

**An encounter
with
San Francisco**

"It's an odd thing, but anyone who disappears is said to be seen in San Francisco. It must be a delightful city and possess all the attractions of the next world."

OSCAR WILDE, WRITER AND POET

LET'S HANG OUT TOGETHER

With brisk strokes, he skillfully sketched the outline of the United States on a small airline napkin. In Hollywood's place he drew a tiny movie reel, while what I recognized as the Statue of Liberty stood for New York. He drew a pair of socks, then removed another pen from his briefcase to color them in with red ink to represent Boston's baseball team.

"And what about San Francisco?" I demanded. After all, that was where our flight was headed. Where was the land that jutted out from the coast, almost completely surrounded by water? Where was the Golden Gate Bridge, gleaming against the honey gold evening sun? And where were the dancing flower children with braided hair in long flowing dresses?

My flight companion, a man in his late 50s, smirked. "San Francisco?" With a deft nudge of his index finger, he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, back to their rightful place. "Well, my dear; San Francisco does not really belong to the United States."

Bewildered, I remained silent.

He brushed his hand through his steel grey hair that had a faint blue tint to it. Perhaps just to humor me, he picked up his pen to draw a solitary island just beyond the coastline of northern California.

"San Francisco is a great island nation with hills, cable cars, and plenty of room for dreams and adventures. Much like Peter Pan's Wonderland; a place where no one has to grow up. The only thing missing from J.M. Barrie's story was a little marijuana." His face stretched itself into a wide, soundless laugh. "Wouldn't you agree?"

I didn't know how to respond. I only vaguely knew what awaited me in the city that was often referred to as the Paris of the West, but my seatmate didn't wait for a response. "I wish I could be your age in San Francisco again!" he said as he carefully added a bridge and drew a cable car on his sketch.

“Fame seekers sashay to Los Angeles, and the ambitious run to New York, but those on a quest for meaning always find themselves in San Francisco.” Passing me the colorful sketches, he uttered a last, “Have fun, young lady!” Then he turned his head, closed his eyes, and dozed off, smiling, perhaps revisiting his own Wonderland.

I folded up the napkin carefully, and stared out of the window into the dense blanket of clouds. San Francisco: a place for adventurers, dreamers and meaning-seekers? Was that me? All my hopes, fears, and expectations mixed with images of San Francisco I had developed from Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City*, Dashiell Hammett mysteries and Danielle Steel romance novels into a jumble of thoughts inside my head. I didn’t know why, but I sure that coming to San Francisco had been the right decision. My suitcases were stuffed with all my hopes, dreams and future ambitions – not to mention almost 40 pounds of clothing.

San Francisco, here I come!

Eleven hours later: Exhausted and depleted from my long journey, I stumbled out of the plane and into the stuffy airport corridor. A little dazed, I followed the other passengers through the long hallways with brightly lit signs directing us to Restrooms, Baggage Claim, and Immigration. I dragged my small carry-on bag sleep-drunkenly behind me. The air conditioning in the terminal made the air feel very dry, while the drab, beige walls seemed to close in on me.

After what seemed like a lot of walking, I found myself in a large hall, and proceeded to the end of a long line of people waiting to go through Immigration. Were those glass booths and metal turnstiles the admission gates to the city of many names? Was this the entrance to Fog City, The Golden City, or just...The City?

I had finally arrived in the place that had held such a tight grip on me ever since my aunt had given me Armistead Maupin’s eight *Tales of the City* books for my eighteenth birthday. I had breezed through the first book in only two nights, hoping that, some day, I, too, like the book’s protagonist, Mary Ann Singleton, would experience just how multicultural and liberal San Francisco could be. Would San Francisco fascinate me as much as it did her, so much that, after only a short while I, like Mary Ann from Ohio, would also feel as though I belonged there and decide to stay forever?

