

a great place to drink



nancy robbin

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Nancy Robbin

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Part I THE SAN GIOVANNI HOTEL AND CLUB

Notions of freedom are tied up with drink.

Our ideal life contains a tavern

Where men may sit and talk or just think

All without fear of the nighted wyvern.

— Malcolm Lowry

1. THE CLUB

All over North Beach the little hotels were waking up

Late in the afternoon a hard breeze came up from the bay, clearing off the day's litter, sweeping ahead of it with equal zest torn papers, pigeons, crumpled flowers, and the great flapping coats of derelicts—driving the fog back out to sea, unveiling the shrouded towers, revealing once again from the Golden Gate a white city. A few cloud puffs remained floating high. The sky, now cleared for the sun's descent, began to glow with a faint gold light—the sun itself burning deeply red through the mists still hanging near the horizon. Slowly the gold light darkened, the clouds of pink fluff turned to velvet rose, the sun went down, the breeze died; it was twilight. All over North Beach the little hotels were waking up.

White port, Tokay, and Black Mountain burgundy flowed freely, but the reservoirs were low. Fresh supplies were needed. A hum of activity had begun in the corridors: loud rappings, footsteps, urgent voices, doors slammed shut as comrades gathered to meet the common emergency. Small heaps of coins grew rapidly, pockets turned out revealing unaccounted pennies, and one or two bills emerged from secret crevices. Old debts were paid and new ones contracted. Runs were made. And a softer, warmer glow spread gradually through the amber dusk. The long day's apathy had ended. Forms emerged from musty hallways: bent old men with shopping bags, young men with empty hands. Groups stood about on corners, waiting. Car horns squawked as blind pedestrians jaywalked to the liquor stores.

On Stockton Street the women were making a last foray on the Chinese butcher shops before six o'clock closing while their children played in front on the sidewalks, squealing and dodging past the men who watched in doorways. Upstairs in his room at the Ace Hotel, Henry Jackson was frying chicken over the hot plate while he waited for his woman to come home. An itinerant prostitute, she was sure to be late today as this was the first of the month and most of the pension checks were in. She had been making the rounds all afternoon, and there was still a hard night ahead of her. He was frying up a big batch: one whole chicken plus extra legs, and after that he thought he might cook some scallops. Delores would be starved. He looked in the fat refrigerator to make sure there was enough potato salad, shutting the door with an opulent bang. It was a huge box, taking up a fourth of the room and, at the moment, loaded with food. Patting its chipped front lovingly, he turned to stir the chicken again, then when it was cozily sizzling, went back to bed and, leaning against the propped-up pillows, sipped a medicinal glass of whiskey. Since his bout with cirrhosis he had given up wine.

Across the street in the Santa Maria the cocktail hour was going full tilt. The second floor winos, revived from their afternoon naps, were winding up for battle, and old man Forney had started his yelling down the air well. ("Shut up! I hear ya! Son amuh bitch! Shut up, I say!") On the first floor, Willie McCoy was just beginning to celebrate coming out of the hospital, where he had left a large section of stomach some days earlier, and now on his fifth glass of port was starting to wonder if just this once he might not forget his bland diet of instant potato and soup and try some of Finch's chili beans instead.

“Did the doctor say you could drink?” Finch asked him. “It don’t seem right.”

“Didn’t say I couldn’t.” He had been careful not to ask about that. But of course it was not on the diet.

“Well, it ain’t good, man. Not the way you do. I mean, where’s it all going?”

Willie stepped to the basin and opened his pants. “In here,” he said. “In one way, out the other.” But suddenly he felt very bad. His stomach—what there was left of it—was rocking; the beans no longer tempted him. He took another long drink and another and gradually began to feel better.

Finch blasted a jarring first chord on his harmonica, then swung into action.

“Shut up, goddamn you!” screamed the old man in the air well.

“You shut up!” bellowed a new voice, hoarse and reverberant from the other end. “Motherfuckus! You woke me up!”

Everyone shuddered. It was Dirty Louise, and once she got started she went on for hours. There was no way of stopping her short of knocking her over the head. This had once been done, but had not been permanently effective.

