

Clint Eastwood and the Bay of Despair

When Eddie Skinner flings himself off the western edge of America, into the churning, emerald-obsidian waters far beneath the Golden Gate Bridge, his image is caught on film by a startled Japanese tourist, who will later use the photo in a project she enters in Kyoto's International Contest on Socially Responsible Tourism. In the photo Eddie is uncannily balanced between the deep marigold hues of both the sunset and the bridge. The tourist will title the photo *Adaya*, the Japanese archery term for *arrow falling short of its target*. Eddie will become another glaring statistic for the ardent moralists in favor of a suicide barrier on the bridge – the latest battle to save San Francisco from itself.

Eddie is in fact a Security Guard at the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services on Washington Street. On this morning he climbs slowly from the BART subway tunnel, the circumference of his stomach causing him some discomfort; he is not extraordinarily heavy, but bulky around the middle from carbohydrates and lack of proper exercise.

It is 7:45 a.m., and Eddie strides heavily through this economic hub past the Stock Exchange and the Federal Reserve Bank, the staunch Mechanics and Union Bank buildings. These solemn, columned structures are surrounded by the more flamboyant Shanghai Commercial Bank, the gaudy Bank of the Orient and the Chekiang First Bank, banks that have been in San Francisco forever but seem to be slowly closing in, like a posse. He glances at the headlines as he passes a newspaper kiosk, "Bay Bridge Fiasco Deepens;" "Funding Found for Suicide Barrier on the Golden Gate."

In one of Eddie's favorite Westerns, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly', Clint Eastwood as Blondie, and Eli Wallach as Tuco come upon a drunk, cynical captain in the Confederate Army who is bitter about the ongoing battle to save a seemingly meaningless bridge in the middle of the desert. Both the Rebel and Confederate Armies want to take Branston Bridge, but both sides want it left intact, so advancing and receding, day after day, hundreds of men die in the process. Eddie feels his chest tighten, as though it is melding to the layers of Kevlar lining the bullet-proof vest under his uniform.

A bleached white sun hovers behind the morning fog as two cars nearly collide, horns blaring. Sansome Street teems with the strident clatter and hum of absolute necessity, everyone needing or wanting to be somewhere, some particular place, in a hurry. Eddie is uncomfortable with this quickening pace. He has always used public transportation, and has become inured to its delays and inconsistencies by allowing himself plenty of time for the commute each day across the bay from Berkeley. For all of his sixty-one years, he has lived with his mother in the same house near the University where she rents rooms to foreign students. Eddie's father had been there in the beginning, until he left Eddie's mother to be with one of the Swiss students staying with them in the mid-sixties. From the time Eddie was four years old, there had been a constant stream of students varying in age and nationality. The rent provided by the students, through the Exchange Institute, was to include two meals a day, which Eddie's mother still provided without fail, and served at the large dining table so that the students could have English speaking interaction with the host family.

“Eddie,” his mother had goaded the small boy in holsters and cowboy hat, “tell the girls what you did this afternoon while they were at school.” Eddie would fidget in his seat, making himself as small as he could in his chair. The students would giggle and point, their words an undecipherable cacophony in his ears.

Eddie’s recollection of growing up is an absurd interweaving of the vile fermented smell of Kim-Chee, and the slow, scraping sound of windows opening in the middle of the night when the culturally defiant Japanese students would sneak out to party somewhere in the distant night.

Eddie’s mother, at 83, still takes in students though the house is long since paid for. She smokes and drinks too much; now she has told Eddie she would soon need his room to rent to yet another foreign student, another future doctor or lawyer, or petty politician.

San Francisco has changed for Eddie. The sparkling city to which he would escape for solace over the years has become alien and dirty and malignant. The endless throng of foreign tourists he remembers from his youth seems to have become the owners of the city, the businessmen and the doctors, the bartenders, cab drivers, the store and restaurant owners. They seem to have become the chosen ones, and Eddie realizes he has helped it happen. In his small way, seated at his little station at the Immigration Office, verifying appointments and keeping the building safe, he is allowing the city to be consumed.

