

Summer of Love

“Turn on, tune in, drop out.” Catalyzed by this catchphrase, a wave of youthful pilgrims descended on the congested sidewalks and tenements of Haight-Ashbury—an oasis of perpetual partying, interchangeable sex, and mind-altering drugs. *“People in motion,”* crooned Scott McKenzie in his famous ballad, “San Francisco.” But the affect was more one of paralysis: a state not dissimilar to that of the lotus-eaters of Greek mythology. The hippie culture was, of course, unsustainable: a benign yet exhausting pose destined to collapse under its own weight. Visit the Haight today and you will find only vestiges of that famous summer of ’67: a poster shop, a vinyl record store, the abandoned home of the Grateful Dead. A few old hippies still sit in the parks, and they will not be offended if you offer them five dollars to pose for a picture. After all, they are much like statues: effigies of a vitality long spent.

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The Summer of Love was forty years old when I became a San Francisco probation officer. I was placed in a domestic violence unit, so it seemed unlikely that a former flower child would ever come my way. But I had been on the job for only a month when one was assigned to my caseload: a rail-thin woman in her mid-fifties. She was wearing a caftan, love beads, and a headband with several drooping feathers. Although she had bruised the scalp of her former boyfriend, she did not impress me as a batterer. With her Roman nose, jingling bracelets, and long stringy mane, she better resembled somebody's eccentric maiden aunt. And her lack of body weight suggested that she was in delicate health.

I held out my hand as she entered my office. "Tom Hemmings," I said. "I'll be your probation officer."

She pinched my fingers as though testing a melon then sat on the chair by my desk. "Cynthia Majik," she said. "I guess I'll be your probationer." She studied me as though I were a painting. "Well," she said. "You seem harmless enough. I was expecting you to slam me against the wall and tie me up with flex cuffs."

"I'm a bookworm who carries a badge," I said. "I'm not into slamming bodies."

"How quaint," she laughed. "A cop that reads. Have you read Lobsang Rampa, Thomas?"

"Wasn't he a plumber who claimed to be a lama?"

"He was," she said. "But he wrote like a poet. Isn't that enough for you, sir?"

"It might be," I said, "if he wasn't insane. I read somewhere that he gave his cat credit for dictating one of his books."

She folded her arms and sighed like a faucet. "The cat's name was Fifi Greywhiskers, Thomas. Please have the manners to use her name."

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“That’s way too much etiquette for a cat.”

She frowned. “If you don’t think cats have souls, you’re more of a pig than you think. My cat has been with me for twenty years. Next month, he’ll be old enough to vote.”

“You didn’t tell me his name,” I teased.

“His name is Winston Churchill. I call him Winnie for short.”

“That’s not too original.”

She tapped her foot. “I’m not at all original, Thomas. I read Rod McKuen poetry, I listen to The Doors, I even belong to the Cannibus Club. I’m really a bit of a cliché.”

“A hippie who brained her boyfriend? That sounds original to me.”

She patted my wrist as though calming a child. “If a misdemeanor makes me original, you’re much too easily impressed.”

“I’m more impressed by your rap sheet,” I said. “Half a dozen arrests by the DEA. Not a single conviction.”

“Do you actually think I’m a drug dealer, sir?”

“I doubt that.”

“I dispense marijuana to the sick and infirm. People with cancer, people in hospice care, people in chronic pain.”

I shrugged. “Only the feds would criminalize that.”

“Did you protest the Vietnam War?”

“Of course.”

“My goodness,” she said. “A cop with a conscience. I guess that makes *you* original.”

She told me her personal history as I filled out her background form. She was born in a small town in North Dakota, her mother was half Sioux, her parents died in a car crash

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in the spring of '67. Abandoning a foster home several weeks later, she hitchhiked to San Francisco and worked as a volunteer in the free medical clinic on Clayton Street. While attending the Monterey Pop Festival, where she helped manage the stage, she fell under the spell of a man whom she called her spiritual husband. That the relationship lasted four decades was no compliment to her "husband." She described him as the "guru type": a self-declared sage who brought home runaways and had sex with them. Tiring of his philanthropy, she brained him with a meat tenderizer, an incident that resulted in her immediate arrest and her placement on probation.

"I barely grazed him, Thomas," she said. "The only reason he called the police is that he wanted me out of the house."

"If you ask me, it's kind of surprising that you didn't clock him sooner."

