Death in the Tenderloin

Just because
No one can see a face
Doesn’t mean
It’s gone.
“It’s never over while one person remembers you.”

PHOTO BY BRIAN RINKER

DEATH IN THE TENDERLOIN

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DEATH IN THE TENDERLOIN

A slice of life from the heart of San Francisco

by Tom Carter, Marjorie Beggs and Others
Edited by Geoff Link

A CENTRAL CITY EXTRA
STUDY CENTER PRESS
### Residential Hotels and Apartments

1. 990 Polk Street Apartments
2. Pacific Bay Inn - 520 Jones
3. Coast Hotel - 516 O’Farrell
4. Iroquois Hotel - 835 O’Farrell
5. Essex Hotel - 684 Ellis
6. 555 Ellis Street Family Apartments
7. Senator Hotel - 519 Ellis
8. Cambridge Hotel - 473 Ellis
9. Coronado Hotel - 373 Ellis
10. Jefferson Hotel - 440 Eddy
11. Hamlin Hotel - 385 Eddy
12. Elm Hotel - 364 Eddy
13. Padre Apartments - 241 Jones
15. Ritz Hotel - 216 Eddy
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19. West Hotel - 141 Eddy
20. Ambassador Hotel - 55 Mason
22. Camelot Residence - 124 Turk
23. Aranda Residence - 64 Turk
24. Dalt Hotel - 34 Turk
25. San Cristina Residence - 1010 Market
26. Civic Center Residence - 44 McAllister

### Other Locations

1. St. Francis Memorial Hospital - 900 Hyde
2. Hilton Hotel - 333 O’Farrell
3. Tenderloin Recreation Center - 570 Ellis
4. San Francisco Network Ministries - 559 Ellis
5. Glide Memorial United Methodist Church - 330 Ellis
6. Father Alfred E. Boeddeker Park - Eddy and Jones streets
7. Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp. - 201 Eddy
8. EXIT Theatre - 156 Eddy
9. Tenderloin Police Station - 301 Eddy
10. Central City Hospitality House - 290 Turk
11. 21 Club - 98 Turk
12. Central City Extra - 944 Market
13. Golden Gate Theatre - 1 Taylor
14. St. Boniface Church - 133 Golden Gate
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   Free Medical Clinic - 150 Golden Gate
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17. Community Housing Partnership - 20 Jones
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19. Asian Art Museum - 200 Larkin
20. Civic Center Plaza
21. San Francisco City Hall
   1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
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“A sweetheart of a person, a gentle person with no pretensions, no meanness in him.”

“The Joy of Life” behind the Crystal Hotel at 128 Eddy St. now is mostly hidden by a new building of affordable housing. Photo by Mark Ellinger
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Death in the Tenderloin is dedicated to Lenny Limjoco, for 35 years our friend and fellow artist whose cover design graces the text and whose photos are found throughout.

Mark Hedin, Heidi Swillinger, Leah Garchik, Ed Bowers, Brian Rinker and Karen Datangel are the other authors. Their contributions enrich the volume, as do the photographs of Mark Ellinger.

The San Francisco Chronicle generously allowed Study Center Press to use photographer Brant Ward’s evocative portrait of Michael Dick.

Many photographs accompanying the stories are courtesy of the deceased’s families and friends. A number were taken from California driver’s licenses and IDs.

We also acknowledge Rev. Glenda Hope’s significant personal and professional contributions toward making the Tenderloin a compassionate community.
“Today is a gift, that’s why it’s called the present.”

The food line at Glide Memorial Methodist Church at Taylor and Ellis streets. Photo by Tom Carter
Foreword

This book celebrates the Tenderloin at its most tender. It was inspired by the obituaries published in the Central City Extra — monthly newspaper for the neighborhood's fixed-income and no-income populace. This is a hardscrabble script.

The Tenderloin is San Francisco’s poorest neighborhood, a high-density, human services ghetto where hundreds of nonprofit and public providers serve a citywide caseload of homeless people in addition to treating the tribulations of the area's 30,000 residents.

Our hood is a mere few dozen square blocks cemented between downtown and Civic Center. Nob Hill is above, Skid Row below. Death in the Tenderloin is our eulogy to this historic, notorious neighborhood and its medley of people, absolutely the most diverse community in San Francisco, the heart of the city in more ways than one. We want you to come away with a sense of how difficult life is out here on the edge.

This book encourages us to think about death, next to birth the most important part of life. Yet these stories are not all somber, they brim with optimism. The obituaries are about people whose death, mostly quiet and independent, is dignified by their memorials, the setting for the ensuing narratives. Memorials mostly are conducted in the SRO or apartment building where the person lived. Typically they are officiated by Rev. Glenda Hope, the Tenderloin closer, who invites The Extra to attend to let the community know of the person's passing and what they meant to those left behind.

We edited the published obituaries, deleting courtesy titles and most dates, occasionally adding landscape details to sharpen the image of the Tenderloin and the people who live here. Most who are portrayed battled addictions, exorcising personal demons — or not. Quite a few had been recently homeless and, with what seemed like a sixth sense, came in from the cold to die in relative comfort with a roof over their head.
Most of these people are unknowns, some are known beyond the Tenderloin, a very few even farther. Certain readers might regret that all important dates aren’t provided. But this is not a history book. It is an anthology of short stories that deal with death and dying in a rarefied setting. Each character is unique. The companion essays — three of them are edited features that were published in The Extra — offer a journalistic context.

The stories are largely composed of the facts of the dead person’s life as their survivors and mourners recalled them, impressions and candid reminiscences of friends, family, neighbors and caregivers. In this culture, where last names are not important, shared experiences make people tight.

