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Leave's End

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I stepped from the bus into the clear salt-tinged air of San Francisco. It was quite a shock after the stale, smoke-smelling bus. The bus wasn't the only damn thing that smelled. After travelling cross-country on that boneshaker, I didn't smell like any rose myself. I glanced down at my scuffed shoes, the rumpled, linty dress blues.

"What a gawdawful mess," I thought, "and the first thing I run into will be the Shore Patrol, no doubt."

"Frisco looked good in the early morning, kind of pinkish and glowing. In spite of myself, I was excited about being here. I had travelled on cross-country busses before, and knew enough to keep well fortified with liquid amnesia.

I took another look at 'Frisco, eased a few kinks, then moved into the terminal. It was nearly deserted at this hour. I waited around a few minutes until the driver and the porter stopped gassing, collected my seabag, and went looking for a coin locker. It wasn't too hard to find. I deposited the seabag, kept the small bag with my shaving gear, and wandered over to the desk to see where I could clean up. I was directed way to hell and gone to the other end of the terminal. I started in that direction, changed my mind, went back to the locker, collected a change of blues and some clean underclothes, then headed for the washroom.

The sickish, sweet smell of disinfectant turned my stomach, but I forced the sickness back. Cleaning up was a pleasure, although shaving wasn't. I had a growth of beard that was just tough enough to fight back. I slipped out of the smelly, rumpled blues, then down to the buff. After putting on clean clothes, I felt that maybe I would survive. I cocked a clean white hat saltily over one eye, and admired the reflection of myself. The females were certainly in for a treat.
I left the smell of disinfectant with relief, walking more briskly now that I didn't resemble a graduate of skid row. The sound of eggs frying, and the aroma of coffee enticed me over to the short order counter. I fed the hangover, much to the improvement of my disposition. The head departed by stages, and life was once more worth living.

There it was waiting for me, San Francisco, the city of a thousand delights. Fabulous stories had drifted my way about 'Frisco. Today was the day to find out if the stories were true. I moved out into the clean sunlight, and hailed a passing cab.

On the way downtown, I kept my neck swiveling to take in the sights. Seen at this hour, 'Frisco seemed clean and airy. The streets were all up and down with narrow little sidestreets branching off in different directions. The cars angled into the curb so as not to fall off the hillside. Arms springing out of little boxes signalled stop and go. We came to a park across from the Federal Building, and I told the cabbie to stop.

I got out and strolled across the street to the park. I took a deep breath of growing green things. After that bus trip the air was clean and cool and wonderful. Ever have that feeling in a strange town early in the morning, before people arrive on the scene to screw-up the works? It's a hard feeling to define, but you're excited, glad to be alive, and feel like you own the place. And to be in San Francisco early in the morning had its own special flavor.

Human nature being what it is, I moved back across the street to a bar that was open. They wanted to see my I.D. though, so I moved on up the street to a place that wasn't so sticky about the matter of age. The glass of beer was served in a big lager glass, the cool foam easing over the edge gently. I took a big gulp before the bartender could change his mind, and the beer shocked its way down.

I knew I was going to get a bit bored before the night blossomed into the wild party I hoped to have. As a cushion against the boredom, I sipped away at the beer, then ordered another. My poor dear Aunt would have flipped at the thought of drinking before noon, or at anytime for that matter. Auntie was a long ways away. I glanced at the clock. I wasn't due at Alemeda Naval Air Station until the next morning at eight. This was going to be quite a day.

The cold beer made me shiver a bit in the cool barroom. I glanced at the various garish advertisements plastered around the joint. Bars are pretty much the same anywhere. I thought about the "Cave," a little set-up joint in Memphis. Now there was a wild dive for you. I thought about the little waitress, Chris, without too much regret. God, what a lousy temper! On the other hand she had her virtues, although not in the accepted sense of the word. A stray memory of sneaking whiskey past the Marine guard at the main gate gave me a brief
chuckle. The bartender looked pretty bored. I moved out into the sunlight.

A cab took me down to the Matson Line pier. I got out and began walking toward Fisherman's Wharf. I'd heard about the Wharf of course, and wanted to see for myself. The sun was beginning to give out some heat. That, and the beer, made me a little lightheaded, just enough so that I didn't give a damn. I kicked a stone into the street, feeling good. The high walls enclosing Matson's pier were lined with trucks loading and unloading supplies, and big boxes of god-knows-what. The place was showing plenty of activity.

I moved along the sidewalk until I came to the wharf where the fishing boats were at berth. They bounced up and down in the easy swell. The sun sent silver streaks across the water, making it difficult to look at it directly. The smell of fish and salt mingled. It was a living, heady smell. I sauntered along the sidewalk, feeling light on my feet. I took another deep breath of honest-to-god salt air, and felt sorry for the poor slobs who worked for a living and couldn't enjoy a morning like this.

