

## EMBARCADERO ONE

*A Crime Thriller by*

Robert Louis Mueller

### ACT ONE

#### THE MISSION

“Hey, Mister. Are you alright?”

“Of course he’s not alright, *idiota*. He’s been shot.”

Mack laid helpless on his back on the dirty-gray, Mission Street sidewalk. The small crowd surrounding him left a space in their middle just big enough for the length of his body and not much more. He knew he had a hole in his gut. On his way down, he saw the blood on his officer blues. He felt no pain. Mostly he felt humiliated; it was his job to protect the people hovering around him but he was unable to move. He couldn’t even see straight.

Years later, sitting at his kitchen nook, now safe from any harm or embarrassment, Mack sank into the memory of this incident as though he was there on the hard, grainy concrete, unable to move. He wasn’t just revisiting a recollection. It was more like he watched a film for the second time; everything was exactly the same, he knew what was going to happen and that there was nothing he could do to change it, but he was totally immersed in its darkness, absorbed in the reality of the past.

“Where did it get me?” Mack asked clinically.

The first guy pointed to a spot only a couple of inches above Mack’s groin. The second guy saw the worry come over Mack’s face and slapped his friend’s hand away. “Not there. Higher. About here.” He pointed with his finger to a spot below Mack’s belly. Not in his groin. He’d have to wait until they stripped him in the ER before he’d really know where he had been hit. Blood and pain can be tricky about their import and origin.

“Try not to move.” The first guy assured him, “Don’t worry. The bleeding isn’t all that bad. Help is coming.” Mack could hear sirens. They seemed to scream from every direction and for his personal benefit. They did and they were. “A chorus of angels,” he thought to himself. “Jesus, if I’m getting religion down here, I must be really messed up.” He tried to ground himself by focusing on the feel of the sidewalk along his backside but felt nothing.

The second guy also tried to be reassuring, “The doctors know what they’re doing. Last year, *mi amigo* caught a bullet, even higher than yours. They patched him up *no problemo*. Big scar though. At San Francisco General they get guys all shot up all the time. You’ll be okay.”

Inappropriately cavalier, Mack actually smiled. Even to nurture, young men competed. He supposed that the second man was right. There was probably nothing down there they couldn’t sew up. No vital organs were involved. But the wound was too close to his man parts; a realization that killed the smile.

Mack didn’t have a lot to do while he laid there. Mostly he looked upwards. There was a lot of cityscape going on between where he was and San Francisco’s mid-day blue sky. The city planner’s blue prints probably didn’t include The Mission’s colorful awnings with faded *piñatas*

that hung from some and shiny Chinese brass chimes from others. Planners sought things cleaner and more orderly than what reality allowed for. The real world is a messy thing.

As ugly and chaotic as they were, Mack also liked the wires that ran above him along the street, crisscrossing the intersection at Mission and Sixteenth behind him. High voltage power lines ran along the top with lower voltage ones just below for the shops. Phone and cable lines below those. He particularly appreciated the taut pairs of cables that ran above each of Mission Street's inside lanes to power the electric buses. The wires comforted him. They were the strings that held the city together. It was the good feeling of being taken care of.

The palm trees had probably also looked different on paper. Since then, they'd grown so high that they made themselves irrelevant back down on the street where people went about their business. Palms, a foreign species, were never right in San Francisco. The city planted them along important streets anyway. They probably imagined that to the outside world, they conveyed an image of warmth even if only borrowed from places south. Everyone knew, San Francisco was not necessarily a warm place. As if he were merely chatting with new friends, Mack shared what he saw, "You know? Those palm trees are so tall that I've never even noticed them before, all the way up there. And I've lived here since high school." Mack worried his two new friends. He was lying on a sidewalk with his gut shredded open and he was, no joke, talking about palm trees.

It suddenly became important to Mack to know what time it was. Out-of-proportion to anything relevant, he absolutely had to know. He couldn't get his arm to move his watch far enough to come into view. So he asked. No one took him seriously. He insisted.

Neither of his new friends wore watches. The second yelled back into the small crowd that had grown, “Hey, he wants to know the time.” An older woman told him that it was about noon. With a snort, she’d taken the opportunity to gently chide him for caring about the time. She was somebody’s mother.

“Where are you guys from?” Mack asked casually, like he might have if they met at a bar.

The question made the young men nervous. They were not at a bar. Even wounded and immobile, Mack was still a cop and not everyone in The Mission was legal. He could see that he’d been rude when he’d meant to be friendly. That was the political divide that too often prevented Latinos from calling the cops for help when they and the community needed them to. After a short pause, they answered anyway. “Tijuana,” they said together.

“So’s *mi esposa*. I mean, she’s not technically my wife but in Mexico that’s what they call her...when we’re there.” The men relaxed. Mack was reassuring them.

## IN THE NOOK

Mack favored the death penalty in famously liberal San Francisco where practically no one else did. That was automatic for cops. Without it, criminals would get three hot’s and a cot when, after they unlawfully cut off the life of another, they’d waived further right to their own.

In the nook, he looked down at the Monday morning headline as the paper laid flat on the table. The San Francisco Chronicle sensationalized, “Young Woman Butchered.” In smaller font below, “In Embarcadero Station.” Adjacent there was a crude image probably taken by a cell phone. Its vantage was down from the large mezzanine concourse corresponding to the large and complicated Market Street intersection above from which the many, street-level escalators

descended. The camera had been pointed farther down into the cavernous space of the train platforms below where BART and Muni tracks ran in parallel, one above the other, to which other banks of wide escalators lead.

A girl's inert body lay upon a small, steel landing on an ancillary, open frame tower of stairs fixed to a heavy escalator bank along-side to also connect the mezzanine above to the train platforms below. The almost always empty stairs served as backup to the electric-driven escalators. The girl was dressed mostly in black from her Converse sneakers up to her full head of jet-black hair. As a theatric extra, that morning, the girl sported a flimsy, glowing, candy-apple-red tutu that had become hiked up around her middle. Probably evidence of a struggle. She was a fighter. Alone on the dark tower, the victim's iridescent torso seemed to float alone as if the garment and girl were lofted alone in the dank air.

In the kitchen nook at home, Robyn stood by Mack's side to see a familiar gloom had come over his face. He was no longer reading the paper. He'd left the premises. He was out there, somewhere. He wouldn't be gone long. When he was ready to come home, she would be there too. No hurry.

"Hey, lover, what's got you?" she asked rhetorically. She already knew. She could feel him. That morning, before Mack doing his disappearing thing, they'd melted together in bed. She still felt his warmth about her. She knew that deep inside, even from far away, he must have felt it too. It had to help.

She read the headline for herself, looked back at him. Even when fully conscious he would sometimes sit silent at the small kitchen table for hours, to stare out from their hilltop view over the once industrial and maritime, southeast corner of the city. It was San Francisco's

less pretty face. One that tourists didn't get to see but the mature couple found compelling. A layer of fog blanketed the open-air scene from on-high as was normal for summer mornings in San Francisco.

"It's okay, baby. I'm not going anywhere." She moved to sit on his lap, propping his arm up to slide herself under. Her Latina curves nested comfortably onto his man-thighs, Mack's could walk whole cities, and hugged her arms around his bold Scottish chest. In a crowd, they were noticed. He stood chin and eyes taller than most anyone while she pretended to break five-two. Her form was soft and organic while he was angular and firm. Odd as they looked, they fit precisely.

In the paper she saw that a young woman had been brazenly killed in the downtown financial district where normally only white-collar crime occurred as businesses and their support people from throughout the Bay Area daily came together for commerce. The Embarcadero Station was both the start and end points of their work day in the city. That day's murder was a rude affront to the normal order of things. It was a vicious crime against a whole city that otherwise thought itself sophisticated.

San Francisco had initially scared the high school age, Ethan Allen McCoy when his mother took him away from little Elko, Nevada. To a teenager, Elko was dead. To his mother, a non-threatening place to raise her boy until local circumstances required their departure. To his young eyes, San Francisco was the Emerald City, a big, bright deal. As he grew, it became to him a city that needed to breathe, to stay in motion, to entertain her next reinvention. To love her was to be in motion with her. But the city choked that morning on the downtown's brutality. For the

liberals it was an aberration, a public health problem to be quarantined. For Mack it was a crime that called for the death penalty. To clear the air.