When my boss had presented me with the opportunity to spend a year in San Francisco helping to establish our company's American branch, I couldn't refuse. I had finally earned my ticket to the place that had filled my dreams of for eight full years.

And there couldn't have been a better time to turn my back on Germany. Life in my hometown of Düsseldorf had become little more than mundane and monotonous. My job had begun to bore me, and I had finally, after several difficult weeks, ended my on-again, off-again relationship with my childhood boyfriend when I realized that he considered us 'off' and was seeing another woman at the same time that I considered us 'on.' It was time for a change, and San Francisco was the perfect place to make one.

My glance swept across the immense Immigration hall. I stood in my worn-out sneakers on the gray-and-white patterned airport carpet that probably had been walked over by millions of other immigrants before me. Red, backlit digits numbering from one to 45 were posted on the windows of each Immigration booth. New arrivals stood patiently and anxiously awaited their summons by grim-faced immigration officers.

A wrinkled, Chinese-looking man sat behind a glass wall. His large dark blue uniform threatened to engulf him. With the countenance of a poker player, he stared at his screen and looked up only briefly when a new passport was presented to him, comparing the face in the photo with the one standing before him. I turned my attention back to the large flat screen television displaying a promotional video for California; it showed happy, laughing families being greeted by friendly immigration officials. Was that supposed to represent Immigration at *this* airport?! It certainly felt different than it appeared.

Suddenly, the man in the too-large jacket said, "Next!"

'Next!' That was me.

"Passport, please," he said. "Your finger there." He pointed to a green, blinking scanner, no doubt enjoying loving being able to use that commanding tone, those few words and concise statements at work. Who knew if he got to say as much at home?

I pressed the index finger of my left hand against the warm glass pane of the scanner. .

"Other finger now."

I repeated the same thing with the right finger.

“Do you have a visa? Why are you in San Francisco?” Question after question after question with barely enough time to answer.

I showed him my visa.

“Are you on your own?” he asked. I couldn’t tell if he was impressed or suspicious.

“Yes, sir,” I answered.

Half-nodding, he pressed a large stamp with the arrival date into my passport. It was official: “Admitted SFR” now stood in dark blue letters in my passport. As he passed my documents back to through the window, he offered me a brief smile that exposed his teeth. His right incisor was broken off and yellowing. “Enjoy your stay.”

That you can be sure of, I thought. Only minutes later, I was already picking up my luggage at Baggage Claim.

In front of the airport, I hopped into the first available taxi. The night sky already stretched itself across the city like the blanket I longed to crawl beneath, though I was excited to see the city lit up at night, But at that moment, all I could think of was sleep. The local time was 8:00 p.m., or more specifically 8:00 p.m. PST. At home in Germany it was nine hours ahead; my family would be waking up soon.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror of the taxi, and saw that my long, blond hair looked stringy and in desperate need of a brush, or better yet, a shampoo. My normally rosy cheeks looked pale. Everything would look better after a good night’s sleep, which I hoped would come soon.

“952 Sutter Street, please” I read from my paper I had brought.

“Sutter Street and what?” the taxi driver asked.

“Downtown,” I said.

“No. What’s the cross street?” With one arm crossed over the other, he indicated that he needed to know the intersection.

I noticed from the map that all the streets in San Francisco crossed to form one large checkerboard pattern. The streets were so long and straight that you could easily ride along the same one for several miles.

“Oh, I’m not exactly sure.”

“No problem,” he mumbled. At least that’s what I thought he said.

I leaned back in the seat and tried to relax. I could have been hypnotized by the disco ball hanging from the rearview mirror and the blue light of the dashboard were it not for a disturbing smell: a strange mix of pickles, air freshener, and flatulence tickled my nose. A half-eaten sandwich and an open tea bottle sat in the middle console of the Honda Civic; the car that was probably old enough to be on display in a museum. I thought of the sleek Mercedes-Benzenes that served as taxis in Germany, and was grateful, at least, that I hadn't been driven in a pickup truck in which I, no doubt, would have had to sit in the back.

