

EMBARCADERO ONE
A Detective Thriller

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; his job was to protect the people around him but he was unable to move. He couldn’t even see straight.

Sitting at his kitchen nook, now safe from any harm, Mack sank into the memory of this incident. He found himself back on the streets as if it were real. It was more like he watched a film for the second time rather than to revisit a recollection. It was always exactly the same. And in a very real way, it was real. It was, right then, happening.

“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.

“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.” To ground himself he tried to focus the hard, grainy concrete along his backside. That proved to be too difficult to find much less keep his attention.

The second guy also tried to be reassuring, “The doctors know what they’re doing. Last year, an amigo caught a bullet, even higher than yours. They patched him up perfecto. 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. The realization killed the smile.

Mack didn’t have a lot to do while he laid there. Mostly he looked up towards the sky. 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.

As ugly and chaotic as they were, Mack also liked the wires that ran above him along the street and that crisscrossed 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 the 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 taken her opportunity to gently chide him for caring. 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.

He looked down at the Monday morning headline. 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. It's vantage was down from the floor that ran one level below street level. It 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.

A girl's inert body lay upon a small, steel landing on an ancillary, open frame tower adjacent to a bank of wide escalators that supported a narrow set of stairs on its side. Those stairs served as backup to connect the BART platform on bottom to the walkway floor near the street, at top. She was dressed mostly in black from her Converse sneakers to her full head of jet-black hair. As a theatric extra, that morning, the girl had 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 was on its own, lofted alone in the air.

Back in their kitchen nook, Robyn stood by Mack's side to see a familiar gloom had come over his face. 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.

Robyn took her time to refresh their extra-large coffee cups glazed with the *49er* logo. She read the headline for herself, looked back at him. Even when fully conscious he would sometimes sit silent in their kitchen nook 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 morning in the early summer.

"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 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 a place that sort of thing didn't normally happen, in the downtown financial district, where business and their support people from throughout the Bay Area came together daily 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 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 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 mildly-absentee Mack's 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 yet she was convinced he had to be able to 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 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, just like those outside his kitchen window at the top of Potrero Hill, the horizontal power and communication lines almost on par with their second floor apartment, the squared edges of nearby, low-lying buildings on the flatlands below, the lengths of the streets down there. Farther out across the Bay, the long ridge and coastal lines that framed Oakland, above and below, east and west. Back closer to home, a stark, vertical, concrete smoke stack rose dramatically high as did the old wood telephone poles in the kitchen's near view. Cutting across the other lines, down by the water's edge, there were the fan patterns of piers that hadn't been used in decades. None of what Mack actually saw was real 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 talk to us. It should have been built with lots of glass to let the sunshine in - like the Library. 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.

“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 bay.”

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. Pedestrian friendly. One stretch 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.*” 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 by taquerías, used furniture and liquor stores, sushi, Thai and Chinese food.

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 literally several 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. Even the internal walls built to bunker specifications. At the far end of the foyer from Valencia Street, a thick, bullet-proof glass pane stood between desk officer and inquiring civilian. 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, as he said repeatedly, 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 at bay. 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 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. 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. 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 of 16th Street, Mack stopped where others waited at the red light. 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 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" and a wag of her finger for her 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 it worked mechanically and 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 three 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 so it just looks bigger." 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 as if cued, "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 with 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 level 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 about it. 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." And soon.

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!*" 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 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 as 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 was 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 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 16th 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 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 and homes to support 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 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 a bit too vigorously and with his left hand. 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 them with a hose and to use their left hands instead of toilet paper, the left 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 the left hand-shaker and didn't see him and so 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.

It was always crowded in that plaza, a transit hub with 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 accurate long before. He guessed that a half-dozen or more Spanish speaking countries were represented there including Central American ones that, in the eighties, sent their people to the United States to escape an American 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.

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 like a native. 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 male 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 the 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 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 town 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 in that sort of thing. And of course in the plaza, there were plenty of substance abusers and *lunies* who used to get housed and fed by the state at a hospital campus in truly lovely Napa. But they'd been long abandoned 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.

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 enough to matter and even if they did, they normally 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 paused in 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. Mack's training kicked in as intended. He lifted his 686 from its holster as he took barely one 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.

Over top the ice cream case up front near door where the cash registers were, a Latino, tiny 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 nearer to Mack of the two cashiers. For just that moment, Mack was invisible to the offender.

“Abierto. Ahora. Abierto. Abierto.” In an unhelpful rage, the gun man had screamed the cashier into immobility. 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 focused entirely on the officer. He began to take aim. Mack did not yell freeze like in the movies. 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, Mack would not be the one letting off wild rounds.

In theory, if the target was close enough and if the first round hit a bit low and he got the second one off fast enough -- as the weapon rose in mild recoil -- the second bullet would strike the target just above the first. The second was always a bit iffy for any gun particularly a revolver, even for a double action revolver. But his guy was so hyped up that he might not have 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 radical pose to crash backward into the shelves of a flimsy, wire rack display case that had towered above him. Its flat, colorful plastic bags of tortillas fell all around him. 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 as he fell backward.

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. “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 who wore black robes when 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 every-more-irrelevant, ineffective - dangerous to itself and others.

It didn't entirely surprise Mack that Captain Sanchez arrived on scene soon after 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. 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. 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. 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 gave anyone, including a civilian, a badge of honor in the world of cops that was bigger and more profound than ones that could be conveyed by politicians in a ceremony.

In the ER, Captain Sanchez explained the process to Mack. "They'll put you off on paid leave for a few days." That was standard but it wouldn't mean much in his case when he was also 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, rectangular, old florescent lights fixtures that hung by chains from the high ceiling. It was not a great place to work and nothing to be proud of. 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, said to Mack, "PTSD might become a problem. You might have nice 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 needed it. Being shot himself was the bigger deal. An active man by nature, Mack knew what it was like to be injured. He could handle it.

BREAKFAST ROAST

“So you’re going to see your other girlfriend this morning?” Robyn had pulled a once adrift Mack back into the world. With him back, she got off his lap to get hot coffee for the both of them. 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 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 that could only come from Africa?”

“Check and check. 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.”

“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. I have nothing against basic biology. It drives the young to make babies and the babies 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.”

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

It turned out that Mack, back on that Mission Street sidewalk, had been wrong about what the doctors could do. Since, he'd endured through three 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 angry, white neighbors had come together at the 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 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 the old days, was no longer acceptable. But 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.

The auditorium where Robyn and Mack met at the Neighborhood House was small, had no stage and was, like the building's exterior mostly 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, not 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 assigned Neighborhood SAFE 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 a demonstration of false authority and a dislike for something, To himself, "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 long-timer who lived at the bottom of the hill for a very long time. 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. 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 very few sidewalk robberies at night. No big deal. Not really. Except for one robbery-murder at the top of Connecticut Street that Mack had investigated early in his tenure as a detective. As usual, no one came forward as a witness and it took place only thirty yards north from the projects. Only thirty yards.

The neighbors always blamed 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 go to 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 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. 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 again to channel their energy into busy work and away from the department. 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 practically 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, only a block and a half from the meeting on Wisconsin Street, where it met Madera. But that one didn’t count. Not for the police or the neighbors. The offender held a gun on one of the neighbors. The neighbor tried to cooperate but he’d left his wallet inside. His roommate pulled up in the the middle. He saw the confrontation but didn’t understand what was really going on. Surprised by the intruder, the offender fired a single shot. It entered the first 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 the discussion about it, Officer Doser referred to the injured neighbor as “the victim.” Cop talk. Crimes had victims. Every incident report identified them 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 belt. A purse gun for a woman that didn’t carry a purse.

[Ed note: the wardrobe description here doesn't work. No woman is going to distort her look like this. I suggest you go back to it being a "purse gun."]

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. 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 as a community 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. But 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.

"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 a bit greedy," she confessed. "This is a good arrangement for us. We'll make a little off her hours, we seriously need the money, 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, *Venerable Life & Causality*, **[Ed note: is this name meant to be a joke? Because it really is too silly]** to investigate the deaths of its insured before they paid out life insurance policies to the beneficiaries. 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. But if its residents were most anywhere besides civic-minded San Francisco, they'd either be on the streets 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 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. 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 had only recently kicked in and with only fifteen years in the department, it was not enough to pay the rent and their modest expenses. 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. Actually, 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 and promoted 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 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 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 its discourse. It was oversized, 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. Only corporate America could have created a public space, 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?”

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 turn 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, 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 made, 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 said, was in 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 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. 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 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 group as they sat in front of him in “TV Room 3.” In chorus, the five men gave their response as trained, “I’m a friend of Steve’s.” Sunday evenings were quieter than most and most were quite quiet in the four floor men’s ward at Laguna.

