

Chapter 6

Parking a car in North Beach in the evening is a particularly vicious form of initiation ceremony. Endless lines of autos creep up and down incredibly steep hills, like swarms of army ants in slow motion, searching for a sign that someone is about to vacate his precious plot of pavement. Someone inserts a key in a car door. The nearest driver jams on his brakes and the cars behind send up an indignant chorus of horns, designed to shame the lead car into driving on before the car at the curb has started, warmed up, and eventually nosed out into the slowly inching procession. Perhaps it is waiting for a dilatory passenger, and then the lead driver must stand his ground against a furious backlog of stalled traffic. A cab driver jumps out and hurls his verbal thunderbolt at the waiting vehicle, its occupants staring straight ahead behind hastily rolled-up windows. Perhaps the driver at the curb changes his mind and switches off his engine, in which case, according to the rules, the lead car must hurry away and go through the humiliating process all over again.

The timid and the extravagant give up and siphon off into one of the little plots where greedy old men in mufflers wait to see how much, literally, the traffic will bear. Paul qualified on both counts. He hated the battle of the bumpers and so long as his money held out, he didn't pay much attention to where it went. He found a grimy shack just below Grant Avenue whose front yard had been paved over to accommodate three tightly jammed cars. One space was empty and a ragged sign in the window read, PARK IT! TWO BUCKS. He was debating whether to look further when a spry bald-headed man with a monk's tonsure of short iron-gray hair threw open a window and shouted, "For you, a buck and a half. You need it worse than I do."

That settled it. Paul drove his battered relic into the space and handed the money through the window to the monk, who took it with one hand and continued to smear the other back and forth over a canvas thick with wet black paint.

"Pretty good deal, eh?" he remarked over his shoulder. "I pay the rent on this dump out of unemployment and clear forty bucks a week off the front yard. It keeps me pure."

He jabbed a thumb at the canvas, tearing a jagged three-corner hole. "That's it! Let the light in. How does it grab you?" He turned back to the window but Paul had already left.

AT GRANT and Columbus San Francisco's under- and over-worlds converge and collide. Streets shoot in at jagged angles as if half-a-dozen city

planners had started from the periphery and laid out their grids toward a meeting point, each ignorant of the others' intentions. Grant Avenue comes in from east and west: the shabby respectability of Chinatown, exotic only to the occidental, and the shabby bohemians of North-Beach, exotic principally to themselves. From the north, the hauteur of Nob Hill peters out in peeling wooden tenements; from the south along the Embarcadero the hint of four-and-twenty stench from faraway ports; and sidling in from the south-east the tawdry pseudo-remnants of the Barbary Coast, an iron archway framing the scene, erotic delights of middle-aged floozies peeling the veils from flabby breasts and flaccid thighs, a great Roman feast of fat and every banquet hall its own vomitorium.

The sun declines, the light thins, the shadows lengthen, and in come the tourists by the busload, poking their noses and their lenses indiscriminately into alleys, shops, doorways, faces. They stand on street corners, self-conscious in straw hats and Hawaiian shirts, peering through rimless spectacles at beatniks and Chinamen, while the blue serge emissaries of law-and-order patrol the fringes, tight-lipped, billy-clubs swinging at their sides, seething with frustration, alert to the crisis that never materializes.

On Skid Row, Mission and Howard, the cops are the ruling elite, giving and receiving, proposing and disposing without question. But here in North Beach they are intruders. Both districts, it is true, have certain things in common. They are the effluvia of affluence, the scrapheaps of prosperity, the dropouts and the fallouts, children without lineage, patriarchs without offspring, all without hope. *Send me your poor, your huddled masses*, says Our Lady of Liberty, with the implicit understanding that they are the raw material to be fired and forged into responsible citizens, doting parents, bountiful producers, insatiable consumers. Those whom the fire destroys are flung to the urban scrapheaps, until the refuse rises above the horizon and is levelled off and dispersed in a spasm of "urban redevelopment".

But sometimes even the hopeless achieve a certain style, an unexpected grace. And there are those who enter the burning fiery furnace and are not consumed, who hide in the scrap-heaps and erect their cathedrals from the stones which the builders rejected. North Beach is such a place, the Heavenly City of the Hipsters, a bubbling stew of no-talents and super-talents, of has-beens, will-bes, and never-wases. No wonder the cops have sweaty palms.