Robyn held Mack's mildly-absentee body warmly, as lovers do. But his mind remained elsewhere. She pulled his hand from the paper into the palm of her own. He'd come back. Not right away but soon enough. She repeated to him. "It's okay, baby. I'm going to stay right here with you." She understood that he could no longer hear her voice yet she was certain he could feel her body with its warmth and weight on his. And maybe even her love. She had hoped that his early retirement from the Department's homicide detail would spare him from further episodes. It didn't. She wondered what part of the newspaper story was the trigger that time. Not the image. He'd seen too much for that. Probably the fact that there was no longer anything he could do about it. By leaving the department, he'd suffered a large loss of self. The article said Inspector-Sgt. Alvarez was there when maybe Mack should have been.

She wondered what Mack was thinking in his darkness.

He wasn't thinking. For all the intensity of his stare, he didn't see much either. From unconsciousness, his eyes had become tangled up in abstractions of lines, very much like the wires above his wounded self on Mission Street years ago. And like those almost within reach just outside their kitchen window at the top of Potrero Hill. Below in the landfill flats between them and the San Francisco Bay were more lines in the form of its streets and very old, low-lying buildings. Farther out on the other side of the Bay, there were the lines of the long ridge and coast that framed Oakland, above and below, north to south. Back closer to home, roughly in the middle of the flats, a stark, vertical, concrete smoke stack from early in the Twentieth Century before the city the city got its power from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. It rose dramatically high

in the near-distance as did the old wood telephone poles in the kitchen's near view. Cutting across the other lines, down by the water's edge, were the fan patterns of piers where land met water and hadn't been used in decades. Probably none of that physical reality was visible to Mack in the present tense. Robyn knew that his mind was in a certain other place, one city district over from their own in *The Mission*.

### PONCHO VILLA

"I'm just saying that if the station weren't such a fort, people wouldn't be afraid to come in and talk to us. It should have been built with lots of glass to let the sunshine in. People would feel welcome to come in, be welcomed and cooperate with us," said a young officer nicknamed, "Mack," a.k.a. Ethan Allen McCoy. Back then, he was new not only to the Mission Station on Valencia Street but to the department as a whole. A rookie who had never hurt anyone or been hurt.

"He doesn't know," commented an older officer.

"I guess nobody told him," chided another as if there were a grand secret Mack wasn't in on.

A third officer, more middle-aged than the others, said, "I like to have several feet of brick, steel and mortar between me and the hostiles."

"That's just it," Mack asserted himself again. "The only hostiles are a few jerks we can't identify because we keep everyone else at a distance."

Like most days in the beginning of his career, Mack started his day on Valencia Street. Since youth, he'd liked Valencia more than any other. It was never as crowded as Mission Street that ran one block over. Or as dirty. It was wide and open, like a boulevard. Mostly quiet. Pedestrian friendly. One stretch south of the station had three used books stores for people who appreciated things literary and who also had the good sense to buy their books at a discount. "*Words are words,*" read a banner in front of one. Fitted among those, there was a tiny, gloomy store front that did something *alternative* with television. He never understood exactly what. There was never anyone there who he could ask. Lots of things were suspicious without mattering. The main block north of the station towards 16th was a busy place with taquerías, used furniture and liquor stores from the old days to which had been added Chinese, sushi and Thai restaurants.

The only ugly thing on that end of the street was his assigned police station. It was new. A large and heavy monstrosity constructed with bricks and mortar feet thick, an impenetrable bunker built to withstand a military-scale attack without it ever clear -- who from. Inside, even on hot days, it was chilly and barren. Stepping inside there was an extraordinarily wide foyer that ran all the way through the building to the parking lot our back. Even the internal wall on each side were built to bunker specifications effectively creating a killing zone for visitors. At the far end of the foyer from Valencia Street, a thick, bullet-proof glass pane stood between desk officer and inquiring resident. The large parking lot in the back was always packed with patrol cars with even more out on the streets. For patrol cars to be *out on the streets* was good. When a uniformed officer could be seen in a station, there was a good chance he or she was loafing.

To Mack's still-inexperienced eye, he said again, the officers would have been safer if they had built it more like the new library with big sheets of glass to let in sunshine to invite the community in rather than hold it away. He might have been right. But he hadn't been around long. The darkness that overcame most of the older officers had not yet set in. To be encased by a great mass of mortar and steel was, for older officers, more comfortable.

Mack said to them before he disappeared into the community, "You know guys, to have a fort here is also to stick our chins out there to be punched."

They snickered. He didn't know.

It being early in his career, he was still wearing his blues on foot patrol when he walked out the door to turn north up Valencia Street towards 16th. From the start he knew that he liked to walk more than ride and best of all, he liked to walk alone. To have a partner made a stronger, maybe safer showing. More defensible. But when he was alone, the community would come to him, open rather than threatened and not so threatening to him either.

When he reached the corner at 16<sup>th</sup> Street, Mack stopped with the others as they waited for the red light to turn green. Everything and everyone was in order. A male youngster, not much above waist-high became mesmerized by his gun. He asked almost innocently, "Is it loaded?" Mack got that question a lot. Maybe people preferred that it be empty and useless. Just for show. No, they wouldn't. Not really. Not on those streets. But they couldn't ignore the obvious threat it presented and often felt compelled to say something. Even if they didn't know exactly what. They were not able to see its occupational purpose so they missed the point of it entirely.

“Yes, son,” the young officer said, “It is. Remember, guns are tools to control the bad guys, not toys. Don’t ever play with guns. Not even toy guns.”

The mother affirmed the officer with a timely placed, “I-told-you-so” look and a wag of her finger for her little boy. Certainly not his first. Or last.

The boy was undaunted, “What kind of gun is it”

Mack, “Ma’am, may I...?” She wasn’t much more than a teenager herself. She nodded.

In those days, if they chose, officers could carry a personal weapon rather than department issue. The long firefight at the Pine Street Shooting put an end to that when officers with different weapons couldn’t share ammunition. Before then Mack put his confidence in an almost traditional seven shot, S&W revolver in the L frame series, a “Smith & Wesson Model 686.”

He could have blamed his Old West upbringing in Elko but there really wasn’t much Old West left anywhere by the time he came along. He chose the 686 because, being a revolver, he could always count on it to work mechanically and it looked impressive. Mack was not a showy guy by nature. His choice of a flashy weapon was strictly a matter of practicality, to project the business image of overwhelming force when need be. To be successful in a tough urban neighborhood required a lot of attitude. His weapon had plenty of that. So did he when he needed it. Tool and man worked as partners, attitude-wise.

The boy became enthusiastic. Excited. Mack wondered if there was a father-influence in his home. “It’s huge,” he said as he pointed to it.

Mack, “Only four inches. Any longer and I’d have a hard time getting it out of its holster when it needed to go to work. It just looks bigger because it’s stainless steel and shiny and

reflects the light.” The luster of stainless steel indeed made a difference. His got more attention than most side arms. When need be or not.

“To shoot guys...”

“I’ve never shot anyone. Probably never will. I hope, son,” the young Mack repeated himself my rote, “It’s a tool, not a toy. When you’re older, if your mother says it’s okay, I’ll teach you how to shoot where it’s safe. I’ve got an old .22 rifle that would fit you perfectly. An uncle,” by which Mack meant one of his mother’s more supportive old boyfriends, “gave it to me when I was just bit older than you.” That seemed to satisfy the kid.

The gun was a device that hung off Mack’s right side from a utility belt much like a framing hammer once did, except it was all steel and more compact. And like the heavy hammer used for pounding things together or breaking them apart, it was made to be violent. Violence was not necessarily a bad thing. Once, on a good day, he got one of Robyn’s hippie-artist friends to admit that without the violence of the sun, life on earth would disappear and that it was the violence of even consensual sex that created life down here. “You can’t be against life.” His side arm was merely a device capable of firing a small projectile across a small distance with some accuracy, to punch a hole in a target. Virtually never a human target.