"Are you visiting or do you live here?" After the immigration officer, he was the second person today to bombard me with questions without making any small talk.

Not right now, I begged silently. I'm tired. My mouth is dry, and my thoughts are only geared towards Sutter Street and the bed that awaits me there.

But I tried to be polite, but curt, so that the questioning wouldn't continue. "I'm from Germany, and will be living here for a year."

"Do you know the history of Sutter Street?" The question was assuredly rhetorical, as my driver continued without pause. "The street was named after Mr. Sutter, who was, by the way, a Bavarian guy. The first gold piece was discovered on his lumber mill back in 1848. The California Gold Rush: you know about that?"

I nodded definitively, and stared at the sandwich whose pickle, thanks to his driving style, was being squished against the open tea bottle.

"He was quite lucky; well, at least at first," the driver continued. "But despite everything, he died very poor. The real lucky one was Samuel Brannan, a sly fellow." The driver examined me through the rearview mirror, so I quickly mustered a look of interest. "Yes, Mr. Brannan was the first millionaire. He drew his profits from that valuable precious metal, too, but not as a prospector – as a journalist and entrepreneur." The driver paused briefly to focus his attention on making a right turn. I wondered how much longer his travelogue, and the drive, would last.

"Brannan bought up all sorts of goods and life essentials that he, in turn, resold at completely exorbitant prices to the forty-niners." A wide grin spread across his face. "Brannan yelled, 'Gold! Gold! Gold in the Sacramento River!' as he ran excitedly throughout the streets of the city. Oh, that must have been an amazing time..." My driver beamed, and then looked wistful. I wondered how he knew so much about it.

For just a moment, he let go of the steering wheel, raised his hands to the sky, and did a little shimmy, which made the tea in the open bottle slosh dangerously around in the middle console. “Just imagine it. Can you believe a single apple cost five dollars back then? Even in New York at that time, you wouldn’t pay more than a dime for an apple!”

“You seem to know a lot about the subject,” I noted approvingly.

“Oh yeah, I’m a tour guide. Well, at least when I’m not driving my cab. Every weekend. Here; take my card.” He handed it back over his shoulder, and I had no choice but to push myself forward from the seat that had become so comfortable in order to reach it. The driver’s pride broke through as he pointed towards his ID mounted on the dashboard. With that, my stereotype that all Americans held two jobs had been confirmed on the first day.

A few moments later, the driver dropped me off at my destination. After assuring him that I still had his card, I entered the apartment complex in the Lower Nob Hill district. Keys had been left for me at the front desk. As I went up in the elevator, the bars of the old door creaked and moaned. Arriving at the sixth floor, I unlocked the door to my new home.

In the corner I noticed a massive brownish-green couch, which made me feel as though I had stepped onto the set of “Friends.” Even though no one was there to welcome me, in that moment, I was just happy that my company had made this apartment available for my first few months. Completely exhausted, I fell into bed.

When I awoke the next morning, the sun had already begun to shine brightly throughout my room. Its golden rays felt warm on my face, and wrapped the room in a velvety-soft haze. I now saw that the walls had been painted matte beige and had white borders. The shiny, golden-brown hardwood floors creaked beneath me as I walked across the room.

My watch read seven o’clock already. Wow; I could sleep for a surprisingly long time; in Germany it was already four in the afternoon. Apparently, my body had already adjusted to the new time zone.

After showering, I pulled out the city map from my travel book, and tried to figure out where the office was located. According to one of my German colleagues who had spent

a year in San Francisco, the office was in the middle of the Financial district, not too far from the Ferry Building and Market Street. That would mean walking distance of no more than 30 minutes.