"I *didn't* ask you, Thomas."

"Why did you even put up with him? You should have left long ago."

She fingered her love beads fastidiously as though she were counting pearls. "Are you judging me, Thomas? I'd rather you didn't. A woman can't be a prude when she lives in the Tenderloin."

"Forgive me for being appalled," I said.

"Forgive you?" she said. "No, I don't think I will. But I'm still going to bake you some brownies."

"Are you hoping to expand my consciousness?"

She chuckled then shook her head. "I'm not *that* starry-eyed, Thomas. But I do offer help where it's needed. Aren't you getting a little tired of being correct all the time?"

"Would you rather I went to pot?"

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She yawned while patting her mouth. “You’re beginning to bore me—let’s finish this meeting. Please give me my instructions and let me be on my way.”

Her terms of probation were standard so it didn’t take long to explain them to her: a stay away order from her guru boyfriend, a hundred hours of community service, and a one-year anger management program. “It’s the judge who thinks you need counseling,” I said when she looked at me accusingly.

I handed her her probation grant and asked her to review it. She lingered over the contract as though checking a shopping list. “My judge presumes too much,” she said finally, “if he thinks it’s counseling I need.”

“You need it to get off probation. I’ll send you to a program.”

She signed the grant with a flourish then initialed each of the terms. When she was finished, she tore off her copy and tucked it into her purse.

“Winston Churchill may die soon,” she said. “What I *need* is another cat.”

*

I sent her to the Tenderloin Mental Health Clinic for treatment and assessment. She was diagnosed as a manic-depressive who suffered from PTSD, a condition she had long been alleviating with medical marijuana. Her psych report also stated that she was selfless to a fault, exhausting herself by working in soup kitchens seven days a week. She was also in the habit of giving money to the homeless at Saint Anthony’s Church, a practice that did not seem compatible with her meager General Assistance checks. The report stressed that during her manic phases she was in danger of collapse, and suggested that she take alprazolam so as to better pace herself.

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Unimpressed, I chose to ignore the report. I did not wish to challenge her maverick spirit with antiseptic advice. Not when she embodied the very best of the hippie phenomenon.

I visited her in the Dalt Hotel where she lived in a city-subsidized flat. The flat was a cramped, depressing room that smelled of cat litter and incense. The bed was unmade, the dresser messy, dirty dishes filled the sink. And a poster of Timothy Leary hung over the stove like a specter.

She was sitting at a small table, arranging some Tarot cards. "Can you handle clutter," she asked me as I walked into the room. A huge mangy tabby slunk out of my way and hopped upon her lap.

"Winnie doesn't like you," she said. "I rather thought he would."

"I'm not here for his approval," I replied.

She shrugged and kept laying down cards. "I hoped you two would hit it off. You're both irredeemable snobs."

"I'm used to snubs," I said as I sat on a hardback chair.

She swept up the cards and shuffled them. "So what brings you here, Thomas?"

"A home visit."

"How civil. Or is that part of your job?"

"It is."

She cut the deck. "Did you hear that Winnie? He's not here because he likes us."

"No need for tea and brownies," I joked.

"I've already *baked* you the brownies," she snapped. "At least, you can take them with you."

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She spread out the cards in the shape of a fan and turned three of them face-up. “If you’re not here socially, how about a reading? I’ll even charge you for it.”

I felt myself blush. “Will you think better of me if I took the reading for free?”

She stroked the cat. “You’re a cop, Mr. Hemmings. A little more polished than most, but you *are* a cop on my back. No, I will not think better of you, but I’ll give you the reading for free.”

She arranged the three cards in a pyramid shape and studied them thoughtfully. “The Hanged Man, the Hermit, the King of Swords. The Hanged Man means you are stuck, the Hermit means you’re a skeptic, the King of Swords means you’re obsessed with control—that’s probably why you became a cop.”

I judged her remarks to be overrehearsed, a set of pat phrases she probably used to get suckers to pay for more readings. No matter that cops are role players too; I had certainly had purer moments. I had cheered when Richard Nixon resigned, I had protested a colonial war, I had even sampled a hit of acid during a peace march on Washington. That I was now a centurion did not really mean I had wholly abandoned the faith. At least, the oppressions I championed were milder than those that once stood in their place.

“Thomas,” she said, “what do you hold *sacred*?”

“Will law and order suffice?”

