

## THE BEAUTIFUL MARINA DISTRICT

Dr. Hart pushed on the door and stopped. The front door to the flat had a large glass pane. He pushed it a little, continued pressure, and the door opened a little.

Dave, my brother, and I drove north from Pacifica some twenty miles to meet Dr. Hart this beautiful Saturday morning. This was my first time going to San Francisco's famed Marina District. Mom, who grew up in San Francisco, talked about the Marina as being the City's jewel. She'd picked up a map at a gas station on the way home so we could figure out our drive.

"You'll love seeing this area, driving through it. Dave, keep track of the map and the directions we write down. It'll be easy to sight see and lose track of where you are. Most buildings aren't taller than two to three floors, it's flat."

Dave nodded to mom. I was pretty certain I could trace the route mistake free on the map. *When I go back over it, I can erase any problems.*

"There are many places where you can see the Golden Gate Bridge. It can be majestic, gorgeous. The district is on the Bayside so it misses a lot of fog and breeze. Oh, the Bay can take your breath away. Sometimes you'll feel like you're at the same height of the water. And, in some places, looking north, you'll see the wooded Presidio. It's where you're great uncle was stationed. Yea, and the 1915 World's Fair was in the Marina. You'll just love being there."

Blue skies dominated this 1963 sunny summer day. With the windows down, excitement blew through my 56 Chevy Bel Air. Dave held the folded map of San Francisco and written directions of streets and turns prepped on the back of an envelope. we enjoyed the drive and listened to rock music on KYA. I was sixteen and Dave was fifteen. We're on top of the world bringing cardboard boxes in the back seat and trunk.

"The door is stuck." With raised eyebrows, Dr. Hart says, "I was here Thursday checking, and this surprised me. You'll be surprised too. I walked through the flat. At the office Friday," he pushes with his shoulder a little more, "I asked your mom if you boys could help. Thanks for coming on short notice." Taking the key from the door, he stepped in.

In the last few years, our family had lived in five different homes. I, the oldest of six kids, was Mom and Dad's strategic partner in moving, organizing the household, and maneuvering our changing lifestyles. We left Tiburon, across the Bay from San Francisco, after years of landslides and a flood that washed Mom's car off the road, almost drowning her. After that, Mom and Dad tried small farms, Sebastopol outskirts first and then around Santa Rosa, with a milk cow and barnyard animals. Run down fences surrounded the old houses in Sebastopol, the first with no phone, neither with locking doors, radios nor TVs.

When I was twelve, at our first farms, I helped Dad butcher in the field. Later, I missed school a few times because of our moves and my hospitalizations. Jobs I found in Pacifica paid more. We were eating better. Better than dinners of beef tongue, chicken livers and hearts, or pickled pigs' feet. Food I wished I'd never eat again.

This job would put me in the real world. Working for a doctor. Maybe making some real money. Dave, who always acted bored, and always said he was bored, knew it was cool to be on this adventure.

We followed Dr. Hart into an elegant home in San Francisco. Because he went in slowly, I was tentative. One foot went in and something obstructed my next step. I lifted it higher and stepped up. *Strange, what kind of tough job is this?*

With Dave's hand on my back, I kept walking, taking tiny steps, feeling for each step on an unsteady floor. I could make out Dr. Hart stopping, turning back to us. "Please close the door." He stepped to the wall and turned on the lights, mumbling, "Yea, power is still on."

Prior to our new suburban home in Pacifica, I had grown up around dirt. When I started kindergarten, we had a dirt floor. As a kid in Tiburon, I thought I helped Dad. For almost three years we added wheel barrowing dirt to our daily chores, undoing the effects of landslides. On our little farms, I was always buttressing barbed wire fences, digging post holes, milking a cow twice a day, caring for a couple steers, more than a dozen sheep, chickens, and rabbits. The all-weather everyday outdoor work demanded skinned up hands, arms, and shins. We butchered outside and sold rabbits dressed for cooking. My clothes, torn and worn, stained and patched, looked dirty after being laundered.

On our way to the Marina home, we weren't thinking of the past. As I turned, Dave and I glimpsed the Bay and grinned at each other. A fabulous day. Dave read the next direction and I turned the music up a little. We came to this jeweled location escaping the prior bonds of dreariness. Nothing could tamper our excitement.

The light came on to the panoramic vista of the living and dining rooms. The sofa, chair, lamps, and living room tables were modern. The dark wood dining room table with curved legs impressed. But our regular breathing. Stopped.