Market Street was a main street that passed through the entire city. During the city's earlier history, the street also functioned as a social barrier, separating the affluent portion of The City from the 'other' part of the city where the working class people lived. Today it still serves to orient the visitor to the city. I only needed to walk eight-and-a-half blocks from Sutter Street to reach Market. I actually felt proud of myself for finding my way so easily. But thanks to the checkerboard pattern of San Francisco's streets, not even someone with the orientation skills of a chicken with its head cut off could have gotten lost.

Although it was 8:30 a.m. and the streets were busy with the day's activity, the city still seemed, somehow, more relaxed and comfortable than the morning turmoil that I remembered from my trip to New York about a year-and-a-half earlier. Even the Financial District of San Francisco seemed quiet and contemplative. Although there were tall, modern office complexes, and grandiose buildings with impressive, pillared facades with windowed fronts that glistened in the morning sun light, they didn't block the golden light from beaming through the gaps between buildings. Even the Transamerica Pyramid, the 850 foot-tall landmark whose top disappears into the fog, and whose base, in order to help the structure withstand earthquakes, includes a hydraulic spring pendulum, seemed to glow with warmth. Despite the modern buildings, however, nostalgic-looking street signs gave the impression that they hadn't been replaced in years.

It was Monday morning in the central business district and yet pedestrians boasted carefree attire: 'casual,' Americans called it. A chubby boy who had squeezed into a too-tight San Francisco Giants' jersey looked like a large candy bar in orange and black wrapping. But what really surprised me about the Financial District was how few suit and ties I saw. Nor did the women wear high heels, or have the made-up faces I had expect. There were no elegantly dressed show-offs. In their place were down to earth-looking businessmen wearing jeans, T-shirts, and tennis shoes. It was impossible to tell who was a barista and who was a venture capitalist from their attire. But then I remembered what my colleague had told me: instead of smug bankers wearing polished shoes, there were low-

key developers in T-shirts and sneakers, and instead of fashion-crazed women with Prada bags, there were eccentric artists with flowers in their hair.

I supposed it shouldn't have surprised that San Francisco felt so relaxed: with a mere 800,000 residents, the city was comparable in size to Amsterdam, and was only the fourth largest city in California after Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Jose. It was also noteworthy that many of the long-established companies in the San Francisco Financial District were more impressive due to their history and longevity than their current economic importance. Prime examples were the Ghirardelli Chocolate Company, Wells Fargo; Levi Strauss & Co. (a German –or more specifically, Bavarian, company, as my taxi driver had pointed out) -- all saw large profits during and after the Gold Rush. *The San Francisco Examiner* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*; the Tadich Grill – the oldest seafood restaurant in the city; and the Anchor Steam Beer brewery – all had been around for at least 150 years.

A few minutes later, I stood before my company's building. Our business involved developing software for medical equipment that monitored such bodily functions as blood pressure, pulse, and temperature. My job was to support the development of our American branch.

I went up to the third floor and walked over to a large glass door. The perfect mix of glass, brick, and wood made the office seem modern and inviting, much more so than our German headquarters that featured utilitarian industrial materials, chosen for their cost rather than their appearance or the feeling they evoked.

The first person I met was Katie, our office administrator. "Hanni; nice to finally meet you." She and I had corresponded about logistics before my trip: where I would live, and so on. Now I was meeting the person on the other end of the telephone and email for the first time. I felt nervous, just as I would if I were starting a new job with a new company, but she gave off a very relaxing vibe.

"Please, have a seat." She wore jeans and a loose-fitting sweater. Her dark hair that had begun to gray was pulled back into a high ponytail. "I'll introduce you to your coworkers in just a few minutes. But first, how was your trip? How was the apartment? What do you think of San Francisco?"

Yet another person was grilling me with questions to which they didn't wait for answers. Was this the American way or a uniquely San Francisco style?

"I need to go over a few administrative things." With that she dropped a large information packet with the word 'On boarding' onto the table in front of me. "First things first." She explained that I needed to apply for a Social Security card. "Without a Social Security number, you can't open a bank account, get medical insurance, or even rent an apartment. You should apply for it today." She then, gave me a stack of medical insurance forms to fill out, and handed me a cell phone I could use while I was in the U.S.