She reshuffled the cards. “The law is an ass—am I not proof of that? You must be rather desperate if the law is the best you can do.”

“And yet you are giving me brownies,” I said.

“That’s because I have standards, Thomas.”

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She dropped Winston Churchill onto the floor and fetched a plate from the kitchen counter. A dozen brownies, each wrapped in cellophane, lay upon the plate. I accepted them out of courtesy; I did not plan to sample them.

Sensing my disinclination, she patted me on the arm. “Thomas,” she said to me stonily, “make sure you return the dish.”

*

I got rid of the brownies by handing them to a band of homeless people. When she reported to my office the following week, I gave her back her plate. She slipped it into her purse and smiled without conviction. “What did you do with them, Thomas? I know you didn’t eat them.”

I confessed to my act of charity. “Will that redeem me?” I asked.

“What do you want with redemption?” she asked. “You seem happy enough as a cop.”

“It was the act of a kindred spirit.”

“It was the act of a charlatan. Kindred spirits are compatible, Thomas—they don’t flash badges and guns.”

“If I were that compatible, I couldn’t do my job.”

She folded her hands in her lap and yawned. “When I told you you were original, that wasn’t a compliment. I would find you far less annoying if you behaved like a typical cop.”

“You’d prefer me to be a cliché?”

“I would—I can handle typical cops. I guess that comes from being arrested half a dozen times.”

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“You handled the feds pretty well. They let you off every time.”

“Do you really think they are done with me, Thomas? They have me in their database and they’re always looking for snitches. It’s only a matter of time until they arrest me again.”

“Give up your cannabis card. Stop dealing pot.”

“Do you think that will make a difference?” She waved her hand impatiently: the subject of drug busts and federal overkill was boring her to distraction. “Shall I tell you about kindred spirits, Thomas?”

“It seems I have more to learn.”

She told me about a Grateful Dead concert she had attended twenty years ago. The concert was delayed when it started to rain, but she had sat in the downpour with thousands of Dead Heads as though she had no mind of her own. The rain finally stopped and a rainbow emerged and the Grateful Dead took the stage. “It was as though the rainbow united us, Thomas. It was as though we had one soul. I was never less lonely than I was at that moment. I was glad to be a cliché.”

“Sounds like heaven,” I said, unconvinced.

“Don’t be condescending,” she said. “It’s bad enough that you pity me—you don’t have to fib as well.”

“All right, I’ll say it. Those were fair-weather friendships. You’re worth much more than that.”

She looked at me curiously then shook her head. “Are you planning to lecture me, Thomas, for holding a memory dear. I’m a silly old woman who lives with a cat. How much am I really worth?”

*

With their baseball caps, blue jeans, and polo shirts, they did not look like federal agents. They looked like three kids on a fishing trip who had wandered into my office. I expected them to start talking about baseball or the kegger they had attended last night. I did not expect them to show me a warrant for her arrest.

Two months ago, they had caught her on film while conducting a sting operation. She had sold an ounce of Alcapulco gold to an undercover buyer—enough pot for a felony conviction if the matter went to trial. Of course, it was not her they wanted—she was worth more as a witness. If she agreed to testify against her supplier, they would ask that her charge be dropped.

Having learned that she was scheduled for an office visit, they had come to put her in jail. They also wanted me to convince her to give up the name of her source. I asked them to wait in the reception area while I prepared her for the bust.

“Some kids plan to lock you up,” I said after escorting her to my office.

She eased herself into the chair by my desk then rummaged through her purse. “Yes, I spotted them in the hallway,” she said. “They’ve bothered me before.” Removing a brush from her purse, she began to stroke her hair. “Will you ask them to wait a few minutes? I want to look presentable for my mug shot.”

“They should pick on someone their own damn size.”

“That *someone* would be hard to find, my dear? They’re a bunch of silly boys.”

“They ought to be tossing a frisbee somewhere or trying to pick up girls.”

“Well, at least, it’s nice to be wanted,” she said.

“It isn’t you that they want. They want you to drop a dime.”

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She checked her face in a hand mirror then pinched color into her cheeks. "I'm not really sure I can spare a dime, Thomas. I spent the last of my assistance check on a catnip mouse for Winnie."

"I forgot that you have standards," I said.

"It seems that you do too."

"Ask your public defender to subpoena me. I'll testify on your behalf."

