

THE EDITOR'S DREAM

BY DAN ARMSTRONG

"Time wastes too fast. Every letter I trace tells me what rapidly life follows my pen. The days and hours of it are flying over my head like clouds on a windy day never to return — everything presses on."
—LAURENCE STERNE, TRISTRAM SHANDY (1760)

"All you need to start an asylum is an empty room and the right kind of people."
—from MY MAN GODFREY

I knew right away I had entered someone else's dream. I stood at the entrance to the penthouse lounge atop the old Astor Hotel in downtown Astoria. The spectacular *Top of the Astor* didn't exist anywhere except in the mind of Michael McCusker, embattled editor of the North Coast Times Eagle. I edged into the dark lounge, surveying the mad scene with trepidation.

The entire east wall of the lounge was blown out as by ordnance. Pieces of broken brick and debris lay throughout the room. Through the gaping hole in the wall, framed in twisted sinews of rebar, sprawled the wide Columbia River eastward. Overhead a full moon mourned its pale luminance from a black sky of stars. Within the lounge, patrons occupied several of the candlelit tables. But there were also many American soldiers and Viet Cong guerrillas lying dead on the floor of the battle-ground lounge.

An olive drab jeep, windshield broken and radiator smoldering, lay crashed in splinters of wood through the center of the bar. A husky Marine sat behind the wheel in full battle-dress, a helmet on his head and a 45-caliber military pistol holstered at his hip. A glass of red wine was in one hand. The other held a thick black pen and pinned a yellow legal-sized lined notepad to his left knee. Though I'd written a couple of pieces for his newspaper, I'd never seen McCusker. Still, it was immediately obvious the Marine behind the wheel of the jeep was the literary vet inspiring this dream. A tall man wearing silk knickers and a broadcloth coat with fair red hair pulled back in a neat queue stood beside the jeep with one leg up on the running board and an elbow on the shattered bar. He and McCusker were engaged in a heated discussion.

I slipped up to the end of the bar. I nodded to the barmaid. The name *Rita* was stenciled in red thread on her blouse. "How about a shot of tequila with a beer chaser?"

As she poured the tequila in front of me I asked about the man in the knickers.

"I believe it's Thomas Jefferson."

"The third President of the USA?"

"Yeah, Sally Hemmings' boyfriend." She smiled into my puzzlement. "Michael draws an unusual clientele."

I threw back the tequila. "Pour me another shot, Rita. Something tells me this interview is going to take place on a higher plane than I expected."

"No doubt," said Rita. "And be prepared — these dreams can be a bit touchy. Mention a name, a place, or anything at all and suddenly you've got it. You're there."

"I don't get it!"

"You have a second shot of tequila here, right?"

I looked down at the bar. There it was. "Yeah?"

"Do you remember seeing me get it?"

I squinched up my eyes and looked hard at Rita. "All I have to do is say it?" She nodded. I pondered the possibilities. "How about..." I grinned. "Dancing girls!"

"Didn't you see them when you walked in?" Rita pointed off to our left — the west wall and a small elevated stage.

"I didn't say anything about them being nude!"

"You just did," Rita deadpanned.

My mouth fell open. I picked up the second shot and tossed it down the hole. I took my beer in hand and picked my way through the corpses to the jeep. I decided not to interrupt the heavies immediately and took a nearby table. A depraved looking young man in a tattered plaid shirt and blonde hair hanging in his eyes sat at the table across from mine. The barrel of a shotgun was stuck into his mouth, a finger resting lightly on the trigger. A crippled Marine sat in a wheelchair next to him. I tried not to look at them. I turned my eyes in the direction of the dancers and one ear in the direction of Jefferson and McCusker.

"What you've got to remember is that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were written by inspired men in inspired times," Jefferson said. "We were filled with the majestic image of a free agrarian nation — governed by the people and for the people. A giant step for the common man. Something new in all the world. And the philosophy behind the writing of the law was a kind of minimalism. We wanted to define the entire thing with as few rules and regulations as possible. We felt the guidelines framed by the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia were all that were needed to define the government of the new democracy. These executive orders and renegade intelligence agencies you've told me about are antithetical to the Constitution as it was conceived. They undermine the balance of power and the entire intent of our great human experiment."

McCusker took a studied sip from his glass. "It's worse than that, Thomas. And it's especially frightening because the original document was designed to prevent these things. Even 200 long years ago, you understood the critical relationship between economics and politics, and the dangers of business holding sway over the lawmakers. All along you realized that unfettered capitalism could create a new aristocracy — just as tyrannical as the one you'd broken from."

Jefferson nodded. "The guarantee of free speech was there to protect the public from such things. You journalists have the responsibility of keeping an eye on the government and informing the public of all that happens. There can be no real democracy if the voters are not educated on the issues."

"Sorry again, Thomas. Though freedom of the press exists, the journalists are owned. Little papers run by independent editors, like mine, are a lost breed. The small press has been swallowed by the media machines — huge publishing and entertainment syndicates — television networks intertwined with multinational corporations. Today big business writes the news. A third of what we see on network news is video clips produced as corporate press releases. Most journalists are no more than public relations writers for the multinational that signs their

checks. Journalism is a lost art. The hard-boiled journalist is an anachronism. As is my paper. As am I. It's no longer what you say or even that you say it, but who you say it to and how large an audience you can capture. The meaning of freedom of press has changed. The audience is conceived as a market now. Information is commercialized and targeted and is judged not by its truth but its market value. Little rags like mine represent raindrops in the ocean of commercial information. Everything to know is out there, and in that sense free. But dollar value transcends truth or need or importance. More and more, our newspapers and television focus on sensationalism or the lowest common denominators of human intelligence — sex and violence. Look at magazine ads and TV commercials. Look at the movie industry. They know what gets our attention. Madison Avenue leads us around by our most base desires and emotions, not our intellect. It's scary. It's out of control. And it's depressingly human."

