

SEVEN RAINBOWS Over SANTA ROSA



Patrick J. Saddles

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Strategic Book Group

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ONE

Along the ascending grade toward the northbound tunnel, he instinctively exerted sudden pressure upon the accelerator, and the silver, sleek LeSabre launched into its passing gear. At sixty miles an hour, Jeff Majors enabled the cruise control and settled back for the early morning journey. A furtive glance in the side-view mirror captured the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge. Its towers, painted in shades of rust-orange, dwarfed the city's skyline. Directly ahead, the Waldo Tunnels crept into view.

Upon entering the portal's semi-darkness, Jeff's mind clicked in reverse to the previous evening's phone conversation with Bill Bigelow, his regional sales manager, based in Los Angeles. Jeff had just completed his daily report covering the initial workday of 1968, and he had to admit that partly because of a steady downpour, he'd sloshed around his territory only halfheartedly. After all, it was plainly evident that the chorus of stoic workers he'd encountered displayed all the apathy of a gifted athlete dogging practice. The nation's labor force, shedding the effects of traditional holiday overindulging, was sleepwalking its way back to the millstone grind. All he could really do was go with the spirit of the flow, which translated to a remote interest in matters commercial and a heavy hashing over of a slew of college bowl games.

After setting aside his report, he'd flipped on his transistor radio to hear the final segment of a KSFO newscast, which told of the latest atrocities in Vietnam. To Jeff's way of thinking, the mother country was involved in a senseless, brutal war, and he'd become infused with the notion that this gross affair needed to evaporate like snow in springtime. Fortuitously, the initial song coming out of the newscast had been Frank Sinatra's "Dancing in the Dark." The tune immediately had lifted Jeff's spirits to the point where he began snapping his fingers as he sang along. "Looking for the light," Francis Albert chanted with a masterful command of the lyrics. He sounded better than ever and in harmony with the pitter-patter on the windowpane. Depression from the inhumanity that was Vietnam had disappeared. But, alas, the patter had melded into a ringing sound, an unwanted cry from a bedroom telephone.

"Jeff, glad you're in," the voice had whined in a Bostonian accent. "Still pouring there?" Jeff had imagined Big Bill, as he was commonly referred to among his subordinates, on the other end, a chap with a sandy scrum atop his lumberjack frame. With a liberal spray of freckles and a lantern for a jaw, he was known to possess venomous fangs of intimidation and could back it up with the strength of a bull-horned rhino. "Congratulations on your last quarter. You went way over quota."

Seldom did Big Bill try to reach Jeff during evening hours; they usually communicated about three times weekly on a specially leased line within the backdrop of normal proceedings. Just last Friday, a similar supportive validation had been credibly lobbed. Jeff had reckoned that Big Bill's call denoted another message.

It turned out that his analysis had been accurate. *If only I could predict the stock market like this*, he'd silently joked to himself. But Mr. Big's dispatch had been worse than he could've imagined. Jeff had flinched hard as his boss unveiled his latest strategy for the new calendar year. He was promoting Stan Clayberry, his

pet honcho from Los Angeles, to the rank of District Sales Manager of Northern California, a bold move in that this title had not previously been bestowed upon anybody. For the three-plus years Jeff had been earning his bacon for the Velcon Corporation, he'd had no concerns about close supervision, nor did he harbor aspirations of management with all the pressure and back-stabbing that went along with it.

What's more, Big Bill had solicited, with the undertone of an edict, that Jeff relinquish all his clients in San Francisco and the East Bay to Stan. In return, Jeff would be expected to shift his operating base to the Santa Rosa area. Big Bill felt that the timing was perfect for the execution of his game plan, as Sonoma County had recently become a hotbed of new business, chiefly the result of Jeff's steady, conscientious efforts.

So, Jeff was now faced with the dilemma of picking up sticks in one of the most scenic cities on the planet and settling into Santa Rosa, a small, unsophisticated, suburban town some sixty minutes' drive due north. But Big Bill hadn't earned his stripes and ascended to his current lofty position without first becoming a crack salesman. He'd known what buttons to push to placate Jeff. He'd pointed out Sonoma County's all-around superior climate, far fewer traffic hassles, and the grand opportunity to lock in living quarters with a swimming pool. He had inside knowledge of Jeff's penchant for water sports.

When Jeff had grunted as if his Thanksgiving turkey with all the trimmings had been swiped from under his nose, Big Bill turned on the charm, a rarity indeed. "Before you...I know what you're thinking, Jeff. What about all the commissions I'm going to lose from a territory I worked so hard to develop? Right? Well, this has all been thought out at great length. You won't lose money on this deal. In Santa Rosa you've already got two main distributors. Business there is growing by leaps and bounds; the front office wants to make sure we get a strong foothold now. You have some good direct clients in that area, too. So, here's

the lay of the land. The boys back at headquarters have designed a special double-commission package, so you won't fall behind the eight ball, Jeff, and you could end up making out like a bandit. Of course, this'll mean you'll have to uproot and make a mad dash into the territory...that's company policy, as you well know. I realize this would mean a big change from your city life and its countless frills. Tell me, how does all this sound?"

About all Jeff could do was mumble that he'd make the trek to Santa Rosa the following morning, weather permitting. In his turn, Big Bill had reminded, "The remainder of the workweek is a lame-duck situation anyway; a high majority of firms will be operating with skeleton crews, and the issuance of purchase orders will be far and few between. So, Jeff, why not drop in on your distributors in the morning, then take the rest of the day to scout for new digs?"

As Jeff cruised onward, rays of sunlight began to pierce through the dense cloud cover, drying the random roadside puddles. A pinball bounced around inside his head, much like it had ever since he'd terminated his conversation with bossy Bill. *Cajoling certainly wasn't his style*, Jeff thought. Matter of fact, practically all of Jeff's peers felt downright jumpy when the monster of a man was nearby. Little wonder, he had a habit of standing people up against the wall and dispensing tongue-lashings for the scarcest reason. Apparently, the guy carried a lot of anger inside.

