

how they met



Sunset glimmered cold and bright beyond the golden gate. Jellyfish bobbed on the green waxing tide and the city of San Francisco hovered vaguely in the distance. Two passengers idled on the ferry's starboard deck.

He plucked pinches of sawdust from his jacket pockets and tossed them over the railing into the cold dark wake. A steam whistled shrieked and a trio of warships passed Fort Point returning from the Philippines.

Beside him leaned the woman he just couldn't ignore, conspicuously alone and roughly his age (which was 25) dressed like a Nob Hill aristocrat, with high cheekbones and dark features and discretely holding a silver flask. She glanced at him and he saw left her eye was badly bruised.

"White man's burden," he said.

The pretty woman smirked at the horizon.

“I love your hat,” he added. “Is that chinchilla?”

“Actually it is dog.” She spoke with a strong accent. Estonian, he thought, or maybe Hungarian.

“You don’t say.” His pomade coated goatee was closely cropped, she noticed. He wore a black felt derby, trim King Albert coat and lambskin boots polished to a glossy sheen – but his cuffs were shabby.

“Can I touch it?” he asked.

“As you like.”

He touched the hat in question. “Silky soft. What type of dog?”

She drummed her fingers on the railing, a diamond ring glimmered in the gloom. “It was the most beloved lapdog in the world, now it makes a satisfactory hat.”

He raised an index finger. “Imperious Caesar dead and turned to clay might stop a crack to keep the wind away.”

“Say again?”

“A round-about way of saying there’s no use crying over spilt milk, especially if the spilt milk can be fashioned to a passable hat.”

“You are a hat maker?”

“Actually I am a journalist.” He doffed his derby. His sandy blond hair was parted precisely in the middle. “Gordon Savoy at your service.”

She curtsied in turn. “Judy you can call me.”

He took her hand and gauged the resistance, the resistance being light he kissed her hand lightly. “Delighted, Judy.” He noticed fight scars on her knuckles and that diamond ring.

She withdrew her hand. “So then mister Savoy.”

He took her hand again and held it firmly. “Gordon please.” He smiled broadly, his teeth were white.

She smiled with her full lips pulled tight. As though she was considering an indecent thought, he thought. “Gordon it is.” She produced her flask, unscrewed the lid, but hesitated to drink.

“Lovely flask,” he observed.

She smelled the contents and toyed with the cap. “It belongs to my husband.”

He glanced around them, feigning nonchalance. “What does your husband drink?”

“Thirty year scotch.”

“He has good taste.”

“Would you like to drink some?”

He shrugged. “Why not.”

She handed him the flask. “You drink half, I’ll drink the other half.”

“You’re sure?”

“Definitively.”

He unscrewed the lid and took three gulps. Smooth and hot and faintly peaty. “Damn fine stuff.”

“You think so.”

“I do think so.” He smacked his lips.

She drank the flask empty and dabbed her mouth with her sleeve. “What if I told you it might possibly be poisoned?”

He looked at her but her expression was hard to gauge. “You shouldn’t josh on such a subject.”

“I do not josh, I merely clarify.”

He thought he detected the hint of a smile but wasn't entirely sure. “You said it was your husband's whisky, correct?”

“Correct.”

“So how could it be poisoned?”

She shrugged, “My husband keeps his most very best whiskey tainted with strychnine on the assumption that burglars will automatically drink the most expensive liquor. I think he might be joking, but also maybe not. Soon we'll see.”

His face grew pale as he saw she might be serious. “And you chose now to test it? And with me?” He sank down on the railing with his face in his hands. “So I'm a coalmine canary.”



“Let's not forget the fact that I drank it too.”

He looked at her grimly. “If you're not joshing I'd be damn well justified in tossing you overboard.”

She smiled, “If I'm not joshing then I'll be dead anyway.”

He stuck his finger in his mouth and tried to gag himself.

“You shouldn't bother. If it was poisoned it would be *very* strong poison.”

He withdrew his finger. “How long will it take before we know?”

“Maybe a moment, maybe forever. Take my hand, I’m very scared.”

They held hands for the remainder of the crossing. Leaning on the railing he felt rather drunk. The Alcatraz beacon flickered past them. “I don’t feel like I’m dying.”