A kid with a 'shine kit was sitting on the curb hoping for an early morning customer. I obliged him. He had his work cut out for him with those shoes. The kid finished and looked hopeful, so I gave him an extra quarter. Why not? It was that kind of day. I talked with the kid awhile, just killing time. We sat with our legs dangling over the edge of the sea-wall. I asked him some idiot questions, and he was nice enough to pretend that they were worthy of an answer. The heat was building up now in the still, calm air. I got up and started walking again.

I wandered into Di Maggio's, wondering whether to eat early, or to have another brew. So I had another brew, and struck up a conversation with the barmaid. She was a pig, but friendly enough and I enjoyed her chatter. She knew plenty of ribald stories about the Wharf area. I spent the rest of the morning just gassing, kidding her along a bit, the way you will when you've got lots of time, and no particular place to spend it. She kept the beer flowing and I bought her a couple. She looked like a hog getting swilled when she downed them, but like I said, I didn't have anything better to do just then.

It was getting around noon, so I decided to chow down. There were some live lobsters crawling around in a tank just waiting to be dropped into a boiling tub of water, so I ordered the complete lobster dinner. Business was picking up a bit, and the buzz of low conversation was pleasant. I sipped on a glass of beer, and wondered how that lobster felt scalding in the water. I didn't dwell on the thought very long. The waitress brought the salad over, and I began the meal. The lobster was delicious, with that fresh, sharp taste that really takes some getting used to. The salad was crisp and cold, with a roquefort dressing, and
there was a baked potato with some sort of cheese sauce. I took my
time eating, enjoying the food, and the pleasant glow I'd acquired.

I finished eating, took a look around the room, saw that there were
no unattached females present, and decided to leave. I paid the bill,
pleasantly surprised that it was so inexpensive. I would have to come
back to Di Maggio's again. The barmaid gave me a bright smile as I
left. What next, was the question that came to mind. Well, I could
always take in a movie.

I started walking back uptown, with the hot sun making my dress
blues like a steaming coat of mail. By the time I got to Market Street,
my breath was coming in short gasps, and my legs felt like lead bars.
I stopped under the street sign, and regained my wind. I used the
time to take a better look at the business section of San Francisco. Yellow
taxi's darted in and out of traffic with horns blaring. Pedestrians darted
across streets, taking their lives in their own hands while doing so.
People bustled up and down the street impatiently. There was no
doubt about it, 'Frisco was a live town.

I wandered up the street looking in store windows, and just gener-
ally taking my time. A salesman from one of the jewelry stores tried to
fast-talk me into buying a ring for my girl back home. I let him waste
his breath for a while before I told him to shove it. Laughing, I moved
up the street.

A movie featuring Sheree North caught my eye, so I purchased a
ticket, and walked into the cool darkness. It wasn't a very good picture,
but the scenery was shapely. I munched on popcorn, which began to
fight with the lobster. I heaved the bag of stale popcorn down on the
floor in disgust. God, but the plot of the movie was terrible. I sat it
out with resignation thinking that the bars wouldn't really start roar-
ing until early evening.

After emerging from the movie, I decided to get a couple of ham-
burgs at a nearby restaurant. Having filled up the chinks, I felt much
better. The glow I'd had in the morning had by this time left me
completely. I decided to remedy the situation with a cooling drink.
A small bar down the street aroused my interest, so I moved in that
direction.

The bar was a small supper club, with a minute dance floor, and
a raised bandstand, with room for a small combo at most. The interior
was dimly lighted with small colored bulbs. There were a few people
sipping on drinks at the tables. I moved up to the bar, and ordered
a scotch and soda from the bartender. I sat huddled over the drink
for quite a while, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did occur
for some time, then business began to pick up, and couples began to
drift into the bar. Most of the couples moved to the tables, but one
couple went to the bar and ordered double shots. The girl was a lush
brunette, with a proud prow, and a well-rounded stern. She was wear-
ing a dress made with some type of body-hugging, shimmering cloth. She was a very sexy doll. The jerk she was with was a rugged type. He was smooth enough, but I didn’t think I would care to test the kindness of his heart. There was something dark and slightly sinister about the guy. I took more interest in the girl, but guardedly, since I didn’t want to tangle with the boy friend.

A small combo moved over to the bandstand and began to tune up. More people began to drift into the club. The combo played a few standard tunes, and got a brief scattering of applause. The bartender looked at my empty glass with questioning eyes and I nodded. The combo began to swing some Brubeck arrangements, and I started to burn inside with the hopped-up driving beat of the bass. The man on piano had a glazed look in his eye, but he pounded the keys with driving force. Music is a weakness with me. Play hot, sensuous jazz and I get crazy urges. I began to stare at the girl more openly. She knew I was looking, and didn’t seem to mind. She even seemed to like it. I could see that the music was getting through to her by the way she moistened her lips and kept time with her body. The boy friend just wasn’t with it. He kept urging her to leave. She wouldn’t go. The guy finally got up, and headed for the can. I decided to make time while I had the opportunity. We were just getting cozy when Ugly returned. Christ, was he burned.