With one hand on the wheel and his eyes on the highway, Jeff continued with his musings. Funny how Big Bad Bill had overlooked mentioning Sonoma County's lack of fine eateries during their phone discussion. Several months prior, Bill had accompanied him to Santa Rosa in compliance with Velcon's company proviso that he supervise all sales personnel a minimum of one day each quarter. Sad to say, Big Bill could only scoff at the local cuisine. Nor had he alluded to venues of nightlife, or lack thereof. A jazz nightclub in Santa Rosa? Hardly! To boot, in San Francisco's downtown area Jeff often turned a corner and

came upon a curvy figure sashaying along the sidewalk in spiked heels and skirt high above the knees. It just didn't figure that he could expect thrills such as these to get the pulse racing at his prospective new community.

The countryside slid by before Jeff's drowsy eyes, eventually transitioning into a surfeit of pastoral terrain. He felt a tinge of empathy for a motorist on the side of the road in the midst of mounting a spare tire. And he once more found himself riffing through his options, which appeared slim. He could either accept Big Bill's entreaty, or tender his resignation. In that he'd thrived in the graphic arts industry for Velcon, he wasn't in the frame of mind to just up and quit. And what if he did? Was there any guarantee that he'd likely be able to secure a position of commensurate standing within a reasonable time frame? In the final analysis, he decided to bow reluctantly to the company line—for no more than one year. If things didn't look rosy by then, he'd hightail it back to the city and pursue a new career.

A sign at the southern fringe of Santa Rosa caught his attention: Santa Rosa City Limits, Population 45,000. Although he'd noticed the placard on previous excursions, he now had cause to suspect that he would soon be indexed as an addition to the present inhabitants.

At Graphic Accents, his least industrious distributor, the secretary, clad in a floppy blouse and slacks, informed him that all sales personnel were out of the office and that he should stop by later in the afternoon. Jeff made his way back to the freeway. Inside of five minutes, he guided the company-supplied sedan along the Airport Boulevard off-ramp in quest of his next stop.

Stepping into Graphic Solutions' quaint office, Jeff was greeted by its general manager, Quint Slattery, "Hey, guys, look what the storm blew in. If it isn't big Jeff! To whom do we owe this impromptu arrival at our beaten-down doorstep?" Scattered horselaughs erupted from the sales crew.

“Everyone, I see, has gained a few pounds since last month, including yours truly,” Jeff interjected. More heehaws broke out. “You have a minute, Quint?”

With a casual but abrupt inclination of his chin, the general manager motioned to tail him into his private office. Below a kinked nose, his purple lips smiled impishly. Tortoise shell frames wrapped around a heart-shaped face that excused him from shaving but once a week. His butter-blond hair had been uniformly aligned with a dash of pomade. When he spoke, the right side of his mouth performed the bulk of the action. “What’s up, partner?”

“Thought you might like to know about a new product in the pipeline—it beats the competition by a country mile.”

“That’s music to my ears. It’d be nice to start off the new year with a home run. Know what I mean—a home fucking run.”

“How about a grand slam?” Jeff reached inside his attaché and dislodged a shrink-wrapped package. “This ought to get us in some new doors. It’s transparent, reproducible Mylar. Trust me, it will run away from the pack. Pricing is competitive.”

Quint hoarded the sample as if it were gold. “Cook Engineering—a more perfect prospect for a demo I couldn’t have. Let’s hope it lives up to its billing. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Now on to other concerns,” Jeff uttered. “Where would you recommend one search for living quarters in this neck of the woods...more specifically, a poolside arrangement? Doesn’t have to be Olympic size; twice the size of a bathtub will do.”

“Hmmm. For friends, relatives...?”

“You’re looking at him. Know this; the powers that be at Velcon believe the Napa-Sonoma area is ripe for expansion. They’d like to beat everyone else to the punch and capture maximum market share. So the boss has asked me to find a place up here, like yesterday.”

Quint wavered pensively before flashing a broad smile. “Mercy me! Don’t tell me the big boys have finally gotten the message?”

Things here have been spreading like wild fire for some time. Bonanza!” The general manager held up the unwrapped sample to the window’s light. “We can do fabulous things together.”

He bit his lower lip and slouched back in his chair. “My apologies for getting carried away. The salesman inside me is easily roused. My bride’s on the payroll at State Farm Insurance. I drop her off every morning. You’ll find rental signs all along McBride Lane. Most of those apartment complexes, I’d bet, have recreational facilities.”

Quint’s secretary popped her head into the office. “Your wife’s on line two.”

“Speak of the angel. I’ll be with her in a sec.”

Jeff rose from his chair. “Thanks. Now just between the two of us, Quint, I have to confess that I’m still at a stalemate about this whole thing. Not sure if I can make the adjustment—keeping all my options open. If you hear of any openings in the industry in the next couple weeks, keep me in mind.”

“I’ve got a hunch you’re going to love the country life, Jeff.”

Heeding Quint’s pointers, Jeff bolted for the Coddington Mall area and McBride Lane. At his second stop he discovered an ideal setup. A swimming pool reposed at the center of a leafy courtyard surrounded by a two-level stucco edifice, beige like the outermost skin of butternut squash.

In a cubicle of an office he met a statuesque, graying woman, who ushered him along a mosaic passage skirting the pool, her red leather shoes creaking obsessively. Jeff thought they easily could’ve been mistaken for sun-dried tomatoes. A slope of garden grass grew between the sidewalk and pool. “It’s empty now,” said the property agent, “but come mid-April the swimming season usually kicks in. A lot of our tenants are employed at State Farm, just up the road a piece.”

Midway, between the southeast and southwest wings, she stopped short and pointed to a canopy-covered carport beyond a

spacious pedestrian entrance lane. A medley of plants and shrubs garnished the footpath's borders. "Of course," she said persuasively, "you would have your own parking stall, and Coddington's within easy walking distance." At the door to unit C-1, she fiddled with the keys. "I believe you'll find it to your liking. It's tastefully furnished, has all the modern utilities."

