Act One: Murder, Foul Murder

In Old San Francisco

1.

A popular crooner once lamented, “I left my heart in San Francisco,” and for many it was true. Cities had themes, they said. Paris was bathed in light; Philadelphia embraced brotherly love. But in San Francisco they celebrated romance. It had romance, then, and it had beauty, unsurpassed beauty. God, Himself, it seemed, had chosen its hills for His earthly studio, where portraits were painted of steep slopes traversed by cable cars, where narrow streets were framed by gracious and elegant Victorian homes. And surrounding it all was deep blue ocean and bay, waters bobbing with white sail and foam, the city’s residents blessed with clear skies and fresh ocean breezes from the sea.

New York City once welcomed the immigrants of many nations to our shores, the Statue of Library extending its torch to light the way for the homeless, the oppressed, the wanderers from an old world seeking freedom in a new land. And San Francisco once welcomed the immigrants of our own nation, those seeking tolerance and diversity, those searching for a vineyard where free thought could be planted and thrive; it offered a new home for the alienated fleeing conformity and imposed systems of belief. San Francisco welcomed them all; they were all welcomed here; they were welcomed without qualification, without restriction; the gates swung open to all who approached.

San Francisco was made of these: it had beauty, it had tolerance and diversity, it cultivated freedom of thought and expression, and it had romance. As night fell and fog horns sounded their mournful ocean cries, as street lamps twinkled in the evening mist, romance traveled its narrow, twisting streets awaiting souls brave enough and bold enough to enfold their wings around another's heart. San Francisco, you see, was a piece of heaven on Earth. And on the evening of September 15, 2117, its population went to bed peaceful, grateful for the paradise they had chosen.

But heaven ended and hell began at 5:37 AM the next morning as missiles rained down upon the American continent and engulfed the nation within a nuclear storm. The first strikes came at dawn, and twenty minutes later, the retaliation was launched. It was the first day of war, and it was the last, for by nightfall, rationality had prevailed at the end of an irrational day. Armistices were announced, treaties signed, agreements agreed upon, the war ended. It was known popularly as World War III, but it was officially known as the Chino-Euro War. It lasted only one day, much shorter in duration than the other conflicts that have punctuated human history, but nothing rivaled it in cost. A billion people had been killed; all major cities, and most smaller ones, had been reduced to radioactive glowing skeletons of twisted steel and broken concrete. For decades afterward, wise men and scholars would debate which country had started the war, who struck the first blow. Who were the victors? Who was defeated? Did anyone surrender? No one remembered. No one knew if there were any victors; the only thing certain were the victims.

Destruction was wide spread; the world was in ruins, but civilization didn't collapse, humanity didn't vanish. Uncontaminated areas were found, and enough people survived to rebuild the cities, cultivate fresh land, and develop new resources. Never again would governments be trusted to guide human destiny. Presidents and legislatures were still elected and still served their terms, but now they served, discreetly, of course, at the pleasure of giant corporations, companies that had coalesced around shattered centers of the world economy and rebuilt the infrastructure so necessary for human survival. Governments that had led nations blindly into war had been corrupt; the corporations that replaced them were equally corrupt, but at least they were more efficient; only they had the determination and the ability to clear away the rubble and rebuild.

Once the dead were buried and the wounded treated, the contaminated wreckage that were once great cities were evacuated. But the good fortune of those who had survived the attacks was only temporary, for radiation sickness appeared during the months and years that followed the war and raged amongst the living. Millions more died, and for other millions who escaped death, disfigurement and genetic mutation were often the only rewards. Those afflicted deserved sympathy and understanding, but instead they became the recipients of a new prejudice that once had been directed against race and gender, religious minorities, the sexually divergent. Enlightenment had lowered the barriers of acceptance to those who had been historically persecuted, but mutants were a constant reminder of mankind's darkest hours, the

unspeakable cruelty of which we were capable, the depths to which we had descended. Mutants were a reminder, yes, a reminder that no one wanted to remember. Men could rebuild the devastated cities, but no one could rebuild the mutants. They were shunted aside, outcasts from the reborn world order. As new communities arose to replace the desolation, mutants were encouraged to gather in ghettos, and when encouragement was insufficient persuasion, they were herded, forcibly if necessary, into isolated and dilapidated enclaves on the flimsiest of pretences.

Hundreds of missiles and bombs had fallen upon the San Francisco Bay Area; and for all practical purposes, the city had disappeared. Where once beauty, tolerance and romance reigned, now only smothering ruins remained. Fires burned for more than ten years, and when surface fuel had been exhausted, the flames crept underground, following water passages and subway tunnels, through the catacomb of sewers that lay beneath the city, feeding on whatever excrement persisted. Eventually, the flames died; the fires hadn't satisfied their unquenchable hunger, nor were they extinguished because fire departments were successful; those departments no longer existed. Rather, the conflagration ended because there was nothing left to burn. "I left my heart in San Francisco," a popular crooner once lamented, but now that heart had been broken forever.

