2012

Many Voices

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Letter from San Francisco: Letter from 1984

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1. Establishing Shot (1984): Theme

Some days there is only one song. This day, in autumn, 1984, in San Francisco, there is only Tina Turner singing “What’s Love got to do with It?”

I meet Erin early Thursday morning at her parent’s home in Pacific Heights. Now only thin wisps of fog remain in the clear sky. North of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Marin hills rise sharply out of the cold, blue water of the Bay.

The Marin hills are new volcanic hills, growing up sharply like mountains in Hawaii or New Zealand. Sharp scented desert trees, eucalyptus, manzanita, and madrone, grow on the hills, echoing the cedars and olives on the hills of Tuscany.
Erin and I walk in the sun through Pacific Heights, Cow Hollow, and over Russian Hill, talking of people we know. Erin is a junior at Smith, studying drama. She is still home for the summer. I am too briefly back in Northern California, that other county in which I was born and grew up. Now, married, I practice law sixteen hundred miles to the east in Des Moines.

Erin and I walk on through North Beach, Chinatown, and then into the Financial District. In Jackson Square, we go into a small food shop.

Chinese people own this store. The food, however, is Yuppie. I order for us both: It is expected. Erin and I eat bagels, goat’s milk cheese, and strong black coffee. There is another man in the store and five or six other women. A woman at the next table eats alone. She wears a black suit. She is my age, late thirties. Her calculator is on the wooden table beside her black purse and her food. Erin, in ragged Levis and a black
sweater, is a dramatic twenty. Speaking of one of the three foundation sires of the Thoroughbred on the track, 18th Century England proverbially said, “Eclipse first: the rest nowhere.” Even silent, Erin leads by at least three lengths in this bleak, Post-Modern room.

Erin then loudly says something. She throws out both of her hands, laughing, deep and low for such a young blonde. But, she is an actress.

The woman in black at the next table tightens her jaw and stares blackly at Erin. From the radio by the cash register comes Tina Turner’s voice, urging lowly, “It’s physical, only logical.”

Erin says, “Let’s go to City Lights,” a North Beach bookstore. At City Lights, we sit for forty minutes on straight backed chairs, looking at eccentrics while we pretend to read obscure periodicals. Erin and I have this space when we need it. When we look at one another, we laugh.
We leave the bookstore and walk along Upper Grant. Here, eccentricity is orthodoxy. Here, too, Tina Turner’s voice floats out the door of the Lost and Found Saloon, imploring, “What’s love got to do, got to do with it?”

As we pass the door of the bar, a hard faced woman in her fifties storms out onto the sidewalk. Back home in Iowa, I practice criminal law. Many of my clients get into trouble when they are drunk. This woman is not just drunk. She is shambling on instinct and stumbling on habit. She is enraged.

The woman lurches into us and glares. She collects herself and stares unseeing back through the open door into the bar. The blind-drunk woman shouts, her deep voice piercing the haze of smoke and Tina Turner lyrics, “No, I’m not writing anything. I’m not a fucking writer. I’m a fucking Communist.”

Erin and I walk on. We chat of people whom we know, talking as Dante said long ago walking along the Arno, “of the
experience of this sweet life.”

By four forty-five, Erin and I are walking along Union Street. As we pass Thomas Lord’s, a friend from twenty years ago comes out with another woman. My friend does not know that I am back in San Francisco, and she does not recognize me. I say her name. Gerry and I speak. Gerry’s companion is French. She works with Gerry’s multinational at their Paris office. The French woman has followed stag hounds through the dark, fairy tale wood of France. Back home, I hunt with the Moingona Hounds. Erin rides under the redwoods in Woodside.

Thus, at the coda of this lovely azure San Francisco afternoon, we four stand together on Union Street, talking of horses and hounds. As we talk blood sports in Franglais, we are surrounded by the succulent smells of grilled meat and gin which flow out the door of Thomas Lord’s. Tina Turner’s voice - emphatically in English, not Franglais - pours out;
enfolding our talk this autumn afternoon in San Francisco, in the question, “What’s love but a sweet, old fashioned notion?” This afternoon, in the sun light, there is no answer.

2. **Long Shot (Autumn, 1984): Development**

A few days ago, the Democratic convention met here. Democrat politician after Democrat politician rose to speak about hard work, patriotism, and the family. Some elections there is only one song.

I thought it odd to hear these Democrats sing these lyrics. If one believes the language of their party platform, they are campaigning for “affirmative action, goals, [and] timetables” for gays in the workplace and for more welfare for single mothers.

Listening to this Democrat chorus praising the family made me think of how uncanny it would be if the woman in black with her calculator lying beside her black purse in the restaurant in
Jackson Square had suddenly begun belting out Tina Turner’s lyrics. The Democrats’ spooky charade reminded me of the only funny story in Soren Kierkegaard’s many writings:

What the philosophers say about Reality is often as disappointing as a sign you see in a shop window, which reads: Pressing done here. If you brought your clothes to be pressed, you would be fooled; for only the sign is for sale. *


The radio entertainer, Rush Limbaugh, says, “Words mean things.” He is right in part. The federal reserve notes in my wallet recite, “This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private.” But the judges of the Several Courts of the State of Iowa and the judges of the federal district courts in the districts of Iowa do not accept American cash, so I renew my licenses with a debt card, cunningly forged from virgin plastic. As they say in the United Kingdom, “Even a cat would laugh.” Some time some words mean things. Sometime words mean nothing.
3. Two Money Shots (1972 and 2012): Recapitulation

From the vast the geographical spectrum of postal zip codes 10016 through and including 10021, running north along the East River from Murray Hill to East 81st Street, the late American movie critic, Pauline Kael, opined in December, 1972, in response to Richard Nixon’s landslide election as the old year lay dying wrapped in a blanket of snow, “I live in a rather special world. I only know one person who voted for Nixon. Where they are now, I don’t know. They’re outside my ken. But sometimes when I’m in a theater, I can feel them.” **

If you dare, cross west on 5th Avenue at 23rd. You will arrive at the Hotel Chelsea. If you dare, cross Central Park, at 79th. You will arrive at the American Museum of Natural History. Ms. Kael was not traveling far in Walden.

Late in March, 2012, the current President pontificated from the Rose Garden regarding the micromanagement of the George Zimmerman case by a police chief of a Florida village. In a classic application of the rhetorical device called “If I had a sister, she’d like Camembert,” the President opined “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon [Martin].”

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Perhaps today’s usual suspects now read the bird entrails falling on 10016 through and including 10021 in a clearer, more post – Darwinian, more progressive way than their predecessor Pauline Kael did in 1972. Perhaps like Hillary Rodham Clinton, they have arguably - in their [strike two] diction, terminology, or jargon - experienced process, growth, and change.

Or perhaps, like the late Pauline Kael, today’s usual suspects ought to get out more often. They could walk a few blocks from the Upper East Side and see at least the site of the World Trade Centers and the east bank of the Hudson River. It might make them Primates - even Homids - again in many of our eyes.

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