

Bar Code

by H. W. Moss

Murio's is one of my favorite watering holes, a dive at the west end of Haight Street on the last block before the entrance to Golden Gate Park. There's something intrinsically ironic in the fact the Park begins where Haight Street ends.

Out front of Murio's you can't help but stumble over descendants of the Great Hippie Scare of the 60's clogging the sidewalk. These street kids are for the most part under 21 which is too young to get into Murio's. Scruffy clusters of them mill around in front of Rockin' Java or lie on the cement with their backs propped against the wall, nose rings dangling from punctured septums, drinking various liquors from brown paper bags, taking surreptitious tokes from glass bongs and openly selling drugs.

You can always tell when a new shipment arrives from Humboldt: The sales pitch becomes more frequent and fervent. You can't walk a block down Haight without a dozen sotto voice offerings. "Kaih-buh" threw me for a while. Had to ask a friend who translated: Kind buds.

The full and complete name of the place is Murio's Trophy Room and three very tarnished silver urn trophies are ensconced in a display case opposite the front pool table. The pool tables are in the back, but one is in front of the other which is why it's known as the front table. Taz often breaks the rack with his cue ball flying into the air. Susan, the current owner of the bar, is convinced he's trying to hit the trophy glass.

The original owner named the place after himself and the tallest trophy in the case is etched with John Murio's name as a singles winner, 1933, Vancouver, B. C. John played tennis before he ran a bar. There is a giant ten foot long plywood replica of a

tennis racket hung low against the wall opposite the trophy case. It was donated by Jack Kramer and it's a Speed Flex with a Fibre Face. Says so on the handle.

The ceiling at Murio's is covered with colored charcoal caricatures of patrons drawn by The Ant. The Ant used to practically live at Murio's, but he doesn't come around much anymore. When he was virtually homeless, Murio's was The Ant's living room during regular business hours, until closing which is 2:00 a.m. in California.

Then The Ant got on a city sponsored welfare program which gives him a room in a hotel at the corner of 15th and Valencia. Fourth floor, bathroom down the hall, a bed and the microwave I bought him. He gets a monthly bus pass, about a hundred dollars in food stamps and free medical and dental. He used the dental to have fourteen teeth pulled including the pair in front which got punched out one night at Murio's when he made a wisecrack to a girl whose boyfriend reached across and slugged him. That's all it took and The Ant had another piece of his persona: stump halves of his two front teeth.

These days The Ant has a lot of bridge work and an oddly perfect smile.

The Ant was born in Okinawa in '61, moved to the States and got his green card in the early 80's. Though what's the point? It's not like he'll ever work. No one will hire him because, even with his perfectly precise dentures, he just plain looks weird. The Ant has these two aeries growing out the top of his forehead. It's his real hair which he cultivates in bundles at the scalp line to grow straight up in two long, thick black strands that resemble antennae. He coils colored rubber bands at the base of them, around and around, and uses some kind of jell or mousse to keep them poking straight up into the air. Children love it; they think it's hilarious. Grownups are usually put off by the effect, at least at first.

Everyone at Murio's is used to The Ant, so no one stares.

The Ant grew up next to the Marine base on Okinawa and must have been raised in front of an American television set. His knowledge of the cast, plots and production values for such shows as Hawaii Five-O, the Beverly Hillbillies and Dallas are extensive. He also speaks English like he was born in Cleveland. The reason The Ant no longer hangs out at Murio's is because his hotel is closer to a bar called Kilowatt which is on 16th Street. These days he mostly goes to Kilowatt where the beers and the pool tables are a quarter less than at Murio's and they offer free pool on Sunday.

Murio's attracts a diverse crowd including skinhead cowboys, intellectuals, lawyers and Goth Grلز. Many patrons are heavily tattooed and you should bear in mind that introverts do not get tattoos. Those who have them generally like to talk about 'em, compare their tats with others and boast about the artist's pedigree. Some, like Dave, wear emblems of their own handiwork.

Dave is right handed and has a permanent set of fuzzy blue-black ink bands on the knuckles of his left. He poked these into the back of his hand when he was a teenager. Sucking on a bottle of Wild Turkey and repeatedly sticking a sewing needle wrapped in thread dipped in India ink into each digit.

"Ouch. Hey, that hurt." Suck on the bottle. "Ouch. Shit!" Suck on the bottle.

Dave told me he was trying to make it look like he was wearing rings on each of his fingers. If you examine the palm side you will note he did not finish the job.

"I tried. It hurt too much."

These days Dave designs software for Sun Micro and is a technical writer. He does not drink Wild Turkey any more, but he does shoot a lot of pool.

Nil shoots pool too. Normally you wouldn't notice the two designs on Nil's upper arms because they were strategically placed to be covered by shirt sleeves. It's only when he wears a tee shirt you can see the intricate band around his left bicep and then there's this really unusual tattoo on his right.