With his eyes alert for trouble spots, Jeff assessed each room. "Well, it appears to be in excellent condition," he offered. "The furniture even looks new. It's pretty much what I'm looking for." Although positive assurance had been asserted, a voice inside him not even he was familiar with had ventilated as if he had all of a sudden learned another language, on the moon perhaps.

"A nominal deposit will hold it for you for thirty days." The spokeswoman jangled the keys and led him back to her office.

Not believing he'd secured a new habitat without having to scour the classified ads in the *Press Democrat*, the local newspaper, Jeff lunched at nearby Denny's. It was either Denny's or try his luck at one of the various fast food establishments. He spent the afternoon making courtesy calls on key clients and made certain to drop in on Graphic Accents where he gave their general manager the news of his pending move into the area.

At four, he wheeled onto the southbound freeway. Twenty-four hours earlier, in the city downpour, he'd been ostensibly disgruntled with the weather, yet otherwise perfectly content. Here and now in Santa Rosa, it was dry with a hint of mist. His mouth was dry; he had a queasy feeling about this entire development. *Things are moving faster than lightning*, he murmured to himself. He felt like a man with one foot stranded in quicksand.

As Jeff motored over the crest of the long, gradual incline leaving Santa Rosa, a panorama of verdant land opened before him, as well as a polarity of weather patterns. He winced at the ominous dark clouds rolling in from the west, a threat of a new storm front. And that's when he felt its overwhelming presence—before he saw it radiating from an easterly direction. Through the mist,

beyond a vast grange dotted with cattle, and above a ridge of clustered foliage, the luminous shades of a rainbow hugged the tree-tops. Outwardly, the majestic arch expanded its bows for miles in a northwesterly cant. In the background the hills glittered from the sun's streaming rays, a sight worthy of an impressionistic painting. Jeff pondered how Paul Cezanne, in his inimitable style, might have captured the scene on canvas. Truly, this display ranked as one of nature's grandest manifestations. Jeff viewed this sighting as if a higher being now sat in his corner. Suddenly he felt a rush, a bolstering of his inner core. He had a gut feeling that his future in the Redwood Empire might not be that bad after all.

Thursday, Jeff managed to pick up a single measly order. After placing said order by phone with the Los Angeles office, he asked to speak with Mr. Bigelow.

Momentarily, Big Bill's voice boomed along the line. "A rugged day! Tell me something good, Jeff."

"The skies cleared just enough yesterday morning. I can't believe how quickly things are happening. Our friend Quint at Graphic Solutions gave me a hot tip on where to look for lodging. Get this! I'm already signed up for a new place in the heart of Santa Rosa. Things are working out." Once more, Jeff couldn't believe the words he'd spoken.

"Great news! I knew you'd come through for me. Jeff, you might still feel a little reluctant, that's natural, but wait till you settle in for a while. My wife and I felt the same way when we migrated here from Beantown. I have all the confidence you're going to rake in some gargantuan commissions in your new territory, and you're going to take to the warm weather."

Jeff cleared his throat. "There's one hang-up. I own considerable furniture," Jeff lied. "The company will cover me for moving expenses?"

"Officially, we have no such program. But if you rent a truck and need help, just make sure to get receipts. There's more than

one way to skin a cat. I'll get you reimbursed from petty cash if I have to. How does that grab you, Mr. Majors?"

"That should ease the pain some."

Since Jeff felt he was taking the brunt of corporate whimsy, he calculated that he'd be well served to seize the opportunity open to him. Coincidentally, one of his ski companions earned his loot working for a truck rental agency. Obtaining a blank receipt shouldn't prove an obstacle. A fifteen-inch Sony TV, an oak desk, and a stereo system were his only major pieces of furniture. Although Jeff possessed an extensive wardrobe, he felt confident that he could squeeze the sum total of his duds into his car. Another of his closer comrades, Derek Chandler, drove a van; he also owed Jeff a return favor. *Time to call in the chips*, Jeff thought. He trusted that the heavier items would be dispatched in an accommodative mode.

Currently, Jeff had the fine fortune of splitting time with two different women, Patrice and Moira. After observing Derek, now deep in the throes of a second unsuccessful marriage, and a host of other associates stomach the bickering and pains of separation and divorce, Jeff felt his best alternative was to play the field. A one-woman relationship at this juncture reminded him of a sculpted piece he'd once photographed in a Paris public garden—a menaced male face trapped within a half-unzipped straightjacket. At any rate, he sensed that most femmes with whom he connected abided by the same sweet recipe. In theory, nobody got hurt.

That weekend, he was scheduled to dine with Patrice at a rustic French restaurant. There, he broke the news of his imminent move to Sonoma County. Over candlelight, she agreed that this turn of events shouldn't have a material bearing on their dating—as long as Jeff was willing to make the journey. A stewardess for a flourishing airline, she was often on the go herself. As things stood, the two of them were able to get together only on a sporadic basis. The same could be said for his frequency of seeing

Moira. Between dates, Jeff maintained an active radar system for fresh female talent at all times.

Dinner was followed by a movie at the Coronet, an electrifying performance by Peter O'Toole in *The Lion in Winter*. Later, at her Pacific Heights enclave, under the veil of soft music, they sipped on cognac imported from France. When he sensed the moment was ripe, he swept back her luminous blonde hair, exposing a set of velvet ears. He kissed the hollow of her neck and between her delicate eyelids and lashes. Flirting with her earrings, he was able to make out his facial reflection in the dangling silver. The night was still young, theirs to grasp and hold. They made it last. They made it unforgettable.

