I left a few hours ago. It was still where it had been parked this morning, after the visit from the Chalk Police. It didn't look so snazzy now. The roof was dented and slightly caved in. Like someone had been teaching horses to tap dance on top of it.

"OK, tell me the whole story," I said to Joe.

The whole story.

According to Joe, the whole story started back a few months before when I put a notice in the classified section of *The Advocate*. It had been time to expand my repertoire. "Master now accepting a few select patrons," it read. "Novitiates welcome." My specialty was not just belts and bondage, although sometimes they were included. My specialty was the fantasy trip. Indoor street theatre, if you will. Sometimes I moved the action to Ringold Alley, the after-hours hangout for anonymous sex; other times to the back-room or toilet of the latest leather bar in the Folsom. They were all places my patrons would never go on their own.

The fantasy depended on the patron. If he were a priest, I might lead him on a trip to the confessional within the confines of The Other Room. There he would, under duress, confess to breaking 11 of the Ten Commandments. Such a confession usually ended in a cathartic climax and a cleansing of the soul.

An opera singer who often visited liked to warm up his scales while being punched around with boxing gloves. Then, as I squeezed his balls harder and harder, his range went higher and higher. When I was doing my job right, he would become *Il Castrato* and sing soprano songs of Zerlina, the peasant girl in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. At the precise moment he released his passion, the dog in the flat next door would howl in sympathy. My nightingale would get dressed and leave. His chauffeur, who had been waiting, double parked on Clementina, would whisk him away to his place in Pacific Heights.

Each session always started with a glass of wine in the front parlor, where the gas-log fire set the mood. The "tip" would be deposited in a large antique stoneware jar on the mantle. We would then move on to The Other Room and fantasies of the night.

Joe had gotten wind of what was going on in my flat above him. One night, during a Mr. Goodwrench fantasy, my patron was rolling across the quarry-tile floor on a mechanic's dolly. The clicking of the casters as it rolled over the grouted spacing between the tiles could be heard throughout the house. The next morning I ran into Joe as we both came out our front doors.

"What the hell were you doing up there last night?" he said. "Teaching horses to tap dance?"

"Something like that," I said. I explained to Joe how I was able to augment my income from photo sales, bar tips, and the occasional carpentry job.

Joe decided he could augment his income from leather craft in a similar way. Perhaps I should have explained to Joe a little better the cardinal rules of the trade. Once a patron has contacted you through your professional channels, always keep it on a professional level. See the "tip" up-front first. Never get personally involved. If they start to see you as anything other than a professional, break it off.

"So this guy answered my ad," Joe said.

"Yeah, go on," I said.

"Well, he called and came over last night. He was much younger than most of the guys that answer my ads. Great body!"

I thought I was starting to get the picture.

“Did you get the tip up-front?” I said.

“Well, not exactly. We got along real well, you know, and he said he was broke and just needed a place to crash, just for the night. So I kind of went along with it, you know.”

“So, then what happened?”

“You got any beer?”

I did.

“Come on up.”

This story was definitely going to be worth a couple of beers. I opened an Oly for each of us. Olympia beer was my favorite then.

As it turned, out Joe and his new-found friend had worn each other out in Joe’s “room” the night before. About two in the morning they had gone out for a walk around the block and headed down Howard Street toward the Black ‘n’ Blue, the latest leather bar, for last call. On the way they passed Fey-Way Studios. The lights were on. Robert Opel and Chuck Arnett were hanging art work for the opening of Arnett’s show the next night. Bad News Joe and The Kid went in. A few joints were passed. They forgot about last call at the Black ‘n’ Blue.

The next morning Joe realized The Kid wanted more than a place to spend one night. He started talking about getting his “stuff” from a locker at the bus station.

“In no uncertain terms I told him to leave, to get out.”

“Did he?” I said.

“Well, yeah, kind of, but he came back.”

“He came back?” I said. “Where had he been?”

“Well, that’s when all the trouble really started, when he came back,” Joe said.

It seems that when Joe kicked The Kid out, he went back to the only other place he’d been to since he had arrived at the bus station. Fey-Way Studios. The door was unlocked but nobody was there, at least not in the storefront gallery. Somebody might have been in the apartment in the back. The Kid spotted the two cases of Heitz Cellar wine for the opening of the Arnett show that night. A peace offering for Joe, The Kid thought. He heisted one of the wooden boxes and headed back to Clementina Street and

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Joe's apartment.

When Joe's at his work bench making leather goods he leaves the door unlocked.

"Come on in," Joe hollered when The Kid kicked at the door.

"I got something for you," The Kid said to Joe. He set down the box of wine and stripped.

"He's standing there stark naked and then puts his boots back on," Joe said.

"Why would he do that?" I said.

"Well, I guess I told him last night that a naked man wearing nothing but combat boots really turns me on. I saw he was wearing the rape whistle I keep in the playroom. You know," Joe said, "just in case."

I nodded.

"Well, I pushed him out the door and locked it," Joe said.

"You pushed a naked man out your door?"

"I wasn't going to let him hustle me," Joe said.

"What happened?"

"I heard some loud noises and then somebody yelling and then that damn rape whistle. I peeked out the window. He was on top of that Mercedes that's been parked right out front. He was jumping up and down on its roof. He must have thought it was mine."

"Why would he think it was yours?"

"Well, when we got back this morning, a little after nine, it was parked right there. I said something about the garage had finished tuning up my car and brought it back. You know, as a joke."

Most of the rest of what happened I was beginning to put together.

The Sand Blaster had come out of his shop for a smoke and saw a naked man jumping up and down on the roof of his Mercedes. He was so surprised he couldn't think what to do. In his *basso profundo* he bellowed out "Chalk Police! Chalk Police!"

Folks came out to move their cars, a little surprised the Chalk Police would be there in the afternoon. When The Kid saw the crowd converging on the street, he jumped off the roof of the Mercedes and started to blow Joe's rape whistle. Still wearing

nothing but his combat boots, he ran down the middle of the street. This was when the neighbors locked arms in a circle around him until the police could get there. Thinking he could shock them into letting him go, he started jacking off. That only caused the circle to tighten, as they were now determined to see the show to the very end.

I opened two more Olys.

Joe carried the box of Heitz Cellar wine back to Fey-Way Studios. The door was unlocked. Nobody was in the storefront gallery. Joe set the wine box on the counter next to the other one and left.

I attended the opening of Arnett's show that evening. He had a drawing I particularly liked. It was of a man pulling a large chain out of his ass. I had done a very similar photo of Mike Monroe, doing the same thing. We agreed to swap our interpretations of that particular fantasy.

Several of the Arnetts sold.

The Heitz Cellar wine was unaffected by the fire.

The gamble had paid off.