
THE GOLDEN GATE SPECTATOR

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

America's most photogenic city celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its most photogenic landmark, the Golden Gate Bridge, on Memorial Day weekend, and for one accustomed to the jowly sobriety of federal Washington a walk through the festivities, which stretched for two miles along the bay, was an invitation to sensory overload. The vistas are famously stunning, but in the foreground at any given moment you were likely to confront, say, a tie-dyed dog on roller skates, or a pet chameleon on a string, dragging itself slowly over the shaved head of its snoozing owner, or a punk rocker on a step ladder heaving into a dumpster (without spilling his beer), or a couple in estrus on the trunk of an antique car. On the bridge itself, "Ranger" Rick Kaufman, a "caretaker turned herbologist," was crawling all the way from San Francisco to Marin County, wearing only two pairs of pants. "I'm always driving across here in a car," he explained, "hearing that traffic is moving at a crawl. I just wanted to know what it felt like." At the marina, I surveyed the chaos with a reporter from a local news service. "This," he shouted, over the din rising from the Gay Freedom Day Marching Band and Twirling Corps, "is San Francisco weirdness at its very best."

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As it happens, the idea of building a bridge across the Golden Gate was first given voice by an exemplar of San Francisco weirdness, Joshua Norton, a British-born speculator who made a handsome fortune in the years following the 1849 gold rush. After he overreached himself in the rice market, however, the sudden and unaccustomed poverty drove him rather quickly nuts. In 1859 he declared himself "Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico and China," and with characteristic generosity San Francisco obliged him. From that year until his death in 1880, his small eccentricities carried the force of custom. Not only did the city's best tailors prepare his elaborate uniforms at no charge, but the Emperor also ate free in its finest restaurants, borrowed modestly from the city's banks without interest, and

rode its public transportation as he desired. At the Opera House he shared the Royal Box with his two mongrel dogs; the newspapers published his imperial pronouncements with solemn dispatch; a local printer minted a currency of the Emperor's design, which was widely accepted as legal tender. Like most other visitors to San Francisco, Robert Louis Stevenson was charmed by the Emperor's legend: "In what other city would a harmless madman who thought himself emperor of the two Americas have been so fostered and encouraged?"

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Not too many, of course, which is why the legend is fostered and encouraged to this day. In San Francisco, the hospitality afforded Emperor Norton is taken as emblematic, giving the weirdness that characterizes the town the imprimatur of tradition. My own introduction to it came eight or nine years ago, when, as a young and extremely callow midwesterner, I first moved to what the local newspapers annoyingly call "Everyone's Favorite City." My desperate search for an apartment eventually took me to a roommate referral service, which for a modest fee would put an applicant in touch with San Franciscans who were looking for someone to share the rent. On that recommendation I called on a woman named Monique, who lived in a rundown Victorian house in the Haight Ashbury district. She had painted her windows in rainbows and half-moons, and throughout the apartment each doorway was strung with a curtain of multi-colored beads. Incense smoke curled thickly from thuribles spaced about the living room. After greeting me wearing only panties and a loosely tied kimono, she immediately inquired into my interest in witchcraft, which I had to confess was non-existent. I remember thinking that she looked exactly like Morticia from "The Addams Family." Obviously put off by my uninterest in her vocation, she nevertheless asked me to sit on a pillow on the floor so we could talk. She flopped herself down across from me, next to an enormous hookah, and assumed the lotus position. She shot me

a stony look from beneath her black bangs. "Tell me about yourself," she said deeply. "Just what sort of person are you?" As she took a drag off a long, dark cigarette, her kimono fell open, revealing her left breast. I quickly looked at my hands. "Well," I said, shakily, "I'm sort of a tit." I didn't get the apartment.