“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. Robyn would have hated to live in Laguna. But if its residents had been most anywhere besides civic-minded San Francisco, they’d most likely ended up either on the streets or in homeless shelter.

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 around 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.

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

“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. Usually, it didn’t matter much. After all, *television was just television*. If not there, then in the open wards there were a few privately owned units. The 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 – the elder men could stare 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 brought with him a pair of oxygen tanks on wheels which he'd rolled towards the center of the room, directly in front of the forty-four inch, flat screen television. Both of the silver tanks were clearly marked for oxygen with a crown of green paint at their 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. Ponderously, in front of each man he placed a mask 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.

Steve Zero understood and took advantage of the disproportionate power a television had in society, a modern-day tabernacle, but it had even more so in nursing home. With his back to the television to augment his own, Steve Zero faced his men. 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 **[Ed note: this is no really a word, or at least a word that wouldn't apply to light. Could you have meant ambient?]** light from the night sky and street lights below seemed to drift in softly, diffusely through the trees and the windows to back light the men. They who faced the television but their eyes remained invisible in the recesses of their faces. The room was ten by twelve feet square, uncomfortably tight during the day but made to feel tighter by the tension the men the shared. The room had been painted too long ago in an institutional beige. 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. As he backed out the door, he whispered 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 behind tight and 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 get around on his own. Over his mask made luminous by backlight, 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 wheeled his bellowing body of considerable weight through the halls and even around the grounds when he chose but he mostly chose to stay close to home. He'd always been heavy but institutional living had made it worse. He was not so lucky with his toss and not at all comfortable with his fate. Tails, he lost. His tube remained secure to the first tank. He did not see any mystical any 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 table.

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 else to loose apart from life itself which wasn't all that great anyway but the alternative was too daunting. He felt shame for the doubt where manly courage was supposed to be. The others responded to his hesitation by making heavier and louder their taps against floor and steel. His hand pointed the tube onto the nipple then hesitated some more before it launch to the nipple of the second tank where 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 nipple fitted to tank, the 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, and his non-functioning legs, he also 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 Three 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. Heads.

Two heads 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 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 and who were would be shrouded by darkness. But there was no mistaking that Steve Three's terror when turned away unable to participate in the other's anti-social game. He wasn't clean of it either. 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 air. 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, Steve Two merely suffered a heart attack like so many older men there.

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

FOG BLANKET

“Man o’ man, it’s cold up here,” Mack said aloud but only to himself as he topped the saddle between Twin Peaks and Diamond Heights, just before he gratefully descended away from Monday morning’s busy, noisy, smoggy Portola Drive.

Woodside Avenue would take him the short distance left to at least the foot of the grounds of Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation. Mack generally walked to work when he could. To Laguna from Potrero Hill, it was only four miles-plus up and over Twin Peaks. Mack would never be the television-stereotypical cop grown fat from sitting in a patrol car or at the station, gabbing and eating donuts.

Not every morning but certainly every summer morning included fog. High up, shards of ice tossed around in the fog by micro wind sheers, pricked at the exposed skin on his cheeks. They hit him from every possible point of attack with no more logic than persistent mosquitos might have had in a warmer place. The fog didn’t just sit there. It was an active thing. Animated. He tried to pretend it away. He knew it wouldn’t be long until he walked into institutional warmth.

He tucked himself down into his favorite sports jacket - bought just three months earlier for forty percent off at Nordstrom’s “Spring Sale.” Blue with narrow labels, a straight cut and fitted tight to his body as if it were his business to sell physical fitness. Three-season appropriate to a San Francisco summer day that virtually always started with its chilly fog that cleared before lunch to return soon after.

As the last thing he always did before going out the door, he’d pop his head through the loop of a brown canvas satchel stuffed basic office supplies - pens, paper, recorder and such - as well as a change of shirt. Yes it was cold but he was a man prone to sweat. When he showed up at Laguna Hospital he’d predictably be sweaty beyond business-proper. The change of shirt mitigated the distance between his physical reality and the more attenuated ones ahead of him.

His preferred route took him from one end to the other of the 24th Street experience. His end was dominated by small, Latino merchants. No chain stores. No Starbucks. Spanish-speaking for the most part but there were also young white people of an arty sort, mostly gathered quietly and apart from the indigenous population, unofficially segregated together in their coffee shops overtly reminiscent of the city’s more Bohemian days.

24th Street soon crossed Mission Street to run up the middle of an upward sloping Noe Valley. The merchants and culture became mainly white and upscale but it was no more or less foreign to him than The Mission District, just as comfortable. Quite nice. Much quieter than the barrio below.

From there, to avoid the fast commuter traffic, noise and smog of the thoroughfares like Cesar Chavez and Portola for as long as possible, he cut through the residential streets, to work them like switchbacks on his climb.

At top and in his final ten minutes of cold, he reflected on what he and nobody else called *the reasonable people* below, those who arrogantly relied on their powers of

reason. Intellect. Among tourists, they were the ones who concluded that it was simply not reasonable for a California city to get seriously cold when California was a state obviously too hot. The reasonable people lived in the realm of abstraction and were generally wrong about events back down on earth. In Fishermen's Wharf, they stood out in their corny t-shirts and silly shorts. Shaking and swearing.

The other kind of people were more akin to himself, based in evidence. They'd have a jacket on their backs or tied around their waists. They were the ones who listened to reports and rumors about just how awful the San Francisco fog could be during the summer. No analysis necessary. They didn't need to know how the process worked to remain warm once outside their hotel rooms. In the summer, the *always-hot-in-the-summer* Sacramento Valley pushed its heat upward into a high pressure zone that, below, pulled the *always-cold* Pacific Ocean air into the coastal areas. That meant fog and Mack was glad for it. Above, it formed a protective shield against what was for him, the Valley's unbearable heat, a scorching too reminiscent of his Elko, Nevada, except artificially made humid by extensive irrigation. Fog was at least bearable. He could dress for it.

Mack could tell a lot about a person from what part of the Bay Area they chose to live. If they lived in the city's western, residential and quasi-quiet Sunset and Richmond Districts, they spent their summers entirely inside the fog bank. If just a dozen miles east, they'd bath in the sun and heat of the Valley with its more Southern California feel. Or they could live in any of a variety of micro climates in-between, like in relatively sunny Oakland. But Mack and Robyn preferred Potrero Hill, the sunniest District in the relatively sophisticated, in the more multi-cultural San Francisco they'd both been raised in.

An icy chill cursed through Mack when he stopped at bottom of Woodside to change shirts, just before he turned around the corner to head back uphill to the venerable Laguna-Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center. Across the street also named Laguna-Honda was the likewise venerable Forest Hill Muni Station where a large 911 scene in progress. No smoke and no fire but fire trucks and patrol cars were parked were haphazardly to block the intersection. To the unschooled in local 911 affairs, it probably seemed odd that the city would send an extraordinarily long truck labeled "Arial" to a subterranean train station. The one marked "Heavy Rescue" made more sense but not much more. But why so many fire and police vehicles for what was probably no more than a stressed commuter fearful that he was having a long overdue heart attack that would turn out to be no more than intestinal gas? Mack knew that when the city got a 911 call bearing on its own property, it sent everything it had.

Mack's training and instincts propelled him forward but he was retired. Whatever was going on, was none of his business. He turned around to face uphill to formal grounds to what was his business, the hospital at its top. Expansive grounds that had been carefully landscaped in the Twenties, had long been left to go. That morning there were fresh dirt-scars across the coarse grass, rudely left by a tractor still pulling a parade of mowers behind it. The gardens remained in squares but weeds had taken them over to obscure their edges. The beige-pink paint on the buildings above them had given way to

gray chips of exposed stucco and flakes on rotting wooden window sills. Civic pride had been abandoned there.

There was a time when civic pride reigned, in the Nineteenth Century, for example. After the 49ers exhausted the gold, many hung around, broke and a continent apart from where home used to be, with nowhere to go, too old, too sick and in need of a place to stay. The city started the hospital as an alms house. In the early Twentieth Century, they built the present structure with large wards that staff modernly with some embarrassment referred to as, "State of the art for Florence Nightingale."

By then Laguna housed a thousand elderly and disabled. As a byproduct, it necessarily produced corpses and the occasional life insurance claim. That meant work for free-lance insurance investigators. Easy work. No controversies. Nearly always the cause of death would be officially and conveniently declared, "Cardiac Arrest." For Mack, it was: in-and-out and fill out a form. Barely had to talk to anyone.