With her hand behind my back, she escorted me around the office.

"Guys, this is Hanni from Germany. She'll be with us for a year." Next she introduced me to the circle of colleagues sitting at the table. About fifteen young, friendly faces smiled at me, and I smiled shyly back at them. Fortunately, I recognized one of those faces: Vijay, an Indian guy who had worked on a project with me at our German headquarters for a few weeks. My initial nervousness quickly began to fade. The team was much more international than the group in our German office, and they all seemed so young, open, and engaged. They represented a colorful mix of origins – England, China, India, Ireland, and Greece. This being a 'casual' environment, some of the employees wore T-shirts with sayings in different languages, and the break room smelled of cumin and soy – scents that overwhelmed whatever other ethnic cuisines people brought with them to work. I immediately felt comfortable and, somehow, at home.

During my lunch break, I decided to apply for a Social Security number. Not more than five minutes into my journey, I stumbled upon a street corner where a guy was sitting on a cardboard square holding up a sign that read, "I bet you can't hit me with a quarter." What a dark sense of humor!

Old bottles, scraps of paper, empty bags, and dirt lay in the gutters. The neighborhood seemed altogether rundown and shabby. There were still a few blocks to go until I got to the Social Security office. The closer I got, the more vacant and dirty the sidewalks became, and the weirder the figures. Meanwhile, I was feeling slightly overdressed in my little white blouse for the simplicity of the neighborhood.

I walked over the black grime of the streets in the new strappy sandals I had bought especially for my first day at the office. A group of homeless people sat at the last

intersection before the Social Security office; beside them were a ripped sleeping bag and a shopping cart full of someone's life's possessions. The California poverty line! I wondered if this area was part of the Tenderloin District. My guidebook described it as plagued by poverty and homelessness. "And lots of crazy people," Vijay had informed me. So I shouldn't be surprised if, for example, I were to see someone wearing a velvet lampshade on his or her head blocking traffic by doing a little dance in the middle of the street. I rushed on.

Walking into the Social Security office, I pulled a number from the machine, took a seat in the middle of the two long rows, and scanned my surroundings. There were more people here who had been marked by homelessness, alcoholism, drug use, and poverty or mental illness than anywhere else I'd been.

A few feet away, I noticed a group of homeless people in wheelchairs – not the high-tech chairs I was used to seeing in Germany, but rusted, metal clunkers that squealed loudly with every move. And just like a mobile home, those vehicles transported all of the worldly possessions of their owners – blankets, boxes, food, and empty bottles. On one old lady's wheelchair hung a bouquet of dried roses whose better times, like those of its owner, had long since passed by.

Where were all the 'normal' people? And what had brought the people waiting here to this point in their lives? Sickness, drugs, personal tragedy? Some combination of unlucky circumstances? I had never before felt so out of place, lost in the middle of a freak show. It seemed as if I was the only one amazed and bothered by the display. Was this just what everyday life was like here? The whole scene was completely at odds with the picture of San Francisco that the travel books had painted for me, which consisted of mornings spent biking over the Golden Gate Bridge, midday lunches at seafood restaurants in the Ferry Building, and evenings spent scaling the city's hills in historic streetcars. Where were those cable cars that pulled by with the quiet charm of long-forgotten times, and that bounced through the San Francisco hills like pearls down a marble run? Almost a little angered, I thought of the beautiful lyrics that Tony Bennett sang about his beloved city where cable cars climbed halfway to the stars. It was becoming increasingly difficult to hold on to that romantic notions I had formed of San Francisco.

Finally, my number came up on the display board. I hastily filled out the paperwork, and the lady at the counter handed me my documents. "Here you go, sweetie." She said I should expect my card in the mail within the next few days.

