

The Cabin

Bob's loft was spartan, to say the least. To get to it, I had to slide open a huge driveway door, then walk through a tunnel to the back, open courtyard of a wood frame warehouse which had, I was told, survived the 1905 earthquake. Along the south side, and back, ten feet above the cobblestone paved courtyard, were a series of rooms, where an assortment of people lived. On the blank north wall, tucked in under an overhanging roof, Bob had carved out a small loft, just about big enough for a double mattress and room to sit. To get to it he had constructed a ladder by nailing two by fours to the studs of the north wall, so you had to climb straight up, and then swing yourself over to the platform he had laid down.

But it worked. Nathan and Don were the owner/managers of the warehouse, and collected rents from the people living there, Crazy Roger, and Tom, who used his space for a studio, but lived someplace else, and Michael Burke, when he was in town. Later Glen showed up, with his VW repair business. I was told there were some other partners, silent, but I was not concerned. One of the rooms had a lot of mattresses in it. After I had been there a little while, I put up some sheet plastic, to let some light in where they had just nailed up a couple of pieces of plywood. Nathan and Don liked that.

I had told Bob that, as far as I knew, about two steps behind me, wherever I went, was the FBI, keeping tabs on me, so if he was involved in any serious illegal activity, it was a very bad idea for me to live there. Bob would use all kinds of drug derived expressions, like, "Lets shoot it up," and "Put that in your pipe and smoke it." But he said, "No, don't worry, you're just being paranoid."

Don was a real estate agent, and Nathan had a small home repair business. One day, they took me along to see a piece of property to buy, in the Fillmore, then a very tough neighborhood. We went into the abandoned, three flat as floor through apartments are called in San Francisco) structure, and were climbing down the back stairs, narrow winding stairs, when suddenly a very large kitchen knife clattered down. I looked up at Nathan and Don, and asked why they had brought that. "Junkies," was the response. I opined as how I did not think the three of us had to worry about junkies, so Don picked up the knife, and we finished going through the building.

Nathan hired me when he needed an extra hand. It covered the rent and living

expenses, and he got to know me, and I got to know him. He grew up in San Francisco. In fact, his mother lived just a few blocks away. Turned out, he had been in jail, five years, for a bank robbery. They got caught right at the beginning, because one of the people involved was a cop. They did not stand a chance. He also joked that he was “tri-sexual”, willing to try anything, but it did not seem to get in the way of us working together.

He was also innovative, and put things together in weird ways. Once, to demonstrate his vision for a planned renovation, he drew a perspective on a scrap piece of drywall, but the perspective was from above, not from a plane, so it was almost an abstract, in my eyes. He knew a little carpentry, and little electrical, a little plumbing, a little tile, and I learned a lot from him, but, half of it wrong, as people later said, because I learned it from Nathan.

In the building there was one toilet and shower, which Nathan had created. Tile floor shower, with scraps of tile, and plumbing made from odds and ends of gas piping, nipples of various lengths, with commercial shut off valves. It was very funky, but it worked.

This was San Francisco in the mid 1970's' still loose and innovative, before AID's came in and wiped out a lot of the try-anything spirit, and before the dot.com revolution made San Francisco impossible to live in except for the very rich. So living in a truck in the industrial section was not so crazy, nor creating a living space in warehouse, wood framed to be sure, was not so extraordinary, at least to me. I did not realize how far from the staid and normal I had strayed.

A couple of weeks passed, and no sign of Bob, and no sign of my truck. No word. I was getting pretty comfortable where I was living, and Nathan and Don were getting comfortable with me. They found that Bob was unreliable. He was.

A couple of months later Bob returned. No truck. He had abandoned my truck in Texas, after delivering his girlfriend in New Mexico. He had an old, beaten down car, formerly black and white, but had been in the sun for a very, very long time, so it was pretty faded. He wanted his space back. I said “Get my truck back.” We almost came to blows, but Nathan, having gotten to know me, and knowing Bob too well, was quite happy to tell Bob that he no longer lived there.

The north wall of the courtyard was, as I mentioned, blank. Nathan and I were talking



once, over coffee, and I offered as how it would be a perfect place to put an environmentally efficient cabin. I had always wanted to build a cabin on the land in Millerton, but my father scotched the idea. I had learned a lot working on the cabin in Maine.

Nathan liked the idea, and said he would build stairs

and a deck, run a sewer line, water line and electric line out. The sewer line came up just to the right of this picture, which, I think, my mother took. I could build a cabin on it, for \$30 dollars a month, lease to expire in 2 years, at which time he would own the cabin. In addition, I could use any of the salvaged materials lying around, some large plate glass windows, and some very old 1X8 for sheathing.