His full name is Niladri Bora but that's far too much for most Americans to pronounce, let alone remember, so he just goes by Nil which he pronounces "Neal." Nil was born in India at the base of the Himalayas in a province called Assam which is a huge tea producer. It is a relatively wealthy area, at least compared to the usual image we have of life in the slums of Calcutta. In India, education is prized and literature highly respected.

India's national language is English, a direct result of the British colonialism that lasted four hundred fifty years if you go by when the East India Company was formed in 1600, or a mere two hundred, if you go by Robert Clive's avenging attack in retaliation for the treatment of British subjects in 1750. The country was full of resources, but her devastating beauty was raped and pillaged until finally set free of colonial rule in 1947.

Thus, English is Nil's first language and he is a reader. There aren't many of us left. His favorite book is "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" by Hunter S. Thompson. First serialized in Rolling Stone in 1971 and illustrated by then unknown Ralph Steadman, "Fear and Loathing" has twice been filmed. The first was loosely based on the book with the inexplicable title "Where the Buffalo Roam" starring Bill Murray as Thompson in a terrible performance that elicited a promise from Thompson "to rip Murray's throat out" if they ever met, and the second with Johnny Depp in the starring role.

Hunter S. Thompson put a bullet in his brain on Sunday, February 20, 2005, in Aspen, Colorado. “Fear and Loathing” book sales immediately increased upon news of Thompson’s death.

The square tattoo on Nil’s right arm is about six inches below his shoulder. It is nothing more than a series of vertical lines perhaps three inches high riding atop a bunch of numbers, exactly what you would find on a box of cereal at the supermarket checkout stand. It’s a bar code. Done in black ink, against Nil’s dark brown skin, the ink appears almost green.

I had to ask. Nil told me it’s the bar code for his favorite book, “Fear and Loathing.”

I didn’t give much thought to Nil’s tattoo until I heard of Thompson’s death. There was probably nothing wrong with the tattoo, but I had a nagging question. Maybe it was macabre, but I wanted to know: Would it scan?

When you think about it, a lot can go wrong with a tattoo. At first you have to worry about infection, but later on the ink may stray and the image blur. You need look no further than Dave’s knuckles for proof of that. Then there is the question of the artist’s skill level, how firmly they held the needle bar, how many beers they had in them at the time and whether or not they took a shot of cocaine to get a grip. You probably don’t have to worry about a color blind tattoo artist, but, hell, I don’t even know that for sure.

In addition to the regular cast of characters, there is a redneck cowboy hat wearing crowd at Murio’s. A white hat is part of their costume. Byron is one of those who always wears a white hat. He’s a steel worker and has been knocking the heads off rivets underneath the Golden Gate Bridge for the last several years. Byron is proud to be a

One way The Ant ticks Byron off is The Ant wears a black leather jacket his brother gave him for his birthday which he uses as a billboard. He writes terse commentary in long hand on a piece of cloth, sometimes on paper, and pins these to the back of the jacket.

One of The Ant's pet peeves is U. S. Marines in Okinawa. The Ant may have spent his childhood next to the military base, but he believes their presence is debilitating to all Japanese. In order to protest this military presence, The Ant uses his jacket billboard to tell the world Marines are evil.

Rednecks are by nature patriotic and the Marines are sacred to a redneck. The Ant really pisses Byron off when he wears a piece slamming the Marines. And whatever you may think of free speech, The Ant tests the limits.

When the Marines held two of their own in the death of a teenage girl in Okinawa, The Ant went on a crusade to expose what he saw as the racism, violence, sexual repression and general depravity of the American military presence in his country of birth by wearing a sign on his back that read: "Score Card -- Marines 2, Virgins 0" and another that read "The Few, The Proud, The Rapists." The Ant illustrated these with caricatures of soldiers in uniform who looked suspiciously like the former mayor of San Francisco.

Hunter S. Thompson's legacy will always be as the creator of a type of writing called "gonzo" journalism. He put the author in the story as a participant as well as

observer. Thompson was not the sole practitioner of this form, but he was its leading exponent. And he often lied in his stories, making up quotes and inventing people to suit his needs.

We will never know what brought Thomson to this state -- finger on trigger, barrel to head -- but it has been widely reported he was in pain from an auto accident and had become a shadow of his former scalawag self, was by the time of his suicide a 67-year-old with a bad back and a lifetime of dissipated living that finally caught up with him.

Steadman wrote on his website two days after the incident, "He (Thompson) told me 25 years ago that he would feel real trapped if he didn't know that he could commit suicide at any moment. I don't know if that is brave or stupid or what, but it was inevitable."