Eddie stops at Starbucks for a rare coffee drink. He doesn’t mind occasionally paying nearly four dollars for coffee here. The clouds of steam punctuated by friendly voices calling out familiar first names, makes him feel somehow secure and purposeful.

Outside, the throng streams by, but Eddie rests for a moment, waiting for someone called Jasmine to call his name.

“Eddie, your Caramel Macchiato is ready!”, Jasmine’s bright young smile lifts Eddie’s spirits some though she disappears back into the shiny grinders and coffee machines as instantly as she appeared. To Eddie, Jasmine has the soulful eyes of Sydney Penny who played Megan Wheeler in ‘Pale Rider’ with Clint Eastwood. Eddie loves Westerns, or as Carl calls them, “oaters.” His favorite western is ‘Warlock’ with Henry Fonda and Anthony Quinn, made in 1959, the same year he was born. Eddie wants to save this town like Henry Fonda tried to save Warlock. Eddie takes the clear to-go cup and drifts back into the street.

There is a block and a half between him and the Immigration Building, but Eddie can already see the lines beginning to form outside. The offices don’t open until 9:00, and then only for appointments, but the lines will never cease. The outliers will continue to come in by bus, by foot, by car, all wanting to live in his city. There are no barriers blocking their entrance, and where there are barriers, they will find their way over or around or through them.

“Eddie!”

Carl calls to him from in front of the Bur-Eat-O, down the street from where he and Eddie share security duties. Carl is small and wiry and smoking a Camel straight.

“Damn, Eddie, Starbucks?” Carl tosses his cigarette on the pavement. “You a fucking yuppie?”

Eddie smiles. He likes Carl. Carl runs the X-ray machine that examines the purses and baggage and tattered bundles wrapped in newspaper and twine,

surrendered by men in bad suits and old women whose eyes are glazed with fear and confusion.

“Just once in a while, Carl,” Eddie says, somewhat chagrined. He envisions Carl as the character Tom Morgan in ‘Warlock’, Henry Fonda’s crippled, champagne sipping sidekick. Carl lives on an old Criss-Craft Cruiser in the Emeryville Marina, giving him a perfect view of both the Golden Gate and the Bay bridges. “Right between the T and the A,” Carl would boast, toasting the brilliant skyline with a can of Budweiser. Eddie had visited Carl on his small boat, and agreed. He loved the city the way it once was, tucked like a jewel between two noble bridges. He could not imagine the city as it was becoming.

Carl and Eddie man their stations in the entryway of the Immigration Office. Eddie sits at a small table just inside the door where he will turn away countless people for lack of an appointment. The rules changed only two months ago in an effort to quell the unwieldy lines which wound around the tall, impersonal, grey marble and block building. An appointment system had been initiated, and it was Eddie’s job to tell these men and women to get on the Internet and make an appointment.

“The Internet,” Eddie had told Carl when he heard, incredulous. “Most of these people have never even seen a computer, yet I’m supposed to suggest they go to the library, or their local adult school?”

“Eddie, you need to get laid.” This being Carl’s answer to everything.

At lunch Eddie is relieved for one hour by the guard from the Asylum division. He walks across the street to Sai’s Vietnamese Restaurant, avoiding the eyes of the people in line to get into his building. He chooses Sai’s over the Bur-Eat-O as he enjoys

watching the waitress who works here. She is quiet, like Eddie, with hair like a Navajo maiden, and her name is Kim. Her eyes are soft and attentive whenever Eddie speaks to her, which is rare; she is the only waitress in the place. He orders only a bowl of rice. He feels different today, unusual – as though some kind of chitinous shield is forming around him. He feels his palms begin to sweat and he sits down heavily at a stool at the counter, weaving a bit. When he feels a bit better, he goes to the restroom and gauges himself in the mirror. He is, as Carl would say, a sad looking mother-fucker. He turns on the tap as he leans against the sink.