Paul too felt a certain constraint. It wasn't that he was frightened but rather that he, well, disapproved. These self-elected outcasts confronted the world with an unearned arrogance. It wasn't their attitude towards respectable middle-class America that he resented—that was something he felt in common. Rather it was their contempt for their artistic and intellectual betters, the real elite who had standards, who could write and paint circles around these clumsy boisterous rebels. Anyone could join the club just by

letting his beard grow and neglecting to wash his underwear. And they were so cocksure, so quick to put down whatever didn't fit their private little theories. Some at least had wit, but most of them were so serious and, the unforgiveable sin, so dull. The shabby little pamphlets emanating from a dozen backroom duplicators contained reams of rubbish that any neurotic adolescent could produce in an hour's intensive therapy. What was the percentage in joining a movement that excluded nobody? Ursula at least was intelligent and could write. Why did she waste her time with these incompetent puffed-up little morons?

He had agreed to meet her this evening at the Co-Existence Bagel Shop out of a desire to redeem himself after last week's fiasco. He did want to hear her read, but preferably under more auspicious circumstances. Why not at the Poetry Center? She was certainly good enough and the atmosphere was more conducive to concentration. These coffee house sessions were more like a carnival sideshow. He preferred acrobats to freaks, and freaks were here in abundance. A toothless old man met him at the door in a battered top hat and a tailcoat green with age and shiny with grease, his toes sticking out of threadbare sneakers.

"Buy a poem," he cackled, "quick, before the price goes up. Only five cents, cash on the barrelhead. I guarantee you, someday they'll be worth hundreds."

Paul pushed past him.

"Fuck you, sonny boy," the old man called after him. "I hope your pecker drops off."

Ursula was sitting near the back against the wall at a crowded table. She was wearing the same sweater and jeans, looking very much less conspicuous than in Seurat's elegant living room. She gave Paul her angelic grin and shoved sideways along the bench to make room. Paul squeezed in between the table and a fat boy in a sweatshirt whose armpits were haloed with concentric sweaty rings. The smell was overpowering. It occurred to Paul that if he concentrated, he could separate it into its chronological components. He tried not to concentrate.

A pale young man with acne was in the middle of a monolog

"The main thing is to realize that everything is as important as everything else. You've got to abolish the sensual hierarchies. Don't look at the reflection, look at the mirror. Concentrate on the bubbles in the glass, the tiny black lines where the backing is beginning to peel away, the layer of dust, each individual particle, even if it takes you a week. The reflection, everybody looks at it, but it's only sansara, illusion, the appearance of things. You've got to get inside the maya, the reality, all those specks and

cracks, each one a universe as complicated as the solar system. Someday I'm going to write a whole book about a speck of dust."

"Which do you think will last longer," Paul asked involuntarily, "the speck or the book?"

"They both exist forever," the young man answered, ignoring the irony. "The book already exists; otherwise, I couldn't write it."

Nobody spoke. The fat boy sniffed his armpit and sighed. Paul waited for introductions but none were forthcoming. He felt as if he'd wandered into a Quaker prayer meeting. Ursula reached under the table and patted him reassuringly on the knee, a small boy in a circle of wise old men. He was off to a bad start.

LOOKING around the room, Paul tried to determine what sort of people had come for the reading. Many of them seemed to know Ursula; several had waved or spoken as they came in. One huge black man with tiny gold earrings came over without a word or a smile, leaned across the table, and gave her an extraordinarily wet kiss, which she returned with grave thoroughness. Paul looked discreetly away at the opposite wall. It was covered with overlapping posters like a cubist painting, announcements for a bewildering variety of poetry readings, jazz sessions, little mags, folk sings, lectures, discussions, art exhibits—amazing how much you could keep up with if you didn't have to worry about anything else, earning a living for example. Add on the unpublicised events, the orgies and the pot parties, and you could kill yourself off in a week. No wonder they all looked haggard! In amongst the posters were little personal notices which were too small to read from across the room, and a large sheet of newsprint on which was boldly scrawled in red paint, "JESUS CHRIST WAS A JEW!