Like the boy, offenders could see the power of it and him. That was enough. Cops had their batons, their handcuffs, and Mace. In the future, some would also have Tasers. Their instincts, training, and street smarts were their primary weapons. Mostly they had each other. These were almost always enough. But not always. For peace officers on duty, guns were their power tools.

When Mack's large revolver faced an offender, the perp could actually see the points of the .357 magnum bullets inside the stainless steel cylinder just waiting to be set free. His choice may have been old fashioned, but as far as Mack was concerned, the best gun was the one so impressive that he would never have to fire it at anyone who had even two brain cells firing.

At home he had a modest collection of weapons but not so many considering that they were tools of the trade. The 686 was his carry gun but not his favorite firearm. That honor went to the Winchester-style, 30-30, lever action Marlin, a hunting rifle he brought with him from Elko. It was not as accurate as a bolt action needed for the open range but it was faster in the bush and a whole lot more fun.

Other officers found chambering their shotguns to be a loud and effective communication tool when need be. It seemed odd to them that Mack didn't see it the same way. They somewhat derisively gave him the nickname, "The Rifleman." To be compared by real cops to those on television was not complimentary. But in real life, when Mack raked the lever back on his rifle, the Marlin was just as loud as their shotguns but with a tone deeper, more masculine than could be made by a piece of hollow steel tubing 12 gauges wide. His may have looked funnier on a city street but it had the better communication skill.

He didn't care that some gun nuts on the street bad mouthed his 686 sidearm. He didn't care much for gun nuts anyway. Their world tended to be one person small and they were isolated even in *it*. They may have identified with the people who worked outside in the world with guns -- cops, soldiers, hunters -- without there being anything being substantial about themselves. They were the arm chair warriors who fought only with each other and mostly on the internet. Each competed to prove that he was the one who knew the most about types of guns and

ammo. The winner would be the one who was most ferociously self-righteous. It must have been difficult to be all that real about it when they were limited to the abstraction of numbers hurled in argument. They might as well have been talking baseball stats except their preference was for barrel lengths, calibers, velocities and ejecta.

Said one, "The 7mm bullets have higher ballistic coefficient than .308 caliber bullets of similar weight. Example: a 7mm 175 grain sierra spitzer boat tail (spbt) has a ballistic coefficient of 654 a .308 caliber 180 grain spitzer boat tail has a ballistic coefficient of 535. What that means is the 7mm bullet will lose less energy and velocity as it moves down range toward the target. This is most important at longer ranges. Example: a 7mm 175 grain spbt fired from a 7mm rem mag leaves the barrel at 2900 feet per second and has 3267 foot pounds of energy."

Mack knew when he'd landed a real gun nut when they saw his weapon and recognized a past problem with it. They'd go on some sort of gun nut auto pilot.

"That's an S&W 686, isn't it?" one would sometimes ask and then chide. "Put a full magnum load in and, *Kaboom!*" All over you. These guys didn't get power from weapons but from being expert on odd abstractions associated with weapons. In truth, years before, the 686 had been subject to a recall, something wrong about the hammer and firing pin when they fired magnum loads as opposed to the lighter, .38 specials they could also use. "So what? Machines can be fixed." But true-believers would rant about the long ago defect, not really offended but pretending to be proof of not only their sorta macho expertise but also their profoundly solemn respect for weapons. Obviously more profoundly solemn than the cop caught with an old 686.

To Mack's mind, a gun was, in fact, just a hand held machine. Not a religion. The one Mack carried worked as well as it needed to. At the range, Mack might not have been as good a

shot as the sharpshooters on the SWAT team but he was more proficient than most cops. That wasn't necessarily saying much. Most cops were terrible shots. Just awful. Even under ideal circumstances at the range. After a rare gun battle on the streets, their casings would be spewed about almost enough to cover the pavement such that it was impossible to investigate what had happened without disturbing their placements.

Mack compared the inner calm needed to strike the target at the range to what Robyn needed when she meditated except that his environment suffered greater much noises to distract him than the ambient sounds she tried to ignore at home. But it was actually easier for him to achieve calm because the results could be measured.

Unlike on television, on real streets, hand guns were generally useful to project power over only short to medium ranges. To strike a bad guy shooter on a roof top or behind a steel dumpster required a long arm which officers didn't normally have at hand. Even back when entering the projects required overwhelming force - vehicles, men, firepower – and officers used to keep personal Uzis and AR-15's in their trunks – the collection only rarely included a proper long arm. The need for them just didn't come up all that often. Frequently careful and always romantic, Mack made a point to put his old hunting rifle, the Marlin, in the trunk of any patrol car he got assigned to.

“Why not?”

On patrol, a younger Mack turned east from Valencia and was halfway down 16<sup>th</sup> Street towards Mission when a disheveled guy approached him talking what he imagined to be cop-talk, punctuated by references to Penal Code sections.

“There were three more 211’s here last night. Did you hear about it? The same guy at each.” The maybe has-been biker was looking for a new buddy on the street, someone with standing. It seemed that he had nothing better to do than make Mack nervous. Men who talked cop-talk made all cops nervous. In his exuberance, this man moved his hand across his chest towards Mack’s side arm. His move could have been interpreted as merely pointing to emphasize a conversational point or as an attempt to seize the weapon. When it came to side arms, there was no room for interpretation. The strange man’s hand had simply gotten too close to steel.

Both adrenaline and testosterone surged through Mack but only in modest degree. He used his left, less-strong hand to deflect rather than control the other man’s right, while he used his own right to spin the suspect into a full about-face. That face made hard contact with the large plate glass window of the best taquería in San Francisco, the clean, well-lit, meat-laden, *Pancho Villa*.

For patrons inside the restaurant, that face clobbered the plate glass twelve-by-twelve as if it were a sound barrier with a boom. The sharper ones aimed themselves toward the floor with an eye kept on the action. The less sharp sat unmoving in disbelief, followed by protests about violations of the suspect’s civil rights when they really meant their own, supposed civil right to live free from blight in an unreality.

Between Mack and the dirty man, it wasn’t a man-man thing, each fighting for his honor. It was his job. Civil servants with families had homes to support. They were of the community and not the underworld. They shouldn’t have to put their lives on the line even though they sometimes did.

That was enough drama for one day. Mack gave the man a quick pat down while he listened to pleas of innocent intent. Officer safety required self-defense but there was nothing to warrant an arrest. Mack shoed him off with the jerk of a hitchhiker's thumb. "Beat it." That was enough excitement for one day, more than most.

### LITTLE BROWN BANDIT

The last time Mack came through the 16<sup>th</sup> Street plaza in uniform, a middle aged man, possibly of Latino or Middle Eastern heritage or origin, come up to him with odd enthusiasm, "I really respect you officers. You keep us safe. I respect you. I do."

That wouldn't have caused Mack much concern except that he also shook Mack's hand with his left one and a bit too vigorously. Mack may not have been the most worldly of young men but he knew enough to know that to offer the left hand was the opposite of respect. In counties where people did their business into holes in the floor, to rinse it and themselves with a hose, using their left hands instead of toilet paper, that hand was reserved for just that purpose. The opposite of respect.

On this day on patrol as with most since, before he entered the next intersection, Mack again looked around for the left hand-shaker and didn't see him. With residual tensions relaxed, he stepped freely into the first of a pair of small city plazas, each kitty-corner to the other at the intersection above the Sixteenth Street BART Station. In the center of each plaza was gaping hole for escalators to move people down to the train platforms underground.

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It was always crowded in that little plaza, a transit hub with several bus stops on each of its four corners. A junky barrio affair. Commonly, the Mission District was known as the Mexican part of town but that stopped being true long before. He guessed that a half-dozen or more Spanish speaking countries were represented there including Central American ones that, in the eighties, fled to the United States to escape an American-sponsored fiasco at home. And half of that many Asian countries too, mixed with a smattering of long-term, white working class and newbie middle class young people with artistic bents. He intended to visit the Asian countries someday. He never got the chance. Too far away.