Down the street in the Clay Hotel the Filipinos were cooking fish. Its heartbreaking odor drifted out to Jimmy J. on the sidewalk below, and he tugged at his tent-like pants and smiled with anguish, but no friend paused. The day before he had come out of jail around three, missing dinner, but spent his dollar on bennies. Now they were gone. He had large liquid eyes and beautiful features, but a strange disease was turning his black skin white in patches. Before this affliction he had been more prosperous.

Farther down, on Broadway, the evening tourists were pouring into North Beach. Lights blazed from the tunnel; its echoing maw disgorged an endless stream. The bars of the Basque and Italian cafes were jammed. Young men in suits and perfumed girls in fluffy coats—exotic night birds—roamed the sidewalks seeking temporary shelter, lighting in doorways, peering at posted menus, book racks, op pop art displays, the Chinese theater, and the all-girl shoeshine stand. At the corner a lost folk singer and his barefoot wife solicited funds without apparent success, but a few early drunks had already scored. (The pickings improved later on as the tempo increased and additional mobs arrived for the Broadway shows.)

The Dante, North Beach’s only urban hotel, was doing a thriving business. Genuine travelers (as opposed to “transients”), carrying real suitcases rather than shopping bags or sleazy cloth affairs, were coming in from far-off places: Stockton, Fresno, and even Los Angeles. The permanent residents sat in the lobby looking uninterested. They too were a more respectable group—the Dante’s rates being somewhat high for the usual run of pensioners and off-beats—and a number were gainfully employed, among them two belly dancers and rock-and-rollers tuning up for work. A torrent of harsh notes spattered on lower Grant, ran through the fish shops, and poured down Vesuvio’s Alley.

At the Mecca, Mrs. Yee waited nervously for the evening’s invasion, ready to pounce on undesirables trying to sneak in for a free night’s lodging. Once she had caught six sleeping in one room—two on the bed, four wedged into the remaining floor space. They

were ubiquitous; coming out of the walls like roaches, they would sleep on the roof, behind the stairs, even in the toilets. Now she prowled the halls fearfully, listening at the men's room, peeking into the washroom, with its three staring basins and the community kitchen where a bearded young man perpetually cooked rice.

At the Rex, a more orderly place, the brutish Basque who maintained peace with his meaty fists was drunk an aperitif while his pretty wife Yvette prepared the evening meal. Their fat little daughters, female versions of papa, sprawled on the front steps and stuck out their tongues at approaching guests, while the whores inside were rested up for the long night.

Outside in the streets there was a continuous coming and going as the more gregarious North Beach residents began setting out toward their regular hangouts—moving from one to another, wandering with no clear aim until they arrived back at the original one. Some went to Vesuvio's and other popular spots to mix with the tourists. Others, leftover beats (now getting on into their thirties), the gay, the hard-core bohemians, and combinations of all three sought the remaining havens on upper Grant and Green while a few old-timers clung to the small Italian bars not yet crowded out by the garish clubs on Broadway. The meth-heads, wise and aloof, strolled up Columbus Avenue to Hamburger Joe's. The not-so-prosperous stood about on corners. But from all these groups there were always some who found their way in the course of the evening to the San Giovanni Hotel and Club.

* * *

Duncan Fraser sat at one of the front tables, holding his pipe and blending into the atmosphere. He felt at home in the San Giovanni, and there were times when he wondered why, since he had never felt that way anywhere else—least of all in the comfortable house in the Berkeley hills where his mother, wearing a vague, benign expression, molded her pots in a clay-splattered smock and his father read progressive magazines and groaned.

Duncan had had his own place now for over a year, a one-room studio near the Stockton tunnel, but he had never felt really at home there either. For the most part he simply accepted the fact. If someone had asked him suddenly why he was there, he would have had no answer on hand. Now, unstammering, he sat in the San Giovanni, cool and aloof, with the proper glass of vino before him, although he could have afforded better. The old Italians shuffled back and forth between the bar and the men's room, French Annette harangued the bartender in the most virulent Parisian accent, and Ricardo down at the far end chuckled into his beer at some obscure Filipino joke. In narrow snap-brims pulled low, two characters stood by the jukebox in close consultation. Soon the voice of Ray Charles flowed out singing the sweet, long-sorrowing melody of "Born to Lose."