Come morning, once they parted, Jeff speculated on the aggregate of other men Patrice likely cavorted with along her busy boulevard of travels, and the lyrics from a Beatles song kept rewinding inside his head: "*Love has a nasty habit of disappearing overnight.*"

Throughout January, two conditions endured: wet and wetter. Jeff counted only three days when the city had been divined with clear blue skies. Discarded Christmas trees piled up against telephone poles at every corner, a San Francisco tradition. As soon as the garbage collectors hauled away one batch, others took their place as though practicing the right of eminent domain. Now, almost February, a few scruffy stragglers still loitered amidst the concrete jungle.

Jeff's final week in the city sped by rapidly, what with bidding farewell to a slew of his favorite clients, packing boxes, and preparing a portfolio of details to discuss with Stan Clayberry regarding the accounts he'd be turning over.

Stan had an intriguing background. Prior to his employment at Velcon, he had plied his trade as a piano tuner. In some esoteric form, he must've connected with Big Bill, as the top dog seldom hired anyone lacking direct sales experience. But Stan was sharp

with the wit. And to his credit, he caught on swiftly to the graphics racket, stuck close to Big Bill, and operated with unending dedication and loyalty. To say that the ex-piano tuner had pitched his nibs into contention for a parade up the corporate ladder was a mild understatement.

Stan showed up at Jeff's apartment Friday at nine, and for some three hours Jeff reviewed the idiosyncrasies of his top accounts and all the hanging situations Stan would need to earmark as top priority. Satisfied that everything had been covered, Stan stretched his arms far above his head and said, "A bit overwhelming, all these details."

They then broke for lunch at the close-at-hand Red Lion, a popular, late-night, sobering-up spot. They slipped into a wall booth partitioned by beveled glass and, once the waiter inscribed their orders, they looked each other in the eye.

"Just to clear the air," Jeff started, "congratulations on your promotion. You learned our biz fast and put up some eye-popping numbers. You deserve it. Me, I made a decision some time ago. My temperament isn't cut out for the administrative life. I'd prefer to stick to the narrow road of a career salesman. So I have no gripes about not being the chosen one. You strike me as a fair person; no reason we shouldn't be able to carry on together."

Stan's visage lightened in relief. "Always grateful for your candor. I wasn't sure how my promotion would set with you. My hope now is that the other two reps in this district aren't harboring any misconceptions. It's possible they just might think that I've elbowed my way in as the bright young savior. I plan to give this my best shot. Off the record, though, if Velcon doesn't promote me up the ranks within two years, I'll be on the look elsewhere."

"It sounds like you've thought things through," Jeff affirmed. But Stan's spoken essence had struck home. Refraining from tipping his own disposition of ambivalence, Jeff suddenly came to grips with the severity that he could be stuck in Santa Rosa for those same two years, unless he, too, hit the job market.

“Don’t forget,” said Stan as the waiter served their beverages, “any territory rigamarole, I’m now your guy, and then I’ll handle things with Bigelow, if necessary. Bill and I are pretty tight.” Stan’s eyes cast off to the side. “I haven’t said this before to anyone, but I know how demanding he can be at times. His style is”—Stan searched for a tactful phrase—“on the aggressive side. I’ve heard a couple nicknames for him that I won’t repeat. You’ll find that I’m well disposed. If someone steps out of line, though, I’ll deal with it accordingly. In any case, I hope to work with you often. I’ve been told you’ve already got some fine key accounts in Sonoma.”

“Anytime you please,” said Jeff, although he knew that Stan would have his hands full club-footing his way around a foreign territory, not to mention coaching the San Jose and Sacramento reps. Did he know he was about to be stir-fried deeper inside the walls of the corporate pressure cooker? Stan and his wife had acquired the deed to a ranch-style dwelling in Fremont, a southern suburb of the East Bay. From there, it was a long hike to Santa Rosa, no matter the time of day or night. At most, Jeff figured on seeing his new supervisor one day each quarter in accordance with Velcon’s policy. With this blueprint, he held no qualms.

On Jeff’s final evening in San Francisco, while tending to last-minute packing chores, he decided upon a brief respite. He put on some soft background music and stretched out on the sofa. In moments his eyelids grew heavy and he lapsed into a trance-like state. Into his orbit of vision then emerged a likeness of Derek Chandler, his closest cohort since his early days in San Francisco, and the man who had agreed to help him with his move the next morning. Now focusing on the form from long range, as with a high-powered telephoto lens, Jeff subtly drew in the image, closer and closer.

Derek first showed up at an Air National Guard weekend

meeting in September 1961. One had to be impressed with his clean-cut appearance and, at six-foot five, he promptly reigned as the tallest airman on the base. Fresh out of basic training and Supply School, where he'd graduated at the pinnacle of his class, Derek oozed with confidence from his every pore. In short, he was full of piss and vinegar.

Jeff, as staff sergeant of the Supply Section, took on the responsibility of showing the new airman the ropes. By lunch break, he'd learned that this giant of a man worked as a property appraiser in the fold of a prominent real estate firm, had married his college sweetheart in his senior year at San Jose State, and resided in Mill Valley, a wooded hamlet of a town just a pole vault north of the Golden Gate. Oh yes, he loved to surf and was given to boisterous laughter at the slightest provocation.

It'd come to light that the two of them had gainfully earned their degrees in business in 1960. The obvious difference, then, was their rank; Derek had only one stripe sewn on his sleeves. He had procrastinated in tackling his military obligation, whereas Jeff had enlisted right out of high school in his hometown of Columbus and had already worked off four years of his commitment while attending Ohio State University (OSU) in the Buckeye State.

At the next monthly meeting in October, the twosome, keenly in touch with their common interests, naturally gravitated toward each other. A friendship spawned and soon they were riding together to the monthly drills. En route from Marin County, Derek would stop at Jeff's apartment nestled in the city; from that point they'd alternate driving chores.

During these commutes, they began to concoct outrageous schemes to wile away the time on drill days. Jeff had been in with a wild bunch back in the Ohio unit, to put it mildly. Along the way, he'd accrued a bag of outlandish tricks, which he now began to share with his newfound pal.