I hurried out of the office with a deep admiration for that Social Security worker for the simple fact that she managed to remain so calm despite the daily chaos. I also felt relieved that I didn't have to pick up my Social Security card in person.

Back at the office, when I told Katie what I had seen at the Social Security office, she said that San Francisco had one of the highest rates of homelessness in the United States, with over 6,000 people living on the streets, many of them in the Tenderloin and parts of SoMa (South of Market) around 6th Street. "There are several reasons," she began, sounding as if she were making excuses for her city's shortcomings. "San Francisco has a long tradition of being the 'place to go' for all kinds of free spirits. The city has been marked by hippie and drug culture since the 60s. And because San Francisco offers more social programs than other cities, it attracts countless homeless people from cities across the country." The San Francisco Food Bank began handing out meals on a daily basis, and Food Runners delivered leftover food from restaurants, supermarkets, and private households to those in need. This program continues to this day. Political and economic factors also played a role. The Clinton administration's so-called welfare reform of 1996 restricted social assistance to a maximum of five years. "That forced a lot of people onto the streets when that time was up."

And since San Francisco and Silicon Valley were center stage to the whole dotcom boom – the Internet explosion of the 90s – rental rates increased up to 500% with all the yuppies and Internet millionaires moving in. "Today, Manhattan is the only city with higher rents."

Her statements left me a little less than happy considering my upcoming apartment search. "The rents were far too expensive for people living on a meager 350 dollars in rental assistance per month. After the dotcom boom, a large number of people could suddenly no longer afford their apartments." She must have detected my anxiety because she added, "You should be fine." Seemingly unconcerned about my situation, she turned back to her work.

On Friday, after the first few days of getting used to my new job, enduring my first phone conference call with our American business partners, and getting to know my new colleagues, I planned to open my very own American bank account. Luckily the bank, unlike the Social Security office, was right around the corner.

“I would like to open a bank account.” Every once in a while, I still felt a little unsure of my English.

“Sure; we’ll be with you shortly,” the lady behind the counter said. She motioned for me to take a seat in a corner on one of the three leather armchairs. Another customer, a young woman, was already waiting. Her legs were crossed, and her bright red stocking glared back at me. Agitated, she sipped at her coffee and ran her fingers through her long dark hair. I sat down across from her and gave her a friendly nod.

“You should have a cup of coffee. It will probably be a while for you too,” she said in a Spanish-sounding accent. She pointed towards a self-serve coffee machine. “I’m Mari Carmen, from Barcelona.” She had moved to the city only a few weeks earlier. “There’s so much creative energy here.” She had already been working on her career as a writer for a few years, and hoped to get her big break in San Francisco. She went on and on, which didn’t exactly fit my image of the reclusive writer, but I enjoyed listening to her and immediately took to her straightforward nature.

“I always love meeting Europeans. I’ve already met a few Germans, Italians, and Spaniards here.” She chatted away as a strand of hair fell in front of her slender face.

“There must be something here that keeps attracting us Europeans,” I added.

She sipped at her coffee. “Yeah, it must be the European *joie de vivre*: good food, quality wine, and nature right outside door. What more could you want?”

Happily, I determined, as per Mari Carmen, that the city must have more to offer than just poverty and crazy people.

As my taxi driver had told me, San Francisco has many facets. It is proud of its Spanish heritage, loves French food, enjoys Italian wine, speaks fluent Chinese, and kicks back in the Japanese style. He had conveniently forgotten to mention the poverty.

“You can find whatever you’re looking for in San Francisco,” Mari Carmen said as she stretched out her long legs.

At that moment, a banker approached to invite Mari Carmen into her office. Before my new budding friendship vanished, I quickly passed her my business card.

“Yes, let’s hang out together,” she laughed. “I mean it. I’d love to get together.”

It wasn’t long before the woman at the counter motioned for me. A few forms and signatures later, I was the proud holder of an American bank account and credit card.

My American dream could now begin. I was ready.