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San Franciscans will tell you that a straight line runs from Norton the Emperor to Monique the Witch, from the hospitality given a "harmless madman" to that accorded the community for which San Francisco is nowadays most famous. On the Friday before the bridge celebration I took a long walk through the Castro district, the heart of the city's homosexual population. Since I left town several years ago, AIDS has of course struck with a vengeance. Everybody with whom I broached the subject knew someone who had recently died, but I noticed too that on this Friday afternoon the bars—with names like the Manhole, the White Swallow, and Does Your Mother Know?—were full to overflowing. "The scene's changed—totally," one Castro businessman assured me. "If anything happens in these bars, you can be sure it's safe. Except for a few idiots." The issue of AIDS and "safety" is now almost thoroughly politicized. Several homosexual rights groups are mobilizing to protest the Pope's visit this fall, when he plans to minister to AIDS patients in the Castro and thereby perpetuate what one man told me was "his immoral war on our lifestyles." And, as always happens when "rights" are at issue, the demands multiply exponentially. In May one homosexual organization demanded that police be required to pass out a condom (why only one?) when they arrest someone from the city's gay districts, along with a pamphlet about safe sex. The sheriff has responded that not only is sex in jail—safe or otherwise—illegal, but the condoms might also be used to smuggle in drugs, which of course may require a needle to use, and we all know what sharing needles leads to. Besides, condoms are everywhere. In one tourist gift shop I saw

them set up by the cash register in a special display case, from which they're sold individually, at six cents a pop. Next to the condoms was a "Memorial Day Weekend Special" for large tubes of Probe lubricating jelly.

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Jan Morris, surely the most intelligent journalistic observer of cities, is less than taken by Everyone's Favorite City. "San Francisco is very stylish," she said, in an interview last year, "but what's it for? There's something about it I find absent. I'm not thinking about culture either—just a sense of purpose." What's San Francisco for? It's a good question, if not entirely fair: with the decline of industry and the dispersal of the immigrant communities, it could be asked of any number of American cities. San Francisco originally found its purpose as a financial center and a great seaport, but in the last twenty years much of the financial business has moved south, to Los Angeles, and the Embarcadero has been given over to crowded fern bars and tawdry waterfront shopping malls catering to the tourist trade. What San Francisco is for, now, is tolerance. The town's historical reluctance to pass judgment—to say enough is enough—has been raised to the preeminent, indeed only, civic virtue (until, of course, the conversation bumps up against the evil buffoon Reagan or the slimy Falwell, at which point tolerance becomes bad taste). In the 1870s tolerance was charming; today, because it's almost limitless, tolerance is—well, weird. It's not hard to imagine what those old tailors, good-naturedly embroidering Joshua Norton's imperial garb, would say about their kids walking to school past the 1808 Club on Market Street, for example, which advertises "Jack Off Parties, Mondays and Thursdays, 8 p.m. - 1 a.m." Such a complaint naturally strikes the contemporary San Franciscan as the worst sort of fuddy-duddyism. But a city needs fuddy-duddies. And standing by the Golden Gate on Memorial Day, watching the boats on the bay and the headlands of Marin meeting the sea beyond, I was strongly tempted to volunteer.

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CURRENT WISDOM

New York Times Book Review

Chilling evidence that the Attack of the Giant Quota Creatures continues:

To the Editor:

In her sympathetic review of my book "Intruders: The Incredible Visitations at Copley Woods" (April 5), Bettyann Kevles makes an assertion I would like to correct. After carefully outlining the admittedly bizarre U.F.O. abductions and enforced genetic experiments my book describes, she states that all the victims of these experiences are white Americans. She wonders, then, if this constitutes a racial bias. Since I had not felt the obligation to disclose the race of anyone I dealt with in my book, I am dismayed that the absence of this information led Ms. Kevles to assume the subjects were, by default, white. In fact, the abductees I've worked with include seven Hispanic victims as well as blacks, Europeans, Native Americans and people of extremely varied ethnic and socioeconomic background.

—Budd Hopkins
New York

Bettyann Kevles replies:

Perhaps this is an instance in which identification of the racial composition of the victims might have been enlightening. The half-alien, half-human hybrids Mr. Hopkins describes are all pink or gray, from which I inferred that all of their human parents were white. I am pleased to learn that a number of them were Hispanic-Americans or blacks.