In his initial year in the California squadron, Jeff had come

across a couple of stick-in-the-muds in Supply and had trouble relating to them. Thus, drill days had worn on in a manner not unlike occupying a dental chair. Derek, however, bore a tendency for mischief; it pulsed in his dark eyes as sure as Jeff knew his surname, a situation that bode for better times ahead. Once Jeff produced a rundown of the diverse capers at their disposal, Derek was itching to let the fun begin. Both of them, it could be asserted categorically, got their kicks from borderline chicanery. Thrusting an opportunistic needle in the cause of off-the-wall amusement, well, they could think of nothing more entertaining.

Before long, they were issuing incorrect uniform sizes, mixing summer tans with winter blues, mingling work boots with dress shoes. And if that wasn't enough to confuse the squadron members, they'd often furnish two left shoes to one airman and two rights to another.

Amazingly, those on the short end of the jokes got a charge out of the shenanigans nearly every time they had dealings with the two *bilkos* in Supply. Except for a handful of nerds, Jeff and Derek found that they'd even developed a following of sorts. Guys loved to drop in just to see what ruse was on tap for the day.

By the time Derek and Jeff went on their two-week active duty period the following summer at McClellan Air Force Base (AFB) in Sacramento, two other newcomers to the Supply Section joined in with the mischievous deeds.

While fulfilling their duties by day at the central supply warehouse, the four of them took notice of a volleyball court behind the depot and challenged the regulars to a match. A date was scheduled for seven that same evening. However, during dinner at the base mess hall, Derek casually mentioned Lake Tahoe, the sparkling jewel in the high Sierras renowned for its nightclubs, stage shows, gambling tables, and one-armed bandits. That's all it took. As if an enormous lasso were reeling them in, the quartet felt the magnetic draw of the mountain resort only an hour and a half away.

Without so much as a courteous heads-up to the competition, they cruised up wiggly-worm Route 50 for an evening of glitz and games of chance. The foursome agreed that by eleven-thirty they'd be wise to head back. Revelry came all too soon at 6:00 a.m., meaning only scant hours of rest by the time they were awakened.

The next morning, shortly after Jeff and his sleepy associates reported for duty at the warehouse, the regulars assailed them with catcalls and sneers for their rude transgression. And when Captain Blandfest, the Air National Guard (ANG) supply officer, showed up and got wind of their irresponsible defection, he went ballistic. After royally chewing their asses, he restricted them to the base for forty-eight hours. Once they'd served their sentences, the captain also assigned them to wash the exterior of his staff vehicle and to clean its interior to spotless perfection, "...or there would be all hell to pay."

Jeff and his rogues got the message loud and clear. They promptly skedaddled off base to a local automatic car wash. Ten minutes later, the blue Chevrolet with gold Air Force logo and lettering, trundled out primed, primped, and pure as a bar of Ivory soap—all for a five-dollar bill, split four ways. For the rest of the morning, Jeff chauffeured his compatriots to a tour of the downtown capitol complex, where they portrayed the role of VIPs on an official mission. The good captain, puffing on his pipe, was not only none the wiser, he actually complimented them on their eye for detail.

In late summer, a couple months after their encampment, Derek announced that he and his wife had parted ways. If anything, the official split brought the two men closer together. Derek moved into smaller digs in Sausalito, a tourist paradise scarcely a hop, skip, and a jump north of the Golden Gate Bridge, and the duo began congregating for surfing sojourns on their non-military weekends. Jeff, never quite comfortable on a board, found himself wildly attracted to body and mat surfing. He also

sympathized with his military colleague in such a vulnerable time, but perceived that this mountain of a man possessed the inner strength to rebound. As long as Derek owned a surfboard, his love for the ocean would keep him afloat.

The subsequent spring, Jeff got to witness up close what he felt was Derek's paramount caper—outside the military. With a band of his surfing cronies, Derek crashed an on-the-air boat party held by Don Sherwood, whose radio station, KSFO, promoted him—tongue-in-cheek—as “the world's greatest disc jockey,” due to his perennial, sky-high ratings. Come what may, Sherwood had arranged to do his early morning show for a full workweek from a sailboat that he'd christened the *Monty Bandar*, a moniker jokingly gleaned from a station vendor. The vessel was to dock each day at a different port around the bay. On the day the disc jockey, also an accomplished sailor, anchored at a strategic inlet in Sausalito, Derek spearheaded a surprise attack by taking advantage of a headland shield of shops jutting out into the bay.

Meantime, with morning fog still hovering, fanatic onlookers crammed above the seawall suddenly picked out Derek's approaching party crashers slinking low to the surface and paddling frantically. Sherwood's fans instantly fell into joyous laughter, stomped their feet, and pointed vehemently. Those aboard the *Monty Bandar*, station hacks, local celebrities, town characters and would-be politicians, couldn't help but notice that their sidewalk audience had shifted its attention elsewhere. Who, pray tell, might possibly possess the derring-do to upstage the emboldened DJ's painstakingly planned junket?

Sherwood, with microphone in hand, spun around in utter fascination at the yelping sea lions now fast approaching on surfboards. As Derek's crew encompassed the ship in a shark-like frenzy, everybody on land and sea took measure of the zany sight. Realizing at once that the scene made for superlative radio, the DJ capitalized on it. “Folks, we're being blitzed by a whole

platoon of surfers. I knew they were comin' to get me one day," said Sherwood, alluding to his constant torching of wave riders for their widely heralded, "lazy, good-for-nothing" lifestyle.

At Squire Sherwood's invitation, Derek climbed aboard, with water dripping from the tip of his nose and rubber wet suit, and shook hands with the DJ, clad in a navy-blue turtleneck sweater and a fisherman's vest. The DJ scrutinized the hulk of this brazen surfer. "Your name, lad?" Brushing the question aside, Derek said, "Just wanted you to know we're not all bad guys. A lot of us even went to college." He then grabbed a black eye patch stowed in his trunks and strung it taut over his right eye. "But I've come to reclaim my ship. I'm the real *Monty Bandar*." Sherwood burst into his patented, throaty laugh, coughed a bit, and then laughed harder—a lot harder.