“Mack, you just get your ass out of here before you get hurt,” he said, as he loomed over me.

“Now look buddy, I don’t want any trouble. I was just making conversation. You know how it is,” I explained. I didn’t get a chance to talk my way out of it, because he just hauled off and knocked me flat off the bar stool.

I don’t like being hit even when I deserve it. I came off the floor groggily, and when he reached out to let me have it again, I kicked him square in the crotch. He doubled up, gasping hard. Like a damn fool, I stepped back, figuring everything was over. God, it had just begun. He pulled a switch-blade on me, and still bent over, lunged at me with the blade held cutting edge up. This guy knew his business. I got out of the way, but not before he cut hell out of my jumper. I grabbed a beer bottle from the bar, and smashed it on the counter. Some damn fool woman kept screaming. Chirst, why didn’t the cops come? The guy was being cagy now, circling toward me, the blade kept straight out, his other arm extended to ward off any move I might make.

I crouched low, and kept the jagged beer bottle out in front of me, backing off, just trying to keep distance between us. I wished like crazy that I had had a knife. All I could do with the bottle was mark him up while his knife could finish me for good. He made a quick slashing thrust, keeping himself well covered. I slashed downward
with the bottle. Blood spurted from his hand, but he kept on coming at me. A quick flash of the knife laid my left arm open. How in hell had I gotten into this mess anyway?

The bastard followed up with another thrust, this time he laid my cheek open. I moved in fast, and shoved the broken bottle in his face, grinding it in, flesh shredded redly. He gave an anguished shriek and dropped the knife. I stepped back, sick. He was a gory, screaming mess. Other than his sick screaming, it was quiet; a shocked, stunned silence. I ran.

The cool damp air hit me as I stumbled into the night. Oh god, I was in bad trouble. My arm was throbbing with pain, but the wound on my face didn't seem to be too bad. I realized that I was still carrying the bottle, and I smashed the damn thing against a wall. People in the street turned toward the sound of the breaking glass. I dashed down the street, then cut between two buildings. I went into the washroom of a gas station, my brain beginning to function. I knew that I was risking arrest if I didn't get some of the blood cleaned off me. A glance in the mirror showed that the cut on my cheek was just a scratch. I thought sure the guy had laid me wide open. My arm, though, was a different matter. It was going to require some attention. I cleaned up as best I could, even taking time to comb my hair, and scrubbed my face. I didn't want to leave anything that would show that I was in trouble. I wrapped paper towels around my arm, and buttoned the cuff of my sleeve, took another look in the mirror, and then stepped outside.

I hailed down a cab, and told him to take me to the bus terminal. I knew now what I had to do. The first thing was to get out of this bloodstained clothing. Fortunately I was wearing blues instead of dress whites, and the blood didn't show in the darkness.

We cruised by the bar where crowds of people were being shoved back by police. I slouched low in the seat. The cabbie made some comments about the commotion, but I just mumbled a few words in reply, and he didn't go on with it.

At the terminal, I opened the locker and retrieved my seabag, then carried it to the washroom. I changed back into my filthy, dirty set of blues, and stuffed the bloody clothing way down into the bag. My arm was still bleeding, so I tore a strip of cloth toweling from the wall and made a crude bandage with it. Then I moved into the lobby again. I crossed the lobby trying to keep from staggering. I went outside and caught another cab to the Air Station.

I managed to get past the Marine guard without any trouble, although I had a bad moment when he leaned over to check my leave papers. He smelled the liquor on my breath, but just grinned and passed me through after telling me the direction to the squadron barracks. Th taxi left me at the barracks, and I walked in. The lights
were out, so I nosed around looking for an empty bunk. Finding one, I dropped my seabag on it, and went to the head, where I was violently sick.

I went back to the bunk, took the bloody blues out of my seabag and took them outside to a trash burner. I lit the pile of paper that was in the burner, and threw the blues on top of the flames. Now all I had to worry about was the arm. I knew damn well that a search would be made for a sailor with cuts on his body, but if I could keep out of sickbay maybe I wouldn't get caught. I went back in the barracks, and located the first-aid kit. I patched up the arm as best I could. I could only hope that his knife had been clean.

I sit on my bunk smoking a cigarette, wondering just what in hell went wrong. The day had started out with so much promise. Now, God alone knows how this is going to end. All I can do is report in, in the morning, and hope that the cops won't locate me before my carrier leaves for Korea. I don't think that I'm going to get any sleep tonight.