Each story helps etch a feeling for life in San Francisco’s Tenderloin — a neighborhood and a state of mind.

“All of us have a lot of grief in the Tenderloin.”

Popular corner of Jones and McAllister streets in front of once-majestic, abandoned Hibernia Bank. Photo by Lenny Limjoco
Everyone’s Friend at the Senator

PATRICIA CARLOS

IT WAS FITTING that Patricia Carlos ended up at the Senator Hotel, famed as a harbor for American Indians. Carlos grew up on the Salt River Pima Maricopa reservation near Scottsdale, Ariz. Then fate brought her to the SRO on Ellis Street when she was 32.

In 1971, the hotel welcomed the Indians from various tribes that federal marshals had evicted from Alcatraz after their 19-month occupation of the island. The hotel furnished them all rooms that night, plus use of the lobby for news conferences.

Carlos was at the hotel’s 2006 “Remembrance and Resistance” ceremony commemorating the 35th anniversary of the Indians’ “last stay among the residents of the Tenderloin,” reads a wall plaque near the front door.

In her second-floor room, Carlos kept her heritage close. A flag showing the “End of the Trail” solitary horseman — sculptor James Earle Fraser’s famous image — dominated one wall and pictures of proud, handsome chiefs decorated other walls.

But the 20 mourners who jammed her memorial in the small hotel community room cared first and foremost that she was a friend. Men and women passionately described the short, stout Pima as a cheerful spirit among them, someone who brought joy to their daily lives and who listened.

Her health had been declining for a couple of weeks, and when she died at 51 at UCSF Medical Center it was of cirrhosis of the liver.

Carlos had lived at the hotel the longest. The Senator, previously a tourist hotel with restaurant and parking lot, a popular haven for visiting vaudeville performers in the 1920s, closed briefly, then reopened in 1992 as a low-income SRO for the formerly homeless after renovation by a new owner, the nonprofit Community Housing Partnership. Her next-door neighbor, William Donlon, 72, remembers Carlos was already there for several months before he moved in, summer 1991.

A gray-bearded man in a wheelchair struggled for words, remembering her sense of humor. Black-bearded Jessie recalled their easy friendship and said her loss felt like getting “shot in the back.” Tony Davidson, a large black man, was grateful he’d known Carlos for eight years. He said her upbeat personality brought the hotel’s community closer. She often told him a “turtle story,” of which she had many, to remind him to slow down.

Then a young black woman stood to sing “How Great Thou Art.” A tall, white man walked in with a small black dog. “My dog bit 14 people,” he said, “especially alcoholics. If the dog didn’t bite her, well, she had good qualities.”

“She was the best friend I ever had,” said a man in front, facing the crowd. “I’m separated from my family in Alabama and I’m happy to have had a friend who was nurturing and supportive. It breaks my heart to lose a friend like that.”

Carlos subscribed to the Pima reservation’s fortnightly newspaper, AU-AUTHM Action News. Periodically, she returned to her roots and sometimes her father visited. A few years ago, they took neighbor Donlon to Muir Woods.

“She loved to travel,” said Donlon, who helped clean her room. “We were going to go to Disneyland, but we never made it. They sent her body back to the reservation. She was proud she was Indian.”

— TOM CARTER
Batman

LONDEVETTE MORGAN

LONDEVETTE Morgan earned his “Batman” nickname by keeping a vigil over the neighborhood while seated at the window of his fifth-floor Elm Hotel room.

The self-appointed street savior claimed to know many of the shopkeepers below, and would tip Elm staff to any untoward activity in their vicinity.

“He saw himself as a peacekeeper,” said case worker Adam Decker.

Morgan, a garrulous teller of tall tales, often would get lost in his random thoughts until someone pulled him back to his story line. He was prominent and entertaining at the SRO’s Wednesday breakfast group discussions in the lobby, where his memorial was held.

Morgan, from Oakland, was among the city’s original Care Not Cash beneficiaries. He became an Elm tenant five years ago right after the hotel was renovated. He quickly earned a reputation as humorous, friendly and generous.

“I saw him Monday, the day before he passed,” said Ricky. “He came by and gave me a dollar, sometimes it was $2. He had a good heart. You don’t see many like him.”

Roz, the only woman among the eight mourners, said Morgan wanted her to be his girlfriend and told her he was going to marry her. But it was hard to know when Morgan was kidding or on the level, she said.

Scott Ecker, Elm services manager, recalled that once, as he was trying to catch a taxi in pouring rain, Morgan came outside and held an umbrella over him for half an hour, as a simple kindness, talking the whole time.

“His storytelling was crazy, and it was hard to know what was factual,” Ecker said. “But I was fond of him.”

Other mourners said Morgan had told them he had played bass in a band and had been a boxer.

A man who lived across the hall said he had had “thousands” of encounters with Morgan and “75% of them were unhappy. He could be a monster, too,” he said, without elaborating. “He was very sick at the end. I think he drank himself to death.”

Joseph Davis, an elderly, 24-year Elm resident, had many discussions over the years with Morgan, mostly in the lobby where residents gather to watch television.

“We always got along,” Davis told the assembled. “He had a lot of imagination. Every month he was getting married to somebody. And he said he had a job at the ballpark. But he never went to the ballpark.”

In Morgan’s last weeks, Davis and others noticed that he’d lost a lot of weight. Yet he kept drinking.

“I don’t know if he was afraid to go to the doctor,” Davis said, “but I never saw him go.”

Batman, apparently ignoring his failing health, died in bed reading his newspaper. He was 53. ●

— TOM CARTER