Sticking up in the air from behind and towering over the buildings, like Godzilla might have, there was a single boom crane. It represented the hospital's future. New facilities were right then being built. Or they would be, once the crane operator got back to work. The bond measure to finance the project passed with some controversy, everything political in San Francisco generated controversy. But no one was particularly excited about the actual construction part. After all, Laguna-Honda was a nursing home. How exciting could that be?

The insides of the place were surprisingly pleasant. Life was low key. Very little excitement involved. Except for that morning. Just inside the massive wooden doors outside the administration offices, several staff had congregated. A quiet tension ensued. The police had called to confirm that the deceased in the Forest Hill Station was, in fact, a resident of the hospital. Throughout it all, a young male, a deputy sheriff, unassuming and overweight, sat at his small table between administration and the access to the wards. He'd check identifications when he had to but never looked up from his crossword.

FOREST HILL STATION

Hours earlier THAT Monday morning, Steve Zero called Steve Three, “Things didn’t go as smoothly last night as they could have. We need to upgrade our security. We need to talk. I need for you to meet me at my Civic Center office at 9:30. Easy. The commuter traffic should have died down by then.”

Steve Three was understandably nervous. He said only, “Yes.” He knew he was in trouble and he knew why.

Steve Zero continued, “Don’t take notes but here’s what you’re going to do. At exactly nine o’clock, no earlier and no later, enter the Forest Hill Station, go downstairs to the in-bound platform and take the very next train that comes in. Get off at Civic Center, exit up the Larkin Street escalator, walk two blocks to the Asian Art Museum. I’ll meet you out front. Got it?”

Steve Three didn’t actually get that far. He only tried.

The Forest Hill Station was directly across busy, hectic, Laguna Honda Boulevard which Steve dreaded to have to cross. If nothing else, to face its noise was daunting enough for a man who had grown accustomed to institutional quiet. On that morning, to face Steve Zero could well be unbearable.

The station itself was WWI era, mausoleum-like structure, framed in trees, a motif of pretention that referenced the classical with three overreaching arches that framed three seemingly smallish doors below. Under a smattering of ivy that up its walls, gray mildew had welded itself to gray concrete that masqueraded as stone. Grim and grainy. And all of it was merely an aboveground façade for over an underground train station. At least the outside made for a coherent presentation. The insides did not. Generations of modern needs had been scabbed into the old design.

The inside ceilings had been built presumptuously high. Reflecting distinct generations of technology, security cameras had been hung from them but only as an afterthought. The city had started with clunky cameras it encased in large, worn and locked, Plexiglas boxes. Haphazardly, newer camera had also been later installed among them. Probably no commuter felt safe there and probably none had ever seen a station attendant give even glance at one of the many, bulky monitors mounted inside the upstairs booth enclosed in bulletproof glass to make the attendants feel safe from the public. To the side of the booth, the several turnstiles had been crowded together. They were also not part of the original design. Nor was the more modern ADA, temporary-plywood ramp that city workers had permanently inserted other end at the top of three marble stairs.

The drop to the train platform level was considerable. It had to be to marry the west end of a deep, two mile long tube that allowed passengers to pass well under Twin Peaks, to come out in the Castro District on the other side. From there, it was only a short ride to Civic Center.

The other passengers marched straight ahead from their turnstiles to descend into a catacomb of twisting, marble stair tunnels that made no modern sense. To a cops' eye, its many gratuitous turns had no doubt always been a security problem. But in the Twenty-First Century, they had become unacceptable yet not really addressed. There were simply too many blind corners and the cameras provided only the semblance of a solution.

Steve Three felt anything but safe. Still at street level, he bypassed these concerns to wheel himself yet further to the left of the ADA ramp, down a squat hallway into an oversized, nearly always empty, dark, dank room with an old, pre-ADA, industrial-size elevator. That room shared the same high ceiling that overstated the station's importance in front while it understated the room's function. It was a massive waiting room that had no furniture. It had no purpose apart from an early Twentieth Century claim of class. Another failed attempt at grandeur.

The room's only functional purpose was to give access to its single elevator that was also gray, dark, dank. A steel box large enough for a small car. There was no need for a camera in a place so few people frequented. Steve Three waited only moments before the elevator door slid open with a long squeal along the length of its track. The doors were heavy, installed back when building materials came by the ton. In him, the pressure released. He'd made it as far as mass transit. The rest of the trip, at least until he got to Steve Zero's office, would be a breeze.

There was already one other commuter inside, an abled-bodied man who held a duffle bag where others might have had a brief case. He paid no attention to Steve Three apart from turning away for a small amount of privacy as he chattered intensely into his cell. The call must have been important to him. He didn't get off the elevator. Steve Three rolled in, turned his chair around to prepare for a forward exit, pushed the down button for the train platform below and settled in for the unduly slow trip down.

In the same moment that the heavy elevator doors sealed the two men inside, Steve Three felt his head and neck painfully snapped to the side by the other man who had taken a wide stance above him. That was the last thing Steve Three felt in this world. He didn't feel the knife as it pulled hard across his throat to slice him from left ear to right, to open his neck up and pull it back - as if he were nothing more than a plastic Pez dispenser and his innards, candy.

“This is what happens to people who can't keep to themselves.”

HOSPITAL CRIME SCENE

Laguna's several, old, brick building lined up in straight series as appropriate to their era. They were joined on the ground by sidewalks and above by, in the modern era, oversized walkways, glassed-in halls that hung in the air to cross from one building to the next several stories up. Sunlight poured in even when fog would otherwise get in the way. Atriums without plants, only the occasional chair and surprisingly few residents made use of the light.

The overpasses were largely empty. So were correspondingly too large to-be-economic halls in the buildings' interiors. Despite the mild drizzle that hung in the fob outside, the city-run nursing home's floors and fittings glistened shinny-clean, bacteria-free and essentially odorless with their olden fixtures, moldings, spurs and byways. He paused to observe the only slight scent of a cleaning product that just had to be major league.

When he turned towards the next men's ward, he felt that someone was staring at him from behind. He turned quickly and without thought to address a possible threat but faced only a woman staffer, a strongly-built woman of medium height with an icy stare.

She had cloaked herself behind a corner but when seen, boldly stepped out into an internal, darkish hall to the ward he passed through. She met meet Mack's gaze straight on. Each pair of eyes locked to take measure of each other. Mack assumed rightly that she'd been following him down the halls but couldn't imagine why. He'd not seen there before yet it was clearly a face-off, a warning of a minor sort. He wrote the encounter off as nothing more than a bureaucrat protecting the institution rather than a personal threat. If a cop reacted to every person who silently challenged him, he'd get nothing done. In that she emitted zero emotion, nothing much registered with Mack apart from her apparent emptiness.

With her inspection, he was glad that he's picked up his freshly pressed, blue sports jacket. It was always good to look professional when on the job, particularly when a man was perceived as a threat by a woman. When he turned back to do his business, it was almost as if the encounter had never happened.

Over the counter and through the glass of the nurses' station, Mack announced himself, "Good morning, I'm Ethan Allen McCoy, the investigator. I believe that I'm expected. May I speak to the charge nurse?"

"That's Nurse Yuan but she's gone home for the day. I'm Nurse Kuen [**Ed note: make this name more distinct from Yuan**]. I can help you. Your colleague is back down the hall, the way you came, in TV Room 3. She's certainly beautiful."

"Yes, we think she's special too," Mack replied just a bit perturbed by the regularity and irrelevancy of that comment about Anyanwu. As an apprentice investigator, her beauty limited her. She would never be able to blend. But sometimes, he told himself, the best place to hide a mission is in the middle of things. People rely too much on what they can see easily and calculate meaning for quickly [**Ed - far too?**].

Mack turned to move as he came but not without pause. He needed a moment to take in the general environment he was paid to understand and evaluate before he entered what could, at least theoretically, turn out to be a crime scene. Beyond the nurses' station and behind him, was the first open ward in a series wards that allowed no privacy. The old fashioned, open wards were a major motivator for the city to build the new, somewhat smaller facility next door.

Along the wall at waist-height, there were handrails that had been installed well after the building's construction and polished by use since. Running high above them from the wall, near the ceiling there hung a row of orange and black baseball pennants for the home team, the San Francisco Giants - as appropriate for a men's ward - with a single blue one on the far end to represent its southern rival. Above those, tacked up on the ceiling itself, modern, silver-gray electrical conduits had been installed. They, he knew, were intended to keep the place compliant with modern codes just the little bit longer they needed before the big move next door.

In the distance, down the hall, conduits and handrails visually came together to accent the scale of the institution that he had come to digest. Along his way, he peeked through each door without compromise of his forward momentum. Several had medical and custodial equipment in them, including a crash cart that no doubt got regular use. Also along the way were two large rooms open to the hall where several elder men sat in chairs staring at large televisions. The only closed door was lettered, "TV 3."