The Ant sometimes acts as if he, too, would like to commit suicide, seppuku or hari-kiri as you will. Or have someone like Byron do it for him. Why else would The Ant fabricate a sign for his back that read: I'm Not the Gook that Kicked Your Father's Ass in Vietnam. There was a drawing of a skinny Asian farmer in a rice paddy wearing a wide brim yellow straw hat. Ant wore that specific insult during one of his now rare visits to Murio's.

Byron sat there at the end of the bar and you could see him begin to seethe. He did not get up immediately, he just sat there looking at his beer, then over at The Ant's backside, again to his beer. Finally, he slugged down the last of a big silver mortar-round sized can of PBR, got off his bar stool and stalked over to the front pool table where The Ant was watching a game.

“Gonna kick yer ass,” Byron said by way of introduction. He moved like a crab, quick and sideways, his meaty hands tight fisted, got right up in The Ant’s face, up close almost nose to nose which was not easy considering The Ant is a good ten inches taller. Byron was built like the proverbial brick shithouse: squat, broad, sturdy.

“Hey, back off, man. What’s your problem?”

“My uncle died in Vietnam, asshole. You’re disrespecting my uncle, fuckhead. I’m gonna kick your ass.”

The Ant has a characteristic shrug. The shrug is a combination “so what” and “who are you” mixed with a level of condescension that can piss anyone off. He made the shrug and Byron pushed his chest into The Ant’s torso like a logger jamming one piece of floating timber into another. Ant backed up a step; Byron pressed forward a step. That’s when several patrons, myself included, realized Byron was about to punch The Ant out which would leave an ugly bruise where his glasses met the bridge of his nose. Or they would probably break on The Ant’s face along with his nose.

J-9 is Dave’s girlfriend. She’s a hair stylist working in a salon across the street. J-9 has turned her body over to the needle bar, is a living testament, a sort of hallowed ground of colorful tattoos from her wrists to her shoulders on both arms. A slender, striking beauty who keeps pet rats which she often brings into the bar to drink beer from her glass, her extreme hair -- sometimes blushed with pink, streaked with blonde or made black in places -- alters almost daily. Fashionable and favoring flair skirts with pumps, on this day J was wearing tight fitting jeans. She has an East Coast don’t-get-in-my-way attitude and at that moment she was loitering near the pool table, her name on the board,

waiting for her turn to play when Byron bumped The Ant backward and nearly into her as she stood with a drink in her hands.

“Oooops,” was how she took it and bumped The Ant back at Byron. Which only served to kick Byron up another notch. J said, “Hey, now, boys. Take it outside. Or I call AJ and you’ll both be 86’d.”

AJ was pouring behind the bar. A little taller than Byron but shorter than The Ant, AJ aspired to become an Olympic judo athlete, was twice a state champion, before taking up bartending. He was at one time an upholsterer and is proud of his sewing skills. AJ also has tattoos, but he only brings them out on special occasions. There are five on his scalp which he covers by growing his hair out or wearing a hat. When his head is shaved, which he does twice a year, you can see three black ants on the left side above his ear, each about two inches long, and two on the right. He had these done long before The Ant walked into Murio’s the first time. AJ would do anything for J-9 including respect the relationship she has with Dave.

And if anyone could 86 both Byron and The Ant, it was AJ.

Technically, The Ant was already half way out of there. The number “43” was scrawled in big red letters across his photo which was taped on the bar mirror down at the end near where the Margarita salt sat in a flying saucer shaped dish. J-9’s threat had the proper effect. Byron did not want to lose his regular place on the last stool at the end of the bar, so he stepped back a little. The Ant looked at him like he was a bug.

This leer only incensed Byron more. He jumped at The Ant who turned, grabbed his portfolio which he lugged around town with him wherever he went and which was, at that moment, inside a large black garbage bag propped up against the wall near the cue

rack. Then Ant high tailed it out the front door. Byron followed taking only enough time to grab his coat off a wall hook. He was right behind The Ant yelling, “Come back here motherfucker,” apparently ready to make good on his threat.

I turned to Nil. “We really ought to make sure Byron doesn’t kill Ant.”

Nil was more realistic: “Or kick Ant’s ass.”

Nil has a way of saying “ass” that is bigger than how most people say “ass,” almost the way Arnold Schwarzenegger says “ass,” with an emphasis on the word that is brassy and full of meaning. Ant might, indeed, get his ass kicked. We moved toward the front doors. I swallowed the last of my Scotch, Nil emptied his pint glass of ale.

Exiting Murio’s there is a sign on the door which reads “If You are Under Age 125, Be Prepared to Show ID.” It was Sunday afternoon and Haight Street was bathed in a full bright San Francisco summer mid-afternoon light. Coming from a dark cave, I raised my arm above my brow to shield my eyes.

