

Wretched Excesses

“What's taking Ray-Ray so long?” Kimmie stomps her feet and pouts. “I hardly ever get to see him anymore, I think he goes out of his way to avoid me.”

“Relax, Kimmie, parking is hard to come by, especially on weekends.” Lydia sighs as she bends her leg behind her, wobbling as she removes her shoe. “These damn heels are killing me.” She grimaces as she tugs the other off.

Kimmie lights a cigarette before exclaiming, “Next time I’m in San Francisco I’m springing for a cab.” She looks down the street and whines, “Gawd, this line stretches forever. I hope newspapermen still get preferential treatment. Ray-Ray can be a bit of a shit, but I’m glad he’s a credentialed reporter.”

“No, he's not,” I say, “He's a third-rate stringer for the Bay Gazelle. Anyway, no one gives a crap about alternative newspapers anymore. Seems about par for the Artist's Guild to chose a cruddy warehouse to host a black-tie affair.”

“Why, Dan Flash, I thought you *were* the man about town. Don't you know the South of Market is hot?” Lydia inspects the linings of her shoes as she speaks. “The glitterati are bored with the opera season. They're out slumming tonight, check out those designer dresses, I feel like I’m wearing rags bought off a Sally’s rack—as in Salvation Army, don’t cha know?”

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I am a freelance photographer; perhaps you've seen my tag, Flash Fotos. Ray-Ray talked me into this gig. I told him to find someone else when he first offered the job; covering performance art isn't my bag.

“Aw, come on,” Ray had said, “Maryhill's the artist.”

“What gender is she attracted to this week?” I asked.

“It's the arts, not the artist we support. Still got the hot's for her, eh?”

“Not since I paid twenty bucks to watch her perform 'Wretched Excesses'.”

“Listen, Dan, I'm doing a three photo layout—it's worth fifty dollars per, what do you say?” What could I say? Billfold editions of dead presidents speak louder than words.

Lydia pulls a silver flask from her clutch. Unscrewing the cap, she catches my eye and says, “I absolutely hate the Eighties; this health and downward dog bullshit is for the birds! I'll take the good old days, anytime.” She tips her head back and guzzles. A drop of clear liquid shoots the curl of her chin. I wonder what she's drinking. A dozen years ago, when her name was Larry, she—he—whomever, drank single malt Scotch, and partied all night long. When I look back on those days, I'm amazed any of us managed to receive a degree from UC Berkeley.

“Gawd,” Kimmie grinds her cigarette butt into the sidewalk, “I can't wait to see Maryhill again. Her last performance was absolutely stunning. I wonder why those creeps at the Theosophical Society got so upset with her. It takes guts to dry heave for twenty minutes straight, you know.”

Sweaty and out of breath, Ray-Ray finally makes his way through the throng of people who are lined up and ready to strut their stuff; I'm betting a red carpet is installed in the entrance

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of this gala event. I'm wondering if the hundred and fifty bucks are enough for the aggravation that surely lies ahead.

Ray's crimson top hat and tails clash with the ankle length tie-dyed gym shoes laced to his feet. Instead of a boutonniere, a card dangles from his lapel and reads: PRESS.

"Christ!" he exclaims, taking off his hat and dragging a sleeve across his forehead, "The nearest parking spot was down on Brannan. What a hike, the whole area's crawling with fucking lunatics. The crazies are everywhere. It must be the full moon that's bringing them out. Wait 'til I tell you what happened on the street, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it."

The doors open and the line starts to move, cutting Ray's speech short. Lydia doesn't bother to put her shoes on; they're strapped together, slung over her shoulder.

"Ladies," Ray says. "Will you please excuse Danny Boy and me? We have work to attend to."

"Jesus Christ Ray-Ray, I thought you were taking me out."

"Consider yourself took, Kimmie. Save our seats, we'll finish in time for the show. Dan, old buddy, get a shot of the patrons and a couple of me at the doorway while I chat with the crowd and the young lady who's collecting ducats."

Ray talks up the attendees as though he were the opening act, a new-wave version of Wavy Gravy. As he interviews people, he conspicuously jots notes on his palm. I set my equipment up for a shot of the marquee. A woman sporting a tee shirt that reads "Dykes for Iron Mike" is working the ticket booth, strong-arming the price of admission from those without season passes. When she notices me, she scowls and says, "No pictures inside! Production rules

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prohibit cameras or recording devices.”

“I'm with the press,” I say.

She snarls, “I don't give a rat's ass!”

