

SAN FRANCISCO SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

[1,940 Words]

Maybe it was the postcard skyline seen between bridge cables, or possibly the startling seagull welcome that hit my windshield as the Jeep Cherokee slowed in traffic crossing the Golden Gate. Whatever the cause this afternoon, by the time I took a right off Lombard onto Steiner, circled Union Street and found a parking place, I was on a true sentimental journey--San Francisco, Herb Caen's "City by the Bay."

"The City," as natives refer to it, holds a special place in my life but not just because I was born there. In 1952 when I was 16, San Francisco's Press and Union League Club sponsored a high school journalism contest. As a lucky winner in the creative writing division, I was luckier still. I landed a seminar with the Chronicle's most beloved columnist. Mr. Caen remains forever in my memory as I politely waited at his office's open door. I--then an aspiring columnist--was timid about interrupting him; but I also wanted to prolong first sight of an idol in action...*and there he was--head tilted, absorbed completely, writing for eternity....*

I sat at a window table in a Union Street café not far from the site of my dad's old butcher shop at Fillmore and Greenwich, and ordered prosciutto and

melted jack on a croissant. The prosciutto was thick and dry; Father wouldn't have approved, but what do tourists know?

Across from the café, Lafayette Bakery was one of only two landmarks left from the neighborhood village days, before Union Street donned the colorful raiment of tourism. The sidewalk underfoot of passersby was the same my brown oxfords regularly had plodded up to Saint Vincent Catholic Church, the main incentive for Sunday eight a.m. mass being a jelly donut waiting in Lafayette's glass case.

Decades gone, I was thinking, since all of time was embraced by the handful of city blocks from the church at Green Street to the Marina and its' green. Decades!--since the would-be-writer slid into the hands of an aged midwife in an upstairs flat at Chestnut and Pierce. Now hot coffee turned her nose red. I laughed and lifted the gourmet cup of it to my lips....

The waitress brought change from my ten; I left three quarters for a tip. Glancing right from the café doorway I saw the Metro Theater, the second remaining landmark: "the Met," my older sister and I called it. There at Saturday matinees we watched World War II happen Hollywood style. How it pained me, to sit through perennial coward-turned-hero Richard Jaekell's last letter to Mom,

before he took enemy mortar to save a friend. But our side always won; and, squinting against the daylight, I could go forth reassured.

I turned left from the café. I already had decided my next stop would be Saint Vincent's....

During the war my family lived in yet another upstairs flat. Now, at the Union/Steiner corner, the scene down telescoping hills to the Bay evoked more memories: war machine factories along the Sausalito harbor; the lonesome hush that descended over the city as blackout curtains were lowered, I in my bed beside a low sash window.

Before the war I fell to sleep gauging the turn of the lights on the Golden Gate's towers. In wartime, lifting the blackout curtain a little, I peered into pure blackness. Missing too, was the huge neon Bank of America sign that previously blazed bright red over the chopping district along Chestnut Street. Old enough to hear the fear of enemy ships potentially off the coast, I would lie back, wondering: *what would a bomb sound like, falling toward me overhead?*

At Yerba Buena Elementary School, we grew a Victory Garden on the then empty lot at the school's Lombard and Webster corner. Mrs. McInerney taught our fourth- grade class (girls *and* boys) how to knit, and patiently saw that

everyone finished at least one square. Then she assembled them into a grand crooked blanket that we sent to “our boys at the front.”

At the Met after war’s end, The March of Time showed emaciated concentration camp survivors and, behind them, a hill of skeletons. I recall my child-thought: *the world’s safe now! Things like that never can happen again--not ever, not anywhere!* I learned differently, of course, no matter how much I would have liked to stay in the warm blanket of that mild ghetto near The Bay.

Turning up the Steiner hill toward the church at Green Street, thought moved back again in time to the naïve butcher’s daughter, sure now of so much less; the butcher’s daughter on her way to becoming a vegetarian! The prosciutto had been in memory of father’s white apron-clad figure standing soulfully in his shop window, as often I found him on my way home from school. He waited, a smile on his face--waiting eventually in vain, for customers who began not to come as post-war supermarkets changed the economic scene. What did come ultimately were heart attack, forced retirement, and death--perhaps not too early for him; way too early for me.

Saint Vincent’s stained-glass windows still were to me the world’s most glorious. Nothing inside seemed altered—the Virgin in her alcove, robe bluer than

blue; the high altar linens whiter than white. But a placque now beneath St. Joseph read, "Pray for the soul of James H. Long, fond Pastor of St. Vincent's, who died August 25, 1960..."

It made me feel bad, because I remembered how I would pray that something would cause a different priest than Father Long to take my Saturday confession. His very name spelled how much time it would take, and I had friends waiting for our exhilarating weekly softball game on the breeze-whipped green of Funston Park. But I knew Father Long would forgive me it today, like he'd forgiven everything before.