To my right, I saw Byron weaving his way in and around the crowds of tourists and street people, following The Ant from the sidewalk as Ant marched in the street just outside the endless line of parked cars. They were already about half a block away, Ant on the pavement looking over his shoulder from time to time to see if Byron still followed. He was out of Byron’s reach and you could tell Byron was no longer all that enthusiastic about proving a point. He’d rather be back in the bar drinking beer. His pace slowed enough for Nil to say, “I think it’s safe. Ant got away.”

That’s when I said, “Nil. Let’s get your tattoo scanned.”

He didn’t question me, he didn’t say no, he didn’t even think twice as he replied, “Where?”

“The Booksellers across the street and down a couple blocks.”

“OK.” Nil has this wide syrupy grin that causes everyone he catches it with to smile back, like a yawning man makes everyone else show their tonsils. Anyone who sees Nil’s six foot something frame coming toward them usually breaks out in a smile because he’s always smiling. It’s infectious. I even catch it once in a while. But I usually stop myself and remember to put on the frown for which I am so well known.

I had already brought up the subject of a scan with Nil, so it was not as if this idea came as a complete surprise. Trouble was, we were usually shooting pool and drinking beer at night when we thought of it. All the commercial stores along the street are closed at that time. Sunday afternoon, however, and the City was strolling by in front of us. There were a few misbehaving idiots to worry about, but I saw it as the perfect opportunity to run a scanner over Nil’s tattoo.

In addition to the alcoholic fantasy of doing something so totally absurd, there was a certain validity to the act.

Ever since Nil told me what it was, I wondered if the bar code on his arm was correct. What if it wasn’t? What if the number was not accurate there at the bottom bordered by the two longest lines, or what if the artist was dyslexic and transposed a couple numbers? Would he have admitted it if he noticed? A mistake in permanent ink? Not bloody likely. Do the lines in a bar code have to be a certain thickness? Could the artist catch such subtlety? Or, not at all impossible, it might be an entirely wrong bar code. Where’d Nil get it anyway? What if it was for a different book? You scan it and the “The Joy of Cooking” pops up on the screen. Ray Moe said he didn’t think it would scan

because an image on human skin is not precise enough. The scanner needs distinct patterns to read properly, he said

Worst case scenario: it wouldn't scan at all and nothing would come up. Anything was possible and there really was only one way to find out. Nil stood on the sidewalk and grinned widely at the idea.

Skateboards on cement make a noticeably different sound than they do on pavement. Cracks and grooves in the cement click like you're standing in front of a train coming straight at you. At first the scraping clatter did not register as it reached my ears. Our backs were toward the park when I realized Nil and I were about to be run over from behind. I poked him in the ribs and we turned aside in time to allow a three-pack of teen riders in sleeveless ragged gray sweat shirts to shoot past. They wove in and out of the pedestrians jamming the sidewalk and never ran over anyone. They probably would not have hit us either, but I was just as pleased we'd moved.

Cars crawled past in the street which was equally as crowded as the sidewalk. The speed limit was 25 but no one could do five. Tourist and local busses alike were stuck in the same traffic jam. We began walking to the book store which was several blocks away and even though the sidewalk was so crowded people passing had to swivel from the waist up in order to avoid bumping shoulders, we were traveling faster than the cars in the street.

Haight Street is not just for tourists and teenage druggies any more. It's become Yuppified. Locals living in the neighborhood shop at the supermarket on the corner, get fix-it-up supplies at the hardware store, buy slices of pizza or hit the thrift stores that have become fashion Meccas for born-again consumers. I live in the Mission District which is

clear across town. I have a car and parking karma, so I drive to Murio's because they have two pool tables which means less waiting for a game. Plus, I know a lot of the people who go there. But that's about all I usually do on Haight Street: park and hit the bar. This would be an adventure.

At that moment I saw Vic coming toward us. Vic works with Nil. They both fix software problems for the University of California which has its administrative offices out near where I live. Vic and Nil play league on the same pool team which is sponsored by Murio's. Last year, Vic tied for winning the most games in league play.

Vic's father is a government contractor in Maryland. The family is from the Philippines, Vic was born in Manila, but they moved to the States when he was just a kid. One day a couple years ago Dad came to the City for a visit and, naturally, Vic brought him into Murio's. I don't know if it was a reaction to the regulars or if Dad was simply overwhelmed by Haight Street, but after about five minutes, Vic's father said incredulously, "Does everyone in San Francisco wear a costume?"

Well, in a manner of speaking, everyone everywhere wears a costume. Suits are a costume with a noose around your neck. Cooks wear white and taxi drivers are supposed to wear a cap. I have a Muni bus driver's brown cap on my bookshelf. It was given to me by a drunken off duty driver who insisted I take it even after I insisted I couldn't. That's what happens when you buy a few rounds and listen to someone talk for three hours.

