

PAUL SILVERMAN

The Cowboy and the Californicators

“So what did you do as a rodeo clown?”

Bick would always remember that question. Harlan had asked it in a grim tone. From his sweeping office window Harlan was watching the black clouds chase away the blue sky, obliterate the mountain, turn the lake the color of coal and shoot hail stones on the eighth hole. His tee time with a Calgary wildcatter was only seventy-four minutes away. He plucked a wooden tee from the silver cup on his desk and snapped it in two.

“I made the bulls laugh,” was Bick’s reply, his expression flat as the butte still visible fifty miles out, but fading to black by the second. “You should have heard H-Bomb chuckling when he ended my career.” But now Harlan was chuckling, and the interview seemed pretty much over.

“Son, did you wear one of those red noses?”

“No, I had my own style. I was a costume guy, I have a knack for thinking them up. Costumes make all the difference. Some nights I dressed like a matador, some nights like a horny cow, tits and all. I had a scarecrow getup too - with baggy overalls and a big red target on my ass.”

“What kind of costume you going to wear digging holes on the beach for campfires and swabbing birdshit off the cedar decks?”

“I’d say...”

“Son, what would you say?”

“I’d say that’s for me to know and you to find out.”

Harlan had a new look on his face. Dead-eye and cool. He looked like a Gary Cooper whose skin had turned to elk jerky.

“Let me tell you about these lake owners, son. They ain’t the same kind of rich people you knew when you were growing up. The wheat guys and the cow guys who could still fix a fence. The mining guys with hands like picks. This gang, they’re all Californicators. Even the Canucks are Californicators, if you know what I mean. How’s your old man doing?”

“He got a pension. He also got a brown lung. He has his good days...”

“Whiskey used to get your old man going. Once he poured out all the yellow liquid soap in the Copper Club men’s room and filled the container back up with a long piss. Some kind of funny. Today he’d be charged with poisoning the public. What does he think of your style of clowning?”

“Hasn’t cracked a smile. Not yet.”

Then again, Bick’s dad had worked for a Californicator. The old-fashioned kind that used to come from Chicago and New York. But Bick didn’t share this thought with Harlan. Not in a job interview.

When Bick wasn’t shoveling, sweeping or scrubbing, he watched the big lake in all its moods, and there were many. The weather this season could turn on a dime – from postcard-pretty to cyclone dark and back again. He pictured himself as a sailboat far out on the water, positioned at just the place where the current was rushing one way and the wind blowing the other way – the net result being he was powerless to move in any direction, not even an inch. He got to see the Californicators up close. Very close.

While de-scumming the pool one day, he couldn't help overhearing the couple chatting. The man could have been a human cousin of H-Bomb, the bull that retired him and his sternum with one stomp. Everything about this man was bull-thick. The woman, though, she had that starved, troll thing going, with an orange tan that looked like it was poured on from a paint can. It being a coolish day, only partial skin was exposed – but many pieces of bling. The man had studded himself with Harley logos everywhere. The woman, although her accent said New Jersey, wore enough metal to stock a Western jewelry store – hunks of hand-worked silver, Yogo sapphires, turquoise circles and squares head to toe. On one of her talons was an enormous diamond tile perched on a fat sapphire band. Bick remembered the two of them from an owners meeting. Their name was Gault – Joe and Maysie. They had been among the most cantankerous ones, bitching about everything left and right. No crack in the paving was spared. If the crack was an inch wide they made it seem like it was a fault in the earth, a menace to every child who might run across it and fall in. Today they were all by themselves, sparring about watercraft. She wanted a pontoon boat, nice and cozy, with a deck that would take eight people and their booze paraphernalia. He wanted a bigger pontoon boat - room for sixteen or more. Hefties just like himself.

“Well,” she said, “why don't you get what you want and I get what I want. Then we can have a shootout. We can play bumper pontoons out on the middle of the lake.”

Joe laughed. His laughter seemed to say he was at least as amused as he was annoyed. It also said that if he and Maysie wanted two pontoon boats, well fuck all they could have two pontoon boats – not a problem.

