

WHARF RAT

JANUARY 15, 2007

Its been a quiet week on the Island. This unnatural cold (1948 was the last time it dropped around to temps like these around here) has all the Islanders huddling inside. After the social orgy of the Holidays, when everyone is thrust upon Undesireables such as one's own family to an uncomfortable degree of closeness not usually permitted. Sitting as usual in his usual spot, Man Mountain hulked in his layers of rags inside the entrance to the parking garage beneath B Daltons. Man Mountain has sat their every day and every night for some fifteen years, his great bulk concealed beneath unknown swaddles of blankets, sweaters, towels and oilrags and he has become something of a fixture recognized by everybody but acknowledged by no one. If you dare to look into his eyes you just may fall into something bottomless and so most people hurry by without greeting him. At least something like warmth steals from the lower depths of the garage and the restroom is right there, although no one has ever seen him use it.

Out by the BART HQ in Oaktown, less fortunate souls huddled as well as they could on cold benches in that little park there even as the thermometer slid lower and lower. Officer Oliver Popinjay drove as usual into the cobblestone

circle, but instead of rousting the roustabouts as usual, he got out of his cruiser there and, gently rapping his thigh with his truncheon, walked over to a bench which hosted a suddenly scared pair of eyes beneath a foul hoodie.

"You gwine 'rest me again?" asked the eyes.

"No." said the officer. "Last time you peed in the back of the cruiser and made it stink. Now Rudy, you need to be gettin' yerself indoors out o' this cold." He spoke in the mellifluous tones of the 1st generation Irish-American.

"Downtown all full up. And Johnson's 'round the corner be closed for intake now."

"O I think we can get you into Johnson's tonight."

"Leave me alone, Oliver," came the pathetic whine. "I aint bothered nobody. Never bothered nobody ever."

"I can't let ya lie here and die, Rudy." Officer Popinjay said. "It's terrible cold. And the City cannot afford to dispose of your body."

"Leave me alone," repeated Rudy. "What is it that makes a man want to be a cop anyway? Always telling people to go here and go there. Making rules and stuff."

"I don't make the rules, Rudy. I have known you some ten years now and you know that. But I think you need to get out of the cold tonight. It's fearsome cold."

Rudy cursed the cold and a number of other things besides, including a digression upon the traitorous Raiders and their worthless "Nation". The lonesome wail of the freight train coming out of the Port a few hundred yards

away came echoing across the lawn which began to glitter with frost under the streetlights even at this early hour.

Then, inexplicably he asked, "They still have popcorn Friday nights over their at the jail?"

That is true. Friday nights the wardens would make popcorn and if any left over, would walk it down to the cells of whoever happened to be a fortunate guest that evening on Seventh Street.

"By that I take it you have nothing in your belly -- other than booze -- to keep you warm tonight. And its Sunday, so you are a long way off from Friday. Come on now. Get on over to Johnson's."

Rudy continued to protest. Dellums was Mayor now. Oakland had a real Brother for a Mayor finally. Things were going to be different. Officer Oliver Popinjay had better watch out. Him and all them Riders. The frost began to build up on Rudy's blanket of newspapers and thin coat. He was breaking no law, just resting his eyes on the bench there. Waiting for the bus. To arrive at 6 a.m. To get breakfast at St. Anthony's in the City. But he stirred himself and felt the cold really get into his bones then. And so the two of them, the young cop and the homeless man named Rudy shuffled across the crisp sward to the opposite side and the warm spill of light from the doorway of the shelter, not one hundred yards from where dark-swaddled men slept on benches.

"Give this man a place somewhere. Anyplace, so long as it is warmer than out there," Officer Popinjay said to Intake, who was refusing no one that night. And then he turned away to walk back to his cruiser.

He's right, the Officer thought to himself. The Raiders are full of horse fertilizer for leaving town. All for a dollar more.

Sitting in his own warm cruiser on the Island at Buena Vista and Sherman, Officer O'Madhauen was thinking much of the same. The Giants are becoming Dwarves, abandoning the City for the suburb like cute rats from a ship. Me paddy would go down and thrash the Owner with his shillelagh if he were alive today. What are we now, a Nation of Dwarves?!

Meanwhile a few blocks over, the decayed apartment complex on St. Charles Street wrapped its blankets about itself behind Pagano's Ace Hardware and in the soundbooth of the IslandLife studios, the weary technician put down his headphones as the last minutes of Sunday ticked over to the next day. From across the frosty estuary and the rustling weeds of the still undeveloped Beltline railroad property came the lonely wail of the midnight through-passing train as it wormed its fiery head through the tangle of Jack London Waterfront.

But for now all are asleep in their beds or stirring by dim light and space heater glow. Each clutches to each in this time of deep winter. But down in the gardens, green shoots of wannabe tulips are already firing up energetically from the sandy loam.

That's the way it is on the Island. Have a great week.