Housewives wear costumes denoting their status as soccer moms. Every profession has its costume. The military designates rank with stripes and apparel. There is a code of conduct that your haberdashery yells out to everyone, no matter where you are. One day I flew to Frankfurt and had a few hours to kill before the train took me to Paris. I stashed

my luggage in a locker and decided to walk around the area near the train station just to see some part of Germany up close. What I didn't know is the red light district is right there, two blocks from the train depot. What I also didn't know was that my clothes -- blue jeans, tee shirt and cheap running shoes -- was a dead giveaway to the madam and her girls sitting quietly on the top rung of the front porch of a house I passed.

"Hey, American. Come up and say hello." I had not spoken a word. I had barely glanced in their direction, tried not to look lest I be tempted, yet she had me pegged immediately.

Nil said, "Hey, Vic. We are going to scan my tattoo." He revealed the bar code on his upper arm. "Care to join us?"

"Why certainly."

We passed The Cow Man who stood against a window which displayed milk products. He had chosen to beg in front of a cheese store. Funny. The Cow Man wore a whole body cow suit with a rubber udder sticking out from his belly. I think it was a Guernsey costume, but how the hell would I know? I couldn't tell a Jersey from a Holstein. You could see two black beady eyes darting from left to right behind The Cow Man's face mask which sported brown horns atop the black and white head. A cow bell around his neck had a sign attached: Will Moo for Money.

Rubber hooves covered his hands. One held a tin cup with a dollar bill flopping half in, half out. His upper and lower body was fully enclosed in cow costume right down to the oversized plastic boots that, again, resembled hooves instead of feet.

“Doses, buds, hash,” someone whispered in my ear. I ignored these distractions because I had a purpose. Another time, another place, maybe. After all, sex and drugs and rock ’n’ roll is all my brain and body need.

I was in the lead, Vic and Nil with lighted cigarettes were right behind. The dumbest thing you can do is light up on Haight Street. Every street person, teenage druggie, lip pierced Deadhead we passed hit them up for a smoke. At the end of the block where Shrader crosses Haight, a taxi was nosing its way through after having stopped for the sign. I halted on the curb corner to let the vehicle pass. Except no one else in the throng felt so generous. As a result, I was pushed out into the street with about twenty other pedestrians and was met half way across by a group of equal size coming from the other direction. The taxi driver began to lean on his horn. I was mostly annoyed until I realized both Vic and Nil were waving like long lost relatives at the driver. Dutch was behind the wheel. I forgot he worked Sunday days. Naturally, we knew him from Murio’s.

“Flake. I got flake,” a rail thin hawker with a patch of hair growing out of his chin offered. I tried to avoid eye contact; that works best for me. The street vender followed my gaze anyway as we passed. Eventually he broke off and I heard him pitch his shit again.

We were on the other side of the street in front of the taco stand where the line was out the door from the counter and all the window seats facing Haight were taken. Eaters watched the flow of people and vehicles as if they were at the movies.

A twenty-something stray with pink hair on one side of her head and green on the other nearly bumped into me. My hands flew up in an I-didn't-touch-you position and my eyes widened. She said, "What was that look for?"

"Nothing," I was immediately on the defensive which is uncharacteristic of me.

"Yah? Well fuck you!" There are a number of proper responses to a near collision, but that was not one of them.

"Yah, go ahead and fuck me," I shot back. "But I warn you. If you do, you'll like it so much you'll never go back to girls!"

She stopped dead in her tracks and appeared to be mulling it over, her tiny brain completely unable to return the broadside. Nil stuck his hand up and did a high five with me. "Nice snappy come back. I enjoyed that very much." His smile was a broad array of white teeth.

One guy on the sidewalk next to us overheard the exchange and was still laughing as we got to the front door of Cold Steel, the piercing and branding parlor. Mick was the manager. He shoots a good game of pool, but always distracts me with his ear lobes which are distended open holes, circles the size of quarters. You could put a finger through, two, the holes were so big. He was also covered head to foot in an eclectic agglomeration of skin art. Some tattoos covered older tattoos which were, in turn, disguising even older drawings. Mick was 29, but he had been a customer in every parlor on the West Coast. He paid so much for penmanship he decided to open his own place. Figured he could interview the best and, if they didn't go to work for him, at least he knew how to find them when he needed something new.

I overheard a conversation as I poked my head inside: “A unified bus is a joy forever, but not when that boy’s on it. Ten years old and he’s a terrorist. At nine he told the driver he was hijacking, car jacking the bus, take this bus to Disneyland.”

“Mick here?” I inquired. The girl behind the counter stopped in mid-sentence, shook her head no and I did not stick around to find out how the child terrorist fared.

