

A meditation on guns and art in the Tenderloin

BY ED BOWERS

THE Tenderloin is a tiny town in a small city. It's practically invisible to most who exist under the holy nomenclature of St. Francis, who put dirt in his food and was loved by wild animals.

In the Sixties, San Francisco was advertised as a den of tolerance, and many whose mind-sets and appearances were not up to par with the majority of middle-class Americans flocked here for refuge. They included a lot of dirt-poor artists.

It was a spiritual journey to a dead end. They found speed, heroin and tainted acid. Now the rents have gone sky high and a poor artist in this town is out of luck if he tries to prop himself up with the job of bicycle messenger where he can dress like a slob and drink quarts of beer out of brown paper bags. He is reduced to working as a security guard, guarding space while other people watch his every action and he tries to stay out of their way and pass drug tests.

The Tenderloin is a tiny ghetto full of brain damage and crime and life and death, a zone where those who are unbecoming to tourists and entrepreneurs are exiled. There are no sentimental tears shed when someone dies or disappears here, and no desire to do anything but make money by any means necessary. The word "no" comes to mind repeatedly.

I was sitting in a Korean hustler bar, sipping a vodka-cranberry. This bar is in the heart of the Tenderloin and one of two whose reputation is glamorous for those who only read about it on the Internet, and rather boring for those who actually show up in person.

The goal of the owners of this bar is to go back in time to the Korean War, or the Vietnam War, where barmaids in the local taverns wanted to survive at any cost so they hustled servicemen hired to kill their people, flirted with them and asked, "Would you buy me a drink?" which, of course, as generous, desperately lonely Americans, they were willing to do, ulterior motives notwithstanding.

The barmaid would pour tea out of a whiskey bottle into her glass and appear to be so drunk that there was a chance, if she were to be purchased another shot, that the serviceman could have a few hours of service between the sheets before he got his head blown off by her brother, uncle or father.

The reason I was sitting in this Korean hustler bar was simple: I was keeping a friend of mine company on her first day as a barmaid. Veronica was nervous on her debut as a member of the service personnel class. She'd gone from Yale to the Tenderloin, a rough ride by anybody's standards.

I've been in service for 25 years. I'm a security guard. My first job was at the Pepsi Cola plant in Emeryville. I worked with an African American named Chad and an Australian named Tad. They were close friends.

Chad was a business major and Tad majored in biology. I already had my degree in English from Harpur College. I didn't know what I wanted to be. The only thing I knew how to do was write, and everybody knows how to do that.

One Sunday, Chad and Tad decided to further my education. They both loved guns and desired that I do, too. On their day off, while I was working a swing shift, they brought in a .357 Magnum, which is equivalent to the power of a Great American Novel.

Before I knew what was happening, Chad and Tad stuck a target with a bull's-eye on the president of the Pepsi Cola plant's office door and began shooting blanks at it. Most people are not artists. They do not have the patience to sit and stare into space long enough to construct weird ideas and put them on canvas or paper. But anybody with fingers can make a little version of The Big Bang.

My first thought was that a stupid and dangerous action was about to be committed, but I was also attempting to have faith in Chad and Tad's judgment and not put a wet blanket over their intense enthusiasm for the Magnum. Their hands were shaking!

I held the gun and when I shot at the door and felt the force of the explosion, I was really impressed by its power. This was a hell of a lot easier than writing a poem or going to work.

Technology is so sexy. In the future, lecherous men in the Tenderloin will prefer to have sex with robots who are disease-free and less financially draining than toothless crack whores. Technological art will have replaced prostitution.

But one of the main squeezes now is the clean, pure power of a gun as it explodes like an orgasm

in the hand on the corner of Taylor and Turk at 2:30 in the morning and some stupid kid who never graduated from high school is dead.

Of course, when Chad and Tad took the target off the Pepsi president's office door, there were indentations from the blanks on its surface, and I saw a look of concern in their eyes, which revealed a secret: No matter how much you like to play with weapons of destruction, there will eventually come a time when those weapons will play with you.

Monday, I was on the day shift, scheduled to patrol the plant, but my main job was to cover the tracks of Chad and Tad for committing an idiotic impulse inspired by the love of guns that might bring the wrath of Pepsi Cola down on our heads.

The president of Pepsi Cola was an alcoholic. He came in hung-over and half-drunk that Monday, approached his door, and noticed the indentations. Then he turned to me as I was sitting at my desk,



ILLUSTRATION BY MYRDA MONASTERIAL

filling out forms, getting ready for work, and appeared momentarily concerned.

"Where did these come from?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied.

In a stress-filled situation, I have found that, in spite of myself, I can act better than any of the Hollywood boys. It's not that I want to lie. But in a society based on lies, if you tell the truth to people who make a living out of lies, you will be punished.