Miraculously, one small sliver of the city had escaped the worst destruction; it was bypassed by the winds of radioactivity that swept across the bay and poisoned the other neighborhoods. Perhaps it was saved by its geography, a narrow plateau of land at

the top of a steep hill, a thin peninsula that extended along a drainage basin beneath the wooded summit of Buena Vista Park; it was sheltered by surrounding heights and natural wind barriers, the forests of Golden Gate Park. Residents had complained about the weather when ocean fog poured across the western regions of the city. When the moist, low lying grey clouds reached the perimeter hills, they divided into separate air streams before flowing into the valleys bordering the bay. The neighborhood was neither buried in the western fog nor blessed with the perpetual sunshine of the lower areas to the east. But when the clouds carried the seeds of radioactive death, the same weather conditions created a shallow depression of safety as the fog sought passage elsewhere.

This area was known as the Haight-Ashbury, the Seventh Ward, a neighborhood revered by history. During the previous century, it had welcomed disaffected youth from across the country, those preferring flowers to weapons, a migrating people who sought to establish a new community based on peace and love. Their experiment in harmony was short lived, however; within a few years, the neighborhood had descended into a nightmare of drugs and crime. And it persisted that way for decades until rising real estate values and increasing population brought a new influx of immigrants to the Haight. But this time the residents seeking new settlements weren't among the disaffected; they were young members of a growing middle class; they worked in industries developing emerging technologies; they were educated and well paid. Older residents saw their opportunity to realize a lifetime of profit; they sold and left with their monetary rewards; the criminals

were driven out, not through police department efforts, though. They were victims of economic change.

So life prevailed until the morning of September 16 when the earth shook, the sky blackened and human destiny changed forever. Most of the Haight-Ashbury escaped destruction, but when the orders to evacuate were issued, the residents eagerly obeyed. They packed their belongings as best they could, boarded up their homes and businesses and beneath a glowing sky fled the burning city, never to return.

Haight Street had been a busy commercial thoroughfare; the side streets, underneath a green canopy of spreading oaks and sycamores, were lined with spacious Victorian homes, adorned with gingerbread and painted in colorful storybook patterns. Now, the neighborhood had been deserted, only the ghosts of departed children played their childhood games on the empty streets. Along Haight, once filled with shoppers, old newspapers and litter blew along the pavements, the only movement along a street of boarded and abandoned buildings.

But with passing years, life began to return to San Francisco. A wave of mutants, several thousand in number, were the first to arrive, their destination, the Haight-Ashbury, the only area in the city still capable of supporting life. Mutants hadn't chosen the neighborhood from a list of attractive candidates; nor did they arrive as pilgrims did, searching for Zion in the wilderness. Their reasons were much simpler: They came here because they had nowhere else to go. It was an invasion, certainly, but a reluctant one. Families moved into the abandoned buildings, and the more

enterprising mutants established businesses within the empty commercial structures. New construction was often necessary; many buildings, the result of neglect and age, were beyond repair. Different facades were erected, and old foundations were strengthened. The neighborhood was slowly returning to life, but it was very different than the life that had once flourished. Mutants weren't prosperous residents bringing wealth back into the area; they were refugees more then once: war and radiation had taken their homes, and they were unwelcome in areas where housing had been restored. The Haight-Ashbury had always been colorful, colorful but shabby. Even an era of relative prosperity hadn't changed that. The present residents, the newly arrived mutants, had meager resources at best; they were among the least endowed citizens in a reemerging world. Colorful and shabby they once said; only now the description was even more accurate.

At first, the mutants were apprehensive. The former residents might return and claim their abandoned property, but with time, those fears faded; rarely did a non mutant enter the Haight, and no one from outside the area ever suggested they held legal title to any of the structures or land. What became of the former landlords? Any answer is just speculation. Perhaps their old homes had been forgotten, or perhaps the memories of falling missiles and exploding shells had helped erase the addresses from their consciousness. In any case, they never returned, and claims were never filed. New laws had also been enacted. Within a stipulated period of time, title to abandoned property was automatically relinquished, and anyone occupying the site could file for legal ownership. And many

did, procedures which finally brought legal recognition to the mutant community. This was the Haight-Ashbury, the Seventh Ward; it was called mutant-town by some; it was all that remained of Old San Francisco.