At this moment three bulb-nosed, frizzy red-haired clowns came bouncing through the door of the lounge dressed in polka-dotted jumpers with ruffled collars and cuffs. Aghast, I realized they were prominent politicians — Bob Packwood, Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton.

"Damn, what happened here?" asked Bozo Bill, the last clown in.

"They call it war," answered Bozo Newt. "But then — how would you know?"

"Or you, Newt?" said Bozo Bob, jumping rear-first up onto the bar. "Or me!" he giggled and snagged Rita by the arm, pulled her into an embrace, and laid a big lip-lock on her kisser. She pried herself loose and spat on the floor.

"Ooooo, Packy's a Party Boy," chorused the other two clowns, laughing and giggling.

Bozo Bob hopped off the bar and grabbed his crotch, pumping his hips *a-la*-Michael Jackson. The sad looking young man whom I recognized as Curt Cobain took the shotgun out of his mouth and leveled it hip-high. "Negatory Bozo," he said. The three clowns suddenly stilled.

"Sit down Curt," the man in the wheelchair spoke. I saw that his legs were missing and parts of his arms. Of course, I thought: Chesty Puller Jr. "Don't waste bullets on anybody but us," he said.

Cobain sat back down and returned the shotgun barrel to his mouth.

McCusker watched this with little response, then turned back to the third President of the United States. "Sorry, Thomas. Life between my ears gets a little rough sometimes." He threw down the rest of his red wine.

"Yeah, either that or they hired a mortician to decorate this lovely place," I interjected, with a two-shot grin, stepping up



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to the side of the jeep. "Rita, get General McCusker here another Red Death. The same for T.J." I squeezed into the back seat of the jeep and indecorously into the conversation. As I sat down with my beer, a mortar shell exploded at the far end of the bar, taking out Bozo Newt. His false red nose flew through the air and landed with a splash in my beer like an oversized maraschino cherry. "Christ!" I swore, dragging the dripping latex bulb from my glass.

"Now you've done it," snapped Rita, shaking her head as she delivered the next round.

On cue the door to the lounge opened and in walked a bearded man with a wreath of thorns around his head and sandals on his feet, dragging a large cross. McCusker lifted his glass of red wine to the hippy. The man returned the gesture with two upraised fingers, revealing a blood stain in his palm the color of McCusker's wine.

"You know him?" I asked incredulously.

"Just another activist from a by-gone age," McCusker said matter-of-factly.

"But isn't that the son of...?"

"Watch out," Rita called over the din of distant war.

"We all are. Myself. Thomas here, and you. Even Rita, in a manner of speaking. No one better, no one worse. We've all been given consciousness and the grace of life. It's just that we generally tend to hoard it instead of share it. By the way? Who are you?"

"Oh, uh, no one really. I mean — uh!" I reached into my jacket and pulled out the letter of introduction I had prepared for just this circumstance. As I handed the unsealed envelope to McCusker, several staccato rounds of gunshots perforated the lounge's general wartime pall. Patrons at tables by the far wall fell to the floor leaking blood. The bar mirror collapsed in a cascade of bullets and glass. A bullet pierced the envelope as McCusker took it from my hand.

Unfazed by the near-miss, he pulled my letter from the wounded envelope, shook out its folds, put on his thriftstore reading glasses, and read it aloud:

Mr. McCusker, I was pleased you found room in the recent NCTE for my piece 'When the Fringe Becomes the Center.' I liked the way you quoted from my cover letter as a lead to the article. I did take exception, however, to your inserting "expletive deleted" in the line "I'm the kind of person who's been known to (expletive deleted) in public." It's not that I mind so much that you might like to attain a certain level of decency in your publication, but I've discovered that people's minds run wild when they are given a chance to fill in the blank. You've opened my public behavior to the crude imaginings of your readership — a bad lot in general; worse in the specific. A few days ago, just as the paper hit the news stands, a friend accosted me by phone after reading the article. "What is it you do in public, Dan? S—t?" Later that same day a woman shouted me down as I crossed an intersection. "What is it Dan, m...e?" That night in an unnameable dive, a slumbering patron lifted his face from a pool of beer on the bar and gave me an unsteady look. A sly grin spread across his face. With a wink, he says, "I know what it is Dan. You wear women's underwear." Please, Michael. No more 'expletive deleted's. My reputation is at stake. I'll stick to words in Webster's. But thanks again for printing the article. I dug it. Sincerely, Dan Armstrong.

McCusker burst into a deep, raspy laughter. So did I. We laughed together a good thirty seconds before he stuck out his hand and gave mine a firm, hard shake. "I've been looking forward to meeting you, Dan. Good to see you in person." His eyes lit the cavern beneath his helmet and he smiled at me with genuine warmth.

Well, uh, yes," I stammered. "The pleasure is mine, really."

When McCusker released my hand, I reached over to shake hands with Jefferson, but he was paying no attention to me. His eyes were riveted on the dancers doing a step he could never have seen in 1780. I turned back to McCusker. "You know, Michael, I really enjoy your publication."

He tipped back his helmet and positively glowed. "A labor of love for 18 years now. Haven't made a nickel!"