Officers were trained to look for the odd person or thing. But in that place with its a confusion of cultures, he faced a kaleidoscope of fractals, each with their own shape and color, each in motion and going in different directions. Well beyond odd, the plaza was visual wildness. So much so that was difficult to bring any single thing into focus for very long before something else tore his attention away and to it. An officer could actually see more of what was going on by *not* looking so hard. All that confusion could be disconcerting for many and for some people, scary. For others, it was exciting. Alive and beautiful.

It wasn't often that he got to walk patrol. Patrol lacked both efficiency and authority. The Mission District merchants had complained about the homeless who block their doors. They probably didn't block anything enough to matter and even if they did, they always left when asked. But it was their merchant group with aspirations for legitimacy and city-respect that had successfully moved his station from an old, dilapidated place held up by cracked mortar and stale gum into its new and functional civic building on Valencia. When the merchants made a request, even if just for attention, Captain Sanchez gave them attention.

Mack stood out from the crowd and not just because he wore a blue uniform. He was surrounded by people mostly shorter and browner than he. Mack was seriously white, tall, college-educated, American born and spoke English like the native he was. If Capt. Sanchez needed to advertise his assignment to the merchants, Mack was the billboard choice. The tall tree that catches the wind, Mack would never be in his element there but he was a part of it nevertheless, he hoped as its champion. Being a young man, he bathed in the respect that brought him. Many or maybe most older men didn't respect a man as a man until he was closer to thirty and had grown past having to prove something about the their newly grown, male selves rather than focus, as they would later, on getting their job done. Or had seen combat in the military. The Mission District was not quite that but an officer learned in a hurry.

Mack was more comfortable there in the barrio with the old shops and dollar stores than when he patrolled high-end boutiques in Union Square where the civilians, most from the suburbs, complained a great deal and only rarely about anything that mattered. But they spent big money in the city and that definitely mattered.

Yet in his more festive plaza, Mack had no illusions. There were some who hated cops for being cops and others that hated American cops in particular. To them, back home, men in uniform were the bad guys. State sanctioned extortionists. And the Americans there were their visiting experts to train them. And of course, in the plaza, there were plenty of substance abusers and *lunies* who years before had been housed and fed by the state at a hospital campus in truly lovely Napa. But the state had long abandoned them to the streets to live out their lives being hurried-along by just about everyone, sometimes arrested and jailed by the city at more cost than public care used to. Ugly thing, jail. To Mack, in his heart and not just in theory, the people in the

plaza deserved the same level of city services provided to everyone else in San Francisco – rich and poor alike.

Mack strolled past the front of the *MI Tierra Market* with its crates of basic fruits and vegetables in wood barrels out front and the pricier ones inside. He heard a woman scream in alarm from the inside. A man yelled orders in Spanish. It was a robbery in progress. Mack's training kicked in as intended. He lifted his 686 from its holster as he took only a half-step inside. To his right, he found the security of a wall. Against that wall, low next to the threshold, there was a small barrel of tiny, bright-orange habanero peppers shaped like little pumpkins but a great deal nastier.

Mack quickly scanned the aisles to his left in the dark, narrow store that was then, as always, packed tight with customers. Above, broken down into quadrants, a large flat scene monitor displayed images from security cameras in the rear. There were no other suspects. The bad guy had no partners. That made it more likely a drug problem than a gangster one.

The pair of cash registers in front were strategically placed on top of the ice cream cases. A Latino, tiny even by those standards, held a shiny revolver, a cheap chrome job that seemed to be almost as big as he. He had it pointed on the cashier nearer to Mack of the two. For just that moment, Mack was invisible to the offender.

“Abierto. Ahora. Abierto. Abierto, ahora.” In an unhelpful rage, the gun man had screamed the cashier into motionlessness. She saw Mack. The bad guy saw her see Mack and swung his weapon in that direction, lowered his body from the knees, distended his hands and knees far forward as he pushed his butt radically back to assume roughly the shape of a

horseshoe with its ends focused entirely on the officer. He began to take aim. Mack did not yell freeze like in the movies. The battle was already engaged. Minimal delay meant maximum officer safety.

Mack also did not have the luxury of a well-aimed shot, the product of controlled breathing, gun sights, and a gently squeezed trigger. It had to be a crude point and shoot affair. With a double tap neatly done. He couldn't account for the other shooter but in that crowded room, but Mack would not be the one letting off wild rounds.

In theory, if the target was close enough and if the first round hit square or even a bit low and he got the second one off fast enough -- as the weapon rose in recoil -- the second bullet would strike the target just above the first. The second was always a bit iffy for any gun, particularly for a revolver, even for a double action revolver. But his guy was so hyped up that he might not have immediately noticed being shot just once, even if hit center mass.

Mack could not see the wounds he inflicted, one or two. He watched as the shooter slipped from his radically tense pose. Instead of collapsing straight down as life left his body like a balloon losing air, once released, what was left of his extreme pose sprung him backward into the shelves of a flimsy, wire rack display case that had towered behind and above him. Its flat, colorful plastic bags of tortillas fell all over and around his body. Any more and he'd have buried himself in rolled flour and cornmeal. Mack also didn't hear the single shot the bad guy got off in his last moments.

The perpetrator was a bleeder. The store owner would lose business while closed for the investigation. That would cost him and his employees money. The biohazard cleanup crew would cost him a great deal more.

Back outside and lying on the sidewalk, Mack became angry for the first time: angry at himself for not securing the shooter's weapon and angry at the little guy for being a shooter at all. Mack's hospital registration alone would cost the city more than the dead man could steal from a barrio cash register. "Asshole."

The offender had set the stakes at life and death for the community, for law enforcement and for himself. And death it was. If not then, basic justice would have demanded it later under more formal circumstances, with a judge wearing black robes as he sentenced the criminal to die, to be executed in a public way for a public purpose. For cops, the death penalty was less about revenge. It wasn't that personal. It was about proportionality and peace and maybe even poetry. It was a natural part of the order of things. Perpetrators worked hard to not look weak. Dead was as weak as it could get. Good.

When the criminal justice system barred the death penalty as San Francisco's liberal politics did, it created an unnatural schism between itself and actual justice to make itself ever-more-irrelevant, ineffective - dangerous to itself and others.

It didn't entirely surprise Mack that Captain Sanchez arrived on scene as soon as the paramedics did. He stood behind them to give Mack a reassuring nod but nothing more. Paramedics had their job and he had his own to do. The captain was actually the first officer to examine the body of the deceased and question the witnesses. Or more exactly, to question people who claimed to be witnesses for the sake of being involved in a public spectacle. They'd sort out which was which in due course.

A couple of hours later, Sanchez also visited Mack in the emergency room at San Francisco General, “You did good. A good shooting. You get better. We’ll take care of you.”

Mack understood that he needed the captain’s support. Yes, the circumstances of the shooting were clear and Mack was clearly in the right. A hero even. But like other traditional police department in cities like New York and Chicago, his was a political organization. Merit did not always carry the day.

The department conducted its investigation of the shooting in short order. If Mack had killed the man in violation of its rules and procedures he could be disciplined, possibly dismissed from his job and his profession like any employee, anywhere. If he’d killed the man without adequate justification, it would be crime, maybe manslaughter or even murder, just as it would be for a civilian.

The departmental investigation soon found that, indeed, it was a “*good shooting*.” That didn’t mean anyone was happy about it. Or unhappy either. It meant only that it met the legal standards for necessity. Mack would eventually retire early and under a cloud, not because of this incident. In spite of it. To take a bullet from a bad guy in battle gave anyone, including a civilian, a badge of honor in the world of cops that was bigger and more profound than any that could be conveyed by politicians in a ceremony.

