

Don MacLaren

From the Lone Star State to the Golden Gate

I began to seriously think of going back to New York, where I had lived for a while after I got out of the Navy, but instead, on Sunday, October 14th, 1984 I packed my things into a car and drove west, figuring if worse came to worst and I ran out of money I would be better off in a California winter than a New York one. Oklahoma City, Texas Panhandle, cooking rice, beans and potatoes on a grill in the middle of nowhere with no one in sight. First snow of the season in Tucumcari, New Mexico – through Taos, Santa Fe, the Grand Canyon. Through the beautiful desert of New Mexico and Arizona and the desert wasteland of the Mojave. Road signs led to Los Angeles and I thought about it but bypassed them and went north to the Bay Area to complete my second trip across the North American continent on Sunday, October 21st 1984. I stopped at a 24 hour diner in Oakland, ordered breakfast at 10:30 pm, walked into the bathroom, looked in the mirror and stared at the face looking back at mine for a long time, till it convinced me that whatever road I took was the right road. I crossed the Bay Bridge into San Francisco and slept in my car, near the Golden Gate Bridge, as I did for the next few days until I paid for a room in a fleabag hotel in Oakland.

One night I went to a bar in North Beach called The Saloon, the oldest bar in San Francisco, built before the 1906 earthquake. One of Charles Bukowski's books has a photo of it on the cover. There was a band playing jazz, with an attractive woman on the saxophone. A man who looked to be in his 50s, dressed in a suit and tie asked me if people could read poetry there. I told him I didn't know, but if people could I wanted to read some. I told him I was a poet.

As it turned out, there was no poetry read there, but I befriended this man and he befriended me. He chain-smoked Camel regulars, and read me poems as we sat at Zim's at the corner of Market and Van Ness late into the night. I asked him what he thought of Allen Ginsberg. "He says he's a Buddhist." I asked him what he thought about Jack Kerouac. "Jack spent three days at my house, drying himself out. He told me he was giving up alcohol, embraced Jesus again and was going to get back to his Catholic roots. We went to church once."

Tom Powers became a friend of mine. He'd been thrown off a roof when he was eight years old and suffered from ataxia, among other ailments. He walked with a cane and a wobbly gait, as if he were drunk. His wife and one of his sons had committed suicide. His two remaining children had abandoned him. He lived in the Tenderloin in an SRO, on social security, after losing his job as an insurance adjuster in the 1960s. He was an alcoholic and a member of AA, and constantly short of money.

As with most good friends Tom and I fought and sometimes separated for

months or even years. Despite the fact I could match every drinking story he told me with one of my own I did not consider myself an alcoholic. I asked him if it was OK to drink while I was with him. He said it was. I would go to his tiny room on Ellis Street, smoke the cigarettes he offered me and drink ale, while sitting on the floor, listening to him read poems as his transistor radio, tuned to KDFC-FM, played classical music. I'd begun to take an interest in jazz and blues when I was in high school, and began to cultivate an interest in classical music in the Navy as I picked up KDFC on my radio.

"Why do you always write about hate and fear and filth?" Tom would ask me. "Just look out your window, Tom." Actually, out Tom's window was a very narrow space between another building. Below it was an alley too narrow for much of anything but rats and roaches. Nevertheless, once a body was found there.

Tom was prescribed a variety of medicines – lithium, codeine, and countless others I can't remember the names of. Oftentimes he offered me samples, most times I refused.

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I spent Thanksgiving of 1984 alone in my skid row hotel in Oakland eating baked beans out of a can. On Christmas 1984 I lay on my bed in my tiny room with a headache because I hadn't eaten anything at all for two days. A couple days later I was walking down the street when I saw someone I recognized from the Navy – a black guy that was in my division on the *USS Coral Sea*. He invited me to drink a cup of coffee. I told him about my financial situation and he said I should have stayed in Dallas, but he lent me some money, and helped me out again later. If it weren't for him my time would have been much more difficult. I ran into him several more times in the Bay Area – about once every year. The last time I saw him was just before I was about to go to Japan. He worked at the Sizzler restaurant as a waiter, and whenever I went there I gave him a humungous tip.

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The move from Texas to California was scary for me because I didn't have any job or connections in California when I left Texas, nor did I have much money. I didn't tell my parents I was making the move as they would have almost certainly tried to dissuade me from doing so, thereby adding to the fears I already had, and perhaps tipping the scales in favor of abandoning the trip, thereby preventing me from embarking on the next step in the journey of my life.

Later, I found a job as a waiter at the Palladium Disco in San Francisco, commuting there from Oakland by BART. The Palladium was open four nights a

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week – Thursday through Sunday. While waiting on customers I had to carry drinks on a tray through the crowd that was packed wall to wall with people. I would go throughout the area where the tables were located (on two levels) and even on to the packed dance floor sometimes to take orders. Somehow, I managed to keep from spilling any drinks. My first night there I made good tips, but that was the only night I did.

The Palladium is at the edge of North Beach, an old Italian neighborhood in San Francisco, and the company that owned the disco also owned a handful of strip joints in the neighborhood.

I don't remember filling out an application for the job before I was interviewed by a guy a little bigger and a few years older than I named "Mondo." Mondo had black hair and olive skin and looked at me coldly with dark brown eyes. "Let me see some ID," he said and I showed him my Texas driver's license. "Do you have a job now?" "No," I told him. "What are you living on then?" "Savings," I told him.

Mondo drove a corvette and wore suits that looked custom-made. He sometimes gave good-looking girls free drinks, and all the girls at the disco liked him. One of the other managers, a middle-aged guy in a suit that looked custom-made, came in one night before the place opened and showed off his shooting techniques with an unloaded pistol. I recall him saying something about being in prison. People seemed to respect those guys. I never respected them, but in order to earn enough money to eat I had to swallow my pride and work for them.

And work I did (though that particular job didn't last very long because I was fired for inadvertently serving drinks to a minor). I spent countless hours of my youth doing things like operating factory presses, driving taxis, washing dishes and cleaning toilets. One of the better jobs I had was working the graveyard shift at a motel on Lombard Street in San Francisco, on the city's "motel row". Working the graveyard shift allowed me to do homework for the college classes I was taking and watch movies on TV. The other desk clerks in the neighborhood called it the Bates Motel, because it looked like the motel in the movie *Psycho*. Coincidentally someone who looked like Anthony Perkins checked in while I was working one night. Another night an old woman jumped out of one of the motel's windows to her death while I was watching *Hiroshima Mon Amour* on TV at 3:00 AM.

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During the Loma Prieta earthquake of October 17th, 1989, I went to San Francisco to check on Tom and he told me his building would not be considered habitable until it had been checked for structural damage. I let him and a friend of his stay in my apartment in Oakland a couple nights, until they found it was

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all right to go back to their residential hotel.

15 years after I first met Tom I called on him, but he was nowhere to be found. Tom was an old man when I first met him. He may have died and been reborn a young man, or he may be wandering the earth and sea like some mythological character - perhaps somewhere beyond the Golden Gate.

Many people who reach the edge of the continent feel there's no place else to go. I guess that's one reason the Golden Gate Bridge is a popular suicide location.

But with the end of a continent and the end of a story comes a new beginning.

After I graduated from UC Berkeley in 1990 I began a different journey - to Japan; a journey that was longer and fraught with more danger than the one I had taken to the Golden Gate. But that's a story I'll tell later. Right now it's time for me to open a bottle of ale and a book of poetry, tune the radio to KDFC and take a look out the window.