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“Long Time Gone:” The Year *Dirty Harry* Was Shot

In December of 1970, I turned twenty-five. Seven years earlier, I could have made war fighting the Viet-Cong. With my twenty-fifth birthday, the insurance carrier thought I was now old enough to drive for the San Francisco Municipal Railway (MUNI). A few months latter, I began driving trolley cars for the City of San Francisco. I drove run number 21 on the 30 Stockton Street Line.

Transit routes are confusing in words. Confusing or not, the operator has to have the map in his head and body. In San Francisco, the Bay is to the east of the City, brackish water between the City and Alameda County in which are both Oakland and Berkeley. In San Francisco, the Pacific Ocean is always to the west of the City, cold salt water until Japan.

The electric motor which powered the Thirty Stockton ran off two electric overhead wires. The vehicle has pneumatic tires and is called a trackless trolley. Unlike a cable car or a streetcar which is wedded for life to metal tracks laid in the pavement, the trackless trolley could move fourteen feet left or right from under its overhead wires.

The trolley was huge metal vehicle, as big as a normal city bus. At rush hours, the seats were all taken, and the aisles packed with people standing and holding themselves by metal poles. If I got more than fourteen feet from under my overhead wires in either direction, the trolley poles came off. At that point, the vehicle lost all power. With no power, I was stuck blocking the street until the City got a big-box sized tow truck to pull my vehicle back under the wires.

Stockton Street is one block west of Grant Avenue (in Cantonese, *DuPont Gai*). Going through Chinatown during the weekdays, the coach was always packed. In Chinatown, my leader, my follower, I, and the other drivers were all behind schedule, all of the time.

Our vehicles were built in the late 1940's with no power steering and no power brakes. This was good because I could burn off my tension fighting with the equipment, especially the steering wheel. My follower said that he was a cashiered Cleveland cop. He was a Black man who always carried a 38 pistol in a pack beside his feet as he said, "just in case." I thought he had at least two personalities. One was fast. One was slow. Both were evil. Nevertheless, his 38 was a well-cared for and beautiful weapon.

Going outbound, once out of the Stockton Street Tunnel, the trolley stayed on Stockton Street for almost a mile going due north into North Beach toward the Golden Gate Bridge, Marin County, and ultimately British Columbia. At Columbus Square, the wires turned west toward the Ocean on Union Street, traveling over Russian Hill. Then the wires turned northwest through the Marina District, past the St. Francis Yacht Club, to our outbound terminal, the Palace of Fine Arts. This was built on an artificial island in an artificial pond in a man-made park for the 1905 Panama-Pacific Exposition.

The Marina is A Very Good Neighborhood. To spin one of Thomas Love Peacock's phrases, "Very Good' is simply civil for 'rich.' That's all." The Marina children and their pretty *au pairs* made pretty vignettes whilst feeding the swans in the little blue lake surrounding the reddish brown exposition building.

In those days, there were often movies being made in San Francisco. Often, the film maker did not want to pay police overtime and other costs to block a street public transit actually ran on. Films were shot a block away from Stockton, California, and Market Streets. In Hollywood, a mixer put in the appropriate sounds, often trolley car or cable car bells, always police and ambulance sirens.

Walking on my way to work I would often see a film being shot. It was funny, even touching, to see the shivering young women extras in their makeup and light dresses, cloaked in topcoats worn as capes and being handed hot coffee by gofers as the sun burned of the morning fog. Clint Eastwood had been in town, making *Dirty Harry*. Many of the men's haircuts, clothes, and dialog in the film are funny ("comedic" as we said in California) today. Nevertheless, some lines have passed into American proverbial speech.

One weekday about two in the afternoon, I was outbound toward the Marina through Chinatown. At Stockton and Jackson Streets, two blocks south of

Broadway, there is a large block of public project housing just beside the trolley stop. I pulled up to the sidewalk to drop off and pick up passengers.

There was a group of ten or so young Chinese men at the stop, all dressed in dark blue or black jackets and dark pants. They were arguing in Cantonese, spicing the Chinese with four letter English words. They were all shouting. Both the English words and the shouting were unusual for Cantonese. In San Francisco, the Chinese were a circumspect people who washed any dirty linens in their own blood if necessary but, always, in private.

One of the shouting men held a pistol in his left hand. Acting on habit, I moved the brass lever at my left hand forward to open the doors of the trolley. The air hissed into the pneumatic lines. The doors began to open. I turned, looking down at the men standing on the sidewalk in the midst of their argument. The man holding the gun fired a shot into a man standing on the sidewalk beside my front doors. My left hand pulled the lever instantly to close the opening doors.

Now my passengers were all shouting in Cantonese. The seats by the left windows emptied as the passengers surged to the right side of the trolley to see the shooting. They were excited. Many were happy. Maybe they thought someone was making a movie. If we were lucky, we might get to see Clint Eastwood.