Collecting himself at last, he said, "Son, you've miscalculated, you're still outnumbered here. Hey! If I snap my fingers, my deckhands will blindfold you and make you walk the plank. But the program's about to end—gotta make way for the news—and I've been around long enough to know when I've been had."

At this interval, Sherwood turned to his spellbound audience on the levee, of which Jeff was a part, and crowed, "Lord! These guys deserve a gold medal for this! Folks, how do you top this?"

A shrill siren from a fire engine, a frequent occurrence on the streets of San Francisco, jolted Jeff out of his stupor. It was as though he'd gone into a five-year hibernation; yet, he recalled every facet of the half-hour venture of his subliminal mind. *Further tasks*, he moaned to himself, *can wait till morning. It'll be good to catch up with Derek again.*

Derek showed up at ten, and in slightly more than an hour's time the duo had everything loaded and ready for transport. Just before noon, Jeff motored across the Golden Gate in bumper-to-bumper traffic with his loyal companion trailing close behind. With the driving lanes beginning to thin as they bore down on the

Sonoma County line, Jeff turned up the volume when a bulletin blurted from the dashboard radio: “The National Liberation Front and North Vietnam have invaded the United States military and South Vietnam amidst Tet, the country’s lunar New Year’s celebration.” Jeff grimaced at the news. The war had escalated. The media quickly dubbed the ambush operation as the Tet Offensive. Innocent pedestrians were being slaughtered in the streets. His huge concern, heretofore, had been the displacement of his own precious lifestyle; he reeled at his self-importance.

Arriving at the carport of Jeff’s new digs, the twosome immediately tackled the heavier merchandise inside the van. The chore completed, Derek dismissed himself posthaste due to other pressing commitments. Jeff then took it upon himself to carry in clothing and miscellaneous items from his company sedan.

As he trudged back and forth along the footpath to his new entrance with the barren pool in full view, he came across a slim man with a pencil neck and pretzel-red hair. Freckles consumed his face. On a subsequent jaunt along the pathway, another fellow sported casual blue jeans and an indigo suede jacket. With a clump of upraised dark hair, he appeared the same height as Jeff. Briefly, their eyes met. No words were exchanged. *Conversations with adjoining dwellers can wait*, Jeff thought to himself. In an hour’s time he had gutted his car, although numberless personal effects still needed to be tended.

On Sundays, he relished sleeping in beyond ten. When he finally unruffled the covers, he realized one of his pillows was missing and hoofed it out to his car. He found the absent pillow wedged in a corner of the trunk. At that moment, a canary-yellow Chevy Camaro swung into a stable half a dozen vacant spaces from his own. It was the passerby from the preceding day, the man clothed in indigo suede. He sprang from his compact and smiled at Jeff over a sporty, black vinyl roof.

“I saw you hauling your stuff into unit C-1 yesterday. Didn’t envy you one bit. Moving’s a bitch.”

“Not all that bad. It wasn’t like a boatload.”

“Sidney’s the name. Call me Sid.” He stepped closer. The grin lingered. “You came in from?”

“The city. I’m a victim of a company relocation. And you?”

“I moved here from Hollywood about six months ago.” The man in suede retreated to lock his car door. “The times that I’ve gone to the city I’ve been one lost soul. Maybe you can give me some tips on the better clubs and restaurants. In turn, I probably can help you with those things around here, but be forewarned, the choices are slim. Sunset Boulevard it’s not.”

“Thanks. Maybe I’ll take you up on that. The name’s Jeff.”

“It takes a little adjusting, as you’ll most likely discover.” Sid started toward the building. “I’m right across from you in C-7, Jeff. Stop over for a drink sometime. I’d really like to learn more about the city.”

Jeff, feeling the need to catch up on the world’s affairs, shuffled over to Denny’s to pick up a *San Francisco Chronicle*. The potent scent of chow induced him inside. He read while he ate, the sports section always taking precedence. With the rest of the afternoon staring at him on his first full day as a new county resident, he strayed off to Healdsburg, a fifteen-minute drive north. Exploring the town square, he blanched at the dilapidated structures and the dinky restaurants. In the shadow of a proud palm, he parked himself on a bench and further perused the *Chronicle*. After a time, he breezed among civilized, upscale tourists milling about the plaza and paid scarce heed to lazy country folks in overalls. Odors of fried food wafted in the chilled air. Not a whole lot to write home about.

He returned to Santa Rosa amidst a winter sunset. The lush green hillsides were illuminated in a swash of colors. All of Sonoma County, he pondered, seemed geared toward dairy and agriculture. Entering the parking sector of his new complex, Jeff noted that Sid’s slot was deserted. He reflected on the brisk chat that had occurred earlier in the day. Although he felt nothing in

common with the guy's persona—a Tinseltown slicker—there was something about Sid's casual air that unhinged his curiosity. Still, Jeff considered his invitation as not sincerely intended. *People say things as an idle practice of social decorum*, he reminded himself.

The telephone installer showed up Monday at 9:00 a.m. with a new system. First chance, Jeff rang up Velcon's office administrator and submitted a change of address and phone listing. He also was told the door to Big Bill's office was closed; the kingpin wasn't receiving calls.

Jeff embarked on a strategy of utilizing his new toy to contact local clients and ascertain the progress of ongoing product evaluations. Appointments got lined up for that afternoon and later in the week. He could always make cold calls, an activity most sales personnel shied away from. After his last afternoon call, he found himself in the borough's southwestern industrial area. On the course back to his new layout, he nearly merged onto Route 101 heading to San Francisco. It then struck him that no longer did he have to wing his way south for an hour or better in antsy traffic, struggle through burdensome city intersections, or beware of the swerving lunatics on either bridge. From this standpoint, he had to concede that he had reaped unparalleled benefits. Too bad the pool wasn't open yet; a refreshing dip he could handle anytime. As he pulled into the carport, signs of spring shone from the hills to the east.