We were on the wrong side of the street. The Booksellers is on the same side as the Milk Bar which got its name straight out of Anthony Burgess’ “Clockwork Orange.” So we had to cross and I got to thinking how walking up Haight was like making a run with Alex and his droogs. If you haven’t seen Kubrick’s ’71 film version of the Burgess book in a long time, rent it. It holds up well. Then stroll down Haight Street some Sunday afternoon and compare.

Metal heads. They were everywhere. Punctured eyebrows, nose rings and tongue posts are one thing, but metal in your cheeks is probably the dumbest idea since the XFL. How do these people drink liquids? Certainly can’t play trumpet or trombone afterwards and my guess is they drool out the holes at night. Soggy pillow explained.

Then there’s the homeless guy with a tattooed face. Old enough to drink, but Susan would not allow him inside Murio’s. Let’s see, what can I do to make certain I never get a job? I know, mouse whiskers and a black nose! Maybe some Neolithic circles on the forehead, a series of dots ranging from large to small rising from the neck line up toward the ears and back over toward the corners of the mouth. That oughta do the trick. More ink to fill up this empty spot next to my nose and tears dripping from the corner of one eye. But only one eye, not both. Don’t want to over do it or make it look like Chuckles the Clown.

Obviously, he did not do this work himself by looking in a mirror and poking his face or else the job would have come out better. Whoever he paid was hopelessly unskilled and this is a perfect example of why you don't give money to the contractor until you are happy with the job.

Haight Street in the afternoon, what a lovely place, such a lovely face.

We started crossing in the middle of the block, perfectly legal where Cole jogs east. Crosswalks force traffic to actually stop, not just slow. I felt like a Soviet era military commander as I held up my arms to embrace the oncoming traffic which went from five MPH to a grinding halt.

We were coming up on the Coffee Cantada and Nil said, "A cuppa Andees tea would be welcome right now. They sell the CTC granular and orthodox full leaf from Assam, you know."

He makes it mandatory for me to smart mouth back. I asked, "Got any scotch to go with that?"

We picked up Alexis in the crosswalk and told her what we were up to. She has hair the color of the sun and her eyes were green with sweet facial features and a shapely body that belied an ice pick wit. We knew her from Murio's, too. When we reached the other side of the street, Alexis commented dryly that, "Personally, I don't think you should be allowed to have alcohol. It might interfere with your daily lithium dose."

Now, how could she possibly know what my legal meds are?

There were four of us on the journey by the time we arrived at the corner Goodwill Store which was doing a booming business. Donations come in daily and the early shoppers are usually neighborhood store owners buying inventory. At this time in the

afternoon the book rack would have been picked over (I once found a leather bound volume of Dickens' "Barnaby Rudge" that was printed in 1873 and must have gone straight from the estate sale where it didn't sell to Goodwill where it did. I love Dickens but I don't recommend "Rudge." One of his earliest, one of his worst.) and the clothing racks would have been refilled twice by now.

Out front was a long outdoor seat on which perched three old guys. One actually held a cane with a crooked end where he rested the palms of both hands beneath his chin. All three looked like they were sitting on a park bench, eying little girls with bad intent.

Rex came out the front door of the Goodwill store. Given the opportunity I will not shake hands with Rex. Not because I don't like him, because I actually find him amusing and there once was intelligence there, but because he is so filthy I have to wash my hands immediately afterward. Sometimes he comes by Murio's when I'm out cadging a smoke and sticks his hand out quick before I can think and I make the mistake of completing the greeting.

Rex is a middle aged alcoholic heroin addict who will eat any pill, snort any powder and drink any liquid offered at the least opportunity. In addition to poor hygiene, he does not eat properly and is thin as a rail. His head is often a mass of scabs and sutures and he is prone to getting hit by cars. He is probably in his late forties but looks much older and I have never seen him sober. No one has. His illness has become more acute in recent years and he can often be seen with bandaged hands or head, the result of falling or being beaten up although no one knows for certain which caused what injury at any given time. He was permanently evicted from Murio's after he bled all over a patron.

Rex is remarkably coherent for someone in such poor condition.

“Well, well, well,” I said as it became obvious he had seen us and we could not avoid him. “Amazing. Rex, you’re still alive.”

“Y’know, you’re the third person to tell me that today.”

“You probably ought to take the hint,” Nil commented.

There was a monkey on Rex’s back; the monkey chewed tobacco on the street car line. There was no help for Rex. He got himself into this mess and he had to come out of it by himself, however problematic that might be. The Ant once told me Rex confided in him he had slept with his own mother. Undoubtedly this contributed to his decline, seriously screwed him up, and I would not doubt it was the only piece of ass Rex ever had. The Ant was repulsed by the idea, and this from someone who is not easily repulsed. The Ant takes Polaroids of dogs taking a shit and shows them around like they were his kids’ baby pictures.