It wasn't only dirt but blood I had grown up around. Sometimes it was challenging helping to butcher a few animals larger than me or the white rabbits. I thought the many moves were unusual. From Tiburon to Pacifica, in a little over two and a half years, five houses, five schools, missed school, dirt, blood and change. In the two plus years in Pacifica, despite two hospitalizations, I'd found more work. First, two hilly morning San Francisco Chronicle paper routes followed by evenings at a butcher shop eighteen hours a week my sophomore year, and now, my janitorial gig cleaning Dr. Hart's nineteen room medical building two mornings a week before school and on weekends. I worked. My world always seemed to zoom a hundred and twenty miles an hour; even though the speed limit for adults was forty-five.

The lights illuminated the uneven floor we were standing on as a garbage plaid, woven with many strands of garbage.

I went inside a doctor's home with voyeuristic excitement. My self-concept was of climbing above the mind numbing and daily relentless chores: of caring for little kids; jobs; sports; Scouts and later 4-H; church; and homework, amidst the chaos of dirt, blood, and changes, to make some money. I wanted a life. The plan, college.

Now, my 'good job' was walking into this luxurious home, which was a new experience, determined to do the offered "tough job." Prior to stepping and sliding into this home, my body was as excited and determined to conquer this work as when I stole home in Babe Ruth League baseball: A hardball in the air moving as fast as the strongest peer could throw it; the third baseman and pitcher right there but looking away, as I took off; turning my back on them; hoping in my head I have it timed right; surging towards home plate crowded with my unaware teammate holding a cocked bat; a crouched catcher in protective gear designed for challenges; an umpire bent over the catcher; racing headfirst; immediately before the ball is pitched. I know there is a bat and an almost whistling hardball that'll happen. From that moment I took off, I was blind, not seeing the ball nor what the pitcher was doing, going with the intensity of knowing I had to make it work. I had to succeed by making some money so I could do things. I had to make a life. I had to go to college.

But a canyon opened in my mind while looking under my feet. The exuberance of success I wore into this doctor's house slammed into a vacuum of incomprehension. I tried to find meaning in the garbage. The pride of leaving chaos behind evaporated.

*How could this be?* I wasn't the only one that was silent. I checked. They were still staring. Dr. Hart took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

My body changed as it had before, from the joy of seeing white baby bunnies nestled with their mom to the unbelievable clenching I felt when we butchered them. *This wasn't right. Filth! Not here. Not now.* My mind laughed. *In America, it was only the world of poor people that lived the unexpected and gruesome maelstroms.*

Unfathomable! We were on top of almost two feet of garbage. It was of every conceivable kind, layered, tiled, and beaten into the floor. You couldn't create this mess by dumping papers, dishes, and pizza boxes on the floor.

Created through repeated behaviors, one layer at a time, the intentionality of not caring was obvious. This wasn't a short-term bad boy or party situation where a great deal of new debris recently dropped. It represented dedicated avoidance of the accumulating result. Containers became debris, left where they dropped and layered. He had his big city pizza dinners. I'd eaten Mom's bit of browned hamburger and ketchup on an English muffin.

Sliding on the moving surface made of napkins, exotic Chinese food containers (I'd never had any), mail, newspapers, overturned once full ashtrays, paper plates, coffee cups, empty ice cream containers and cereal boxes, dirty and abused dishes and bowls, empty cartons, open magazines, beer bottles, alcohol and wine bottles, salt containers, TV Guide magazines, dry cleaner's wraps and more. All left, walked on, repeated identical actions, squashed and compacted 'left overs.'

Curious, I bent down to move some items. It wasn't loose. Under the edge of a pizza box, a newspaper stuck on top of something else. Bending down lower than my feet caused me to take a deep breath. This wouldn't be easy. It was going to be hard on our backs and legs.

"Look around," Dr. Hart broke the silence, adding to the noise in my head. The disarray underneath preceded us. I saw the entire flat, including the bathroom, covered in garbage.

Trash jammed doors open, including the bedroom closet doors. Debris piled on part of the bed morphed into the pile top on the other side of the bed. The closet kept two pressed shirts and a lonely suit hanging. An inside out suit coat sleeve reached towards me from under layers in the corner. *I hadn't put cardboard in my shoes, nor had Mom patched my jeans for a couple of years. He'd wasted suits.* My head dizzied. *Impossible, not real.*

I stepped on a black shoe, the sides crushed over. In the kitchen, part of a belt protruded upwards. The back door pile was a little higher. The partially shoved away accumulation from the bottom of the stove allowed the oven door to open. We followed Dr. Hart, trying not to slide on the waste that floated on layers below. None of the mail was opened. Piled wine bottles next to the dining table demonstrated where someone watched television while drinking.