“How can you know what dying feels like?” She held his hand tighter. “It might feel perfectly normal.”

They beheld San Francisco approach across the water like a sandcastle kingdom. The jumbled structures grew larger and larger until they finally docked and disembarked.

“We’re alive.”

“Are we?”

He was bound for North Beach, she for Pacific Heights. He offered to escort her as far as Van Ness Avenue and to his veiled surprise she accepted his offer. Thence they wandered steep and foggy streets where cable cars clattered like mechanical monsters and faceless figures traced trajectories to oblivion. He felt pleasantly tipsy. “You were joshing about the poison. Right?”

“Of course,” she said. “So then Gordon, have you any children?”

“I had a cat once but the cat ran away. And you?”

Her profile grew pensive. She did not answer.

They climbed a rickety staircase precariously hung on Telegraph Hill. “Glorious,” he paused to admire the waterfront. “Looking at such views I can almost detect the presence of God, like when I was a very young boy.”

She frowned at the view and spat on the boardwalk, an unfeminine gesture which gave him pause. “I am not sentimental type.”

“Not the sentimental type, alright.” He touched her spit with the toe of his boot.

“Passionate yes, sentimental no.”

“Passionate yes. How yes are you passionate?”

“How much yes is this?”

“That’s a lot of yes.”



They resumed climbing in silence, inwardly amazed by the kiss they’d both just perpetrated, until they reached the summit of Russian Hill. Packed with passengers and plaintively groaning, a cable car clattered past them. Locked together at the elbows like old friends, they passed beneath the garishly golden tooth of the local dentist, McTeague.

“You were talking of a cat.”

“My cat, yes of course.”

“Your cat that ran away.”

“I cried some tears believe you me.”

“No use crying over spilt milk you said.”

“I never bought another cat. And with the money I save on milk I could buy myself a capital hat. Or several drinks for a lovely lady.”

“A lovely lady meaning me. Which suspectly sounds like proposition.” She smiled out of the corner of her mouth, slyly. “You sure you like ladies?”

“Sure I like ladies.”

“Not some kind of nancy boy?”

“Hardly,” he tugged at his collar. “But doesn’t all this chatter about milk and desert islands make you a wee bit thirsty?”

“As you like.”

They approached a middleclass groggery when suddenly he paused and patted his pockets. “Damn it! I left my money in Sausalito.”

“Did you now.” She took a seat on a bench made from barrels.

He floated nearby on a cloud of agitation. “I wonder if I should go back for it.”

She rifled in her handbag. “You need not bother. I have very much money.”

“Do you.”