She turns her back to me. I see a likeness of Mike Tyson, and Heavyweight Champion, printed on the flip side of her shirt. His arms and boxing gloves encircle his head, like an Old Master's rendition of a halo.

Soon Ray works his way up the line to the iron maiden of ticket collectors, and requests an interview.

“Goddamn it, I'm busy!”

“Perhaps another time?”

“End of the line, Jack.” She stabs Ray with her stare and jerks her head toward the street. Ray wanders over to where I'm set up, and starts writing his lead in. He finally gets to interview his quarry, while I photograph the action.

“Okay, Bub,” she says when Ray finishes questioning her, “let's see what you wrote.”

“Sorry sister, freedom of the press, first amendment stuff, you know, all that good shit,” Ray replies.

I have several photos of her sitting on Ray, prying his fingers apart as she reads the notes jotted on his palm. I finally manage to drag him from the inquisition. We are in luck. The nearest bar on Harrison Street is classy enough to handle top shelf Scotch. Other than needing a beefsteak for a black eye, Ray seems to be recovering. If he hadn't demanded a refund on our tickets, I'm guessing only his ego would have been battered.

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“Ray, what’s going on? Do you realize how annoying you can be? That lady was only trying to do her job. She seemed highly agitated with what you wrote.” He lifts his left hand from his glass, extending it forward, palm facing me. What I decipher reads: bull dyke ticket taker, flaming faggot gentry, dago bi-couple in line, etc.

“Ray, it's damn near the end of the Me-First decade—we're out of the dark ages. What the hell do you call this?”

“My style, I'm on the cutting edge.”

“Jesus H. Christ, Ray!”

“Easy Danno, I'm developing the journalism of our time.”

“Ray, you're acting like an over-the-stern, shock jock. Man, you're missing the boat. Nazis, supremacists, and wackos will be your audience. I'm having a tough time calling myself your friend.”

“Get off that high horse, after all, we do have the freedom to be unconventional.” Ray is straightening the brim of his top hat as he speaks. “Another thing, we're all getting really tired of your water references—just because you were lucky enough to snag a houseboat to live on doesn't mean that the rest of us are enamored with your water views.”

“Ray, I'm really surprised by your lack of sensitivity, especially here, in this city. Anybody stooping to print garbage like what you propose will find themselves dead in the water.”

“See, there you go again, get off this boat-thing, won't you pal?”

“Here I was, all worried about your safety when we left you alone to park your car. If this

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crap gets published, your life won't be worth fretting over. Don't forget, many of the journalists you claim to admire fought to rid the media of this racist, bigoted rhetoric. Do you think for one minute what you're aiming to do is cute? Ray, write with style. This macho bullshit doesn't cut it anymore. Buddy, a Pulitzer is sure as hell not in your future."

"Shit!" Ray smacks his forehead with his hand; "I might have witnessed a murder tonight."

"Yeah right, the death of humanity."

"No, I saw a shooting!"

"Sure you did, Ray-Ray."

"I did, no lie, at Fifth and Brannan, while parking the car, this drunken spade . . ."

"Ray!"

"Er ah, . . . an intoxicated African American and his shopping cart were half out in the street, colonizing the parking lane. I get out of my car and talk the wino into squatting on the sidewalk. Along comes this woman in Capri pants and stiletto heels, a real slutty looking . . ."

"Jesus, Ray!"

"Sorry . . . Anyhow, she's walking a pit bull. The dog's ugly, scares shit out of the wino. The woman keeps yelling: 'Bruno, heel!' Finally, she manages to drag the brute down the sidewalk.

"The wino pulls a bottle from his cart and flops down on his slab of cardboard. I park and lock my car doors before cutting across the middle of the street. A ratty old pickup truck squeaks around the corner and shudders to a stop. The driver's door springs open, a cheesy looking spic—

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er a Mexican, maybe American, leaps out and shouts: 'If I can't have Bruno, you don't get 'em edder!' The woman in heels shrieks: 'No Paco! Don't!' She drops the leash, the dog growls and charges the wino. Blam! Blam!

“The woman hides between a pair of parked cars. The shots must have caused the old lush to soil him self. He jumps up, the wine bottle he's sucking on falls out of its sack and smashes against his Safeway cart. The gunman waves his piece and lays down a couple more rounds. Then he climbs into his truck and tries to run the broad down. He stops near the car in front of mine, backs up, backs again to the car behind me and so on, working his way down the street looking for her. I run to a corner store and dial 911. The dispatcher tries talking me into sticking around, but I grab onto my hat and haul ass.”