Vic made the mistake of inviting Rex to join us. “We’re going to scan Nil’s tattoo at the Booksellers. Care to come along?”

“Naw, I can’t do that. They won’t let me in there any more,” Rex replied. He seemed genuinely remorseful. “Not after I threw up on the magazine rack.”

“Glad to know you won’t be doing that again any time soon,” I said.

Rex attempted to shake hands goodbye, having failed to shake hello, and when I declined and put my palm in my pocket, he tried to hug me. The thought was so abhorrent I jumped back nearly into Alexis who was standing behind me for protection.

Rex missed his grab. I took hold of Alexis’ hand and pulled her along the sidewalk into the intersection. We were under the Haight Free Clinic sign when I turned to see who

was still with us. Apparently Nil or Vic had spread the word because there were three newcomers, two of whom I did not know. We were up to seven.

Turtle was riding his skateboard in our direction. This guy is a Murio's regular but disappears north to Humboldt several times a year ostensibly to find work as a house painter. But isn't that why all the hippies moved to Humboldt? No jobs.

Turtle has a real name. Nobody calls him by it. He once told me he changed his name in elementary school and even his mother calls him that now. Turtle is in his mid-twenties and has been in trouble with the law several times, but mostly for really stupid things. He was arrested late one night for being intoxicated on a skateboard.

How can they tell when you're drunk on a skateboard? I mean, do you weave funny on your board? Do you run stoplights, crash into things? Who can you hurt but yourself?

Turtle said the cops confiscated his board, threw him in the back seat of their cruiser, drove him around town for an hour, punched him in the face five times and let him out.

He rolled to a stop right even with me and Alexis on the sidewalk and began singing a Patsy Cline song that's on the jukebox at Murio's. "Crazy, I'm crazy for feeling so lonely, I'm crazy, crazy for feeling so blue." His hands went to his heart as he acted out the lyrics.

"We're going to scan Nil's tattoo," Vic volunteered. "Wanna come along?"

"Sure thing. Where?"

"Booksellers. Down the block," Nil answered.

Turtle favors baggy pants and loud Hawaiian print shirts by day, has been known to show up at the bar wearing a shiny seersucker suit with a wide red tie at night. I began

marching and Alexis caught up with me. Nil had shown her the tattoo while they walked. Now she asked what the scan was supposed to prove. That's the point, I told her. We don't know. Maybe nothing will show up.

There were tourists to the right of us, tourists to the left of us and tourists in front of us blocking our brigade as we made our way toward the book store. Tourists are stragglers by nature. Unlike a resident who has a purpose, tourists are looking for reasons to stop and gawk. They frequently stare at street performers whether they are entertaining or not. And there were plenty without talent lining Haight Street that afternoon, believe me.

I was particularly annoyed by the Street Comedian who comes at you palm open with a joke. What do you call a dog with no hind legs and steel balls? Sparky. What did the fish say when he ran into a wall? Dam. I have been known to steal and use his material. But he is so gross, smelled bad and was covered with tattoos and scars, he got some in prison and others in bars. Nobody wanted to be near him and he was mostly paid to go away.

If the Street Comedian had a real name, nobody knew what it was. I dodged his hand, said, "I gave at the office," as I swept past and pulled Alexis along with me. But he caught Nil squarely on the sidewalk in front of a Chinese restaurant, muttering another crack, trying to get him or Vic to pull out a quarter. With one exception, I never give street beggars the time of day, let alone coins from my pocket. The exception is Roger who is always outside Elbo Room on Saturday night. Roger is an articulate black man who for some reason refuses to work for a pay check that gives withholding tax to the government. He does odd jobs during the week for cash under the table, has his regular

place on Valencia Street on weekends when foot traffic really picks up. Roger I give a quarter to. Nobody else gets zip from me.

Nil and Vic were another story. Both popped hands out with a piece of silver to ward off the Comedian who was practically poking them to prod a donation.

We were within sight of the Booksellers which was in the middle of the next block. I wanted to get off the street and get the scan over with. I had no idea the exact time, but I knew it was getting late in the afternoon and they would be firing up the barbeque at Murio's in a little while. I didn't want to miss that, so I put on the speed walk.

"You know, I met Hunter Thompson once," I told Alexis as we picked up our pace.

"Yah, where? When?"

"First off, he was an asshole. He was a jerk, a real turd and I will never say anything nice about him."

Nil caught up with us in time to overhear my critical remarks. "Yes, you can tell that from his books."