"That won't be necessary, dear." She reached back into her purse. "There's something far more important that I'd rather have you do."

"Yes, I'll feed Winston Churchill," I said.

"And try not to show him your badge." She patted me on the elbow and gave me the key to her flat.

*

A federal public defender phoned me. Her voice was youthful, fruity, and hinted of sorority rushes. She told me the case had been filed in District Court and the offer had been made. Cynthia had simply shaken her head and offered the court some brownies.

"Why didn't the judge cut her loose," I said. "She was busted by the Backstreet Boys."

The attorney laughed. "I kinda got that impression. She said those kids would be much better off if they found something useful to do."

"Not everybody has standards," I said.

The attorney fell silent. I clutched the phone, wondering if we had been cut off.

"They have the law," she said finally.

"Does the law really need to have them?"

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The fruity voice grew caustic as the lawyer continued to speak. “No one wants her in federal prison, not even those dorky boys. If she would help herself just a little, the judge will throw out her case. A single name—that’s all it will take to get her back on the street.”

“I doubt that the streets hold her dear enough for her to make a deal. She lives in a dump in the Tenderloin.”

“Maybe you could convince her, hon. She speaks very highly of you.”

Feeling a flush of undeserved pride, I defused the compliment. “That isn’t because I’m her mentor,” I said. “It’s because I’m feeding her cat.”

The attorney again fell silent. I waited for her to speak. “If you ask me,” she said after several long seconds, “she’s cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.”

“I didn’t ask you,” I said.

She laughed. “It’s you who’s holding her dear. But *I* need to know more about her before I pitch her case. Like, isn’t she kinda crazy? Are there problems with her probation?”

“Only one,” I said reluctantly. “Her standards are higher than mine.”

*

Her case was scheduled in the federal building on Golden Gate Avenue. Flashing my badge, I bypassed the checkpoint and entered a museum-like foyer. Some Chinese dancers were performing a number, and a bake sale was taking place.

I located her court and pushed past the portals. Her attorney was not in the courtroom. I showed my badge to the bailiff and ducked into the holding tank.

She was alone in the tank, perched on one of the benches. Her legs were tucked in a lotus position, and her eyes were closed in meditation. Her jump suit was much too large for her; it made her look like a child.

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Opening her eyes, she scowled at me. “What are you doing here, Thomas?” she said.

“I *hope* you’re feeding my cat.”

I sat beside her and held out my palm. “I hope you can spare a dime.”

“If that’s your idea of a joke,” she replied, “I’d rather you spared me your wit.”

“How much were you paid to sell that ounce?”

“I didn’t receive a cent. I sold it for a friend.”

“The same friend you brained with a hammer?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve already taken a fall for him. You don’t really owe him another.”

She took my hand in hers and smiled thinly. “You’re such a lecturer, Thomas,” she said. “I ought to be taking notes.”

“I’m here to back you up.”

“How gallant. And what do you know about loyalty, Thomas?”

“I know you should drop that dime.”

Releasing my hands, she bowed her head as though she were sitting in church. “A dime for a memory—*really*, Thomas? When we joined our hands on the Golden Gate Bridge, when I wore a wreath of white roses? Goodness, the fog was so silvery we could barely see Alcatraz.”

“He didn’t deserve you.”

She arched her eyebrows. “Deserving has nothing to do with it.”

“It will in prison.”

“A vow is a vow. Didn’t you make one yourself when you let them give you that badge?”

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“That’s different,” I said.

“Is it?” she answered. “The law is an ass and you know it.”

“Give them his name, they’ll forget about you.”

“And allow them to wipe the slate clean? Not when I took his hands in mine and made a celestial vow.”

“You pledged yourself to a child abductor.”

“That makes no difference, Thomas. My totem is the eagle—a bird that mates for life.”

The door to the holding tank opened, and the bailiff called out her name.

“If you’re not going to fly the coup,” I said, “there’s nothing I can do.”

She looked at me sternly and rose to her feet. “Thomas,” she said, “just feed Winston Churchill. I don’t want him wasting away.”

*

Her public defender was standing at the podium when I walked into the courtroom. She was pretty young woman in a pink skirt suit and high heels that looked like stilts. The DEA agents had also arrived and were sitting at the District Attorney table. Still dressed in jeans and polo shirts, they were texting on their iPhones.