So I did. I think I started in July, and had it weather sealed in November. In the picture to the right, you can see the triangular deck, and the space where Bob's loft used to be.

Nathan had run a sewer line out to it, and I was going to put in a toilet and outdoor shower, on a triangle portion of the deck, truly exposed to the elements. It had

electricity, from the building fuse box, and I had a small black and white TV. The three windows were made from large panes of glass, the kind that sheaths high-rise office buildings, which, apparently, had fallen off the back of a truck. Most of it was made out of found materials. The major expense, as I recall, were the 2X4 studs for the walls, the shingles to side it, which you can see above, and the roll roofing. It was pretty neat, I



thought, and completely illegal.



I was living three blocks east of Castro Street, which was really warming up by then, and three blocks south of Market, in the heart of San Francisco, and, if I solved my money problems, I was living the life I wanted. I even had, for that summer, a wonderful girlfriend, Jenny. Jenny was enjoying San Francisco, but in the Fall, she got real, she started law school at UC Davis, I was a little too fringe, I think. We camped out on

the deck, with the framing of the cabin open to the sky. I think she loved the sense of adventure, but decided to tone it down when she started law school at UC Davis that Fall. It did not help that when I visited her in Davis, I walked out of a record store without paying for a Linda Ronstadt record.

I hooked up the stereo system I had stored in my truck, and would play Little Feat into the courtyard, sinking into the weathered courtyard recliner, napping in the sun. Life was good, but there were clouds on the horizon ...

As I got to know Tom, the guy with the studio, I liked him less and less. There was a hardness to him, and when I learned that he was a licensed gun dealer, alarm bells went off. Not that I ever saw any guns, but something fishy was going on. And Crazy Roger was really crazy. He had been a Hare Krishna, and still dressed the part, but was into guns, and showed me where he could order silencers for guns by mail. He gave me a phone number to call, if ever things got really strange, he got really strange. Well, really, stranger.

One day he was heating his rice over a small camp stove, in the driveway tunnel on the front end of the building. I pointed out that this was a very dangerous thing to do, because the flame could ignite the bone dry, 70 year old wood. And we looked, as the flame formed a column at least 8 feet high, toward the 10 foot high framing members.

After that he listened to me. I was impressed with my magical powers, part of my addled psychedelic state.

One day, after the cabin had been completely framed, I asked Don what it was that Tom really did. "Oh, he is a registered gun dealer. He sends guns down to Mexico in return for heroin." Just like that.

He wasn't joking, and I was in the middle of a very strange situation, way beyond my depth. Michael Burke, who sometimes stayed there, and who was considered pretty much an angel dust zombie, dusted, as they said, for good reason, lived half time in Mexico, had a family down there, and would appear, sometimes, and just hang out. So he had a role in it also, exactly what, I am not sure.

And Nathan, drunk, angry with me, had smashed my banjo against a wooden column, but the next day thought better of it. I could go buy a new one, if I got the money from a Coast Guard officer who lived in the East Bay. Which I did. Which is the banjo I now have, 45 years later. But this guy too must have been part of the deal.

I did not really know what to do. Slink away, and I figured they would find me. Join in – no, that was wrong. I called Erma. She gave me advice that probably saved my life. "Don't call the cops." I would not thought of that. But she knew. After all, her ex ... She did not say it, but I understood it to mean that they already knew what was going on, and liked things nice and quiet, just as they were.

My reaction was moralistic. I mean, I already had shown that side of me, in a hustler's world. Once, even, in the following months, Don told me that I should wear a collar, meaning, become a priest, a minister, if I wanted to be such a goodie-goodie. I know understood why Nathan could drive around town, even though he did not have a driver's license, because of his felony conviction, or why, when Don showed up with a Ford Thunderbird convertible, as I remember, with expired plates, told me I could drive it all I wanted as long as I stayed in the city, I realized it was protected. And better understood what Nathan had meant when he said, as they were cleaning out the warehouse after they had first bought it, they found the bones of some dead cats, and just threw them in the dumpster, or what he meant when I asked what he sold in a shop he had had on Haight Street in the late sixties – junk, was his answer, or even what Roger's role was in the whole mix, having been kicked out of the Hare Krishna for being too violent, and suspected of being the arsonist who set fire to a restaurant, which spread to the building it was in, and several people were killed... maybe.

I had called Erma on the building phone, and I am pretty sure that they had heard the conversation, so they knew what was up. I was very scared, thought I was going to die, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote, about all my fear, to get it out of my system. That was when I really learned to write, to let the words flow as they want, and worry about spelling and grammar and syntax in the editing stage, to simply write freely, the way I got these words down.

Work with Nathan dried up. I was on my own, but one day, Nathan said, come on, we are going for a ride. I got in Nathan's truck, and then Tom got in. I was stuck in the middle, between them. I asked where we were going. No answer. We drove into a neighborhood I had never been, and then into the landfill, the dump of San Francisco, as I remember, and I was told I was being too noisy.