From his desk positioned at the corner window of the living room, Jeff wallowed in the angular shadows cutting across the concrete patio. The lines of definition joined to form a wheelbarrow, which fused into a flat-brimmed sombrero and fast became a sea otter with frisky whiskers. Fascinating! His daily view had been altered, as was his total outlook.

Facing his first Monday evening in hick town, he found his heart throbbing for the City of Hope. *What did I get myself into?*

he muttered to himself. He couldn't ditch his thoughts from the fast life in the big metropolis. A sword of sadness stabbed at him. He felt a longing to talk to someone. He grabbed the phone and dialed. Ted Billings answered in an upbeat tone. "Hey, Jeff, how's the boy? Still living out of cardboard boxes?"

To earn his daily bread, Ted plugged away as a news assignment editor for KFRC Radio, the city's leading rocker. The two of them had met some three years earlier in the surf at Kelly's Cove, just below the world-famous Cliff House. Between swells, they had started yapping about other sports. Ted, slim of build, with a Beatles haircut, quickly distinguished himself as a knowledgeable baseball fan, which promptly laid the groundwork for a solid friendship, even though he was ten years Jeff's junior. Jeff later made mention of the mat surfer to Derek, who was in the drawing-board stages of throwing a party at his Sausalito duplex. As a squad of Derek's younger surfer pals would be there, he suggested bringing Ted along. From that point on, Ted became one of the regulars.

Youthful as Ted was, his profession contributed to his knack of digging for angles. He remained on constant monitor for fodder—if not for a news item—then for a wisecrack. By this time, he and Jeff had developed a quirky mode of conversing.

"That part's over, thank God," said Jeff. Now I'm trying to find some genuinely good things about this one-horse town. But already a friendly neighbor discouraged me. So far, my social life has revolved around Denny's. You'll have to come up when the pool opens, and make sure to bring a couple chicks. I might go stir-crazy by then."

"You'll get used to it; just pretend you're an Eskimo."

"Funny how I can always count on you for smart-aleck remarks, dingbat. But right now, I'm gratified to chew the fat with anyone who happens to speak in city lingo. Already, I'm looking forward to my first trip back this Saturday. I have a date with a brown-eyed bombshell."

“Where’d you meet her, at the garbage dump?” Ted asked.

“Ah, hilarious! For your info, on a volleyball court. Of course, you wouldn’t know a volleyball from your left ball.”

“Hah! Your sense of humor’s still intact, meathead. She has a girlfriend?”

“Mind your manners and I’ll look into it. I’ll try reaching you Sunday. Hope to still be there, if you catch my drift.”

“Roger. Don’t get lost.”

“See you later, wise guy.”

“You get KFRC up there?”

“Most city stations come in loud and clear.”

“There are a couple stations in Santa Rosa; check ’em out, let me know how they sound.”

“Will you be thrilled if it’s nothing more than farm reports?”

As the Sonoma County Engineering Department was Jeff’s first visit charted at eight-thirty Tuesday morning, he tramped to his car a hair beyond eight. Overnight, gusts of wind had deposited cakes of loam on his hood and front windshield. Government clients parceled their time differently from private industry, he had learned. They favored early appointments, whereas the corporate types chose to take their coffee and shake out the cobwebs before consenting to the entertainment of sales consultants in their workspace. Their unwritten rule of thumb: not before nine-thirty, and preferably after ten.

Orville, the county’s end-user, had already been buying a range of Velcon lines, and Jeff had promised to show him a new timesaving item. Forty-five minutes later, he left Orville’s office duly encouraged and whistled along the glossy corridors, cognizant of the bank of pay phones on the main floor. *Big Bill is probably barking orders at the office staff about now*, Jeff thought. It was time they talked turkey.

“Jeff, how’re things?”

“I just demoed our new transparent Mylar at Sonoma County

Engineering. It outperformed K & K's product hands down. Orville can't wait to put it to use. He has to run a requisition through purchasing. By tomorrow, he'll have a purchase order number; they use scads of the stuff."

"Nice! And with the account never having used this line before, it counts as new business and double commission for you. See, Jeff, you're going to make it fine. Before you know it, you'll have one helluva territory. You all settled in now?"

"More or less; I had to rent a truck, as I suspected. Two of my pals helped out."

"Here's what I want you to do. Send the receipt to me, but don't list the amount on your weekly expenses. Phony-up a bunch of meal stubs; turn in one or two on each expense report. Space them out and no one will know the difference." In the parking lot, with his shoulders lowered against a stiff breeze, Jeff shook his head in amusement at the web of institutional deceit. He had received a directive to falsify meal chits to mask his own bogus voucher. At games of this ilk, Jeff flourished. He liked to categorize such doings as "creative financing."

Prior to his next call at Graphic Solutions he procured a dozen doughnuts, which were a legitimate expense. Quint and his three sales reps sat around an oval table in a mustard-colored room with a bay window that opened to a sunken pond and sweeping greenery. Billows of steam rose from a cluster of coffee cups as Jeff set foot inside to snickers and mock sarcasm, but the boys abruptly changed their tune when they caught sight of the bakery box.

Primarily, Jeff's appearance was to announce his local presence and official full-time support. He also informed the crew of the over-the-top response the new transparent material was receiving from all territories and fielded a raft of questions on its features and benefits. Quint concluded the gathering with a reinforcement of Jeff's assertions. "We can make a killing with this product, guys. And now you've got local backup, so keep knocking on doors. Meeting's adjourned till next Tuesday."

True to their custom, once the others filed out, Quint and Jeff stayed put in the conference room. The general manager removed his tortoise-shell frames and inspected them for dust accumulation. “I can see the impact on my gang already,” he confided. “With you here full time, they have visions of dollar bills stuffing their pockets.”