[May 3, 1987]

Writer

Dr. Kirkpatrick Sale reveals the tricks of the trade for hysterics bit by the Lit. bug:

And even when what's on your plate is nothing so simple as a profile or an autobiography, it makes good sense to go out of your way to find a character here, an individual there, a personification, an embodiment, that will make your themes live for the reader. I once vowed that I would never read a word about Richard Nixon's background or career—this was sometime around 1959—and I kept that vow until I undertook a book on Watergate and the sleazy world of the Sunbelt it opened up for us. And then I knew I would have to delve into Richard Nixon's character completely. It was a sickening trip, to be sure, for what there is of substance about the man is depressing and oily and banal and evil and vengeful and cruel, but I knew I had to know the man inside out—and I knew I had to paint that portrait as carefully as I could. I knew it would turn out to be no more than a minor theme of the book: the faults, dear Brutus, are not in our individuals but in our culture. But it would prove to be vital, and a vital way of presenting the distant truths. So I let Nixon come alive here and there, let readers sympathize with him now and again, let him come through, eventually, as a believable and knowable person.

What we won't go through for our art!
[April 1987]

Rolling Stone

The *Stone's* incomparable William Greider sings for his supper:

Liberals are making a comeback because Reagan failed to deliver on his economic promises. The Gipper laid out a program that, he said, would restore prosperity and boost incomes. Okay, the nation gave it a shot, and it didn't work. Inflation was eliminated—but all this proved was that inflation was not the source of the underlying problems. In fact, vast areas of the economy were much better off with inflation than without it. The numbers don't lie: economic growth, investment, productivity, employment, wages, every important indicator of economic vitality has taken a turn for the worse. The state of Reagan's economy in the 1980s is even more troubling than Carter's in the 1970s.

[June 4, 1987]

New York Times

A sensible suggestion from Friendly Ted, apparently the village idiot of booming Waltham:

To the Editor:

The new \$200 million United States Embassy in Moscow has been bugged, and it clearly cannot be used as an embassy. What do we do with the building?

I disagree with those who say it must be torn down. Why not turn the building into a school, a college or a cultural center? Students from the United States and the Soviet Union could go to learn the language, social customs and cultural contributions of each other's society. Both countries could provide teachers and financial upkeep. And, if the school is bugged, listening to one another's youth might prove enlightening.

Knocking down the new building would be a waste of taxpayer money, and the loss of an opportunity for the superpowers to create something positive instead of leaving it as a negative mess.

—Theodore Jones
Waltham, Massachusetts
[May 14, 1987]

Esquire

A correspondent from the rag "for man at his best" gives Daniel Ortega the standard once-over and is mesmerized in the standard way—those eyes! this time performing amazing tricks: So it was natural for the junta coordinator, in the midst of a cheering crowd at a great religious festival, to remain almost somber. The turn of events that had brought him to Purisima could hardly be said to have stopped revolving. He would do what he could to influence those events in his country's favor, and his eyes shone inward and outward at the same time, as they always had, while he calculated the chances of Nicaragua against both the gravitational pull of its own underdevelopment and the momentum of the national engine coursing toward it from the north.

[March 1987]

Boston Globe

Little Steven Erlanger of the *Globe's* Moscow staff falls in love:

The fresh, purist wind of Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet general secretary, has caused extraordinary soul-searching throughout Soviet society.

His commitment to discipline, accountability and quality control, his tough stance against corruption and drunkenness, a shake-up of the bureaucracy and a weeding out of the Brezhnev old guard, all this has delivered a shock to the system, and to the people who have learned to manipulate it.

[April 11, 1987]

Arrival

Mr. Scott Russell Sanders, belletrist, trots out his most gorgeous prose to investigate a favorite subject—Mr. Scott Russell Sanders, belletrist:

"This must be a hard time for women," I say to my friend Anneke. "They have so many paths to choose from, and so many voices calling them."