Mack quietly opened the door to see a much smaller television room with a small window. That was not where Mack would want to spend his last days. Brightening the room considerably, Anyanwu stood busy at work, typing away on her cell phone device. She was indeed beautiful. Statuesque. With even, gentle, almost European features and luminous blue-gray eyes that contrasted with her ebony skin to create the illusion of advancing even when she wasn't. Hers was very close to a perfect beauty.

"And good-morning to you too, Sargent-Inspector McCoy." Anyanwu turned to him wearing the same, rather stiff, wool business suit she'd worn when he interviewed her for the job. It seemed almost but not quite to compensate for her youth. She'd lost her wide-eyed look but remained perpetually earnest. Earnestness counted with Mack.

He remained silent.

"Are you as depressed as you look or just grouchy for a Monday morning?"

Mack ignored her greeting. He noted that there was only one chair in the room, an empty black electric one that faced the television. No residents.

Anyanwu asked, "How's Robyn?"

"Let's focus. What do we have here?"

"Nurse Yuan was apparently the one that found the body. I got a chance to talk to her briefly before she, understandably, left for the day. She reported that she unlocked and opened the door on schedule at eight this morning, walked over to a body in that chair, here in the middle, then left. She said that she didn't touch anything, not even the body for a pulse. There was no point. Rigor had already set in."

“No one else?”

“Except for the cops. They came and went in minutes. After that the body was removed.”

Mack said perfunctorily, “Okay, apart from the deceased and a hundred other residents, none of the professionals would have touched anything. Both training and habit.”

“But more than that, she said it *creeped her out*. Those are her words.”

“What creeped her out?”

“She couldn’t say, not exactly.”

“How much time does she have working as a nurse?”

“Eleven. Seen it all. But this was somehow different. If you authorize the hours, I plan to come back at the start of her shift at seven tomorrow to walk her through her morning, step-by-step. Maybe when the crisis has passed and she’s in the middle of her routine, she’ll remember more.”

“Demographics on the deceased?”

“A sixty-six year old, white male. A retired longshoreman. No known, potentially fatal health problems and no suicide note. That electric wheelchair belonged to the deceased. It seems that he was watching television but by morning it had been turned off and there wouldn’t have been any power anyway. The nurses cut it at midnight.”

“If it had power, what would he have been watching?” Mack made a mental note about his deceased’s straight-on viewing angle.

Anyanwu clicked the surge protector to turn on the cable box and television set.

She said, “Channel six, the Nature Network.” She looked back to her mobile phone to hit some keys. “If he came in at one o’clock, an hour after the room was cleared, the first show to start from the beginning would have been...*Goddess Cultures: Nature’s Worshipers*. That seems odd for an old longshoreman. After that at two was *Pretty Blue - Killer King Fishers*, That’s a bit more like it. Then at three, *Great Whites & Their Prey*. That’s my boyfriend’s favorite. I bet he’s seen it at least three times. He roots for the hungry shark while I root for the prey. That was followed at four by *Vultures of the New World*, followed at five by *The Ant Queens, The Cloning Machines*,.”

“That’s enough,” Mack said. “If rigor had set in before eight, the deceased would have to have been dead at least three hours before the queens got to their cloning. So, assuming the power to the room had in fact been turned on, who turned the television off after the death when Nurse Yuan hadn’t touch anything?”

“No one that I’ve talked to so far.”

“Did someone look in before Yuan did, see the body, then to avoid trouble, ducked back out?” Mack asked rhetorically.

“That’s possible. There are a lot of people here. In the eight hours the room was supposedly without power and the door was supposedly locked, anyone could have been here, maybe even a friend of the deceased. Or staff.”

Mack said, “Probably not staff or a resident. They’d assume the door was locked and not even think about it until it’s time to open it again in the morning. In an institution

like this, it's not just about formal schedules that control behavior. Their body clocks get locked in sync to the schedules. Every event has its precise place and time."

"Okay."

Mack continued, "Maybe there's a missing somebody that came in, met with him, watched him die, watched TV with him or not, stayed alive himself and left. Either way, someone else was here. That doesn't exactly add up to a natural death."

"No, it stinks," Anyanwu affirmed, not sure if she were overstepping her bounds.

"That's what we have to count on. The person who left this room will carry that stink with him and that's what we're going to look for. "

"I'm on it," she assured him.

"Do we know who his beneficiary is and what the payout might be?"

"Not yet."

"We need to see the policy. And interview any buddies he might have had."

Anyanwu said, "How about I stick to the nurses and you do the men, you know, their being your fellow old guys and all."

"No, they're yours also. Meanwhile, I'm going to put an official hold on the policy pending further investigation. That should piss off a somebody who may already be counting his money and maybe ready to make a stink about it. I want to know who."

"Yes sir, boss."

"That's, *yes partner*, to you. I'll talk to the investigators at the Hall of Justice about whatever the emergency was at the foot of the hill, also this morning. Do you have time?"

"Yes, I do. I need the hours. Besides I like a good mystery."

Mack said, "Real investigators collect evidence. We aren't really in the mystery-solving business. Too much work, not enough time and not often unraveled anyway. That's why they're called mysteries. You do the interviews, collect the documents and leave it at that. Whatever answers there are will flow from that and you'll still more hours than you end up wanting."

"I'll charm the pants off the old-timers... Not really."

"It's okay if they end up not liking you. Understand?"

"Yes sir, boss-partner."

THE SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

“Excuse me,” a man startled Anyanwu from behind in the wide first floor corridor outside the Laguna administration offices. He’d unintentionally startled her with a rude tug on her elbow. She’d been buttoning her overcoat to re-enter the cold fog but found herself turning into the handsome face of a tall man of African-decent like her but with a far lighter skin-tone than she. He wore a suit that, at least at Laguna, suggested he was important.

He opened, “I’m told that you’re the life insurance investigator.”

“I am one of them.”

Freeman calculated that her youth, gender and inexperience would make her an easy mark.

“My name is David B. Freeman, Jr. I’m the director of the San Francisco Material Support Foundation. We serve the residents here. I’d like a chance to talk to you, if you don’t mind. The Foundation is the beneficiary of the Tom Shao insurance policy. Can I talk to you about it?”

Anyanwu enjoyed her good luck almost as much as she loved to be called an investigator. “Sure. Let’s talk.”

“Not here. How about tomorrow at the main library later? I’ve got meetings at City Hall across the way. We could get together at the downstairs café.”

“What time?”

“It opens at nine. Does that work?”

It did. At no point did he care to ask for her name.

The next morning, a Tuesday morning, after making a few calls to lay the ground work for her Laguna interviews, Anyanwu took BART’s Civic Center escalator up the Market Street level. That put her across from the San Francisco Public Library. According to most, the Civic Center held San Francisco’s political power. It was the large, rectangular site squeezed between governmental buildings of the many, occasionally harsh, demonstrations and sometimes overzealous police responses to them. It was also a place of great and colorful cultural gatherings. Either way, expressions of community in a city where that mattered more than most. And like most communities, it had to be balanced against that more sterile and corporate interests in the nearby, high rise financial district. Central to what constituted the City and County of San Francisco was the play was between the political showmanship at the Civic Center and the real deal, downtown money.

Anyanwu crossed Grove Street to approach the new library’s main entrance. Like older civic buildings, it referenced the classical but did so demurely. It certainly contrasted against the fidgeting mob of mostly homeless men who daily gathered out front if its side door, truly its main door, a massive thing made of chain link fencing material that would, on command, roll up to let them in. She’d never seen so many apparently disconnected men in one place before. To be poor in the United States was to be destitute in a way that no African man could ever be. It stuck her as sad.

On the digital second, the gate timely opened the library to a rush of patrons who may or may not have had an interest in books. She wasn't sure. "What could be their hurry? It's not like they're late for work," Anyanwu wondered. Behind them, she entered the foyer. She was momentarily tempted to look through used books sold by Friends of the Library to the left side. But Anyanwu *did* have a job to go to. She moved on without stopping.

Although a bit out of her way she walked straight up up to the security post and metal detectors to admire the enormity of the library's core, a round, open air, sun-filled well. On each of its first four floors, square stacks took off like spokes to a wheel. She thought it great, practically inspiring but the arrangement offended many who harbored an affection for the way things were supposed to be. Libraries were supposed to be logical, linear - that's how the human mind was disciplined to function - and that meant square. Not round. However as a budding young intellectual, Anyanwu enjoyed its architectural analogy to the human brain with its confusion of organic interactions that might possibly engender in its patrons, a creative moment or two.