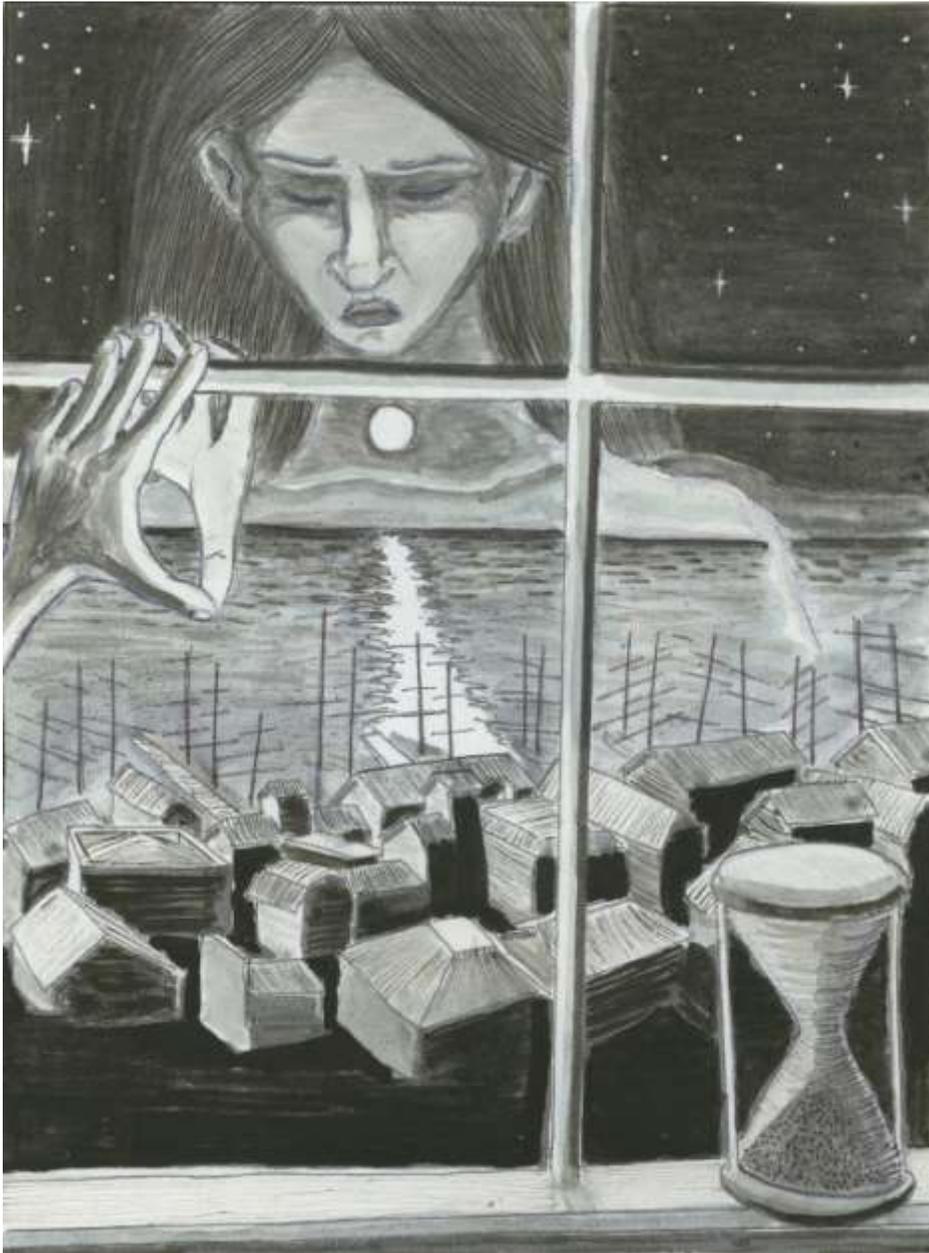
“I do.”

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the cat came back



Behold the crooked skyline whereupon sits the caterwauling cat. Backlit by stars and slinking softly in silhouette against the crooked skyline, big Tom tabby with a crooked tail and scabby ears, feral descendent of Argonaut ship-cats, he descends to a weedy lot to sniff the air for rodents, rivals and alley cats in heat, and prowls the ground for gophers, sprays an errant post and saunters to the street, where he hops atop a garbage bin to better see the gutters. His eyes shine silver in the starlight, crouched tightly with tail tucked away, watching and waiting, his scabby ears perky and shifting. Suddenly a sewer rat scurries from a storm drain - he leaps from his vantage point to chase it down and the rat squeals in anguish, dispatched with a sharp bite to the neck. He carries the twitching rodent gently as he would a kitten to the shelter of some pampas grass where he gnaws the tender neck to cleanly detach the head. This trophy he carries from rooftop to rooftop back to the home of his human, where it joins a grim tableau of similar trophies – a pigeon, a gopher and two other rats – set upon the windowsill as tribute to his owner. He licks off his paws and leaps into the dark to continue the harvest. The breezy night is crystalline with starlight and the blinding brightness of dawn is still half the night away.



Through the hallway transom a chilly breeze was blowing. By the pale glow she gauged the dimensions of his tiny North Beach flat. Sparsely furnished yet cheaply tasteful, it was the discrete domicile of a superfluous man. In the corner was a dented typewriter on a soapbox desk and a small bookshelf sagging with books and stacked with periodicals.

She examined a book, *Nightmare Stories* by Madam Blavatsky, on loan from the Salt Lake City Library and five years overdue. She climbed back into bed.

He felt her warm body against him and slowly roused. “We’re still alive.”

“Are we?” she said.

He felt her naked body. “Did we?”

“You fell asleep.”

He pretended to yawn. “Truth be told, I’m surprised you’re still here.”

“Shall I leave?” She started to rise.

He seized her shoulder. “By all means stay.”

“As you like.” She held him close beneath the blankets. He grew even closer until she shirked his advance. “Sex is just a habit,” she sighed.

“Then shoot me the habit, rabbit.”