It was hard to breathe in the sunny kitchen. Dishes, pots, glasses and more Chinese food boxes covered the counter and the sink. Dr. Hart tried to open the window but stopped as a moldy dish slid off envelopes towards the floor. No sound. Nothing broke.

Circling back to the living room, I wondered what Dave thought. The silence in the flat, except for the sound of our steps and slides, seemed eerily appropriate.

I was staring at Dr. Hart. "Well, I need this place cleaned up. It's disgusting, won't be easy. I'm thinking: pack it in boxes; rent a trailer; keep all your receipts; and take it to the Colma dump."

I'm not sure about Dave. *Uumm..I'm still staring.*

"Be careful. This won't be as fast as I thought. There might be broken glass. Who knows? Again, just work carefully. I'm thinking, start in the front, stack the boxes, get more when you need them. Did you see the Safeway?"

I nod.

"Do that, then go to the dump. It'll take a few days. There's places for lunch on Lombard Street."

I nod.

Aware I'm still staring, and taking short breaths, I work at looking involved. This is an archeological dig where I'll discover more about this history. How could this happen here? I look down, use my foot to move a fork, some letters, a saucer, a crushed shoebox, and a once pressed shirt. *How could someone live so piggishly in a gorgeous neighborhood and still go to the dry cleaners?* I look under a wrapping. An empty syringe jolts me. It's exactly like the syringe of pain medication they gave me for days in the hospital two years ago.

I looked up and met Dr. Hart's eyes as he looked up. He had seen it, too. "I told you, you have to be very careful. You can't simply scoop stuff up. It's gonna take a while."

"Is he coming back? Does he know we're here?" I thought it was a man because of the magazines, bottles, and the unmatched and uncared for men's shoes.

Our eyes met again. "No." He looked away. "He's not coming back." He put his hands on his hips, then turned back. "And I have to get this cleaned up."

I was looking down, trying to comprehend. What ghosts created this poverty of self-respect in this vast richness of opportunities? This guy had a whole house and didn't cook nor finish his expensive food. Dave and I shared small sleep areas for almost sixteen years. Until recently, we hadn't slept in bedrooms, but unfinished attics, outdoor screened in farm porches, remodeled garages now. *He had ticket stubs, empty bottles; it was a treat for me to have a Coke. He used a dry cleaners; I did my own laundry.* Nothing computed. *He had what I'd never had.*

Finally, Dr. Hart tried to explain, I guessed, so I would stop staring. "He's had a rough time. It was a new job, a new place. He worked a lot." And then he shrugged his shoulders, looked away, clicked his tongue to himself, and took a few steps, looking everywhere but at us.

*We're two naïve teenagers impressed we're in the Marina District.*

Dave looked away, raising his eyebrows. I got chills. *The way he said, "new job."* I started to feel awkward. *He knew the guy. Did he work with him? He wasn't at the Pacifica office; it would've been at the hospital. The guy had to make some bucks to live here, eat out, do dry cleaning, tickets, all that. The guy was a young doctor!* Everything Dr. Hart said about him was in the past tense.

At that moment, I remembered burying the remains of the steers a couple of years ago. I used the hide to drag the remains to the location where I dug the hole. I remembered the severed head's unmoving eyes watching me as it rocked back and forth while being dragged. Bury it. Rake it over. No marks indicating the slaughter occurred. And here, none of the mail nor cards would ever be answered. After the clean-up, the steer went from grazing to non-existence in just a couple of hours. *Chills again? Don't shiver.*

This house was once a vibrant home. Now, a few clothes were still in the closet and the dresser. Some rotting food in the refrigerator. Everything else was on the floor, counters, furniture, or gone.

We'd trailer all of his possessions now unpossessed to the Colma dump, where a bulldozer would push dirt over his remnants. Like the slaughter where the remains were buried so we could

keep playing around the barn without thoughts of the filthy evisceration and end. *Funny how my mind can think so many things instantly in pictures!*

I didn't want Dr. Hart or Dave to notice my expressions. *I haven't worked my way up to a better job or escaped anything.* I didn't want more time with dirt, blood, and chaos. Now, knee deep in pitiful filth and death, my mind was grasping for some sane comprehension. The journey through this man's madness angered me. Worse, I felt dirty again. This haunted my understood world. Almost dizzy, I hoped I wouldn't get sick in front of Dr. Hart.

Our talk with the doctor finished, we got in my car, and drove away. Dave and I started the job on Monday and finished a week later. We worked all day. We've never talked about it.