Along Union Street my eyes searched the tops of passed buildings, but gone were the old porticoes where cement gargoyles once perched on high. I recalled one Saturday on way to confession, when before midnight the night before Mother had had me test her ravioli filling, to see if it needed more salt. *Well--*as taught in catechism by the flowing-white- hatted nuns of DePaul--should one die with a 'mortal' sin on their Soul they'd go straight to Hell. *Unless*, that was, they recited a sincere "Act of Contrition" prayer before death hit.

In those days, *eating meat on a Friday* was a mortal sin; and that ravioli filling had meat in it! *Oh God*, I had thought along Union Street; *what if one of those gargoyles was to fall on my head? I wouldn't know it, before I was dead!*

So I walked in the gutter instead....

But that was ‘yesterday.’ Today, “The I” asked, *are you right?* Herb Caen surely could have answered. *Was it the “F” streetcar*, that clanged along Chestnut Street and took me to North Beach then back, balancing a roll of Lucca Factory dough for Mother to fill raviolis for an Easter feast. First, I’d visit my aunt’s bakery, circle past the oven and smell Calegari French bread at its best, picking up a warm roll on the way.

Rarely, however, would I climb the stairs to the top flat over the bakery for an extra visit to my paternal grandmother. Regular Sunday visits to her with my parents were enough for me. I never saw her smile, ever, before she died in the shadow of that local sun dial known as Coit Tower. She had lost the home of her soul. Cut off by the outbreak of World War II, while visiting the nine of her 11 children that had emigrated from Italy, she never was able to return.

From lively talk among aunts, uncles, and cousins at our open-family Sunday dinners, which we had no matter how strapped my parents were, I conjured colorful images of grandmother’s life in Italy. I envisioned her hearty and happy in the family’s bustling manor in the sunny Tuscan countryside, complete with coat of arms on the gate. There (I was told) she designed corsets for local gentry; and every day oversaw a midday meal for as many as 20 persons—

seamstresses, field workers, and her many children; the latter appearing at table only when weaned from wet nurses with whom they passed the forgetful hours of infancy.

My grandmother had had a formal education in Europe, remarkable for a woman in the latter part of the 19th century. My father's deep respect for his mother's intellect translated to me and my three sisters as honor of female consciousness *per se*. Altogether, the mental image I wove of my grandmother forged an intimate bond with my psyche, a vital counter-influence on otherwise immigrant new--world conditioning.

City-bred daughters of immigrants of my era rarely made it into college. I did manage myself into a second year at San Francisco State, but very soon I was a typical 20th-century working spouse and parent. Privately, for enough years, I repressed Life's circumstances of birth and conditioning against heart's desires.

Now, pumps clacking the Union Street pavement, Mind tasted its own bread—not Calegari's best nor Sunday's St. Vincent wafer. A bread formed of grains of words steeped in the pavement beneath my feet: the immigrant spirit--Civility and Reason, exercised not because of imposed dictates, but as duty and right of the individual soul.

I hadn't *planned* a "Vernal Equinox" pilgrimage; but of a sudden Self realized it *was* the season of Passovers and Easters, orthodox and unconventional; and I experienced a surge of synchronistic awe....

Specters of war were hovering over World again in guises of religiously cultural differences that smothered the true dearth of inequalities of fundamental human existence. Godly concepts and modes of religious observance in reality were of little import between neighbors of equally fair resources, livelihoods, and social standings. I recalled Franz Kafka's remark: *The 'Messiah' will come only when the most unbridled individualism of faith becomes possible.*

Amid the youthful harmony of various and sundry skin colors and beliefs in my San Francisco 'village', I felt like Leila Ahmed about her girlhood in Egypt. As Leila said, "They were people my parents knew and saw...my brothers' friends and my sister's and my own."

Unlocking the Cherokee's door, I thought: *I can sum up that which fueled the writer in me in two words: San Francisco.* So, too, might Herb Caen, although never could I be him or write what he wrote. San Francisco lived in Herb Caen. He gave voice to it, the people and the events along all of its walks; I simply lived in it--climbing its' hills muffled against the mist, listening to the fog horns on the bay. But in time it gave voice to me.

Just after my freshman term at Galileo High School we moved to Marin County and a society so different than that from which I had come. ‘She’--that lived once in Pixley Alley, rented a bike for 25 cents an hour, and streaked along the Marina Green vowing, *Life’s never going to get me!*—she found herself awkwardly placed, in her new school’s cultural spectrum. She never fit in, really.

[Self did okay, however! But then we know those ‘City girls’--they’re indestructible--]

(except!—we didn’t appreciate it exactly, when the Papacy by Pope Pius 12th in 1958 changed what I had believed taught to be a God-law. I would have needed only to serve a sentence in Purgatory for a ‘venial’ sin, as the edict announced. Eating meat on a Friday no longer was a mortal sin!)

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