

Bay Bridge

News about the disaster was first broadcast just before 5:00. At Gentleman Jim's, the crowd, still small for a Friday night, was sitting in a semicircle around Jim, listening intently as he finished telling a joke.

"But that's what I've been tryin' to tell you, ma'am, there ain't no fuckin' butter!"

The crowd burst into a paroxysm of laughter, wheezing, and coughing. Jim, seeing that the audience was his, waited until everyone regained composure and then repeated the punch line "there ain't no fuckin' butter!" Immediately there was a second volley of cackles, rasps, and croups; and one of the regulars, Alex, shoulders shaking and eyes squinting, howled in submission "Jeeesus! I'm gonna piss in my pants!" Jim, again sensing an opportune moment, put down the glass he was wiping and, imitating Groucho Marx, raised his bushy eyebrows, tapped an imaginary cigar, and retorted "You do and I'll tell your mother!" It was more than Alex could take; amid more raucous laughter he reared his huge, square head, looking like a beet-red gargoyle, expelled a burst of Scotch-filled air, spun from his stool, and staggered hurriedly off in the direction of the men's room.

Above and behind Jim to his right, the Advent Video Projection System could not compete with the noise at the bar.



Normally, the five-by-four-foot screen was the center of attention, a fact Jim had anticipated when he invested nearly three thousand dollars to have the system installed and a wall recessed to provide maximum viewing efficiency. "People aren't stupid," he philosophized to his many loyal patrons; "you wanna have the best reputation, you gotta have the best equipment, the best food, the best drinks--and you gotta keep the place shining," emphasising the "shining" by flipping his dishtowel onto his left shoulder and holding out a sparkling, freshly-cleaned glass for all to admire.

But it was not yet 5:00, and the only program "worthy of the electricity," as Jim put it, was a talk show which droned on tonelessly, providing an almost whispering background to chorus of intermingling conversations.

Suddenly, Jim became aware of a pause in the program, and, expecting a commercial, he glanced up at the screen, seeing instead the logo for a news bulletin. He waived frantically to quiet everyone and then turned up the volume as he unconsciously began wiping another glass.

"...our program to bring you a bulletin from Channel 4 News. We switch you now to our News Watch 4 studio and Kevin McKenzie."

On the screen appeared the young, dark-haired anchorman for the news normally broadcast an hour later. He hurriedly finished adjusting his clip-on microphone, and, receiving his

cue, addressed his audience. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began somberly, like a judge about to read a 'guilty' verdict, "we have just received word of an incredible tragedy--Bay Bridge has collapsed. I repeat..."

There was an immediate hubbub of gasps, shouts, and expletives from all around the bar. Everyone, as though suddenly feeling a need for closeness, jumped down from their stools and clustered together near the center of the screen. Even the "loners" occupying three of the wooden private booths joined the crowd. Brad, in a booth whose wall was adorned with pictures of a Hudson Hornet, Henry J., and other defunct automobiles, had been nursing a particularly good dry martini as he admired the handsome, leather-enclosed calligraphy set he had just bought at Imperial Office Supplies. Jennifer would be pleased with the gift, he reasoned, so pleased that she would invariably give him a loin-searing hug and kiss which would serve as the prelude to a long, exhausting session of making love.

But hearing about the bridge instantly turned Brad's warming blood to ice. He stiffened, as if gripped by an epileptic seizure, and almost choked over the mouthful of martini, which he was able to swallow in one desperate plunge. He left his drink, scooped up the dark brown case, and mechanically joined the crowd at the same time that Alex, still savoring Jim's butter joke, lumbered back from the men's room.

"Hey Jim," Alex chuckled, "you hear the one about flippin' rocks?"

"QUIET!" Jim bellowed, his menacing stare and vanished smile underlining the urgency of his command. "EVERYONE! YA WANNA HEAR, DON'T YA?"

The crowd noise dwindled to a few scattered whispers and then complete silence. Alex, confused by the sudden change in atmosphere, searched every face, hoping to find the one that would give away the joke being played on him. But this was no joke, he perceived, even through the translucent barrier provided by the Scotch; so, crestfallen, he added himself to the mute, huddled mass watching Kevin McKenzie on the screen.

"All we know at this time," continued the newscaster, "is that there are casualties as well as survivors. We have a mobile unit rushing to the scene and should be able to start bringing you first-hand reports in a few moments. We are preempting regularly scheduled programs so that we can extend our coverage of this devastating news story."

The conversation at the bar began to pick up as Jim went around back to check that the adjacent dining room was ready for the traffic of aficionados who would, within an hour, be packing in, as they did every Friday night, to sample the house special: linguini with red or white clam sauce. Brad, peeling a five dollar bill from his wallet, slowly ambled back

to his booth and left the money under his glass. Then he headed for the heavy, wooden doors, brushing by but not noticing two blonde women who made their way into the bar and left a sweet but acrid trail of perfume which swirled around Brad's head and curled through the opening in the door as he left.

Outside, Brad was greeted by a rush of chilly air which, at first, felt refreshing but, as he walked, steadily became more uncomfortable so he buttoned his grey overcoat that he never bothered removing while he was at Gentleman Jim's. At that time he had been feeling satiated, almost elated. He had finally picked up that calligraphy set which he had been meaning to get Jennifer for over a month. Then there was Jennifer-- and her novel. The thought of another Friday night of editing and love-making had blended well with that dry martini--until the last mouthful--and the bulletin about the bridge. Now, he was walking nowhere in particular. He thought about going home or calling to tell Linda he was all right, but he knew she wouldn't be there--Friday was her bridge night, he recalled, dwelling briefly on the grim, ironic pun that zipped through his brain. He did wonder, though, if Linda would worry when she heard about the collapse. Undoubtedly "the girls," as she referred to her dinner/bridge club, would find out soon enough. How would Francie react? Or Cathy? Or Sheila? The thought of their husbands forced Brad to gaze at the case in his right

hand and remind himself--except for that stop at Imperial, he would have, as always, been the fourth member of their car pool--another morbid pun which only intensified the tightening knot in his stomach.

He was startled from his daze by the discordant wailing of two ambulances and a rescue unit which honked and veered north through a crooked but widening path of motorists trying to cooperate. Brad was suddenly resolute; he knew where he must go. Each bit of evidence drove reality further into him. First the news bulletin, a screen and a face telling him he should have been on that bridge; then the calligraphy set, a leather savior to prove he wasn't on that bridge; and now the ambulances and scattering motorists, the chaos for those who were. What remained, then, was to see the bridge itself--or whatever was left. Brad knew that, with the roadblocks and detours undoubtedly set up, he wouldn't be able to get within five miles of the scene so he headed two blocks east to Bay Terminal. There he could catch the South Hills bus that would take a circuitous route around the bay and up through the cliffs which afforded a perfect view to the valley below. He hurried, as the sky was draining its dull blue and replenishing it with a dull orange horizon which would first expand, <sup>then</sup> brighten, combine with red, blue, purple, and would finally meld all the colors together to form a clear, black night. He had about an hour of daylight left.