Behind the bar Antonio checked his bottles and drank more brandy, prepared for a sudden onslaught. Red-faced, moody but mild unless provoked too far, Antonio shuffled about his duties, refusing to hurry, ignoring Annette's voluptuous oaths and the bulky seaman thumping his glass with equal calm. So far it looked like a quiet evening, but there was no way of knowing. Five minutes after the dinner gong sounded the room might be empty and stay that way the rest of the night—except of course for the permanent fixtures of Calvin, Maria, and nutty old Marcus mumbling irritably in his corner chair. Or a crowd could materialize out of anywhere (any dull Tuesday) and stay until two o'clock, fighting,

dancing, smashing glasses, and sooner or later bringing the law. At present, however, there seemed to be just as much happening back of the bar as in front of it. Centered before the long mirror, flanked on either side by rows of glasses (mainly the small ones used for the sour red vino, which was drunk by most of the customers), a giant whiskey bottle solemnly revolved. To its left a neon waterfall spilled endlessly into a bright blue lake, and down at the end near the ladies' room a penguin dipped at regular intervals into a shot glass holding a yellowish liquid. Coffee bubbled on an electric plate, emitting a bitter brown odor. (later in the day it was hardly safe to drink; except for occasional cafe royals, it was mostly for ornament.) And over the mirror in her gilded frame, Teresa's granddaughter, wearing a white confirmation dress, surveyed the scene with a cold, pure smile.

On the clock to her left the minute hand hopped to 5:45, and shortly afterward Frank came in through the door that led to the hotel proper upstairs, looking half awake from his afternoon nap. Co-owner, manager of the San Giovanni, Swiss-Italian, approaching sixty, he was a slender man with gray-flecked hair, gray eyes, and a youthful step. Some said he was out for the dollar, others that he was easy going, one of the few truly generous men alive. The fact was that he had his moods. He smiled good-naturedly now at no one in particular and passed through the bar to the dining room-kitchen in back. Almost immediately Teresa, his partner, came down the steps from the kitchen rubbing her hands on a red-flowered apron, still speaking rapid Italian to someone behind her. She paused for a moment, surveying the room with benevolent interest, nodding and smiling (most widely of all at Duncan, a pet who had never done anything "bad"), then joined Antonio back of the bar. Here her attention grew suddenly fixed on a pallid figure slumped on his stool, so abject as to be almost invisible. Her face grew stern.

"Caesar!" she said. He peeped up slyly. "Why you still here? I tell you to go home three hours ago."

He ventured a ghastly smile.

"No!" she said, although he had asked her nothing. "You had enough. Go home!"

"Teresa, lend me four bits."

"Four bits! Not one bit. You go home." She looked at Antonio for support, and he shook his head glumly.

"Teresa, let me have one drink and I will go home."

"No. No!" She appealed again silently to the bartender, who spread his hands. A hopeless case.

"Just fifty cents. I want to go down to the Chinaman's and get some soup. I'm hungry."

Her look grew fierce. "You don't buy soup. You drink."

"Please, Teresa. I'll pay you Monday. I get my check."

She scowled ferociously, then went to the register and took out two quarters, which she handed him with a look of grim disapproval.

Instantly his whole demeanor changed. He straightened up, and the color came into his face. His little black mustache quivered. “Un porto!” he cried and flung a quarter onto the bar.

She clutched her hair with both hands, rolling her eyes up to Jesus, but there was nothing she could do, for he was now a paying customer. He had tricked her again.

Teresa, like Frank, was close to sixty and, like him, young for her age. She was short and sturdy with warm brown eyes under heavy lids, big teeth, and a brush of hair which varied weekly from shades of purplish black to a comfortable brown. To further describe her objectively would have been difficult since she was obscured by superlatives heaped on her over the years and evoked instantly in the hearts of her followers at the sound of her name. Some called her an angel, but she was perfectly human. She had a number of biases and a high tolerance of intolerable persons. It might have been safest to say she was not complex, that she understood suffering and had a happy nature. To Duncan and some of the others, she was the life-soul of the San Giovanni—which might have been only another North Beach bar without her.

Yet it was not Teresa alone that drew Duncan back again and again. He had been coming here now for around six years, but much more frequently since he had moved to San Francisco. He had first come into the place by accident during the early phase of the Beat revolution, while he was still a student. Like so many others, he had arrived on the scene that summer—never quite certain if he was of it, with it, or only watching, but he like the rest of them night after night had followed the ritual circuit: starting out at Vesuvio’s, then moving up past Broadway, crossing Columbus, and right on Grant, stopping off at the Bagel Shop and the Coffee Gallery, then at The Place and continuing back by way of Green and the Anxious Asp to Columbus again. All these establishments had been jammed to explosion point, and the mobs had been worse outside than in—with the beats, the tourists, the fuzz, and the hoodlum gangs from the Mission crushed to a heterogeneous mass. One night he had drifted a little outside the circle and into the San Giovanni.