“Ray, you need to talk to the cops.”

“I don' know. Will you walk with me, back to my car?”

“Wash your hands—get rid of that ink. I'll call us a taxi.” There is a payphone near the restrooms and I make the call. While I talk with the dispatcher, Ray walks out of the men's room wiping his hands on his trousers.

When he notices me looking at him, he hoarsely whispers, “This joint doesn't even have a paper towel dispenser in the can.”

A yellow cab eventually shows up and transports us to Fifth and Brannan. As Ray pays the cabbie, I get out and walk around his parked car. I see two humps on the sidewalk. I suddenly feel nauseous.

“Ray, look!” A momentary breeze rattles beer cans, startling me. I jump back, bumping

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into Ray. A figure is slumped over the sidewalk on his hands and knees, a dog lays sprawled at his feet. Ray kneels next to the man.

“Is he alive?” I ask. The man's face appears to be stuck to a puddle of wine and coagulated blood.

“He's not breathing,” Ray whispers as he gently rolls the man over and covers him with a tattered sleeping bag that spilled from the grocery cart. The dog's leash is tangled around a stocking-less foot. I think about shoving the animal to the edge of the curb, but doing anything seems pointless. I'm a big-city photographer—I work weddings, bar mitzvahs, birthdays, and take portraits—I don't do death well.

Ray looks at me. “Believe it or not, I've listened to what you been telling me bro, maybe we should document this poor fellow's plight, use it for a civil rights lead in?”

“Get off it Ray, are you sure you called in an emergency?”

Ray stands up and hooks his thumbs in his pockets. He looks at me and says, “There's a phone at the market, two blocks down on the left. We could try calling again.” A strangled gargling noise rises from the walkway. Ray drops down and tugs at the sleeping bag. He tears the old man's shirt collar open and checks for a pulse, and then sticks his thumbs into the man's mouth, prying it open. Frantically, Ray tries to breath life back into the body.

“Ray?”

He shakes the man by his shoulders, pauses and listens, his ear near the man's chin.

“Ray?” Once again, Ray breathes into the man's mouth.

I run for the telephone. The market is closed but there is a telephone booth on the side of

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the building. As I get close, I see that the receiver is missing—just a coiled steel cord dangles from what is left of the black case. Pieces of metal and plastic surround a tire iron on the booth's floor. I run another block, searching, but find only darkened warehouses. I turn and head back, my leather dress shoes chafing my heels. I slow to a walk when I notice Ray leaning against the rear fender of his car, smoking a cigarette. On the sidewalk, the sleeping bag is once again covering the body.

“Maybe we should find a precinct station?” I ask.

“You didn’t call the cops?”

“The phone was ripped off the wall, we need to report this. You never even tried to call the cops, did you?”

“Why would I do that? I am not The Cities’ guardian angel. And now that the dude’s dead, do you really want to get us involved?”

As we climb into Ray’s car he says, “You know, someday technology will advance enough so that we will all be carrying portable telephones and shit like this will be eliminated.”

“Yeah right,” I say, “and we will all own driverless cars, as well.”

Ray goes, “Why are you always so negative? It’s small wonder you haven’t formed meaningful relationships with women, why can’t you just go with the flow?”

When we get back to the South of Market warehouse, people crowd around the exits, laughing as they wait for Town Cars and cabs.

“What happens now Ray?”

“You talkin’ ‘bout the dead guy and the mutt? Maybe not tonight, in the morning, street

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sweepers or sanitation department workmen will find the bodies, stinking to high heaven. It won't matter, curb service is another function preformed by the working class, nothin' we need to dirty our hands on or worry about."

"That's supposed to be uplifting?" I ask.

Finally, Lydia emerges from the building and looks around. Ray honks his horn and she walks over and crawls through the back door.

"Kimmie told me to tell you she's tired of hanging with the clown prince of journalism, she used an F-bomb describing what you should do to yourself. Maryhill flagged a cab and Kimmie left with her. Would you be kind enough to drive me home, please?"

"Sure," Ray says, "By the way, what was the title of Maryhill's performance piece?" He has his pen out, poised and ready to write. His left palm is facing him, a blank new page of his personal journal. Lydia hands him a program.

When I see the title of the performance piece,

Bottom Burps: the Study Of Flatulence, from Richard the Third to Aunt Matilda.

I think to myself that Maryhill is once again in rare form. Of course I'd never say it out loud in this car, in front of Ray-Ray, at least not until I get paid for my work.