In the ER, Captain Sanchez explained the process to Mack. “Once released, they’ll put you off on paid leave for a few days.” That was standard but it wouldn’t mean much to him while stuck in a crackling clean bed on the fourth floor of San Francisco General with its shiny floors and grim soul. When he’d become stronger but was still recovering, he’d be assigned to the Records Room, a large Zombie-land warehouse for cops to kill time while on the mend or

pending charges. It was a large, shadowy, gray-painted work area of a warehouse sort, barely illuminated by long, old, rectangular, florescent light fixtures that hung by long chains from the high ceiling. It was not a great place to work and nothing to be proud of. But it beat sitting at home, watching television on workers comp.

“You’ll have to meet with the shrinks.” Sanchez didn’t mean an actual psychiatrist but one of the department’s two uniformed psychologists. Mack wasn’t in the mood to be shrunk but he understood that was the drill.

The captain reassured him, “Just sit there a nod a lot. They won’t bother you. I promise.”

The next day Officer Gordon, a staff psychologist in civilian clothes, said to Mack, “PTSD might become a problem. You might have night sweats and bad dreams. Without waking, you might find yourself screaming at the world. That’s normal. You might sometimes have flashbacks even during the day. That’s normal too. It won’t mean that you’re going crazy. You’ve had a big piece of your body torn up. That’s trauma. And you killed a man. More trauma. Perfectly normal to have a reaction. Pick up the phone and call me. Any time, day or night. I mean it. That’s my job. I’ll walk you through.”

Mack nodded.

“This is serious. I’m serious. Promise me that you’ll call.”

Mack nodded some more.

Officer Gordon knew he wouldn’t. The PTSD program was a bone thrown by liberal politicians. Not thrown to the cops for their benefit but to the voters to make it look like they cared and that they were in charge of things when, on the streets, they weren’t. Couldn’t be.

Mack didn't worry about PTSD. While he was still lying on the sidewalk waiting for the paramedics, he had time to reflect on what had just happened. He'd had killed a man. He couldn't see what the big deal about that was. The bad guy got nothing more than he deserved, a long time out for someone who clearly needed it. Being shot himself was the bigger deal. An active man by nature, Mack knew what it was like to be injured. He knew he could handle it.

### BREAKFAST ROAST

“So you're going to see your other girlfriend this morning?” Robyn had pulled away from the once adrift Mack as he came back into the world. With him back, she could get off his lap. She took her time to refresh their extra-large coffee cups glazed with the *49er* logo. His short interlude with the past couldn't compromise her glow from the quality man-woman time they'd shared earlier in the morning. At the sink, to find a simple spoon, she had to dig under a pile of Mack's unwashed pots and pans left-over from the Sunday afternoon before when he cooked up a vat of his rich, super-hot gumbo. Okra, shrimp, sweet catfish and sausage melded into the roux. The crabmeat fell apart into wispy filaments that seemed to reference Arabian calligraphy. Having been raised in his early years in the desert, Mack reveled in the organic. It would have been better if they'd had somewhere to put in their own garden. If Robyn and he owned their own place.

“Wouldn't that be great?” He quipped quietly but not even Robyn could hear him.

“How old did you say she was?” Robyn asked.

“Young.”

“Yeah, how young.”

“Anyanwu’s twenty-two.”

“Young, drop-dead gorgeous and tall like you?”

“All of that.”

“Rich black skin and a bubble butt that could only come from Africa?”

“Check and check. South Africa. Could bounce a dime off that thing.”

“I suppose you could go for a twofer this morning.”

“At my age, that’d probably kill me.”

“That sounds more like excuse than fact. You know that I don’t let any slackers into my bed.” She laughed.

“Oh. So you’re not jealous. Just greedy. Besides she got a boyfriend.”

“What’s his name?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Where’d they meet?”

Maybe it was a guy thing but Mack couldn’t care less about where they met, “She’s said only that he was also a student Berkeley and that he’s smart. He’d have to be to keep up with her.”

“And a stud.”

“Now you’re guessing.”

“I’m certainly not complaining. Basic biology drives the young to make babies and it’s their babies that feed us in our old age. What we do, we do for fun. Am I right?”

“Of course, you are, *dear*,” he said with sarcastic emphasis on the “dear.”

To bring him into line, Robyn sat back down in his lap to give his chest hair a rude tug.

It turned out that Mack, back on that Mission Street sidewalk, had been wrong about what the doctors could do. Since, he'd endured two bowels resections, the second to relieve a twist from the first. But he was right about the impact of his wound on sex. He'd lost interest for quite a while. It took Robyn to bring that back. She was both exciting enough to make the effort and risk worthwhile and was also safe enough so that it could happen at all.

It mattered to the both of them, where they met. Years earlier, a dozen white neighbors, angry about recent crimes, had come together at the nearby Potrero Hill Neighborhood House, a low slung, dark-wood structure. If its design looked like it had been borrowed from a Presbyterian summer camp to be oddly placed in the urbane, it was because that's what happened. The community center was a Presbyterian project meant to benefit neighbors in the black projects just over the hill.

Constructed during WWII as low-lying military barracks on a hillside near the Bay, that happened to have a great view, the abandoned barracks continued life thereafter as public housing projects. Nobody liked them but to displace the residents in favor of a high-end condo project, as might have happened in more recent times, was no longer acceptable. And yet to spend scarce public money to upgrade them up to more livable standards was also to accept their permanency. That was unimaginable. So the former barracks sat as they always had, and might always do, in an awkward status quo.

Robyn and Mack met in the small auditorium at the Neighborhood House. It had no stage and was, like the building's exterior mostly made of dark wood, but it had a spectacular, wide open view of a sunlit downtown and the Bay beyond. None of the neighbors cared about the view on that night.

"We pay your salary. Damn it all," a clearly frustrated man said as he took an aggressive stance, shoulders forward, face in the lead.

"No you don't," said Officer Dan Doser.

The city's assigned Neighborhood SAFE (Safety Awareness for Everyone) organizer cautioned, "Let's keep this civil. Please no profanity or personal attacks. They don't help."

Officer Doser wasn't offended and didn't think he needed the help, "The City and County of San Francisco pays my salary. It gives the orders. What you pay is taxes. So do I." Officer Doser had been less than diplomatic.

Mack added, "And the City wants you safe."

"Crime waves are not acceptable," asserted a middle-aged man. He was there to protect himself and family from criminals, sure, but mostly he was wanted to protect a million dollar plus real estate investment in gentrification in an area where most residents still drove late-model cars and lived under the protection of city rent control.

Unheard but undaunted, the newcomer repeated, "Absolutely unacceptable."

Mack wondered, not for the first time, what people meant when they said, "not acceptable" – beyond expressing a dislike for something coupled with a demonstration of false authority. Only to himself, Mack said, "Okay, he doesn't accept crime. And then what?" He asked the man aloud, "How long have you lived here?"

“Two years.”

Three of the longtime neighbors laughed. It'd been a great deal more dangerous before gentrification started. One commented, “You have no clue.” For a moment, it was no longer neighbors versus police. It'd become newcomers versus old. A basic class divide.

Mack saw the shift. He was working class himself and a long-timer who lived at the bottom of the hill for most of his life. But as a public sector worker, he had a job to do. He was there to placate all the neighbors. New and old. Rich and not-rich. In that dynamic, the screamers fed off each other with zero impact on crime or on the officers. The goal was for every one of them to leave the meeting fully sated.

Mack asserted, “Sir, crime is always unacceptable.” He'd actually said nothing but it worked. One empty platitude had neutralized another. The man sat down in a huff.

Officer Doser was, again, the less diplomatic one. Sensing a victory, he said dismissively to the seated neighbor, “You knew this was a high crime area before you moved in.” Another piece of nothingness put forward to for public consumption.

Robyn was at that meeting also but she was not one of the screamers and she didn't consider herself particularly vulnerable. She'd had lifetime of hard knocks. Periodic crime waves weren't among them.

The Potrero Hill neighborhood was indeed experiencing a crime wave: mostly broken glass on their vehicles in the morning and a just a couple sidewalk robberies at night. No big deal. Not really. Except for one robbery-murder at the top of Connecticut Street, three streets from the Neighborhood House that Mack had investigated early in his tenure as an inspector. As

usual, no one came forward as a witness to make themselves vulnerable to retaliation. And it took place only thirty yards north from the projects. Only thirty yards.