From there, she turned on her mid-heel to her right to descend underground into another cavernous well, smaller and darker than the one it reference above. At bottom was the San Francisco Library Café where she'd arranged to Freeman.

The crowded café had college feel to it. Cheap tables with cheap plastic chairs scattered about. Every one of them was occupied. Standing room only, full of mostly black Americans who waited to get into the Koret Auditorium next to the café to hear a black, beat poet from Newark, New Jersey speak. A great deal darker than the others, Anyanwu felt only a bit out of place. About the same as with white Americans but different also. A kinship without a connection. The acoustics were terrible. It forced people to talk loudly if they were to be heard above each other and the street noise that poured down from the sidewalk above. Several leaned against a piano protected by a black-quilted vinyl cover.

A sign propped up in its middle said, "Do not play the piano."

Looking around before she left the stairs, Anyanwu scanned the room for Freeman. He wasn't at a table and not in one of the modular booths that jutted out from the far wall and that lined up directly underneath people walking above. When a party of four got up to leave, she went for it. By the time she worked her way through the small but tight crowd, only one chair remained. Seated, she sized up the politics of her turf. She disliked the noise of the crowd. It would distract from her business but assumed they'd soon be gone. "This works," she said out loud to the disinterested masses who stood above and around her empty table.

And there he was. He didn't simply show up. His was a parade with a yappy little, fur-ball dog on a short lease and particularly broad smile on his pretty African-American face. He wore a designer suit more upscale than the one he wore the day before with a too-stylistic hat added to top it off. She wore the same suit she wore most anytime she had business to conduct. She found him immediately repulsive. Her instincts told her to pretend to ignore him. It was his meeting. He had to come to her and he did. He didn't simply walk up to her and say *hello*. Instead he popped up next to her, slapped each foot

down with a clap. He held both hands outward – one offered to shake and the other to grasp her wrist with insincere intimacy if she allowed. Like a circus performer might, she could almost hear him say, “Ta-dah!” Instead he beamed, “Ms. Naidu?” His grandiosity had put her on guard. His address put her on notice.

He repeated, “Anyanwu Naidu, yes?”

So he did know her name. She nodded but didn’t say or do a thing. She certainly didn’t return the hand shake he’d offered.

Not quite noticing her rebuff, he glanced around for a chair. None available. But he saw a young woman get up clearly headed for the condiments and with full intention of returning, to her friends’ astonishment, he stole her chair almost before she got free from it. Nonplussed, he carefully, almost dramatically, placed his fedora on the table too close to Anyanwu.

She started to protest his theft of the chair but he cut her off. His eyes gazed upward to the nondescript ceiling, right hand up, he twisted his wrist each way with a royal wave. He dismissed her concern without quite seeing it, “That’s alright. I needed a chair.”

“What the...,” Anyanwu said only to herself, pleased that she held herself back from comment to remain focused on the job. She didn’t have to like the man to question him. On the contrary, not liking him made questioning him all the more compelling. Before the young woman returned, the chair issue had become moot. The doors to the auditorium had opened and the crowd had begun to move in that direction.

Freeman asked, “Anyanwu Naidu, that’s an unusual name, isn’t it?”

“I’m not from around here. Tell me about your foundation.”

“And you work for Ethan Allen McCoy, I’m told?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s married to Robyn Hernandez, the famous San Francisco artist?”

“They’re not married,” she said. She wasn’t so sure the word *famous* applied to a local artist - no matter how respected.

He let that lie. Somewhere between distracted and disinterested, he began a process that continued throughout their conversation. With great care and deliberation, he adjusted and readjusted the ordering and linear arrangement of each item on the table, apart from her recorder: salt, pepper, paper napkins and some loose coins that emerged from his pockets for that purpose. When satisfied with those, he took a breath. As reflex, he allowed himself the audacity to bring her recorder into his order.

The proprietor of the café approached him from behind. “Sorry, no dogs allowed.”

Freeman rudely retorted, “Suzy is a registered assistance dog.”

“What for?”

“That’s between me and the City and County of San Francisco.”

The proprietor shook his head and walked off. He’d done his best. He didn’t need the aggravation of yet another jerk.

Anyanwu asked, “Assistance for what?”

“Emotional support.”

“What?” This time she hadn’t held her tongue.

“It pays to know people in government.”

“I see,” she said blankly.

Clearly annoying both of them, an ambulance up on the street level to interrupt his brag. It'd drown out last words that she didn't care to have repeated.

He restarted on a new track, “What a waste? Do know what it costs the city for just one ambulance trip to transport just one individual to the ER and then costs the city to treat them there?”

“No.”

“No one does. There are too many indirect costs to calculate. But it's safe to say, a whole lot. With that same money, I could help hundreds of Laguna residents. So which should be the priority? Serve one guy, probably a drunk, or serve hundreds. No contest. But just try telling the mayor that.” He'd not only name-dropped, the *mayor* but put *his honor*, the mayor in a subordinate position.

“How long have you been working for the foundation?”

He ignored the recorder, “Two and half years.” Though he then stared straight at her, more like through her.

“And where did you come from? Where did you work before?”

“Me? Nowhere. Everywhere.” He paused, focused just enough to see that she didn't appreciate his non-answer and added, “Before this job, I worked in the procurement departments of hospitals, including General and at UCSF, and in other large nursing homes. Eventually I got jobs with various suppliers of durable medical equipment. Basically I was in sales. That's why I can get the best items for the best prices for the residents at Laguna.” His eyes darted around the room as if to take in snippets of objects and people, like taking snapshots to gather together when others could plainly but comprehensively take in as a whole. His otherwise soft, brown eyes never stopped jutting about. She wondered if that was where the old cautionary came from, “Don't trust people with shifty eyes.”

“Tell me again for the recorder, what does the San Francisco Material Support Foundation do, exactly?” Word-for-word, he repeated the entirety of a well-practiced spiel, “Our mission is to enrich the lives of residents at Laguna-Honda Hospital. We provide everything from...”

“Did you know Tom Shao?”

“Sure I did. I'm the one who got the electric power chair for him. I like to spend time with the residents, to talk with them personally when I get a chance. I'm the friendliest face they see all day.”

She wasn't sure that she approved.

“Strictly business. Often friendly but not exactly nicy-nice. If you know what I mean.”

He'd lost her completely. She wondered if he could tell the difference between business and personal relationships.

“You see...I want to imprint myself on their minds before their memories get weak.”

“His passing must be difficult for you.”

“Not really. I just sold his chair the next person, that’s all. I know it’s not politically correct to say but a whole lot of people die in a nursing home. I never let it get to me. I doubt it bothers anyone else, either. They just pretend it does. I don’t know why.”

“So that’s how you got to know Mr. Shao, the deceased? Tell me about him? What was he about?”

“ABC, American born Chinese. Retired blue-collar worker. A longshoreman, I believe. A fairly typical story. He once had a pension but his, like many – well, pretty much all of them -- bit the dust. At least on the low end, like for the residents at Laguna. He told me that he once had a 401k plan but he lost big pieces of it too, with each economic downturn. Some anonymous somebody in the stock market ended up with it. Survival of the fittest, you know. But he had us. That’s what we’re there for.”

“Any other friends, maybe family?”

“I don’t really know. Beyond their finances, I don’t like to go too much into their personal histories. You know how the old guys are, once they get started on their pasts.”

“Was the electric chair yours, his, the foundation’s...”

“We bought it for him but it was all his.”

“Doesn’t the government pay for them?”

“Most of the time, yes, but Mr. Shao didn’t qualify. A retired longshoreman can keep his upper body strength for quite a while - so he didn’t qualify under Medicare.”

“But you resold it?”

“It was his chair that he chose to bequeath to the foundation to sell to another in need.” He fell back on another spiel, “Laguna is the largest single-site, municipally owned and operated nursing care facility in the country. Our residents need mobility to get around it and its grounds, more than most. Medicare doesn’t take that into account.”

“Are you a city agency?”

“They contract with us but we’re separate.”

“Either way, city money?”

“Sure. The city gives us most of what we need. We get funding in all the usual ways. I write grants. And we get bequests from people who respect our work. Donations too...when we can hunt down and guilt trip distant family members, old friends and former employers to make them.” He chuckled as if he had shared an inside joke with her.

Her face registered disapproval. He’d said too much.

He changed the subject with yet another factoid to hurl at her. “I’m sure you know that the city is constructing a new campus that will provide modern housing and a complete continuum of long-term healthcare services. The new facility will be among the most innovative, technologically advanced, efficient, flexible, humane and natural in the world. It will, by design, encourage rehabilitation and independent living while setting the standard for the enhancement of resident’s quality of life. At this critical time in its history, Laguna needs the foundation more than ever.”