Paul glanced back at Ursula and the Negro. They were still at it. He felt he was being made a fool of; but perhaps that wasn't quite fair. She wasn't his "date" and besides, such conventions probably didn't apply here anyway. One must be adaptable and remember that customs differ from one social environment to another. He hadn't read Margaret Mead for nothing.

Come to think of it, this really was a kind of primitive sub-culture. Someone would probably write a book on it soon: *Coming of Age in North Beach*, or *Ritual Incest: the Role of the Absent Father*. Which South Pacific tribe did they most resemble? The Arapesh, probably: relaxed, permissive, cool, non-competitive. Did they have children? What was it like to grow up in such an environment? Perhaps they would rebel against parental permissiveness, cut their hair, buy a Brooks Brothers suit, and begin a counter-migration to Madison Avenue and the stock exchange. He imagined these children in later years, trying to shake off the father image, at odds

with the open society, victims of compulsive private rituals, seeking out ultra-directive therapists. Perhaps rebellion was the wellspring of creativity after all. Even he had rebelled in his own unobtrusive way. What about his ardent Anglophilia, his early infatuation with St. Swithin's, his pipes, his tweed suit? Perhaps he had no right to be condescending.

The Negro had gone and Ursula was whispering in his ear. "That was Eddie. He's just served two years for raping a white whore. He likes to degrade me in public, maybe it'll keep him out of jail for a while, poor dear." Paul's brain did a double somersault. Evidently, he still had a lot to learn.

There was a loud crash and everybody looked up. The bartender, a three-hundred-pound hulk in a dirty chef's apron, was standing in the middle of the room like a shabby Alp, bashing two beer mugs together.

"Quiet, everybody! You there, shut up, you think I'm talking to myself? Tonight's poetry night. Everybody that wants to listen, stay where you are. Anybody wants to talk, get out."

He waddled back behind the bar and dropped the mugs in the sink. The boy with the acne pushed his chair back and got up. He was barely five feet tall and climbed onto the chair so he could be seen.

"Uh, Ted's not here yet so I'm going to begin. I'm going to read a couple of Haikus and part of a long poem I haven't finished yet."

He cleared his throat, shuffled through a handful of papers, couldn't find what he was looking for, climbed down, rummaged about in a pile on the table, struggled back onto the chair, and began.

Sunbeam through a knothole,
a tunnel of dust.
Who am I?

There was a hesitation, a scattering of applause, and the reader continued:

A dog turd steams
on the hot pavement -
God is improvident.

More applause, louder this time.

"The next poem's about sensation. It's just a fragment; the poem is called, "Little by Death", and it's sort of based on the Karma-Sutra."

This time the loud applause of aroused expectations. The poem turned out to be mostly an anatomical catalog of organs, muscles, bones, veins, arteries, nerves, some in Latin, some in four-letter vernacular. Orifices were itemized, categorized, divided and sub-divided, described singly and in conjunction, brought together in every conceivable and inconceivable combination and position—Paul couldn't think of a thing that had been left

out. But there was nothing erotic about it, no descriptive adjectives, no sense of personality or even of totality, just disembodied apertures coming together somewhere in outer space. It was quite surrealistic.

"He's going to be good someday I think," Ursula whispered. "He works very hard. Before he wrote that last one, he spent two weeks reading Gray's *Anatomy*."

Ursula was next. She read pleasantly and unpretentiously, but with a trace of stage British which wasn't apparent in her conversation. The poems were vividly and explicitly sexual, with a sense of humor as well, like a feminine E.E. Cummings but without the verbal acrobatics. One poem which concerned lesbian intercourse made Paul wonder whether it was written from imagination or experience. The audience was attentive and enthusiastic. From the number of times they called for more, it was evident that she was popular.

Two other poets followed, older than most of the audience. One had read too much Gerard Manly Hopkins and used phrases like "bird-bedazzled breakers"; the other was a tired old Marxist-Social Realist who only made it half-way to the Finland Station.

THE LAST poet, unexpectedly, was the fat boy in the sweatshirt, who hadn't said a word all evening. He heaved himself up from the bench with the aid of a puffy hand on Paul's shoulder and stood panting in the middle of the room.