The white neighbors always blamed the blacks in the projects for whatever crime there was. They were right, as far as they went. But it wasn't the residents there who did the crime. In fact, they suffered more crime and more violent crime than anyone in that room of white people. Arrest records showed that outsiders came in to use the relatively cop-free area as a staging area before crime, and for cover after. They were pros.

Mack's involvement in the investigation of the Connecticut shooting got him roped into the Neighborhood House meeting as a department representative. And that he lived there, at the time, at the bottom of the hill on Mississippi. What the captain didn't say was that Mack had to supervise the meeting because he was the only one in Homicide Detail with even some community relations skills. Officer Doser certainly didn't.

"Then why don't we see more patrol cars?" A neighbor woman complained.

Officer Doser was only a little less blunt than before, "We're here, alright. But we can't be here all the time. You have to be our eyes and ears. Call us."

Mack added, "And to come forward as witnesses. If witnesses don't come forward to testify, there's not much we can do." A departmental cliché that tossed the problem back at the civilians. But the Connecticut street shooting was still an unspoken example.

Mack added, "You didn't see Officer Yang spend the night last week in the bushes below the Rec Center, at the scene of the Connecticut shooting. Officer Yang is one of our most productive officers, what we call, a cops'-cop. You got the best. He did his best."

“That’s just great,” the first speaker said sarcastically, “We got the best. And we ended up with nothing just the same.”

When a neighborhood got a bit nuts over crime, the city would assign through its neighborhood SAFE program, a community organizer to set up a meeting between the department and angry residents. The way the city worked those meeting was to invite the angriest residents into a room to let them vent on a couple of hapless cops. Damage control. Nothing more.

Predictably the residents would rant and rave for a while before they’d eventually burn out. They would feel good about having asserted themselves against cold, unfeeling, city hall bureaucrats. They would *feel* heard but they had really been played.

At the first sign of the anger’s dissipation, the SAFE organizer was supposed to take over the meeting to channel their energy away from the department and into busy work. They’d be made to feel involved. They’d be told to make a neighborhood map with the names and phone numbers of each resident so they could call each other when need be – which was practically never.

They were provided with an electric etching pen to mark their property with identifying numbers -- that never mattered. If the neighborhood met an artificial benchmark for participating households, the city would award them with a sign to post on a pole that would warn criminals that their neighborhood was SAFE organized. Criminals had better go to elsewhere. If the criminals paid it any attention, which was probably never, it was only to go to the neighborhood

next door and only for a little while, if that. Like all hunters and gathers, they'd be back when conditions shifted back to productive.

There had also been one non-fatal shooting to back up a robbery attempt by a substance abuser, on Wisconsin Street, only a block and a half from the meeting, where it met Madera. But that one didn't count. Not for the police or the neighbors. On a sidewalk, the offender held a gun on a neighbor who tried to cooperate but he'd left his wallet inside. His roommate pulled up in the middle of the exchange. He saw it was a confrontation but didn't understand what was really going on. Surprised by the intruder, the offender fired a single shot. It entered the second neighbor's wrist to exit close to the elbow. Drug addicts did what drug addicts did. Nothing could be done about that. The pros were everyone's bigger concern.

During the quick discussion about it, Officer Doser referred to the injured neighbor as "the victim." Cop talk. Crimes had victims. Every incident report identified them by that and by name when possible.

A man (the men dominated the meeting) took offense, "I don't identify as a victim. Not for a minute."

Neither did Robyn. During that tense period, when she left her apartment a short block from the drug addict shooting, had been, it'd become her style to slide a tiny, .22 caliber revolver under her wide, hand-crafted shawl she wrapped around her waist. A purse gun for a woman that didn't carry a purse.

It had no power but once an attacker was shot with even a little bullet, she figured, he'd reconsider options besides pursuing a robbery that was already over. That would be enough, she

reasoned and hoped. If they were together, Mack would not have approved but it was her choice to make. To kill a man rarely made sense to her, to kill over property made no sense.

She knew something about community meetings. She'd once been a field organizer for the Farmworkers Union in the early Seventies. At the Neighborhood House, what she saw was a PR scam but said nothing. She certainly wasn't going to let bureaucrats sap her energy by provoking her into pointless screaming. For the cops to keep her neighbors busy seemed like a good idea to her too. She just sat back and let it happen.

After the meeting, she approached the better looking, more muscular and definitely smarter of the two cops to tell him off, one-on-one. That went so well that Robyn bedded Mack that night, her first man in a long while and her first cop.

## SCAVENGING

"You never liked having a partner." She said to Mack still on his lap in their kitchen nook.

"I've got you."

"A work partner." Robyn needled his ribs with a finger.

"An assistant who wants a little American life experience before grad school. I can make that happen."

"I was only kidding before. Maybe being a bit greedy," she confessed. "This is okay for us. We'll make a little off her hours and she'll bring a lighter woman's touch to your operation."

“I’m meeting her at Laguna-Honda Hospital at eight-thirty. I have to get moving.” He gently nudged her off his lap. It was a hospital in name only, a city institution left over from when the Gold Rush had petered out. Many of the men remained. Long since then it had devolved into a city-operated nursing home with a thousand, mostly elderly residents.

“Man or woman?” She was referring to the deceased. Mack was on contract with a Texas insurance company, *Life Span & Causality*, to investigate the deaths of its insured before they paid out life insurance policies to the beneficiaries. Packed with elderly residents, it produced corpses as an inevitable by-product. Laguna was a regular haunt for Mack. Robyn hated the whole idea of institutional living. Mostly she hated the prospect that she might someday have to live in Laguna herself. Hearing the name alone made her skin crawl. Artists didn’t get city pensions. But if its residents were most anywhere besides civic-minded San Francisco, they’d either be on the streets like too many others or in homeless shelter.

“Man. He died overnight. The scene should still be fresh. Anyanwu’s email said she’d get there early on to make sure it stays that way. We’ll interview the witnesses, check the body and pick up the preliminary medical report if they have one. I’ll have my report and bill faxed to Dallas by five.”

He was anxious for the money but there was a larger problem. The job of a real private investigator wasn’t exciting and didn’t much interest him otherwise. Robyn could hear all of that in his voice. She understood that Mack missed the days when he had a recognized role in society, regular pay, the company of regular guys and authority behind what he did. But for her it was less embarrassing in her artist circles for him to be a retired cop than a cop-cop. Besides, both as an artist and his lover, she regularly appreciated that he could make his own hours.

She also appreciated the pain of his demotion. “I know it’s not as glamorous as homicide inspector.”

Mack’s retort, “At least it’s a full step above auto claims adjuster.”

“Ouch.”

Someone would die. He’d eyeball the deceased to confirm identity and status. He’d interview a witness or two, more at a large institution like Laguna. It was mindless work. His interview questions were preordained by some anonymous somebody at corporate based on court-trial records and actuarial studies. He’d fill out a form report. The beneficiary would get paid, frequently get paid a lot, enough to justify Mack’s professional fee, but never soon.

“And this time they’ll pay us, when?”

His pension from being a city employee was not enough to pay the rent and their modest expenses in expensive San Francisco. Artists almost never got paid.

“When they get good and ready. What do you have planned for the day?” Mack changed the subject.

“I’m going to the dump to scavenge for materials. Gerald said they got a fresh load of steel for me to pick through.” There weren’t many other women sculptors and practically none that worked at scale.

“Gerald, the eco Nazi,” Mack said.

The city dump was not some hole in the ground but people still called it that. Like a lot of cities, nothing got dumped there. It was more of a transit stop for discards to be sorted and trucked elsewhere in large tractor trailer rigs. Whatever got diverted from landfill, and most of it was, saved the city money. It even had an artist-in-residence program that once featured Robyn

to promote recycling by making it interesting and sometimes attractive to the community while productive in its own right.

“That’s him.” She agreed.

“Are you taking your death trap or did you get a ride this time?”