She’d suffered factoid-men before but this guy just kept coming at her. She found him to be about as believable as a late night infomercial. She wondered if it was because he was a politician. “I didn’t hear you say anything about insurance pay-outs.”

“Of course. You already knew that. Like with Mr. Shao. We arranged for his \$50,000 life insurance policy for which he made the foundation his beneficiary.”

Now she knew that she didn't approve.

“Don't you think that we should be compensated for our loss the same as other friends and family. We're closer to him than they are.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Not really. It's all for a good cause. Most residents are in their last days and have no regular family. If they want to give something back to the community, we certainly appreciate the help.”

“You gave him a power chair and paid for the life insurance policy as well?”

“Why not? I can't remember what the policy cost but it couldn't have been much while the payout is excellent.”

“The chair must have cost a bundle?”

“For his, I think we paid something like twenty-five hundred when it was new. I'd have to check. He was its second owner. Now it has a third. What do wheelchairs have to do with life insurance policies?”

“I have no idea,” she deferred. “The actuary guys back at corporate decide what questions they want the answers to. In cases like this where the beneficiary is not regular family, they want to know what the relationship and financial arrangement were. When we're done here, all I do is fill out a form for the bean counters. Everybody's got them. don't you?”

“I'm personally responsible for every dollar that comes in and goes out.”

“That sounds like a lot of busy work for a man on the go.”

“I have a sharp secretary that keeps day-to-day track of it for me. To keep it all legal, we hire independent CPAs once a year to review our accounts.”

850 BRYANT

“Ugly is as ugly does,” Mack said only to himself as he stood in front the battleship-gray, San Francisco Hall of Justice building. The color made sense. It had been built back in the heyday of battleships on large, flat section of landfill along the bay where water used to stand. Unlike things having to do with the sea, it was not round and it didn’t move. It certainly lacked even basic civil appeal. Starting on its opening day it was a hideous, faux granite block that towered over what had once been a booming, light-industrial, low tech and low laying section of the city.

“Ugly does as ugly is,” he said. Much like the city’s Laguna Honda Hospital building, *850 Bryant*, as it was more commonly known, was a depressing second-tier civic project of the next generation. Instead of providing social services for the needy and deserving, it was dedicated to the endless processing of alleged criminals into the state prison system. Beyond that, it reeked of an evil not confined to the criminal.

Mack took a moment’s pause before entering - not to scope it but himself. With an incredulous shake of his head in a moment of sour nostalgia, he reflected on how he once actually belonged inside that monument to monstrosity. But never really did.

“How’d I ever do that?” he said. The fact was that he had indeed been a part of the unnatural ebb and flow of law breakers and law enforcers. That was a long time ago. Years before they’d cast him out as the alien he’d become and maybe always was. Once out, it became clear to him that both cop and robber subcultures were the actual aliens in an otherwise civil society. He wasn’t sure what he was.

After a quick stop that morning at the library, he walked the short distance to 850 Bryant. “That was then, this is now,” It was Tuesday mid-morning. He shook off his memories and resentments to brace himself for induction inside the behemoth. With stiffened resolve, he pulled open its heavy, glass front door. Once in, he raised his retired officer’s badge high to bypass the long line of understandably anxious civilians who waited to be inspected by security. He gave a knowing nod to pair of harried officers he did not know but knew they’d been unfortunate enough to be assigned to unenviable posts just outside the protection of the solid door and bulletproof glass of their Southern District Station. It was useless to them, just feet behind their posts. That much was ritual and predictable. Upstairs would be neither.

The Homicide Detail on the fourth floor would be hostile territory. He needed to soften the area before going in. To his right, there remained a small bank of pay phones - relics from the past – in accord with the building generally and Mack’s career. With a five dollar bill held out in his hand, he asked a young man to send a text message to Sgt. Luis Alvarez upstairs, the lead investigator for the Embarcadero Station murder. He may or may not have also been assigned to investigate the events at the Forest Hill Station but he’d certainly know about them.

Like most officers, Alvarez supplemented the city’s dysfunctional radio communications system with a cell phone provided under contract by the San Francisco Police Officers’ Association as one of its many membership benefits. The fearsome

political weight the SFPOA carried in city politics compared favorably with that of the AARP in Congress. Not to be messed with regardless. The reply from Alvarez did not come right away. Mack could see that the young man was growing impatient. Another five fixed that. The reply eventually said, "Come up." He did.

Around the corner on the ground floor, an elevator door full of officers who wore guns and uncomfortable civilians was closing to exclude him. Left arm forward, body twisted to the side, as they moved, Mack slid between the heavy steel panels without contact. In front, a middle-aged officer said approvingly, somehow knowing that it was cop-to-cop, "Still got your moves." He did.

Sgt. Alvarez intercepted Mack at the elevator bank before Mack could be seen by what could have once been his fellow officers. In less stressful times, Alvarez was one of the few truly jovial cops Mack had known. Alvarez liked to joke that he'd been hired as Homicide Detail's token, NRA card-carrying, Republican Latino. Even San Francisco had to have one. His good humor of a mature sort stood him apart and maybe above from the rest, both young and old.

Most civilians were allowed to see only their professional personalities: paramilitary, somber and cliché-loaded, in action, a Wrath of the Lord posture executed with command voice always imbued with the implicit threat of violence - occasionally made real. What all workers did with their minds and their bodies during their working lives created their occupational cultures. Those went a long ways in defining who they were, not only at work but everywhere. In that, cops were no different. A cop was a cop no matter where he or she happened to be.

Sure, comrade-cops who worked professionally on the dark side could also be social. Homo sapiens and thus social animals by nature. But also suspicious of other home sapiens. Burdened by a wary eye. Their sociability had a short reach at an anti-social end of that continuum, much like the criminals they pursued. Once hired, they were no longer required to be San Francisco residents. Few stayed. Many chose to live near each other in exurban Petaluma, a quaint town forty miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge in famously liberal, otherwise wealthy, Marin County.

When off-duty and alone among themselves, they'd joke and jostle with each other but they could never really let go into full-on fun. Humor was possible but never happiness. Beer a cop and cop-family only barbeques helped to loosen things up for them. They earned it every day. On duty and off.

On that morning at 850 Bryant, Alvarez was visually tensed up in his shoulders, his jaw tight. His normally soft, even sweet smile had given way to the pressures of the Embarcadero case and its implications for city politics, his ultimate employer. At the outset still at the elevators, Alvarez made it clear to Mack that he had very little patience left for anyone. Anyone. He stood squarely against him, nose to nose, not allowing movement from the short, access hall in front of the elevator bank. Alvarez had made it clear that their meeting was tentative, contingent on Mack's value to the Embarcadero case as Mack implicitly promised with his text message that included his name and only the number, "830."

Mack said to Alvarez, "I was afraid you'd forgot who I was."

“Not likely. Forget the terms under which you left? This’d better be good. You’ve got one minute. Talk.”

Alvarez and Mack absolutely knew each other from the old days but they were never buddies. All cops, it seemed to Mack, understood that his retirement was not due to age. He’d been booted out by a past chief of police whose appointment he’d openly opposed. Mack had questioned his moral authority in general terms but underlying Mack’s concern was the private knowledge that Mack and only a few other officers knew and had kept to themselves, a history of domestic violence. The next chief would be a wife beater.

Mack had enough experience with wife beaters, and a few husband beaters, to know that the thing they all had in common was a failure of empathy that’d otherwise connect them to others so they’d know that the woman they were talking to was a flesh and blood human being like them, really, a part of them and not to be abstracted into an enemy force against which they had no choice but to defend themselves.

To Mack, it was obvious that wife beaters lacked in their guts a central piece shared by members of all social species including the human one, the ability to connect to other members of the species. They lacked the essential, personal *humanity* to connect them to the larger thing also called *humanity*. For the unfortunate them, that lacking translated into an interminable life of profound alienation and social shame, maybe a too-much-to-bear pain.

This lacking was so profound and immutable that, to Mack, it just had to be a genetic defect for which they could not be blamed but nevertheless retained legal responsibility for how they handled it. They had the same choice anyone else with a disability, defect or any other life difficulty. They could accept it, even embrace it but in the interest of a good life for themselves and others, choose to accommodate it.