I was enraged. I was also simulating more rage to get the passengers away from the right hand side of the trolley. If we stayed at the stop, some of us would be shot. If the passengers tipped the trolley over, some of us would get shot and more of us would be crushed.

One man near me looked as if he might speak some English. I asked him. His eyes were wide with terror. Neither he nor I were expecting to see Clint Eastwood making a movie. The man managed to tell me, "Yes, some English."

I heard more shots. I thought, "If this machine tips over on its right side, I'm going out my left window."

At Orleans in 1429, Joan of Arc's men called the English troops "Goddamns" because of the Englishmen's incessant use of the curse. I told the passenger who said he spoke some English to tell the other Chinese that I was God-damn-it angry; they were to sit God-damn-it back down and right God-damn-it now:

By the 1970's, among White or Black San Franciscans, "God-damn-it" was a *Komodo* dragon or a *coelacanth* of *maledicta*, a living fossil, which had miraculously survived from an earlier time. God-damn-it, however, worked with my Cantonese load. I told the man to tell the passengers that I was not stopping until Columbus Square, four blocks north and around a corner.

The man shouted something in Cantonese. Maybe he said, "Round eye bus driver angry. Big Trouble." Maybe he said, "Round eye bus driver crazy. Bigger Trouble." Maybe he even said, "Round eye bus driver angry and crazy. He in uniform. Could be he I.N.S. spy. Deportation. Biggest Trouble."

Whatever my bilingual passenger said to them, the shouting, angry passengers turned into muttering, passive aggressive passengers. Many sat down. The remainder evened out inside the trolley aisle. I pulled out from the curb to the left. I did not stop until Columbus Square, four blocks north of both the handgun and, four blocks north of, in criminal justice talk, the shootist. I hadn't counted shots. In answer to Dirty Harry's question, No, I did not feel lucky.¹

Running north along Stockton Street, we sped past slower cars, parked bread trucks loading, parked wine trucks unloading, and a multitude of shouting waiting passengers in our usual stops. As we flew along, I used one hand to give the man who spoke some English two books of uncut transfers. I told him to force his way through the passengers standing in the aisle and get to the back doors. I told him to knock anyone down who got in his way. I said that he was to tell everyone who would get off at Columbus Square through the back doors that he would give them a transfer good until midnight. The passengers who did not want to use the transfer themselves could sell it to other people who wanted to go somewhere.

At Columbus Square, our wires turned west out Union Street. I turned off Stockton onto Union. The trolley was now pointed west behind a block of at least three story buildings. At the stop on Union Street, I stood up and picked up the large wooden wedge we used to block our tires if we were broken down on a hill. I turned and looked back at the passengers. All but two or three of the passengers got out through the back door. The bilingual man waved as he went down the back steps into the street. He held up the second book of transfers and asked, "I keep?" I waived to him, nodded yes, and shouted, "Good work. Thank you."

I drove the trolley, now all but empty this time of day, along Union Street, and then into the Marina District, approximately eighteen or twenty uneventful blocks to the Palace of Fine Arts, our outbound final stop. I actually caught five full minutes of layover before my next scheduled run back inbound. No one was around. I got out from behind the wheel and did some pushups on the trolley floor. I shouted. I punched the padded seats a few times.

Going back downtown, I drove south past Stockton and Jackson Streets toward the Stockton Street Tunnel. There were police cars and an ambulance at the outbound stop by the housing project. The next day, I read in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the one young man was dead when the police arrived. The paper said

that it had all been a turf war, what the economists call a war over market share, for the monopoly of selling opium based drugs in the housing project.

When I heard the initial shot at the housing project, my thoughts were quick and ordered. First, move the brass lever back and close the door of the trolley. Second, I do not want to be shot. Third, if I am shot, and I can't walk, I want to die. Fourth, I do not want a passenger shot. Finally, I thought, I do not want to put my life on hold, crawling over police, lawyers, and judge's postponed depositions and trials, caught in someone else's stately minuet of continuances, whirling and spinning around their extramarital affairs, serial monogamy, husband's mother's death, or a daughter's horse show under the live oaks in Woodside.

I remember thinking as I pulled the trolley out into traffic with its human cargo of a hundred men and women, I did not want to wait to testify three years later in a criminal or even later, in a civil case. Under oath, I would tell the truth. "That was years ago. Anyway, they all look alike to me."

At the time, I had fired shotguns and 22's. Later in life, I would go combat shooting with 38's and 45's with a friend in the sheriff's department. Next morning the paper said that the murder weapon was a 38 caliber Smith and Wesson. The sounds were not someone's old car backfiring or someone making a movie. The shots were loud. According to the *Chronicle* story, the shots were accurate.