"I think it's a lot harder for men," she replies.

"How do you figure that?"

"The women I know feel excited, innocent, like crusaders in a just cause. The men I know are eaten up with guilt."

We are sitting at the kitchen table drinking sassafras tea, our hands wrapped around the mugs because this April morning is cool and drizzly. "Like a Dutch morning," Anneke told me earlier. She is Dutch herself, a writer and midwife and peace-maker, with the round face and sad eyes of a woman in a Vermeer painting who might be waiting for the rain to stop, for a door to open. She leans over to sniff a sprig of lilac, pale lavender, that rises from a vase of cobalt blue. . . .

I search my soul. I discover guilty feelings aplenty—toward the poor, the Vietnamese, Native Americans, the whales, an endless list of debts—a guilt in each case that is as bright and unambiguous as a neon sign. But toward women I feel something more confused, a snarl of shame, envy, wary tenderness, and amazement. This muddle troubles me. To hide my unease I say, "You're right, it's tough being a man these days."

[Summer 1987]

Dallas Morning News

Scholarly sociopoliticohistorical insights from Prof. Sam Donaldson:

"The left wing has never been in the ascendancy in this country. This country is basically a conservative reactionary type of country. Yes, we make progress in some areas that are thought to be areas of liberalism. By fits and starts, human rights is one of them. But it's always going to be the right wing that is going to make the most noise. It was the Ku Klux Klan that marched up Pennsylvania Avenue in the 1920s. It wasn't the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. It's always the right."

[April 16, 1987]

Washington Post

An erstwhile Senate aide testifies that Mr. Gary Hart's real first name was probably Tom:

"I remember one day in the Senate, I'd been there about a year maybe, and Gary didn't show up for work one day. So I called his home and Lee said, 'Oh, we've had this tragedy.' I ask what's the tragedy. She tells me that during the night their cat had taken quite ill and Gary couldn't deal with it. He couldn't sleep with the fact that the cat was ill, so he stayed up all night holding the cat, and it eventually died in his arms. He was crushed.

"I could see him get a 16-page brilliantly written paper from one of his aides and forget to say thank you, you know, honest to God forget to say thank you. It didn't occur to him, and then losing sleep over a cat. The guy is just a very, very tough nut."

[May 8, 1987]

Chicago Sun-Times

Sophisticated badinage from Judy Markey, columnist and Aristotelian for the Windy City's Number Two:

But the real point of National Condom week is to educate, encourage and absolutely demolish any last vestiges of embarrassment. After all, what's to be embarrassed about? It's not like yesteryear when young men died a thousand deaths purchasing the coveted foil packet from their local pharmacist. Today there are racks and racks of the things sitting right there in the open for anyone to buy. Even a woman.

[February 15, 1987]

New York Times

In the kultur pages of the venerable *Times* of New York Mr. Stephen Holden bears the burden of reviewing another grisly drama of toilet amour for the ithyphallic modern male:

Robert Chesley's two-character drama, "Jerker, or the Helping Hand," is a cry of anguished solidarity from the heart of San Francisco's homosexual world, a segment of society where the AIDS epidemic has taken an especially devastating toll.

The play consists of 20 telephone calls between J.R. (Jay Corcoran) and Bert (John Finch), strangers whose anonymous telephone-sex relationship turns into a morale-boosting dialogue on homosexual pride. Conversations that begin as intricate, kinky safe-sex fantasies change in mood and quality as rough "playtime" stories metamorphose into tender "bedtime" stories that look back nostalgically to the 1970s.

"Jerker" accurately bills itself as "a pornographic elegy with redeeming social value," and its gamy language and continual simulated autoeroticism are definitely not for squeamish tastes. . . . Over the course of the drama, we learn that J.R. is a paraplegic Vietnam veteran. And in a stridently angry and simplistic diatribe, he contrasts the evil morality of war to the "really, truly basically good" promiscuous way of life that the epidemic has cut short.

[May 1, 1987]