A little later, Maysie held forth on her beauty philosophy. She said she was quoting some famous European movie star – Lolo Somebody. Bick couldn't catch the name. “Once you're past thirty you gotta make a choice, there's nothing else you can do. You either choose your face or your ass. If you eat what's right for your face, you're ass gets fat. If you eat what's right for your ass, your face gets thin. The skin pulls back and the bones stick out, your nose especially...”

Maysie said all this to Joe, but she said it so loud Bick felt he was part of the conversation. And he must have been, because suddenly Maysie turned his way and waved him over.

“We have a serious problem at our unit. I mean serious serious...”

Next morning he came by first thing, just as she had told him to. If Joe was there he didn't show it – he never made an appearance. She walked him through the big living room on the way to the deck and the million dollar view, which went straight up the lake to the snow-mantled peaks.

“Stop looking at the mountains. They don't pay you for that. Look down at your feet.”

But Bick wasn't just looking at the mountains. He was staring off into the distance while his mind processed the spectacle he had just passed through. The Gault living room. Crammed wall to wall with more of that corporate cowboy stuff per foot than he had ever seen. Longhorn chairs, horsehide rugs, bronze rodeo sculptures, antler chandeliers, wagon wheel tables, horseshoe sconces, Navajo blankets, buffalo stampede paintings. In the Gault condo, every object that had a leg also had a hoof.

Bick snapped to and did as he was told. What he found, three inches or so from his right shoe, was a small army of rodent turds.

“This is bad,” she said. “Do you know what we pay for a condo fee?”

Bick kept his mouth shut. He knelt and checked the seams where the decking met the exterior wall.

His position gave him a shoe salesman's view of her cowboy boots. They were the kind that cost more than his car. He kept looking from the turds to the boots as she turned up the volume knob and let him have it.

“What are we looking at here? Mice? Rats?”

“Don't know. Could be squirrels. The little red ones, maybe.”

“That’s an important fact. I’d like an answer.”

Bick nodded. What did she expect him to do – send samples to the state college lab? He said he would find out about pest control and get back to her. Next came his attempted retreat, back through the living room.

She fired her biggest cannonball just when he reached the door.

“This isn’t Mother Nature, that mouse crap. Don’t come back and tell me it’s nature. It’s management, and by that I mean your boss Harlan. Please tell him the Canoe Age is over, and the Yacht Age has come. He’s still running this place like it was a Boy Scout camp.”

This time Bick had to fight his lips to keep them shut. An hour later he was assisting on a patio repair project, heaving bags of Sakrete onto a flatbed. Over his shoulder he saw Maysie’s orange stick-legs bounce by. She had changed into sneakers, and Bick pinned his eyes on the legs and sneakers and kept watching her, watching and thinking, until the jogging path turned sharply into the woods and she disappeared.

It was okay that she disappeared. He had watched long enough to have a concept. That evening he phoned his dad, who was even less audible than the last time. Then he went out and purchased the London Fog.

“There is a reason the Thunderhead Times used the word allegedly.”

Harlan said this in one of his emails to the Gaults and the other owners, after Bick had his arraignment and the proceedings began to unfold.

“Allegedly,” Harlan’s email continued, “is a qualifier all news reporters must use when they are publishing charges against any U.S. citizen. That is because the charges have yet to be ruled on by judge and jury, and this is the United States of America, where all people are held innocent until officially proven guilty. Our Constitution says so...”

What was being alleged – and buzzed about all over the Valley - was that Bickford Hayes exposed himself to Maysie Gault one day while she was out jogging. She was on her third mile, deep in the tall conifers. The accused emerged from behind a Yellow Pine and did a full frontal. They said he was wearing a raincoat, the trench kind they always show in the cartoons of men exposing themselves.

“You had the right costume – I’ll say that for you,” Judy Butters said to Bick as she began to prepare his defense. But he didn’t reply. He answered many questions, gave her a ton of background info, but whenever she asked him point blank if he did it, or even came within range of asking if he did it, all he would tell her was the kind of day it had been when the alleged offense occurred. He said it was a nice day like most days in late summer. The only difference, Bick said, and he leaned on the words when he said it, was the funny way it started off.