“You missed the chance. Behave yourself and eventually you might have another.”

He studied her pensive profile. “Penny paid for brass tacks.”

“Brass tacks. What is brass tacks?”

“I mean the scoop. The dirt. The lowdown skinny.”

“Brass tacks is I am thinking of my husband.”

“Judging from your subtle perfume I deduce he must be wealthy.”

“What a nose you have.” She looked girlish in the gloom, almost angelic except the black eye.

“And if he can afford to treat you like *that*,” – he gestured at her face – “he’s a codfish aristocrat and a sonofabitch to boot.”

She touched her eye and tangibly stiffened. “Now there is some dirt you should truly be wary to dig.”

He rolled out of bed and lit a lantern. “Forgive me.” He stepped behind the partition to piss in the chamber pot, and noticed her clothing neatly folded atop his rickety writing chair. The platinum brooch, the diamond studded bracelet and most especially that patently ridiculous daisy dog hat. “I could be terribly mistaken but your dog hat seems a metaphor for something.”

“For something, you mean like a symbol?”

“Something like that, yes I do.”

She sat up naked in the lamplight. She had the sinewy build of a manufactory girl, not a wealthy woman. “Do tell.”

He leaned on the footboard. “You spoke of a desert island, and I think maybe your dog hat was a message in a bottle.”

“What message, for what?”

“A message for love, a message for escape.”

“Pshaw, sometimes a hat is just a hat.” She pulled up the comforter. “Furthermore my hat was never made from dog. You were correct it was chinchilla.”

“Chinchilla not dog, I am speechless.”

“I don’t know why I said it was dog. In fact I never owned a dog. Or saw a dog I liked. In fact I am scared of dogs.”

“You know what dog spells backwards.”

“Backwards or forwards, dogs cannot spell.”

He climbed back into bed beside her. “But *if* you were a dog, what type of dog would you be?”

“I would not be dog, I would be cat.”

“What if you had no choice.”

“I could never be a dog.”

“But what *if* you were a dog.”

“*If* I was dog.”

“What would you do?”

“A dog should dig up bones.”

Savoy cocked his head. “Dig up bones?”

“And suck the marrow. Like this.”

“Jesus! Judy Blue or whatever your name is, I swear to God.”

“To what God could you swear? You call yourself a nihilist.”

“On the topic of religion I’m more strictly a theosophist.”

“Shhh.” She glanced at the gently rattling window. “What is that?”

He spoke in a whisper, “What is what.”

“That.”

“I hear nothing.”

“Listen.”

Listening, they heard the whistling wind as it shook shutters, rattled panes and coaxed drapes to undulating spasms. Also the faint pitter patter of feline feet.

“That’s my old cat.”

“The cat came back?”

“Not really. But he leaves me little trophies now and then.”

“Trophies?”



“Mouse heads and such, left on the sill. I think it’s a form of charity.”

“Listen,” she said.

Listening, they heard the sea breeze blowing and wind chimes chiming and flapping wings and distant drunken shouts. The crooked streets thronged with bellicose songs. The drunkards sang:

“Somewhere evening bells are tolling,  
Somewhere sultry winds are blowing,  
Somewhere fresh-mown grass is greening,  
Somewhere happy dreams are dreaming,  
To the rhythm of the Summer,  
To the ranting scarecrow drummer.”





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## Skullduggery

They strolled hand-in-hand through a pauper's boneyard where dry flowers rattled in the breeze and headstones yawned like snaggle teeth, mute exclamation points to the silence of death.

He took a deep breath of the fresh ocean air. "Capital location, had for a bargain."

She considered the deed in her handbag, exchanged for a check from her private account.

"This was not cheap."

"San Francisco keeps growing."

"Like the emptiness of my piggy bank."

"Wait ten or twenty years and these outlands will be inlands. It's called an investment."

"Investment on paper."

"Investment underfoot," he kicked a stray bone.

She conceded, "Maybe once these dead are updug. Raised as you say."

"And raise them we shall. You purchased the property and that makes you landlord, you should give your tenants notice."

"So we can truly evict the dead? But the dead shall then be homeless."

"We'll find them other homes. We must clear the past to erect the future."

They walked on a while in silence, holding hands but palpably chilled.

