Sing San Francisco to Me

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Abstract

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WHAT is San Francisco? You ask me? Then I will tell you about it, tell you through the eyes of a farm boy from Iowa who didn't like the farm, but wanted the city. He is a boy who used to think that Chicago was wonderful, that there was nothing finer than the lake breeze or the buildings, and he would reel back and take in a thousand shining windows at one look. That was before San Francisco. That was before he knew.

What is San Francisco? It is waking up on the train after falling asleep in Sacramento after being awake for two days. It is a strange feeling, this suddenly not knowing what direction he is travelling, and seeing the water of the bay, and the barrage balloons across the bay. It is a sudden beginning of second-intervaled beats on a kettle drum, beats that go on for a half hour or more. It is the man on the train saying, "Well, it won't be long now. This is El Cerito."

"Where's San Francisco?"
"Oh, you can't see it yet."

No, at first he can't see it. But he knows it's there. He suddenly knows that there'll be eucalyptus trees and the sea breeze. All of a sudden he knows that around the bend is Chinatown. The train jolts, and he is pretty sure it is an earthquake, and he looks for terror in the clear blue sky; there is none. But off to the left, and beyond the curve where you think San Francisco is, he sees the clouds come in. "Rain over there."

"No . . . fog."
"Oakland! OOOaklaaannndd. This way to the ferry."

He fingers his green ticket to the ferry in the half-darkness of the shed. He is scared. Up ramps, quickly, lugging the heavy suitcase. Stale air. "Tickets please, have your tickets ready. Ferry leaves in three minutes."
Tickets to San Francisco. Tickets to the end of the world, to magic, and ships for China—give him a ticket to the ocean. Will he beat the fog, will he see the city before the fog comes? “Look, lady, you don’t need to shove, there’s plenty of time.” There’s plenty of time to live . . . but there isn’t.

Then he is on the boat, but he isn’t sure. It is like a train station, and a person could buy coffee for ten cents a cup in the restaurant right in the middle. But this is a big boat even if it is just a ferry—it is a big boat.

“Eureka!” He is out on the deck now, and turns to see the boat’s name, Eureka, stretched across under the commander who leans out of the window, puffing his pipe, and turning a little to pull a cord and send out a clang on the bell. But then he has to go to the front of the ferry, out to the very tip, and look.

He is cold suddenly. The shivers go tearing up and down his back, and for a while he is dreaming and this isn’t really true. The water, grey and blue, bothered by the strong wind. The bay bridge, tearing down at an angle from back of the top corner of his right eye to infinity down towards the left, and it looks as if the farther end is lost in the shining fog that starts to rush over the grey mountains towards the city.

What is San Francisco? It is two loud clangs on the bell, and the sudden moan of a horn, trembling around in the air, and then the quietness of the boat moving, and the sharp cold of the air.

“Gee, this is swell.”

“This your first trip, Sonny?” The man tried to light a cigarette in the wind, and he couldn’t.

“Gosh, I’ve never been west of Iowa before.”

“Is that where you come from?”

“Yeah.”

“Work on a farm?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, how do you like this place?”

“I think it’s wonderful.” He thinks this is the moment that he has lived for. He thinks this is everything there is in life for a while, the sky, and the water . . . “Where’s the ocean?”

“Oh, you can’t see it from here. It’s out beyond the island. San Quentin. The bridge is in the fog.”

The Bridge, the Bridge, the Bridge! He can hear the roar of the traffic on the other bridge, the bay bridge, and he can see
the undersides of it, and it looks like they are headed straight for the pier in the middle. And then sea gulls! A white one stops right in the middle of the air and looks at him, and stays there a while before sliding off.

"Hey, see that woman over there?"
"Which one?"
"There, in the green coat. She's been bothering me all the way from Sacramento."
"Oh?"
"Yeah, she wants me to buy her dinner tonight. She says she'll sleep with me if I would."

Now there are two sea gulls, and beyond, he can see the towers of the buildings, and beyond, the separate puffs of the evening fog coming in, racing down over the city.

"Look at her—the fat slob."

The green coat comes over to them and the arm hangs onto the man who suddenly turns away to talk to her for a while. The boy is all of a sudden shaking all over from the cold. He leans his hands on the smooth white rail, and he can't stop the shaking of his body.

Then she speaks to him. "Where you going in San Francisco—where you going to stay tonight?"

To the red lips, and the black blowing hair, and the eyes, he says, "Oh, I've got relatives—I've got a sister here."

And she laughs. "Okay, skip it. Well, kid, how does it look to you, San Francisco?"

"Fine. I'll like it fine."

"Okay, sonny. Keep your nose clean." And she tugs at the man's arm, and they go inside.

Then the boy was alone. The sea-gull perched on the rail by him, and then flew up towards the bridge till he couldn't see it. He couldn't keep from shaking. He couldn't keep the fog from taking away the city before his eyes, and he knew it was grey, but he decided it was a nice grey, and it was the city.

What is San Francisco? It is a cold wind, and the Eureka. It is a shabby green coat, and a grey fog. It is the bell clanging four times and the grey man in the overcoat yelling out to you, "Everybody below deck for exit please. Stairs to the rear. San Francisco. Everybody out."