"This is sort of an action poem," he said in an incongruously high thin voice. "It's called The Revolution."

He drew a long deep breath, stood on tiptoe, flapped his arms, and screamed at the top of his voice.

"Fuck the fuzz!" he bellowed several times in rapid succession. "Fuck the fuzz! Fuzzy fuck! Fuzzy fuck!" Suddenly he was on his knees, his arms cradling an imaginary machine gun, strafing the room, guttural ack-ack noises coming from his throat. Then he was on his feet, grasping his throat with both hands, rolling his eyes, falling to his knees again and onto his side where he lay panting and quivering like a sow in labor. A few seconds later he was on his feet again with an alacrity which contravened the law of inertia. He was off again at full bellow:

"Fuck the fuzz! Duzzy Fuck! The fuzz fucks ducks! Ducky fuck! Fuck the bucks Duck the fuzz! Fizzle-fuzzle! Fuzzy-wuzzy! The fuzz ducks fucks! The fuzz fucks for a buck!"

As the permutations multiplied, the poet danced around in time to the words and started to remove his clothes. A few variations were muffled in a

cave of cotton as the sweatshirt came off over his head and revealed tumbling terraces of fat, like a rubber pagoda.

"Fuck the fuzzy ducks", he screamed and dropped his pants. A blue-capped head appeared around the edge of the door.

"Hey! What the hell's going in in there?" it demanded. The poet leaped in the air and stripped off his shorts.

"FUCK THE FUZZ!" he screamed again over and over at the top of his voice, dancing and cavorting around the room in his tennis shoes. The mountain of flesh quivered and undulated, the volcanic surface heaved in seismic eruption, his limp penis flapped and thrashed about like a wounded snake.

"Jesus Christ! He's done it again! C'mon Harry, we gotta take him in!"

Two cops rushed in, grabbed the poet by his arms and dragged him kicking and screaming into the street.

"Fuck the fuzz! Fuck the fuzz!"

The cries faded into the distance, the mordant echoes of a mighty organ. Nothing remained but a crumpled heap of dirty clothes. It was a hard act to follow.

"Come on, Paul," Ursula said quietly, "they may be back and it would be sort of a good idea not to be around."

In a few seconds they were outside, anonymous in the curious crowd, and then walking hand in hand up the hill towards Ursula's apartment.

"SO WHAT did you think?"

Ursula was sitting on the floor, still the smiling Buddha. They had been talking around the evening's events, speculating as to what would happen to Nature Boy who, it appeared, had been distributing handbills explaining why he was conscientiously opposed to wearing clothes. He had also been had up for disrobing at the Presidio, City Hall, the lobby of the Fairmont Hotel, and before the high altar in Grace Cathedral. The Bishop, an ardent progressive, had come out publicly in his defence, comparing him to the Juggler of Our Lady.

Paul shifted the pillow behind his back, trying to get comfortable. "I thought you were first rate, Ursula. Do you write from imagination or, uh, experience?"

"Both, I guess. If you're thinking about the lesbian bit, that was 'after Sappho', you might say. Long after Sappho."

"I see." That answered his question - didn't it? But there were others.

"You know, it's a funny thing," he continued. "We get along pretty well, we communicate easily, we well, we relate. Right?" Ursula nodded vigorously. "And yet our worlds couldn't be further apart."

"You make it sound like an old Marlene Dietrich movie: 'You belong to one world, I to another'. Should I walk slowly away in the fog under a streetlight?"

"No, dammit, you know what I mean. You're talented, you're bright, you're—well, civilized. Why don't you maybe do graduate work and teach or something? Get among people with standards? You could still write. Why throw yourself away on a bunch of nuts?"

"How am I going to get away from nuts at a university? You saw the people at Seurat's party. They're supposed to be the elite. Do you really think they've got anything going for them besides a regular salary? Look, Paul"—she got up and strolled around the room carrying her coffee mug—"I tried it at Berkeley for a while. Went to lectures, studied theories of literature, even took a creative writing course from the department's resident celebrity, who spent most of the term conferring with a Harvard fairy he thought was New Yorker material. For me it was a waste of time. The only thing I was interested in was my writing and what might help it along, which was exactly what my teachers weren't interested in. Whenever it was going well, I got bad grades because I wasn't studying, and vice versa. So I decided, the hell with it, I could learn more from other writers, even second-rate writers, than from a gaggle of tiny minds who sat around contemplating their great American navels."