The president of the Pepsi factory shrugged his shoulders and entered his office. He didn't care. All he wanted to do was to leave by noon and get drunk. He was a good guy. He knew about lies and truth and didn't want to bother himself with either.

The Korean hustler bar in the Tenderloin where my friend Veronica got a job as barmaid depended on lies that were believed by its customers in order to make money. Lying there is an art form. Making money is all that counts in America, or the world. Anyone who doesn't believe that is going to be a starving artist. Lying makes money.

So I was sitting on a bar stool next to an African American woman who was sipping an expensive shot of something that tastes like cough syrup, and talking to Veronica.

The bar had obviously been taken over by a handful of African American drug dealers. All were sour-faced women, except the head man whose name was Omar, an African American in his 30s who looked prematurely tired and sad and resigned to the fact that he was capable of killing anyone who even resembled the part of him that was now dead inside.

Poetic justice! The Korean hustler bar was being hustled by African American professionals. They owned the place now. Between the hours of 10 a.m. and 7 p.m., few barflies came in here when they noticed Omar's crew, unless they wanted to buy heroin, crack or speed. The vibe here was hard drugs, not cocktails for two.

Bar owners don't have a chance to prop up their overhead if their clientele is nothing but a handful

of drug dealers who purchase one shot of high-end cough syrup every two hours and whose aura is saying, "Get the hell away from me, you alcoholic bums. We have business to do!"

I just wanted to have a quiet day and mind my own business and do a good deed for my friend. I didn't care about Omar or his gang. I had enough problems of my own. If Omar and his gang killed me, that was their problem. My soul would haunt them. At the time, I had finished with a marriage of 18 years and was half dead anyway.

Then this kid came into the bar, an African American pretty boy carrying his coat in his arms like it was a baby.

I was bored, but it is at moments like this, when boredom sets in, that often something happens that is enchanting. Sometimes life mimics art and is better than a movie, especially in the Tenderloin.

"Give me a shot of Jack," said the young African American kid to the debuting barmaid.

"I have to see your ID," she replied.

The kid showed her his ID and the truth was revealed in a clear laminated light: He was under age.

"I'm sorry, I can't serve you. You're too young."

"Okay, then give me a Coke." The kid kept looking behind him like his mother was about to show up and drag him out by his ear.

"I'm sorry," replied Veronica, "but you're too young to drink anything in this bar."

A bolt of lightning hit the kid, and he appeared terrified, as though he'd glimpsed the face of God and didn't like what he saw. He tossed his coat down to the floor and fled the scene like a rabbit in heat. It happens like that in this neighborhood. One second it's quiet as death, the next it's a run-for-your-life scenario. Life here is a transvestite drama queen full of surprises.

"What the hell is going on now?" I wondered to myself. Now I was inside of a plot.

Veronica stared at me with her big green eyes and said, "Look at that! He dropped an Uzi! He had an Uzi in his coat!" Ah, explanation and epiphany.

A few minutes later the cops came into the bar and told me not to leave. They didn't have to worry about that because I didn't have anywhere to go.

The cops entered breathing heavily, in a state of great excitement, and appeared to be having an adrenaline rush equivalent to any drug high purchased on the street. I felt sorry for them having to make a living nabbing losers.

So I sat in the bar and waited. Nothing else happened. The play ended before it began. It was still-born. The whole incident was like a pigeon having sex in less than a second. It was over like every moment in the eternal now is over now. The curtain was down.

But I wanted an explanation, something I could remember, interpret, and discuss, and I got it from Omar the Drug Lord, who came over to me and spilled the beans. A lot of people spill their beans to me, perhaps perceiving that I am so insignificant that it doesn't matter what I know. Sometimes I feel like a secretary taking dictation in hell.

"That kid mugged an old black dude who was a good man," explained Omar. "He'd loan folks money when they needed it. I hope he goes to jail for a long time."

Omar, seller of poison to those who wish they were never born, was a moral man. He should have been a judge.

Then I finished my drink and left the bar. I don't remember where I went. All I know is that I am still alive and that this particular play is over.

Veronica was fired a week later for refusing to hustle fake drinks to horny drunks.

I wonder if the indentations are still on the president of the Pepsi Cola factory's office door. The president probably drank himself to death. He was a nice guy.

My beat is art in the Tenderloin, so I'd better explain why I am writing about guns.

Guns and art have a lot in common. Both can express humans' deepest, darkest passions. One creates, the other destroys. Both are dangerous.

Art does not need to be viewed from a safe distance. The Tenderloin is a 24/7 creation. It is jazz and Jackson Pollock painting crazy strokes on a giant canvas with the sound of a .357 Magnum pounding holes in an office door and scotch flowing like cyanide.

Please support art in the Tenderloin and stop being so violent. The guns out here create unhappy endings and are not shooting blanks. ■