They had the option to reject the delusions it artificially created in their brains, starting with the one that other people were the source of their pain, rather than an arithmetic, A, T, G, C, glitch in their innards. The accommodation for the same kind of glitch that created blindness might be a red-tipped cane. For the abusers, it’d merely be an understanding that beating others was not necessary or could even be helpful. Demands that others honor their alien pretensions of status supremacy, the righteousness of their entirely parochial, frequently intense rules that governed their notions of right and wrong, as a supposed antidote to shame, were worthless to the alleviation of shame created entirely inside themselves. These were the thinking people who a cop would never have to meet, much less arrest.

But for the others, the anti-social ones who elevated their character defect into a sense of special entitlement, maybe even an ideology of universal application, these required attention from law enforcement. When Mack would show up on their door step, what Mack saw were not his and others’ superior but a fraud, a fake man being fake and making a real big, self-righteous deal about it. “But officer, she...” Their source-pain and fight and injuries they inflicted were somehow her fault.

A failure of empathy would be a problem for anyone but particularly for law enforcement. For understandable reasons, sworn personnel officers had to be and were

held to a higher standard. Mack's point about the prospective chief was simple: if a man lacked the capacity to connect to others, he might be good at making quick decisions and imposing them with force but he'd would never have the basic tools to know what was really going on, what truly needed to be done about it and how to communicate that need to others. He'd be too profoundly apart to connect. Not a leader and not appropriate to manage an armed force of 2,000 men and woman who wore blue and regularly carried their guns into confusing and dangerous incidents – on the fly.

To Alvarez, Mack proffered only a series of quick quips, “At just before eight-thirty this morning, I reported to Laguna to investigate a probable insurance claim based on a recently deceased insured. At the bottom of the hill, I passed by a department response to the Forest Hill Muni Station. At the hospital, there was what turned out to be a death under suspicious circumstances. The two were proximate in both time and place. Yours, I don't know about. Mine may have been for natural causes, a suicide or set up to look like a suicide when it may not have been.”

“What was suspicious?”

“This and that. We've only started our interviews.”

Alvarez asked, “Was there a knife involved.”

“No knife that I know of. Am I in?”

Alvarez paused. He answered with a turn, to head back to his office. Thus escorted, Mack followed him down the long, wide, empty and sterile corridor that too long ago had been painted drab, institutional beige. Two hundred feet down, Alvarez turned right, to turn a brass door knob, to pull open an old door. The upper half of the door was opaque glass from the old days that indicated, in a once-fashionable font, “Homicide Detail.” Unconsciously, both men straightened their postures for an approach into what was for Mack, and what could to easily become for Alvarez, enemy territory. He directed Mack to proceed ahead of him, through a small, junky area once dedicated to the formality of a receptionist but then used only to pile junk. There as not her half-glass door to breach on its other side.

Like most peace officers, the members of the Homicide Detail were supposed to work mostly on the street where the crime, criminals and victims were. As it was, they solved only 30% of the murders, a low figure they blamed on a lack of community support which they blamed on the community itself. Too often they sequestered themselves away from all that in an enormous room that, like the building's exterior, had retained its Thirties-style plaster walls, thick wood moldings and towering windows to the outside. It had the same warm flavor and feel as many city class and courtrooms of that earlier era. Its ceiling was high enough for a basketball court and wide enough for its spectators.

Cops didn't do cubicles. Instead, like reporters, they worked at old oak desks scattered around somewhat chaotically.. Since Mack's time on the Detail, the room had not changed at all. There was nothing warm about those who occupied it.

Mack counted a half dozen detectives present, whites and black, no Latinos apart from Alvarez, and all men except for the one woman-detective. With Mack's entrance, their bodies remained positioned as they were, facing in various directions, absorbed in

various conversations. When Mack could first be seen at the entry threshold, as one, they fell silent. Their bodies remained fixed as they were. Like Mack had seen chickens do in the night, only their heads turned to see the intruder, to demonstrate their disapproving eyes and icy stares.

Alvarez demonstrated his own authority and control with a firm grip on Mack's elbow from behind. It was possible one or more of the detectives knew Mack from when he was also a cop, it seemed that they all did but he couldn't image how. It'd been a lot of years and certainly he didn't know any of them. Still held at the elbow, Alvarez turned Mack to their immediate right where, against the tall southern wall, there was a later-installed short one with three short doors. The middle door was closed. The two on either side opened into a pair of two purposefully tight interrogation rooms. Both of those opened up into the same high ceiling, All of it - also unchanged from Mack's day. With great purposefulness, Alvarez moved the two of them in that direction. Without pause he snatched up a bundle of files from his own desk on the left to steer Mack to the open door on the right. Behind them, Alvarez pulled closed the modern, hollow wood door that he slammed with all the authority of balsa wood.

Mack was in.

TRESPASSERS

Alvarez spread the files out with a slide, as if they were about to play cards. Mack reached for one. Alvarez slapped his hand down on the table with a loud bang that could be heard by the others outside. “No you don’t! Our files are confidential, beyond your reach. Understand?” Mack did. And Alvarez understood that while he had to follow protocol, he also understood that he had to fit them to the urgent circumstances. He needed help. And he didn’t trust city politics. No one did.

The interrogation room couldn’t have been more cramped. A pair of short benches faced each other over a small table. The benches were barely big enough for two but even then, two adults were practically on top of each other. As it was, the benches were up so tight against the tiny table that the knees from each side occasionally knocked against their opposites to create physical contact, seemingly casual, between unequals. The set up was meant to magnify the intensity of already intense confrontations.

Mack knew the small black recorder Alvarez placed between them was a subterfuge. Interrogators could turn it on and off to create the illusion of going on and off the record. Near the ceiling far above them, there was also a hidden video camera that recorded every squirm a suspect would make. A separate machine recorded every word. The machines were crammed into the three foot wide closet between the two interrogation rooms. What had changed since Mack’s day was the number of audio-video lights, dials and monitors in that closet. Mack had helped install the original generation of electronics. The current set was well beyond his expertise.

As a co-professional working on a potentially-related case, Mack had good reason to be involved. And Mack knew what was doing. He may have left the department under a political cloud but his reputation as a productive investigator was never questioned. If anything, being politically ostracized made him more trustworthy. Alvarez said, “I have to make a call. You won’t touch the files while I’m gone.”

Without allowing time for a reply, he left the room. He’d spared Mack from any obligation he might otherwise have felt to play pretend. Once outside in the big room, Alvarez opened the narrow door to the audio-video equipment. He cut the power to all of them with the clicks of two surge protectors. Alvarez closed that door just as he had opened it, loudly enough for Mack and all the others to hear. Cops were only rarely subtle. With all eyes on him, Alvarez worked his way to his heavy, old oak desk in the middle of large room, spoke into a phone for ten minutes to return to Mack – knowing that the former officer would have fully briefed himself while the files would remain exactly as they were when Alvarez left.

Alvarez said sternly, “All of this is off the record, you understand.”

Mack replied, “I understand that ultimately nothing is off the record.”

“Ultimately.” With that, Alvarez splayed a set of crime scene photos duly stamped as evidence. “What do you see?”

Mack started with the downward views, “The basically unused, narrow, steel... essentially aerial staircase at the northeastern end of BART’s Embarcadero.”

Alvarez was in accord, ‘Virtually everyone avoids it in favor of the escalators.’

Mack continued, “A probably dead girl on the second platform down, in an unusually large amount of blood. Head wound?”

“He drove the knife through her eye, into her brain.”

“That’ll can do it. Her body lies contorted as if there had been a struggle. I can’t really make out her face because of her massive amount of hair, cut in a retro, Betty Page style. When she stood, it hung down to her mid-back. From the size of her mop and it looking like it was freshly squared, it might be a wig.”

“It’s all hers.”

“White powder on her black outfit?”

“She’d just gotten off work at the upscale bakery in the Ferry Building.”

“From her hair style, from her somewhat clownish clothes and her body form, she’s maybe in her early twenties, possibly an artist.”

“Assume for a minute that this was the work of a serial killer. Do you see a theme, a killer’s message? Did he stage it or was it just a matter of technique?”

“I vote for a message. A girl in a cage. Couldn’t be more obvious. The platform is small, maybe only two and a half feet by four. Not even five. On three sides, it’s encased in thick glass. A confinement theme. There is also a sense of display. Possible misogyny. Either way, she’s been controlled. Utterly.”

From the files Alvarez pulled out another set of glossy crime scene photos, fanned them as before and said, “This was the murder weapon from Forest Hill, taken from three angles. A backward curving knife. Tell me, what is it, if you know? It’s certainly unusual. We’re getting it identified at the Culinary Academy over at the foot of your Potrero Hill.”

“Exquisitely formed and elaborately etched which makes it more traceable. It looks like a boning knife to me.”

“You’re the cook.” Alvarez spread a third set of crime scene photos that looked much like the first. Alvarez explained. “This is a different knife. The first was found at Forest Hill and measured six-three. This second one was found next to the body at Embarcadero. It’s shorter. Three-nine.”