As Jeff was about to reply, another event drew his hazel eyes outdoors. Beyond the pond, above rows and rows of treetops, a piper cub descended, its wings teetering in the wind. The craft suddenly hit an updraft—the pilot compensated, climbing with the zephyr. He then leveled off for 100 kilometers before proceeding into a sharp right-rolling ascent. Over acres of orchards the plane made a rainbow arc, and then banked superbly into a second landing approach. In the city, Jeff had never seen a display of circus flying to compare with this. He’d forgotten that the Sonoma County Airport was based a scant mile away. He would now have a lasting impression as to its whereabouts.

Jeff gazed back at the branch manager, now wiping his lenses with paper tissue. “Incidentally, Quint, I’ve been meaning to thank you for helping me in my search for living quarters. I found suitable shelter in the area you suggested, complete with a large courtyard and a pool. Wouldn’t do for Jay Gatsby, but for my working-class needs, it’s just what the doctor ordered.”

Quint looked bemused. “A man of the arts! An admirer, I take it, of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous novel about the roaring twenties? You’re awash with surprises today.” He winked. “Now all we have to do, boy, is get you married off.”

“I always took you for a dreamer, Quint, but your suggestion has all the images of a real nightmare.”

Fog rolled in Wednesday morning and covered all of Santa Rosa; it lingered in the perimeter of Jeff’s courtyard. His first appointment was set for 10:00 a.m. The drapes were drawn partially open and his were feet propped under his desk as he

was on the line with Orville minutes shy of nine. The engineer had just read yesterday's pledged purchase order number as SRC-033820, and had asked Jeff to repeat it back to him.

"More than happy to oblige," Jeff replied gratefully. "Your P.O. number is SRC-033—"

Orville's tentative voice came back on the line. "Jeff, are you still there? You sure you want this...?"

Jeff had found cause to stop reciting. The door to apartment C-7 across the short span of concrete and grass had opened and shut abruptly. A sultry blonde had paraded down the promenade, passed over the crosswalk that led to the pool, then continued along the building to the central passageway heading to the adjacent carport.

"What's that? Oh, sorry. I dropped my pen. Your number is SRC-033820. Delivery should take place this Friday. I'll check with you early next week."

Jeff refocused his eyes across to the unit from which the lovely lady had stepped. His thoughts zoomed back to the chance meeting of a few days ago with the gent in the carport. In sparse seconds the name clicked on his tongue: Sid. *So, Sid had a beautiful girl living with him or, for that matter, maybe she was his wife. Enough!* Jeff commanded himself. Prudently deciding it was none of his affair, he shelved the episode and decided to head out early for his 10:00 a.m. designated meeting. But as he braked for a stoplight, his mind raced back to the curvaceous blonde on high heels that carried herself with palatial poise. He guessed her age between twenty-one and twenty-four. She exuded sex.

Thursday, the fourth day of his introductory week on new soil, while Jeff was busily chatting on the horn about 9:15 a.m. with a new prospect, low and behold, another young lass exited from Sid's pad. This one was more informal, less assured than yesterday's visual treat. Regardless, her skin-tight Levi's revealed shapely, long legs. Everything shook in the proper places. The texture of her skin was as smooth as cream; her long black hair

had a tantalizing sheen. From behind the curtains and the center post separating the corner windows, Jeff arose, phone cocked to his ear. His eyes grew larger, his jaw dropped as he keyed on her stride around the side of the building facing the pool. He concluded the conversation and abandoned the phone.

The plot thickens, Jeff said to himself. He then considered another possibility: Neighbor Sid was married to the blonde and the raven-haired beauty was his sister. Both were living with him—easily within the realm of valid logic.

Jeff was amazed—amazed at how his disciplinary instincts took over, steered him to a narrow, unclouded channel. From the inner walls of the channel a voice surfaced: *Build that customer base; hit those double commissions; dispense with ridiculous conjecture. Drop it like a bad habit!*

But could he? How many college chums had he observed who had lost their powers of concentration, suffered poor grades, and inevitably dropped out—all the consequences of distractions from the opposite sex? His resolve would be on trial Friday morning.

In his standard spot near the corner windows, he squirmed in anticipation. What might he see today? A little past nine—no activity. Fifteen minutes later, a stunning maiden shimmied and swayed from C-7. Auburn hair curled seductively at her neckline. She had marvelous cheekbones and lacquered, juicy lips. She, too, strutted confidently, but Jeff vowed that he detected a giddy blush as she pranced over the crosswalk. Because the drapery shielded him to a sufficient degree, he felt sure that none of the three beauties had been wise to his...peeping tomfoolery. He preferred to think of it as a natural reaction.

Three nights—three different women. Three nights—three different women. The phrase rewound and replayed in his tape recorder of a mind. This all seemed too incredulous.

He thought back to a college co-ed acquaintance who had dated tons of guys. She'd once scheduled an afternoon picnic

with one of her old high school beaus, to be followed by a soirée with the first string fullback for the Buckeyes. A quick cleanup and change of costumes, she'd surmised, could be squeezed in. Things boomeranged, though, when traffic snarled returning from the picnic. Mr. Fullback sat on Mandy's porch in a fidgety session with her mother as her initial date escorted her to her doorstep.

She'd laughed embarrassingly about this entanglement when she recounted the story to Jeff. Although Mandy luxuriated in promiscuity, from that day forward she enhanced her well being with a self-assigned goal—that of upgrading her skills in time management.

Could an eventuality similar in nature occur with his neighbor? How was the guy able to juggle three women? Might there be more? What secret formula did he possess? Clearly, he appealed to the female gender in a special way. Jeff began to speculate; he closed his eyes and dialed in the man in suede and came up with dark hair, average looks and height, dressed casually, yet slickly, heavy beard line, yet cleanly shaven. That summed it up: there were no other extraordinary features. Jeff prodded himself to desist with the balderdash. Were he in Sid's shoes, would he want someone snooping in his personal life? Still, the scenario that had played out before Jeff's eyes over the past three days intrigued him to no end.

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