"Well, I used to volunteer for the San Francisco Review of Books which had offices on Broadway above Enrico's. The editor was Ron Nowicki and I sold advertising and he published my film and book reviews. One day Nowicki got passes for the only time the American Booksellers Association ever held their convention in town and a lot of celebrity writers attended. I met Thompson at the Mitchell Brother's Theatre on O'Farrell. They were hosting him and Zippy the Pinhead and a few other celebs to food and drink and all the porno movies you could watch. Upstairs opposite their offices they had a billiard room with a regulation size table. I was ambling around munching free food, just poking my head in the various rooms when I came to the billiard room where

the door was closed. I opened it, poked my head inside, caught Thompson and someone else smoking a joint. I went in, closed the door behind me, and Thompson comes over and reads my name tag. ‘Review of Books?’ he says. ‘Bogus. Get the fuck out. Bogus.’ He was quite intimidating. I backed out real quick and that was my only experience with the prick.”

“What a day for a day dream,” Jason said in greeting as he confronted us. My story was finished, so he picked a good time to say he was just walking down to the bar when he saw us. Not to be rude, I explained we were on a mission, did he want to join us? In response to Jason’s next question, I described Nil’s tattoo. That’s when Jason lifted his pant leg. There in dark ink on his calf was the double thumb gonzo fist, a Thompson trademark forever imprinted in Jason’s flesh. I had forgotten; Jason was as enamored of Thompson’s work as Nil was.

Jason went one step further and raised his shirt saying, “That’s Hunters signature.” On the side of Jason’s chest was one recognizable letter, a “T” standing about five inches tall, but after that your guess was as good as mine as to what it actually said. I’ll take Jason’s word that it was Thompson’s real signature, but it was an unintelligible scrawl and I just didn’t know for sure. It was not particularly legible, you could not read the name or anything other than that big “T,” but I assume it was valid.

Jason said, “Of course I’ll join you. But it’s almost five. They close at five.”

Was Jason serious? Did the bookstore not have enough business from international travelers and local readers to stay open longer than five pee em on a Sunday? What was this world coming to if readers did not subsidize the source of their lexia and pay the price of a paperback in order for the store to stay open late seven days of the week? Was I

asking too much? Was there no longer such a thing as a reading public that demands books be available into the wee hours or even the less than wee hours on Sunday? Did we not have as great a reading a public as could be found in New York which famously sold hot dogs inside its book stores and catered to the night worker, the night visitor, the night stalker, the night person who only comes out when the sun descends?

Jason's cold truth agitated me. It never crossed my mind we might not make it on time and the doors would be barred to us. How near to five was it? I asked Nil who pulled out his cell phone. He said, "Two minutes to."

No way! Hose Ay. I turned and waved an arm to get everyone's attention, then broke into a loping gallop, Alexis' hand in mine, her pace equally rapid as I passed a clothing store that sold used blue jeans with big holes in the knees for more than my rent. We were nearing the front door of the bookstore, were past the goofy hat store which sold imitation Cat In the Hat knit smoke stack chapeaux, when Dano stuck his head out the open barber shop window and said, "Where you headed, guys?"

Dano is another of the more literate Murio's patron, but in a different way than, say, Nil or I. Where we know American and English novelists and their work, Dano knows song writers, particularly rock writers and the bands they performed with. He is the one to ask when you want to know who wrote, "My legs are thin. Don't ask me what I think of you, I might not give the answer that you want me to." He also writes. Over a game of pool one night, Dano gave me a lyric he had written that day which went, "I realized I'm too old to die young."

Another night I was having a good discussion with him when I looked into his face and realized Dano's left eye was dilated. I pointed this out and he said that's because he's manic; a blown pupil is one of the symptoms.

"Whenever they take me to the emergency room, the doctors think I have a concussion."

Dano stepped out onto the sidewalk and his arms were full of books. I read several titles. On top was Faulkner's "The Reivers" and below that P. G. Wodehouse's "Sunset at Blandings," which I knew was not a tale about Jeeves and Bertie Wooster. Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Agent" was also in Dano's hands and there, too, was a copy of "The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald."

Much as I wanted to blunder another ten feet and through the door of the Booksellers, I had to ask Dano what he was doing with the books. The crowd of friends clustered around him.

"I thought I'd come out and give these away rather than commit suicide," he said nonchalantly.

Nil picked up the Faulkner text. "Never read that one," he said admiringly.

"It's yours, take it," Dano offered. "It's a good story. They made a movie out of it starring Steve McQueen."

I took the Wodehouse from him and Alexis the Conrad. Dano seemed pleased with himself. I turned to Vic who was not as much of a reader. Vic said, "Look."

I turned around and there was the owner of Booksellers placing a closed sign in his window. Then the shade was drawn and I knew we had not made it in time. I was not about to beg and realized we might as well go back to the bar.

“Everybody has to believe in something,” I said as I waved the copy of
“Blandings” in the air. “I believe I’ll have another beer. Care to join me?”

And we have not tried to scan Nil’s tattoo since.

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