Mack took it in stride that Alvarez had just let Mack in on an departmental secret.

Mack observed, “Two from the same set, probably a set of four. Elegant, maybe ritualistic. Odd sizes? You’d think they’d be straight up 4” and 6”. I’m thinking metric. That’d suggested a foreign manufacture. For the killer to start with the shorter one suggests an escalation. Just two murders doesn’t make our man a serial killer but his leaving behind a signature may.”

Alvarez added, “There’s also a custom ”C” stamped on them. What could that mean?”

Mack said, “A manufacture’s seal? Or a wholesaler’s? End users? Have you had a chance to review the surveillance videos?”

“Not at Forest Hill. Downstairs in the crime lab, they’ve done a quick run through. As far as getting an identification goes, they’ve so far got zilch. Nada. Nothing. You see, the killer wore a wig that hid his face. We’re thinking medium height and build.”

“Come on? Train stations have cameras all over the place.”

“And on the trains. It’s too bad he didn’t get on one. If he did, we might have him in custody by now. Those have a much narrower, shorter view over a confined space than the ones spread around the stations. From the looks of it, our perp had the foresight to scout for the blind spots.”

Mack observed. “Planning activity...”

“And he looked for old technology to exploit. Muni’s Forest Hill station is definitely old. It’s been a while since I was inside. Very old. Arching, cathedral ceilings. White tiles.”

Mack, “Back then we had the luxury of being more concerned about asserting class in architecture than security.”

Alvarez nodded, “I never expect much from cameras. The ones at traffic intersections are worthless.”

“When you need a cop, you don’t go to Radio Shack. You hire a cop.”

Alvarez returned to the case at hand, “We did get one good shot when he came in through the doors at the Forest Hill station, better than anything the cameras picked up at Embarcadero. At Forest Hill, he was pretty much confined to a camera’s short viewing range there, in the entryway. Still, we couldn’t see much. He wore the same big-hair, blond wig he wore before, fluffed to cover his face. Not much to go on.

Mack said, “In San Francisco, a man wearing a gaudy wig is not so unusual but odd enough to for most people to avoid eye contact, maybe more so the downtown suits from the suburbs who tend to keep their distance from people more than the locals. Still, no witnesses with helpful information?”

Alvarez asked, “Right. Are you sure that you have a crime at Laguna?”

Mack said, “Not yet.”

Alvarez said, “Let’s break down the two that we know connect – Embarcadero and Forest Hill. Both are train stations but two different systems, BART and Muni. He doesn’t seem to have a beef with a particular agency.”

“If Laguna factors in, he’s probably got no beef with mass transit generally. Not counting oil companies, who could? Myself, I rode the elevator up...”

“His approach? Points of attack?”

Mack said, “I’m listening.”

“At Forest Hill, to cover his escape, he let off a smoke bomb in the elevator where he’d cut his victim. The fire department found the car at the bottom, on the platform level but he exited the scene on street level. At Embarcadero, he dropped a bag of blood on the top landing to make sure commuters didn’t follow him down.”

Mack said, a bit disappointed, “Effective and dramatic. Both of them. Not so at Laguna.”

“Matching knives. One victim stabbed through the eye and the other’s throat was cut. The message?”

“*See no evil, say no evil.* What did the Embarcadero victim see and the other victim see or hear and want to say?”

“At Forest Hill, the victim was confined to a wheelchair and trapped in an elevator which is basically a kinda box. That’s our confinement theme again. From their

wounds, they must have been approached from behind. Surprised. Right eye and throat slit from left to right. Right handed.”

“At Forest Hill, it wasn’t a power chair, by any chance?”

“You got it.”

“My insured rode one. There’s a possible connection. Maybe. There are lot wheelchairs in this world.”

Alvarez said, “Train stations are controlled environments. So are hospitals.”

Mack said, “No so much hospitals.

“But in hospitals, residents do line up for most everything.”

Mack again, “Sure but in stations commuters line up in single file to pass through turnstiles to ride escalators down. Trapped in shoots - like cattle off to the slaughterhouse. Reminds me of my good ole’ boy days. As a kid in Nevada, I sorta helped... Actually, I mostly got in the way of grown men punching cows.”

“You were a good ole boy? That figures.”

“Elko. The Heart of Northeast Nevada.”

“Elko. that’s huge,” Alvarez smirked. “Bottom line, we don’t have much. Really, just a blank.”

“That’s the only place to start. Robyn says finding the void is the first step to finding *it*. That’s why she always starts her art by completely clearing out her studio. She stomps around in circles a few times with incense burning to make things cloudy. Gets loaded and horny. And boom, art starts.”

“If you don’t mind, I think it’d be a good idea to skip the artists when I’ve already got politicians on my back ready to hang me when the the public is ready to hang them.”

Mack said, “You can handle that.”

“They can’t hang me - but once,” Alvarez said with a defiant twinkle in his eye.”

“They only got me once,” Mack agreed but had kicked in more fully what was at stake.

Alvarez took a deep breath, “Okay, what have *we* got to start? If he really is a serial killer, the manuals say that makes him white, male and middle-aged. That’s easy enough but two very different victims with no known connections to each other. If we focus on just the train stations, we’ve got similar locations. Both ways, he does lots of planning that included a large diversion. Essentially the same murder weapon. Bloody messes, both of them.

“Plus colorful costuming, props and scenes. When he killed on the Bay Area-wide transit system for the first, he broadcast his importance down those lines into dozens of communities. He threatened seven hundred people. He plans at scale.”

Mack said, “And both are weird. That brings us back to Laguna. Also weird.”

Alvarez, “Weird is always thin as potential connections go but it’s something.”

Just then there was a heavy knock on the hollow door. Alvarez responded in full voice, “I’m busy with my expert.” He whispered, “They’re a bit afraid of you and with all the press and pressure, they’re a bit afraid of me too. They won’t bother us. If this case goes south, they don’t want their names involved, particularly as obstructionists.”

Alvarez had overestimated his clout. Whoever it was, banged on the door with enhanced intensity. Silence on both sides that was followed by Lt. Dean Seeley who barged in at full steam ahead. Straight away, no foreplay, he grabbed Mack by his head and underarms in an effort to pull Mack up and out of the room. The confines of the tight furnishings kept Mack's body stuck where it was. On a second yank, Mack popped loose to come flying back out through the door. With a firm grip latched onto Mack's collar, Lt. Seeley turned Mack's body to face down to push his face into the hard floor. There'd be bruises in the morning.

Steely exercised command voice, "You're under arrest for trespassing on police property. You have the right to remain silent. Everything you say will be used..."

Sgt. Alvarez was outranked but was not the bystander type. He jumped on Seeley's back. In turn and not looking at all grown up, a gaggle of men and the woman piled on his. Training and experience told Mac that his only chance at getting free would be if he broke the hold in the first instant while it was still tenuous and before two hands could get hard on him. He didn't.

By the time the fracas had calmed down, Mack found himself pinned down while being cuffed from behind. The points on Seeley's old Western-style police star, the San Francisco Police Department dated all the way back to those days, stuck hard into the flesh of Mack's back. The points were sharp but bent slight inward so that sort of thing couldn't happen unless the wearer intended it to. For a grown man to get cuffed against the floor was about the most humiliating experience a man can have. One strong man forced another into submission. Dominance and submission lead to bondage. For both men, rape was implicit.

Throughout, Alvarez fired orders at the lieutenant *as* if he were the one in command.

Seeley may or may not have had command but he certainly had control, "By order of the Chief of Police, this man is permanently banned from this building. He's trespassing. I'm taking him in." He didn't know Mack but he knew that he hated him. Seeley just knew thing like that. No need to meet him. The pain of seeing a man too sure of himself...a track record that was too good...was proof enough.

Alvarez shouted, "That was several years and two chiefs ago. When your chief moved on, he took his orders with him. This man is here on official business and at my invitation. "

Without relaxing his hold, Seeley twisted his upper body around to face Alvarez, "I don't care where this man does his business so long as it's not in this building. If you still want him you'll find him next door in County Jail Number Two." The Lt. gave Mack's cuffs the two finger test for the sake of the immediate public's consumption. And off to jail he and Mack went.

Once out of sight and between old Hall of Justice and the new, half-round and the new, arty-appearing jail Steely stopped. From behind Mack, Seeley couldn't resist giving Mack a few rabbit punches into his kidneys. That hurt. And a yank his cuffs upward, to cause Mack to rear up against his restraints in agony.

Surprising both of them and putting a light on the subject, a flash camera went off in their direction.