He looked at the dozens and scores of graves, and imagined each and every burrow contained a better human being than both of them taken together.

She retrieved a mummified lily from a zinc receptacle and smelt it, smelling nothing. She plucked the wilted petals one by one. "He loves me, he loves me not. I love him, I love him not," until she ran out of petals and tossed aside the stalk.

“I need a cigarette.” He struck a match but the breeze blew it out. He had one match left. The boneyard gave no windbreak except a ramshackle chapel the size of a chicken coop. “In there,” he said.



He lit his cigarette and took a drag, gave her a cigarette to hold but not to smoke, then put his empty matchbox in his pocket and fingered clumps of lint. He imagined them sharing a grave, thereby mixing their residual molecules together forever. “We could do so much more together.”

“Much more meaning what.”

“Much more meaning anything. We could change society.”

“Change society?”

“Through charity and philanthropy.”

“With my husband’s money and your what?”

“With my enthusiasm.”

“Your enthusiasm.”

“We could even start a newspaper. I do have a journalistic background as you know.”

“And my husband?”

“There is that.”

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sowing the seed



She watched the lazy ebb of lavender light and the wastage of another day, silent save the wall clock and the fizzing of sunday champagne. He rustled the paper to break the silence. “So easy to feel the hurt caused by others, so hard to feel the hurt we cause ourselves. Funny how that works.”

“Spoken like a man who’s never been hurt,” she observed without looking.

“Two wrongs never equal a right, that’s what they taught me at the orphanage. And what I really hate is all these broken souls who spend their whole lives tormenting the universe simply because they’re too cowardly to kill themselves.”

“I’m not a coward.”

“I wasn’t talking about you. Have you read today’s paper?”

“Which one? I skimmed all three before you woke. In fact I read them twice over.”

He yawned into his hand. “I enjoy my sleep. Especially on Sunday.”

“Every day is Sunday for you.”

He shielded his eyes with an upturned palm. She was so beautiful. “I simply asked if you read the paper.”

“I proofread your newest article too. How many dictionaries have I bought you? I’ve long since lost track.”

He took a deep drink. “I never asked you to be my copy editor.”

“You are wonderfully naïve, my dear. And stupendously lazy.”

“I do everything you require. On paper and otherwise.”

“Occasionally you do. Increasingly you don’t.”

“My writing is sound, I’m a competent investigator. And when I feel agreeable to certain other antics I also perform those duties fully.”

“How much do I pay you?”

“Speaking of salaries, I spoke with your husband yesterday to discuss a new press.”

He felt her probing eyes – and avoided eye contact. “Do tell.”

“He wondered where you were. Per usual.”

“And what else?”

“Refused my request.”

“Wonder of wonders.”

“He called me your profligate pet, your maudlin marionette and a common fool to boot.”

She smirked the first smile of her day. “Felix has an exquisitely direct way with words.”

“He also called you a neuropathic slut with the morals of a mongoose. Said he loves you more than Schubert lieder.”

“That much?” She revealed small white teeth like those of a child. “Even a broken clock stands correct by serendipity.”

He reached for the sparkly and took a deep drink. “Anyway, I was asking if you’d read this morning’s paper.”

“For the final time Yes Yes Yes - more or less.”

“Here’s a dilly of a story. Did you read it? It concerns a dead prostitute.”

She watched the bubbles in her champagne as they rose and rose and rose. “A dead whore is news and that somehow surprises you. You are so shockingly innocent, like a darling little boy.”

“Throttled dead yester morn. In the very act of lascivious congress too. Shocking.”

She set her champagne flute on the sill. “I meant to address your dubious work ethic, but now you distract me with this salacious anecdote. From a rival rag no less. Shame on you, Gordon. Shame shame shame.”

He held up the article. “The prostitute was rather young, it seems. Hardly but a girl. Shocking, shocking, simply shocking.”

“Keep up this annoying incitement and I’ll have no recourse but to chastise you.” She planted her hands squarely on her hips. “Is that what you are hoping for?”

He pointed at the smudgy print, therein lay the point. “Appelbaum was the dead girl’s name. Adelaide Appelbaum. What kind of name is that?”

Her smile faded. “You say the name like I should know it.”

“Should you?” The clock grew deafeningly loud. Outside, a hummingbird buzzed the fuchsias.