“Every single morning I cook myself grits for breakfast. Done that for years, so I know what I’m doing. I take the same pan, same amount of grits, same amount of water, and I use the same amount of heat for the same amount of time. Now on that morning I did it the way I always do it. But I’m telling you, those grits, they just stuck to the pan...”

“Guess it was just one of those days.”

“Yes, Ms. Butters, it sure was.”

Then there were the emails, filling the inboxes like arrows raining down from the Western sky. Bick wouldn’t have known squat about them if Judy hadn’t made him look. She was granted access to every last one of them, same as the prosecuting attorney.

The first – and worst – came from the Gaults to Harlan, with cc’s to all the other owners. It called Bick a criminal of the most despicable kind and said he was a threat to every child who set a bare or sneakered

foot on the natural wonders of Bayview-on-Thunderhead. It charged Harlan with keeping Bayview safe from Bick by whatever means were necessary. And if Harlan didn't do it, the owners themselves should do it.

The email gave Bick a nightmare in which he was impaled by a thousand orange popsicle sticks, each one a leg of Maysie Gault.

Harlan's response – to this and all the others – was the “this is America” argument, and that the police and courts were the ones to deal with the incident, applying due process and respecting the rights of all parties. Cowboy noose parties had gone out of fashion when the automobile replaced the horse. He ventured one opinion, however, which he said came from his own investigations. “From what I have read, exhibitionists do not become predators. It just does not happen. Those of us who would take the law into their own hands should bear this in mind.”

Next came a solo blast from Maysie, directly challenging Harlan's authority to tell her or any owner what they should or should not do. “You are not the King of Bayview,” she wrote. “And I am not a surf.”

“S-u-r-f. The judge will scratch his head over that one,” Judy remarked.

On the heels of Maysie's email came the jihad rant from Joe. “I have a daughter who is fourteen years old,” he wrote Harlan. “I am very protective of her, so you watch what you say. I warn you. My protection of my daughter knows no bounds.”

The date of that Joe Gault email was August 24th. As Bick read it, he bit his lips and tasted blood, again remembering what had happened right afterwards. The Thunderhead Times blasted it in New York Post type. The paper said that Gault, 43, a former collegiate tackle, allegedly entered Harlan's office on August 25th, slammed Harlan's face beyond recognition and kicked bones all over his body, fracturing dozens of them.

Like Bick, Joe was apprehended, investigated and put into the wheels of the ever-rolling criminal justice system.

“Can't enter that vicious attack as evidence in your defense, Harlan,” Judy Butters said. “But that kind of horrific thing does have an atmospheric effect.”

On the day after the haircut, she met Bick at the courthouse door, approved his blue suit, red tie and white shirt. Then she surprised him again, saying that for this particular proceeding his presence was required, but not his appearance. By that she basically meant he didn't have to open his mouth. Bick did as he was counseled, which turned out to be prolonged sitting on his ass in a polished oak chair, under the nose of an armed officer. He sat five hours or more. For much of that time, he stared at a tall polished oak door, clueless as to what was going on behind it. Eventually, the door swung open and Judy emerged.

“That's it. They aren't going any further with this. You can just go home.”

“Are you telling me...”

“You can just go home.”

It crossed Bick's mind to say something goofy about what freed him, something about how it must have been the red tie. But he found himself too tangled up in that word she'd used.

Home.

Big word. What was it now? And where?

The Thunderhead Valley Hospital was the place he went to, and without delay. They wouldn't let them see Harlan, though, and there wasn't much of Harlan left to see. He had worsened and now, in fact, was in the ICU, deeply asleep. A plastic tube steadily filled his veins with morphine. And the immediate family and a clergyman were the only ones they'd let go through the door.

Bick considered penetrating the door with a fist – until he thought of someone else he could visit: Joe Gault. Very likely Gault was still out on bond. Bick wracked his brain and came up with a concept. It was

so clear he could have drawn it on paper. He went straight to the Thunderhead Mall and spent considerable time at one of those Halloween stores that, nowadays, are open year round. He tried on various masks until he had the one he felt was ghoulish enough for the occasion. Then he phoned some of his old rodeo contacts and found a place out in the sticks where they sell supplies to the trade only. He drove out there and bought a bullwhip. It was thick and heavy, a real one – not the kind used for Californicator fun and games.