Or another time, we were at a party at Don's, the first time I had ever been there, when suddenly Don said, "He's getting away," pulled out a snub nose revolver, like what the police use, and shot it over my head.

Or the time that Nathan said they were looking to buy the old brewery, abandoned, to convert it into a (gay) bathhouse, and were having a party up on the 14th floor, and I was invited to come, but I did not have to, with some emphasis, but I was really invited to come, "but I did not have to", repeated, and I saw myself taking a pushed leap out of one of the buildings, that Nathan was warning me about.

And another time, Nathan said to me, "You are in good hands." Allstate, you know, and I thought that my concern about the FBI was not so fantastical. It was soon after I went to visit a person with whom my father had gone through the Ethical Culture School system. I knew he was in the city, but never went to him looking for word, I don't know why, but I did this time, figuring he should at least know if I disappeared so he could tell my family what might have happened. His name was Frank Oppenheimer, and he was the founding director of the San Francisco Exploratorium. His older brother, Robert, by then deceased, was even more well known. I told him how growing up we had a blanket with his last name on it which we used in the car, when we kids were in the back seat during the winter. A safety blanket. And then I told him of the situation I was in. His response was absolutely flat, almost as if he already knew the whole story. His wife, apparently, called from her office, asking what I was doing these days. Frank responded, "Odd jobs", which was certainly the case. Frank had a PhD, in physics, and had worked at Los Alamos on the bomb. Because of his wife's membership in the

Communist Party during the '30s, he lost his security clearance and eventually wound up in San Francisco, founding the Exploratorium.

For whatever reason, the gang bought another warehouse in the Mission District and moved their operation there. I saw less and less of them. One day in January, Roger was on the roof, shooting a rifle. I decided it was time to call the number he had given me. Sergeant someone answered, the cops, apparently, I explained myself, and he had no idea of why I called.

And then one Monday morning late in January, everyone left, in a hurry, leaving me there alone. The phone line went dead. I spent the day, doing whatever I would do in those days, and the next day, read in the paper, that, the morning before, two hit men from the east coast had been murdered at the corner of Silliman and Amherst Streets. At least that is how I remember it. It seemed poetic to me, in a way, for I was certainly a silly man from Amherst.

At least that is the way I remember it. I can't find any police records on Google, nor does the SF Chronicle go back that far, and, remember, this is historical fiction, so it could be just my imagination.

By then, I was working as a carpenter on some property owned by Jim Jones's church, and so was a little independent. Then, in February, the warehouse where I was living was sold, and I had to move. I had to leave the city. I had bought a pickup truck that someone had bequeathed to Jim Jones church, so I had wheels. I could go anywhere. I went to visit a friend, Jack, from Mime Troupe days. I told him the story. I said, "Maybe I should head West," and he replied with a smile, "You already are West." "Well, north of here it rains too much, so I might as well head south, to Los Angeles." And that is what I did.

I had stayed in touch with Dan, my roommate from Del Mar, had even connected them when they lived in San Francisco, before they moved to LA. He said I could crash at his place. And that is what I did. I felt that at any moment, my life would end. Without being too dramatic, my courage came from knowing of the courage of the civil rights workers in the early sixties, and from my suspicion that the truly evil nature of the war in Vietnam originated in the Golden Triangle's heroin. When I had called Erma, I knew I was making trouble for some very troubling people.

I was no longer a pacifist. Part of my clear moral reasoning had been alloyed when I got

to know the guys living in the house in Belchertown. One of them in particular was a reasonably decent person, but was psychologically structured like a cat, a hunter killer. Have you ever watched a cat with a mouse? It is all instinct, the cat cannot help itself from hunting, catching, playing with and then killing and eating the mouse. That is the way cats are, and that is the way this guy seemed to be most expressive of his essential character. So it was possible for people to be both fundamentally moral, and killers.

And Tom, the businessman, who sold death, so that he could sell death, was truly a source of evil in society. Not only that, he was completely protected. The money he made was invested in real estate, laundered, and I worked, for a while, on some of the absolutely beautiful houses being built in the Berkeley hills with this money. But it was all stained, and rotten, and I chose, in essence, suicide, rather than live in such a compromised way. I know it sounds dramatic, and I know I was afraid, but, ultimately, I was not afraid of death, as long as it was for a just cause, but dying ...

This all sounds so grandiose when I write it, but I know that it dominated my thinking for years. Before that, my pacifism was based on my presumption that no person was so evil that the world would be a better place if he was no longer in it. Now, I saw that I was mistaken. There were people in the world who were absolutely morally corrupt, and I had found one.