“The truck.” Hers was a beat-up, 1982 one-ton, flatbed Ford F-350 preliminarily painted by her with a flat blood-red primer then left at that. Her bumper sticker read, “A Woman & Her Truck - Is A Beautiful Thing.” Her particular truck had never had a pretty day.

“I’m not liking the tires.”

“As long as they go round and round, they’re good enough for me. It’s the cooling system that needs help. Last week, it overheated on the far end of Bayshore in South City, leaving me stranded with a bunch of overheated guys who tried to be helpful but not one had what the situation required, a tow.”

“Safety first.”

“Okay, you said your police officer-piece. Gerald has his eyes out for some used tires. It’s good for us that the downtown fleets throw them out on a paper schedule, not when the tread is actually worn. From Babylon to the dump to me.”

“I still don’t like your relying on the tires you’ve got on that truck, particularly if you plan to haul a heavy load. But I will change the thermostat for you. That might be enough to fix the cooling system. It’s old regardless.”

“That’d be good.”

“A thirty minute, thirty dollar job. No problem.”

She leaned into him, “Thank you, *Dear*,” with her own, Fifties emphasis on the word, “dear.”

He looked back at the paper. He knew the crime scene well. The image included the open steel tower that stood at the dark and extreme end of Embarcadero Station. The tower’s stairs were just two person-wide and not often used by commuters who preferred to ride the wide sets of escalators. Commuters were all about riding. Mack knew it because he preferred to walk. Apparently, so did the victim.

The stairs tower looked like it had been tacked onto the more substantial escalator tower as an afterthought. He thought that it was probably included to meet a previously overlooked safety code standard, the underground equivalent of a fire escape. There was not much to it. A steel skeleton rose high in a large void with table-sized landings closed in on three sides with thick glass. One of which, half the way down, encased the body of a dead girl.

The image in the paper included a portion of the enormous fiber sculpture that hung in parallel to the tower, a sixty foot long Macramé weave. The ropes that mimicked twine were as thick as Mack’s thighs. It was probably included in the train station, he thought, to meet some sort of PC city policy to promote art by requiring it in building projects.

Mack despised corporate art. He knew it was corporate art because it was overtly intended to be conceptual but added nothing to the world or art discourse. It was over-sized, over-stated and still boring. Of course being underground from the downtown office buildings, it really couldn’t have been anything other than it was. It had no doubt been expensive at the time but it had, by then, grown extremely dirty from neglect. It just sort of hung there massively and

ignored. Collecting dirt embedded in its fibers. Only corporate America could have created a public piece at the unused end of a train station that could be so profoundly stark and grungy at the same time. Finally, it seemed even to him, that in his time with Robyn, he'd become an amateur art snob without necessarily becoming an actual artist.

Artist or not, Mack continued to think like a cop as he examined the image in the newspaper, "Why would a man choose to murder a woman in that very public but empty place?" Mack had no idea. "Was there a private motive or maybe a public point to make? Either way, did the killer take special pleasure in the act of snuffing out a human life? Maybe it gave him a rush. Or was he cold and surgical? "The girl's body was oddly twisted in the pool of blood. She might have seen a chance to get away and gave it the big effort to try, even if only not to succeed. For that, she had Mack's respect.

For a good minute he tried to imagine the sense of vulnerability a young woman like her must have felt down there, alone in the dark, hanging from a light steel tower in mid-air, even before her attacker's appearance. He couldn't.

#### INTERRUPTS

"Excuse me, sir. You're getting wet," said a matronly woman about his age.

Mack was indeed getting wet but not by much. It was worth it. He stood in the first floor gallery for modern art at the *de Young Museum*, in Golden Gate Park. A very long walk from Potrero Hill. He made the pilgrimage regularly.

*Hama* was Robyn's last piece to make a public splash. At just over seven feet tall and fitted from pieces of steel, she modeled it on the giant, Byzantine, wood-paddle, water wheels on the Orontes River that still turned in the middle of modern Syria. Mack worshiped Robyn. Anyone with good sense could see that she was the sexiest woman on the planet.

An art critic missed the whole point of the piece. Critics did that sometimes. Where artists saw substance, he focused too much on craft. Craft mattered but it was at its strongest when it disappeared workmanship into the art itself. He wrote, "Molten waves of rippling-perfect welding beads caressed junctions between flats and angles, undulating as sweetly as knit-and-pearl." Just as there were wannabe cops, Mack figured, there were wannabe artists. He imagined that this one had apparently been stuck staring at a computer screen for too long, straining for just the right metaphors when the piece he had viewed was already the metaphor.

Her art was not in the welds or in the intricacy of the unevenly offset spokes. And it was not in the Mylar-net bags that she had delicately woven, stuffed with coins and set into some of the open wedge spaces between spokes. Her art was more than that.

One benefit to being the lover of an artist was that Mack got to help. With three winches, he muscled and she guided the wheel from flat on the studio floor where it had been constructed, to vertical and on top of a wide pyramid made of mini bricks which, once on site, would sit in a ceremonial pool of water. The pyramid's bricks were small but real. She made them with a true love for earth materials. For a time, that part of her project got away from her as she put maybe too much effort into them. By hand, one brick at a time, she coarsely-pitted them to suggest that they'd survived the ages under inhospitable circumstances. Making, baking, surfacing and laying

small blocks of reddish and gray clays, some she smeared with a mossy-green glaze, was tedious and trying. But that was not her art either.

The music that broadcast from inside the pyramid, her favorite aria from Lakmé sung decades before, was art. High art. Madymesplé's voice continued to soar powerfully and angelically even through the low fi recording of her day. Her song seemed to carry Mack into the heavens. "*Doucement glissons de son flot charmant, Suivons le courant fuyant. Dans l'onde frémissante. D'une main nonchalante...*"

To Mack's *escultura*, the magic was not actually in the song or the heavens. Its source, as Robyn would explain, was inside us where she, he and we could sometimes, even if only momentarily, find a state of grace very personally for ourselves. But the music was not *her* art.

Her art could not be seen or heard. It was not time but was experienced through time. Mack stood just inches in front of the complicated, dripping-wet wheel structure as it spun clockwise around him at the shoulders to splash his face gently, as it was slowly rusting but very obviously not ever going away.

"Excuse me, sir. Please stay behind the white line."

Mack barely gave the security guy a glance. Without losing his attention on Robyn's piece, Mack produced his retired peace officers' identification from a pocket which showed him to be a sergeant-homicide inspector. Between strangers in law enforcement, rank practically guaranteed respect. "I'm working," Mack said in conclusion.

There were moments when the open spokes allowed the coloratura soprano's voice to pass through and into him. There were other moments when the spokes nested with bags of coins periodically mooted spiritual flight with their profanity.

Robyn's art was the unexpectedly uncomfortable yearn Mack bodily felt as he was made to wait an inordinate amount of time for the wheel to turn just enough more, for the sublime to return.

### SOLIDARITY CIRCLE B

"I'm a friend of Steve's," Steve Zero called out to the small group as they sat facing him front of him in Laguna's, fourth floor, "TV Room 3." In chorus, the five old men gave their response in unison as trained, "I'm a friend of Steve's." Sunday nights were quieter than most and most were quite quiet in the four floor men's ward.

"The Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center" was its official name. It had been, as a plaque said, established as a charity hospital in the late Nineteenth Century to take care of elderly "Forty-Niners" - men left over from the heady days of the famous Gold-Rush that put San Francisco on the map. "Laguna" as it was more simply known, had long ago devolved into enormous, city-operated nursing home for the elderly and disabled.

Steve Zero hadn't had to wait long for his comrades to arrive that night. If the men were anything, they were timely. First, he could hear a barely audible voice from outside the door, "The coast is clear." Together, one after the other, led by the elder Steve One, they rolled their power chairs and scooters through the door like a geriatric biker gang, to form a half-circle formation in front of Steve Zero with his back to a blank television, coming to a stop in their precise, predetermined places. Excited, naughty conspiracy was apparent from their tense but delighted faces. They were breaking the rules just by being there after the room's closing.