She sat down on the mattress beside Paul. "So here I am, earning a few bucks a week as a part-time X-ray technician, poor as a Baptist church mouse, and writing my arm off. I wouldn't trade it for all the Fulbrights in the British Museum."

Paul didn't know what to say. People who actually did things made him uncomfortable. It was that smugness again, the conviction that they had discovered the secret of the universe.

"Dammit, Ursula, you sound just like the evangelist types I used to know when I was a kid. You talk about poetry as if it were infant baptism. Well, I'm not a True Believer any more. As far as I'm concerned, if you look at it closely, everything is a waste of time. I'm strictly a spectator, just trying to find out what's going on. I'll be quite content to cultivate my own garden - that is, if I can ever get it planted."

"Poor Paul. . . Have you ever made love, or do you prefer to watch that too?"

Paul's color was mercifully concealed by the glow of the red bulb.

"Now look," he said in his best professorial manner, "don't get aggressive. I have, as a matter of fact, but that's beside the point. We were talking about poetry."

"But don't you see, for me they're all part of the same thing."

Ursula's breast snuggled Paul's arm like an affectionate puppy. "Both sex and poetry are part of communication. They grow out of each other. You know, I have a feeling that you'd make one hulluva good poem!"

Once again Paul was overcome with the paralysis of indecision. But it was evident that the only thing required of him was passive compliance. Ursula's hand was under his sweater, her fingertips running lightly over his chest. He was a spectator at his own seduction. He raised his arms and his sweater and T-shirt came swiftly off together.

Ursula was nimble as a nurse. In no time at all they were two naked savages in the red glow, her plump body rubbing against him, purring, arching her back, making little noises of encouragement. He felt a sudden spasm of self-disgust at his disinterest, his total lack of involvement. Life was sweeping over him like a wave, carrying him along in its wake. He had done nothing either to encourage it or to resist it, he was a jelly-fish swept in with the tide. But at least he could sting. He sat up so quickly that she lost her balance and rolled partly under him.

"Look, Ursula, I just can't go through with it. You make me feel like a research project, as if I were just so much raw material."

He tried to sound stern, but his voice came out pouting and petulant, like a small boy that doesn't want to wash his hands. Ursula was immediately reassuring.

"I'm sorry, Paul. I understand, really I do. Never mind, let's get some sleep."

She reached down, pulled the covers over them, and snuggled against his side. Outmanoeuvred again, he lay on his back and tried to decide what to do next. But he was too tired and confused to think. Within a few minutes he was past caring and fast asleep.

HE AWOKE in the middle of the night to a sensation which, in his semi-somnolent condition, he couldn't quite identify. There was a weight on his legs and a delicious tingling in his loins. Raising his head slightly from the pillow, he saw Ursula lying face down on top of him, her arms around his buttocks, sliding her wet tongue slowly, methodically along the length of his penis, letting the two tips linger together for an instant before returning swiftly to the root. Suddenly he was awake and reaching to lift her head, but his arms stayed limp at his side. The strength drained from his limbs

and concentrated at the point where Ursula was quickening him to a complex of dormant sensations. Even his self-consciousness was fading, his self-control was slipping away to that throbbing center of vitality that had waited so long to justify its existence. The tension mounted slowly in little spasms under Ursula's calculating touch, like a bucket jerked up inch by inch from a deep, long disused well. Then the muscles tightened unbearably, for the last time, as the bucket hit the trigger at the very top of the well, tipped, and emptied its contents into the dusty well race: old rotten leaves, a couple of dead mice, a rusty tin can, all the stagnant fluids of soul and body, the mouldy barriers which fragmented his identity, all the competing forces which divided and subdued him. This, he thought, was the peace that passeth all understanding, keeping his heart and mind in the knowledge and love of the flesh, the seminal baptism, the Sacrament of the Holy Orgasm. His root, his whole body, was suffused in a halo of fulfilment. Transfiguration bore him gently up to life everlasting. Blessed are the lovmakers, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. He closed his eyes, offered a silent thanksgiving to the God of Love, and slept.