Life was indeed returning to San Francisco. Most of the land along the Bay south of the Bay Bridge was uncontaminated and suitable for development. While the mutants established their community in the Haight-Ashbury, a new city of gleaming towers of steel and glass was arising along the waterfront, once the site of crumbling docks and warehouses, now expensive prime real estate. Eventually, the city was reincorporated. New districts were defined, elections were held for local and citywide office. Essential services began to return: sanitation and water, police and fire. The Haight-Ashbury, or the Seventh Ward as it had been more frequently called as of late, was especially dependent on expanded services. During recent years, radiation had crept across the last approaches to the area. The Haight had effectively become an isolated island in the midst of radiated ruins. The only means of transportation into the area and the only way for supplies to reach the residents were hover cars and trucks that could fly over the surrounding contaminated desolation.

City engineers took radiation measurements around the perimeter and erected warning signs and low wire fences to identify the safe areas. The inhabitable zone consisted of a narrow corridor centered on Haight Street, from just beyond Broderick to one side of Stanyan and extending north and south two or three blocks except for a few irregularly shaped areas. Beyond these boundaries

lay a sea of wreckage and ruins, piles of indefinable rubble that blocked the view in every direction. To venture past these lines was to invite almost certain death. The Panhandle, a wide strip of green lawn and towering redwoods, running parallel to Haight and extending eight long blocks from Baker to Golden Gate Park at Stanyan, had been the site of concerts and informal sports since the last century. It had disappeared, burned and littered with mounds of unrecognizable debris. During daylight, the sky, even under the brightest sunshine, was tinged with a sickly reddish coloration, and at night, the radiated glow from the surrounding hot areas provided illumination on the darkest streets; the moon and stars were no longer visible, the night sky a mixture of lurid orange and black.

After many years, the Salvation Army established a mission in the mutant community, and their supporters around the country brought pressure to bear on city governments to better mutant living conditions. A struggling tourist industry had been reborn and found itself allied with other business groups and residents who held a vested interest in a cleaner environment. Together, these different groups with separate objectives, these charitable organizations, city residents and industry associations made common cause and finally convinced the city government to begin clearing away the rumble and devastation that had once been San Francisco.

A lucrative contract was awarded to the Phoenix Corporation that proposed a thorough cleanup of the devastated areas. Because of the radiation danger, robotic equipment was employed to excavate huge areas and bury the accumulated piles of rubble.

Aircraft lowered explosive devices to flatten the mountains of debris while giant bulldozers moved the resulting detritus into large excavated subterranean chambers. By project's end, a great plain spread from the boundaries of the Haight-Ashbury to the environs of the New City and extended south along the Bay, through the heart of the old city to the Golden Gate Bridge. The ground was covered with four feet of poured concrete and capped with rolled, heated macadam. For the first time since the war, residents of the Haight-Ashbury could stand on their sidewalks and see the Bay and the glittering skyline of New San Francisco nearly five miles distant. It resembled an enormous vacant parking lot, but one that would remain vacant for lifetimes to come. Barriers of concrete and macadam had reduced the roentgen level emanating from the bare ground and buried debris, but not eliminated it, nor lowered it sufficiently past the danger point, the threshold for human life.

Improvements were also made to the mutant district. Streets were repaved, brighter street lights installed, sidewalks reconstructed with new drainage screens and manhole covers. Selected buildings were renovated with new brick facades. Since the war, earthquakes were no longer a threat on the West Coast; nuclear impact had moved the tectonic plates out of alignment. Stone and mortar had become common building materials. The Lincoln Memorial Theatre on Haight and Shrader was restored and reopened for the first time since the missiles fell upon the city. Most importantly of all, a new brick wall, four feet in height, was constructed completely around the safe perimeter of the Seventh Ward.

It began just past the Broderick Street corner where Haight Street plunged steeply toward the old Divisadero corridor, now obliterated, and continued up hill to the entrance into Buena Vista Park; it circled the Park boundary and enclosed lower Cole Valley before following Shrader Street to the location of the Bear Republic Hotel at the edge of Stanyan and Haight. Here the wall grew to ten feet in height where it walled off the eastern side of Stanyan Street, a barrier intended to discourage anyone from venturing forth into the heavily contaminated Golden Gate Park. Descending down hill toward Oak Street, the wall turned east and ran along Oak parallel to Haight, sealing off the southern sidewalks from the radioactive areas to the north before rejoining Broderick Street on the eastern edge of the neighborhood.

Perhaps half the former neighborhood had been lost to fire and radioactive contamination. What remained was home to nearly three thousand mutants, but it was more than enough room. Most residences were still abandoned and empty; fifteen stores and businesses were scattered along Haight Street, all of them concentrated within the final three blocks at the western terminus of a seven block commercial strip; locations along the rest of the street extending eastward were still boarded over, apparently awaiting an unspoken rebirth.

A calendar is visible through the window of Mel’s Army Surplus on Haight near Ashbury. The date is July 8, 2231, the day our story begins....