They were not exactly a captive audience. Steve Zero was middle-aged and perfectly healthy. Not a resident. Three of the men were confined by their physical and emotional limitations and the weight of their chairs. Two were entirely ambulatory but not necessarily motivated to activity without prompting.

“TV Room 3” was the smallest of the three television rooms, each with a different size television. In theory, a resident could find something he wanted to watch in one or the other. If not there, then in the open wards there were a few privately owned units. Usually, it didn’t matter much. After all, *television was just television*. With most of their heads drooped forward, residents didn’t talk much and they read even less. Television was comforting or at least mind-numbing, and sometimes, if rarely, also entertaining. Even with only the audio in the background – some of the elder men stared blankly out the large institutional windows into the tree tops. That was okay also. But meals were their most prized activity – bodily fulfillment three times a day.

With the troops in place, Steve Zero began to tap his right shoe rhythmically, the clap made sharp by its leather sole. In time to his taps, the other men began their own loud, tapping, three with their feet against the floor and two with their hands against the frames of their power scooters, not making harmony but to make noise was good enough.

At exactly midnight every night, the unit nurses locked the doors and cut the power to the television rooms, just as they locked up the drugs in the medicine locker. That night, Steve Zero, as he was known for these sensitive occasions, had used his pass key to open the room back up for the others. He’d pulled along behind him a pair of oxygen tanks on wheels which he’d rolled towards the center of the room, directly in front of the forty-nine inch, flat screen television hung

on a side wall. Both of the silver tanks were clearly marked for oxygen by their crowns of green paint at top, a warning augmented by stickers appropriate to that potentially hazardous gas.

With the men in their places, Steve Zero scooted a low table into their middle, in front of the tanks. Ponderously, in front of each man he placed a mask on the table from which dangled a two-foot length of clear tube. In the middle of the table, he heaped a fistful of new balloons ready to inflate. All of it, a ruse. Should they be interrupted, the oxygen warnings might not seem significant for older men who might very well have had no prescriptions for it. At worse, a small hullabaloo might ensue, rules were rules, but there was nothing serious about it. A minor infraction. Ruse level two: helium, not oxygen, was the gas actually inside the tank. Despite the men being well past their partying days, if the helium were found out, the balloons might make that gas make sense. A lot of thinking had gone into their ceremony. Too much.

Steve Zero understood and took advantage of the disproportionate power a television had in society, as the center-piece defining a modern-day tabernacle, but it was even more powerful in a nursing home. With his back to the television to augment his own, Steve Zero stared hard into the eyes of each man in series. He began, exactly as he began each of their training sessions for this eventuality. “Men, dying is something absolutely everyone does. It is something that everyone *can* do. You can’t flunk dying. We all know that. But you can sacrifice your friendships and immortal honor if you or any one of us fails to stick by the others. Through *solidarity* we evolve from mere individuals into a single unit. We each have to make the choice, to die with honor together or not.”

Steve Zero had not turned on the harsh overhead lights. The ambulant light from the night sky and street lights below seemed to drift in softly, diffusely through the trees and the windows.

Even so, the men's eyes remained invisible in the recesses of their wrinkled faces. The room was twelve by fifteen feet square, uncomfortably tight during the day with residents but made to feel tighter that night by the tension the men shared. The room had been painted too long ago in an institutional beige. Along, below standing chest height, the walls had become scraped with black marks most everywhere. In two places, where the plaster had been breached by abuse, a fine, white dust daily settled in neat piles on the otherwise clean floor below.

His part done, Steve Zero began his solemn exit. At no point did he turn his back to the men. He backed out the door, whispering only, "You know what to do." They did. The only thing they didn't know was *who* among them would be the one to do, the big *it*.

Steve One once again exercised leadership over the group. He fitted his mask to his face, pulled the elastic band behind tight behind then fit its empty tube to the first tank. A scrawny, little old man, he'd long ago outlived the actuarial tables and with the help of the chair, he could still get around on his own. Over his mask made luminous by the night's light, he smiled. Evil was in his eyes. He was in no hurry but if need be he was ready to end his days that night. Either way was fine by him. On exactly the beat of the next tap, he gently tossed a shiny quarter onto the table. It rolled in two lazy circles before it laid flat to come up heads. His mask remained in place as he removed his tube from the tank. Fate had given him a pass.

Steve Two was next in order. He was a man in his late sixties who could gainfully wheel his bellowing body of considerable weight through the halls and even around the grounds when he chose but he mostly, as they all did, chose to stay close to home. He'd always been heavy but institutional living had made it worse. With his tube fitted to replace Steve One's, his toss was not so lucky and he was not at all comfortable with his fate. Tails, he lost. His tube remained

secure to the first tank. He did not see any mystical, harbinger of oncoming death or his life flash before his eyes. Just a case of the nerves. Like a long drool, his tube merely hung rather pathetically from chin to tank.

Steve Three was the other Steve plagued by weight. On that night, he sweated profusely around his mask. It clouded it up. He had no family to visit him and nothing to lose apart from life itself which wasn't all that great anyway but he was not ready to die. But the alternative of shaming himself with inaction was too daunting. He felt shame merely for the doubt where manly courage was supposed to be. And had once been. The others responded to his hesitation by making heavier and louder their taps against floor and steel. His hand pointed his tube onto the nipple on the second tank, then hesitated some more before launching it forward. His sweaty fingers slipped on the smooth plastic. For too long, the tube swung limply below his likewise wet neck and face. The tempo of tapping feet and hands, like a death march, hurried him along. On his second try, he was successful with the tube and also successful with his toss. Heads. On the table there were three quarters. Two heads and one tails. One tube fitted to tank, the other free.

Although the youngest of the group, Steve Four was the most limited of the men. Beyond his age, a man in his early fifties, he suffered from a developmental disability. Yet he was sufficiently intelligent and aware of his circumstances to carry on alone with most of life's tasks including if he had to, its last one. If his mother had been there, she'd been horrified. Knowing her, she'd have intervened to save her son while chastising the latest set of males to take advantage of him. As much as Steve Four wanted to be anywhere, elsewhere, it pleased him that his Mother was far away. He understood exactly his current predicament when he fitted his tube to tank. Heads. He'd live to see the next day and his mother again.

Steve Five was the last to go. He and the unfortunate Steve Two were equally fearful. Anxious to get it over, Steve Five fitted his tube to open nipple, leaned forward in his chair and dropped his coin. It landed with a bounce that gave no indication of which way it would go. Tails.

Two tails up coins sat there ominously. The prospect of a bonus round increased the tension and tempo of taps into ferocity. Together Steve's Two and Five picked up their coins to toss them back to the table. Steve Two was out of luck. The rest quickly retrieved their coins from play but left their masks on. *Solidarity*.

Anxious to get on with it, Steve Two leaned forward to give the valve on his tank a good, solid turn. The men could only barely hear the gas hiss its way from tank to tube to man. Steve Two, a.k.a. Enrique Gomez, a graduate of Mission High, took that moment to make eye contact with each of the other men in slow turn. It frustrated him that in his last contact with others, their eyes were shrouded by darkness. But there was no mistaking that Steve Three's terror when he turned away unable to participate in the others' anti-social game. But that didn't make him clean of it. Months before, the absentee Steve Zero came to understand that Steve Three had become an obvious problem.

Helium gas quickly filled Steve Five's lungs. It was not a poison gas, it left no trace and it caused him no direct harm. Indeed, it made normal breathing possible while it deprived his body of life-sustaining oxygen. His cells quietly, simply suffocated. There was no alarm and no pain. In quick order, his head fell to the side as if he'd, once again, merely fallen asleep in front of a television. When the hospital later conducted the mandatory autopsy, it would find nothing to indicate foul play. And the guys would leave behind nothing to suggest helium or anything else

that might implicate them or Steve Zero. Officially, as was routine there, Steve Two was declared to have merely suffered a heart attack. The oxygen tanks to be dismissed.

With Steve Two's sacrifice, the surviving Steves would not be compelled to don masks again, not any time soon. But their life circumstances had been much improved by their power scooters. For that, Steve Two would be appreciated but not actually missed. Laguna wasn't really much of a place for sentimentality.