But, living in this social milieu was not all bad. There was an expectation of basic honesty, and a realistic evaluation of the nature of different peoples' character. For example, again and again I would think of some of the people I come to know those fourteen months, and understood better that, in the good society, one's word is one's bond, and one is known not just by the truth they speak, but the truth they do.

Don was right. Maybe I should put on a collar.

What else happened that year in San Francisco? Project Artaud was an exciting center of cutting edge culture, and I got to know some of the people there. I even ran for the job building manager, and elected position, because it was a cooperative venture. Szdan, I wonder where he is now, agreed to be my campaign manager, and my campaign platform was to go and talk with each resident, tell them I was running for building manager, and ask them if they wanted to smoke a joint.

I was more serious than that. I realized that much of what I had been doing was by inspiration, that is, was my art, and perhaps my art was administration. Anyway, I had a

three piece suit that I had bought in Washington, to dress appropriately for any interview I might not get, and an attache case which included my resume, It also had a picture of Beethoven, from a WETA FM, pasted on its side. I appeared before the committee and explained how I was right for the job, and went to open the attache case. It wouldn't open. In a fit, I threw it on the ground. They thought it was an act, or a reenactment of the climax of the Mime Troupe play. They thought I did a good show, I was an artist, but they hired someone else, someone they knew, They thought. Several months later, he took off with the money they had in their checking account.

Stefan deFurrier made puppets and dolls, and befriended me. He had a dwarf orange tree on the roof, which had one orange, and offered it to me. In December, he told me about the Rocky Horror Picture show, and asked me if I wanted to go. I said sure, and he told me to meet him outside. It was a midnight showing, and I looked for him, but could not find him, except that there was a very tall woman in a bright red dress who kept looking at me. It went right over my head, that this was him. I wonder how he is now.

The big news was that Harvey Milk was running for Supervisor, as the first openly gay candidate. I lived in his district, so I walked up to Castro Street, and then south, to where his camera shop was located, went in and asked for him. "Why should I vote for you?" I asked. He responded with his elevator street, which had nothing to do with sexuality, and everything to do with housing and schools and jobs and city services. I thanked him and left. Sean Penn captured him well in the movie.

Project Artaud had a very large room, with a very tall ceiling, which had great acoustics for playing my banjo. The whole room resonated, and sent new sounds back from the further corners like an echo chamber.

One evening there, Gamelan troupe from Indonesia performed. I had never even heard of this art form, yet there it was, including the shadow puppets, and music. Another day, the Flying Karamazov Brothers stopped by and gave us their show. And another day, Twyla Tharpe's company performed in that same space. But the biggest thrill, for me, was seeing, for the first time, contact improvisation. Mangrove, a four man company whose studio was in the building, flew into each others arms with abandonment and trust, free men celebrating their liberation. The moves were not choreographed, but entirely improvised.

I wanted to dance like that, they invited me into their studio, but I did not know how to

join in the dance. It was not until 25 years later, at my first time at Dance New England's summer camp, that I learned how to trust that way, taught by a superb teacher from Germany, Rolf, who had us start by lying on the floor, and, after five classes, we were twirling each other around on our shoulders. It was to be a very large part of my life for the next 25 years of my life.

I would play my banjo on the street, busk. I never made any money, because, perhaps, I just wasn't that good. I certainly was not, and am still not, an entertainer, and that is what really attracts people. But I was spotted by a member of the Folk Song Society of San Francisco, who invited me to the bimonthly gatherings at Faith Petric's house, in the Haight, where I met a lot of fellow musicians, Just as importantly, I got to go on the Memorial Day weekend camp, in Big Basin Redwood Park on the Santa Cruz peninsula, and these were one of the highlights of my time in San Francisco. The music, and the camaraderie were nice, but, for me, the spectacular part was sleeping underneath, or even inside, the old growth Redwoods of the park, walking on a downed redwood tree across a very deep gully, and just enjoying the serenity and smells of the woods.

Because of my participation, I met Tom Hunter, a touring musician and UCC minister, who was to help me out several years later. I still sing a couple of his excellent songs, though he, apparently, passed away several decades ago. Strange, he was a year or so younger than me.

Anyway, gas in the pickup truck, I headed South. I remember stopping at San Luis Obispo, where I had a place to stay with some people I knew from the folk music world. What followed has the feeling of a dream; I don't think it is true, but I remember, clearly, going with them to a small restaurant/diner for a meal, sitting down at a table in the back, and then the whole restaurant cleared. We were the only ones there, and I was told, "This is the last time you get saved." Did this actually happen? I am not sure. Without sounding too grandiose, I know that most people in my situation would most likely have wound up disappeared ...

Me? I disappeared to Los Angeles, but, of course, never disappeared at all.