In 1951, Eddie had once read, winds reaching 70 miles per hour had caused the Golden Gate Bridge to sway twelve feet in either direction and wrenched it erratically up and down, causing cars to veer completely out of their lanes. Even subtle changes to the bridge's infrastructure could be dangerous. A poorly designed barrier could cause the bridge devastating stress. Eddie's skin feels heavy on his face as he tries to smile. He combs his hair back, as he has removed his cap upon entering the restaurant. The feeling has become a steady vibration deep within his core.

Kim has set the check by Eddie's barely touched bowl of rice. She is maybe 40, with a few wrinkles near her eyes, which dart quickly throughout the restaurant; she is quick and efficient, and so small that Eddie feels protective and suddenly brave. He waits at the cash register, and when Kim takes his check, he wastes no time.

"I was wondering if you might like to get some dinner sometime." He doesn't look into her eyes right away as he fumbles with his wallet. When he does, he feels his head begin to pound again. She is shaking her head with what might very well be disgust. Eddie's face begins to burn, and as he goes, he hears her turn to the cook in a burst of

laughter. He pulls on his cap before he leaves the restaurant; the words “fucking cop” ring hard against his ears.

In ‘Warlock’, Henry Fonda stands in the ruins of a burned-out saloon. He has tried to save the town, but realizes that even if he does, he can never be comfortable in domestic civilization.

“So, you gonna bag the waitress?”

Eddie only glances at Carl. It is beginning to get late in the day and his head has continued to throb. He is trying to explain to a small Hispanic man in a flannel shirt and cowboy hat that he must come back when he gets an appointment. Eddie is not required to speak Spanish; so many languages echo off these walls that to translate for all would be impossible. He makes them understand somehow. This man is not getting it, however, and he is becoming louder and louder, fear and fatigue having broken him and he is now going to try to break Eddie. The man startles him by climbing onto Eddie’s table like a deranged puppet. Carl is speechless behind his X-ray machine.

Eddie feels the vibration resonating stronger within his chest. He grabs the man and doubles him over. He leans in near the man’s head. He thinks of Bill Pickett, the famous black cowboy who invented bulldogging. Pickett would come alongside a Longhorn steer, drop to the steer’s level, twist its head toward the sky, and bite its upper lip to get full control. Eddie feels the warm blood in his mouth.

Carl is pulling him off the man. The supervisor is wrenching Eddie away.

“Get your gear and go,” he tells Eddie, “now.”

Eddie boards the 4:23 bus #54, northbound to Marin, by way of the Golden Gate Bridge. Even Clint Eastwood, in 'Pale Rider' had to eventually leave the citizens of Copper Canyon to fend for themselves.

He shifts in his seat and feels the stiff bullet-proof vest beneath his shirt. *He has forged it by hand from a sheet of iron, tied it to his torso with rope, and it is hidden beneath his poncho. He is Joe in 'A Man with No Name', they try to shoot him again and again, but each time he gets up, shakes off.*

"The heart, Ramon, don't forget the heart," Joe tells a stunned Ramon Rojo, whose eyes are like stones from hell and his lips quiver with hate.

"Aim for the heart or you'll never stop me."

There is talk of enclosing the sides of the Golden Gate Bridge with clear fiberglass. The idea is said to appeal to those who feel the beauty of the world-famous landmark might be compromised by such a physical barrier. Engineers have warned that such a device would block the wind, pushing it up and under, forcing the bridge to inevitably lurch out of control.

It is nearing sunset as the bus rumbles up Lombard Street. Eddie begins to feel at ease with the pulsation growing and vibrating deep within him. He longs for the open plains of the old west, the cowboys and the Indians and the bullets and arrows soaring between them. This city may be beautiful metaphysically, but it has lost its spirituality, its heart. Eddie smiles, looking out at the receding sun. It is the heart that is missing from this city.