It was dim and still. He thought he had wandered into a movie set. There had never been any real place like this. From its shadowy ceiling three dull bulbs in glass reflectors hung on chains. The walls were a greenish rust, a blend of their natural shade with a fine patina of smoke and grime; the floor was of some dark, scuffed material like beaten earth. Some dusty old men with hats pulled low on their heads were sitting around a table, and there was a tiny, gray-haired, gray-bearded woman in pink house slippers perched at the bar along with some burly, ruddy-faced men who might have been mariners. Time, which had been wheeling by in a weird succession of shifting faces, blasting jazz and screaming monologues, came to rest. On the wall to his right were three unframed prints of a cow, a dog, and a horse, each colored the same rich shade of brown on a bright green meadow. They had always been there. A small old man with a short pointed beard and a knobby hat came out of the men’s room and walked with a shuffling step to a table in back. His walk was eternal. Then another old man put a dime in the box and the sad sweet strains of “Il Sirio” poured out the tragic tale of a sinking ship. He ordered a beer and sat down—in harbor at last.

Before long Duncan was a regular customer—less regular after the fall term started,

but he still continued to make trips over the bay from time to time whenever he felt a particular urge to visit the San Giovanni; and he always experienced that same sensation of “rightness” he had felt the first time. He found, however, that it was usually not as quiet as it had been that first night. Crowds would appear and vanish. Strange drunks came and started quarrels with the regular ones—or vice versa. Now and then there was trouble. The fuzz came in and hauled off some of the customers. The upstairs residents (mostly Italian pensioners) bickered among themselves, and Teresa scolded. At times the jukebox bounded with wild Italian rhythms. Chairs crashed. People fell down. Louanna, the aging hustler, rose in her cups and cursed the gods, and the old man sighed behind the bar and poured more vino. In these surroundings he would often experience a curious sense of inner peace—as though he had entered a world which was older, deeper, and somehow more human than what he had known before.

There had been a few changes over the years, but these were minor ones. The clientele was larger and broader; the spirit was much the same. The upstairs residents now included a Frenchman, two or three Argentinians, a Spanish Basque, an Indian, and several others of North American antecedents and dubious aspect. The color prints of the cow, the dog, and the horse had long since been torn down by Louanna in a fit of pique, but the three blank spaces where they had been remained. North Beach itself had changed much more. The beats, consistently harassed by the law, had at last departed, leaving a bearded residue to blend with the older bohemian element which had been there before; bars had changed hands or converted to sandle shops; and the clubs had passed through phases of Greek line dancing, the twist, and the swim. But the San Giovanni remained essentially the same.

Duncan was also much the same, but his feeling about the San Giovanni had grown and deepened over the years; and now that he lived so close, it had truly become his home. He went there just about every evening after work and often spent the better part of a weekend where he was sitting now—alone or with others, sipping his vino, engaging at times in conversation (intense or trivial—it made no difference), but mostly just sitting there, watching and waiting—for what he would not have been able to say; but when he left he seemed to be satisfied. There were times when he questioned his feelings about the place, and periods too when he tested himself by staying away; but he always returned with an eagerness only renewed by his brief denial, and, if he had been away more than a couple of days, with a sense of vague apprehension—as if some disaster might have occurred in his absence. Sometimes he thought it was much like being in love.

But if this was love, it was still a mystery. He had yet to define the particular quality—or combination of qualities—which stirred his heart. In philosophical moods, he thought it might well be the quality of life itself, or even its opposite. For the elements here were always close to the surface. It was a world without embellishment where the very immediacy of life in all its rawness constantly implied its negative counterpart. The old men died and, carted away feet first, were replaced by others. The specter of General Hospital hung in the shadows, haunting not only the aged. For alcoholics and other addicts it also represented—beyond the drunk courts, jails and brief sojourns in state asylums—the ultimate ghost. And again, conversely, these very horrors made the simplicity and closeness of life in the San Giovanni seem all the sweeter and more desirable by comparison.

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