In Mantua long ago, and then in Imperial Rome herself on the bank of the Tiber, Virgil heard those shots. He wrote in the *Aeneid*, "From a single crime, know the nation." Book II, line 65. Near his death in 1830, England's King George IV, after punishing the cherry brandy, often told dinner guests at Windsor Castle that he had fought at the Battle of Waterloo.

In reality, sick, mad George's government let him travel abroad only once, and that time, only very briefly and only to Ireland. In 1815, the King's, Prime Minister, the first Duke of Wellington, had won the Battle of Waterloo in the Kingdom of Belgium. The Duke replied, always softly, some writers say gently, to the King's repeated stories of fictive cavalry battles—movies that we make about the selves we wish we were - "I have often heard your Majesty say so."

Hillary Rodham Clinton is now the Secretary of State of today's Imperial Rome. Some months ago, she recollected that she had been the target of Serbian sniper fire. She believes that she is qualified. By today's standards, she is. The actor who played Eddie Haskell in *Leave it to Beaver* is a Republican and a peace officer in Southern California. The actor who played Mr. Rogers is dead.

Today, American politicians ride in hardened sport utility vehicles. What sport you may well ask. When she was merely Princess Anne, now H.R.H, the Princess

Royal, once took gold and repeatedly silver medals for England in the European Three-Day Equestrian Event Championship. The three-day event requires both the horse and the rider to start, win, and to finish together in dressage, cross-country, and stadium jumping. Captain Mark Philips, the princess's sometime husband, won a gold medal in the same elegant, demanding sport for England in the Olympics.

You can buy good horses. You can hire good trainers. You can not buy coholes or labia. What sport, American politicians? Sitting beside Rush Limbaugh in a sky box? Watching other people on television play golf?

Someday, as in Ayn Rand's title, Atlas may shrug. Trolley drivers, nurses, police officers, firefighters, dentists, pilots, automobile mechanics, and accountants may say, softly, perhaps even gently, to our chauffeured emperors, queens, and satraps, their capacious buttocks toing and froing caged behind bullet-proof glass in the back seats of their armored sport utility vehicles, "This job is hard. You are all-wise, all-knowing. You have much virtue. You are immortal. You are living gods. No hand dare pluck at your velvet sleeve. You drive the trolley."

Nevertheless, one day in Chinatown, I drove away from trouble. I took a hundred men and women with me. They wanted to slake their curious thirst in a pool of red blood. They were wrong. They were angry. At that moment, they were fools. Or, as the French say, "the absent are always wrong." My passengers were absent from themselves for a timeless moment that afternoon.

Many years later, I saw the film *Independence Day*. When I saw the people dancing on the skyscraper roof to welcome the aliens to Los Angeles (the building itself playing the role of a reverse-Trojan horse), I thought of my trolley passengers that day in the 1970's. Some are living still, others are now dead, but all of their momentary insatiable, burning curiosity of that day is now only ash.

Sometime Life's game of Tag requires a couple of adults. That day, my bilingual passenger and I were It. That is what I learned from him and from me, a long time ago on Stockton Street.

When we heard the first shot, my passenger and I were just four blocks west—that is four blocks away from the Bay and four blocks nearer to the Pacific Ocean—from the Gold Rush clipper ships now buried beneath Sansome Street. At California and Sansome Streets, the proud towers of San Francisco's Financial District, the Transamerica Pyramid and the Bank of America Building, towered then and now.

As you read this today, in San Francisco at least one woman will say to another on California or Commercial Street, as in the Virginia Woolf story of the conversation told beneath "rods of light wheel[ing] across the sky . . . the air force . . . practicing;

searching for enemy aircraft in the sky,” “Right, then, drinks at the Carnelian Room around five-fifteen.”²

Somewhere forty years ago in California, Clint Eastwood and his crew had wrapped up *Dirty Harry*. Nevertheless, the players in that clever film were not on Stockton Street that afternoon. Nor am I today. That afternoon, those people, I, all men and women living that warm afternoon, now like the clipper ships, buried beneath Sansome Street, are inextricably in another country. Even if we still live or partly live, those people and that day are now, as the Chinese said, “all long time gone.”

Notes

1. “I know what you’re thinkin’, punk. You’re thinkin’, did he fire six shots or only five? And to tell you the truth, I forgot myself in all this excitement. . . . [Y]ou could ask yourself a question. Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?”
—*Dirty Harry*, [www://film-site.org/dirt3.html](http://www.film-site.org/dirt3.html). 07 February 2009.
2. See “The Searchlight,” 120, 123 *A Haunted House and Other Stories* (1944):

Then a voice behind them said:

“Right you are. Friday.”

They all turned, felt dropped down to the balcony again.

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