The young attorney was making a pitch to a justice that resembled Judge Judy: a sixtyish woman who looked as though she was impatient to leave the courtroom. In a voice that could sweeten coffee, the attorney kept dissing the drug buy, claiming that the agents had paid more than street value and were guilty of entrapment. “Are you serious?” the judge kept repeating as the lawyer presented her case. An assistant district attorney sat

quietly, content to let the lawyer talk. Hunched in front of an iPad, he was playing *Words with Friends*.

When the public defender finished her spiel, the judge looked in my direction.

“Would the probation officer care to weigh in?” she asked.

My pitch was equally impotent: I stressed that the defendant kept all her appointments, that she was too self-denying for crime, and that if she ended up in federal prison I would have to feed her cat.

Ignoring my stab at humor, the judge fixed her eyes on Cynthia. “Miss Majick,” she said, “please take the offer. I won’t be able to sleep tonight if I’m forced to send you to prison.”

Stepping up to the podium, Cynthia cleared her throat. “I did charge too much for that ounce, your honor. I usually make very fair deals.”

“Then please make another, Miss Majick.”

Cynthia folded her arms. “Goodness, your honor!” she exclaimed. “How much more is that silly ounce worth?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow,” the judge said. “Tonight, I want to sleep.”

As the judge breezed out of the courtroom, Cynthia patted my arm.

“Make the deal,” I insisted.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” she said.

“I’m being compatible.”

“No you’re not, dear. You’re determined to play the hero and that’s not what I want from you.”

“Would you rather rely on karma? Or maybe the King of Swords?”

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“Why *not* karma?” she said. “I’ve been busted six times for possession and the curtain hasn’t fallen on me yet.”

“You talk as though we’re in a theatre.”

She laughed and poked my side. “Court *is* theatre, Thomas. I should think you would know that by now.”

“All I know is it’s time you grew up.”

“Is it?” she said. She squeezed my hand. “So why are you trying to diminish me, dear? Do I trouble you all that much?”

The courtroom was now almost empty, her attorney was nowhere in sight. She let go of my hand and allowed the bailiff to walk her back to the tank.

*

A knock on my office door awoke me from a nap. I opened the door, and she entered my office. Sitting on the chair by my desk, she gave me a vinegary smile—the same smile she gave me yesterday when we sat in the holding tank.

“Thomas, please don’t look so surprised. You make me feel like a ghost.”

“You caught me unawares,” I said.

“Were you sleeping on the job?”

“No,” I lied.

“Don’t fib to me, dear. I don’t like it when you fib.”

“I take it that judge will be sleeping tonight.”

“She threw out the charge this morning. She told those boys they would have to find some other way to make their cases. Goodness, they looked so annoyed I almost felt sorry for them.”

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“Fuck them,” I said.

“Don’t be so self-righteous. They did what they thought was right.”

Opening her purse, she removed a paper and handed it to me. It was a federal court order dismissing the drug charge. “You meant well, Thomas,” she said, “and I love you. I know you don’t want to hear that.”

I shook my head self-consciously. “You loved those fair-weather hippies, you love that child abductor. And now you love the cop on your case. You deserve far better than that.”

“Deserving has nothing to do with it, dear. I told you that once already.” She rose to her feet. “May I hug you?” she said. “Or will that violate my probation?”

Pushing my chair away from the desk, I stiffly returned her embrace. Her body felt so fragile it was almost like holding a bird.

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She completed her counseling and community service without getting busted again, and I filed a motion asking her court to terminate her grant early. When her sentencing judge granted the motion, she patted my cheek in the courtroom. “How nice to be successful, Thomas. You must be so proud of me.”

“Be proud of yourself,” I answered. “You won’t have to come see me again.”

“Thomas,” she said. “What a stickler you are. Will you take me to jail if I do?”

After I closed her case, she continued to drop by my office. Each time, she turned up three Tarot cards and gave me a cursory reading. Her shtick was always the same: I had nothing whatever to fear. “I see no redemption *for* you, dear. You will always be a cop.”

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When she stopped coming by, I redeemed myself by calling the Medical Examiner. Not wanting to feed Winston Churchill again, I cringed as I made the call. As though reciting a mantra, I provided her birthdate and name.

An irritable clerk made me wait for an hour before faxing me the coroner's report. The cause was pulmonary failure, she had passed almost instantly. Her body lay unclaimed in the San Francisco Morgue.

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