

GETTING OFF, Editorial

Dropping Dead in NYC/SFO/LA
How We Fuck Ourselves up...

THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD, 1979

by Jack Fritscher

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Historical Context Introduction

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We weren't stupid. If anybody needs proof that in the wonderful Titanic 70s everyone knew we were too hot not to cool down, here's my chapter and verse written long before the shit hit the fan, and other metaphors of disaster. In addition, I'd like to correct the misconception that everyone who enjoyed the 1970s died.

History may not repeat itself.

But I will.

The majority of us from the 70s survived to tell the tale, because even in the midst of one of the biggest parties in the history of the world, there was luck, and there was caution, and most of us did not shoot up with needles which was far more infectious than fucking.

In 1979, I wrote this cautionary editorial like a man on the speeding *Titanic* who saw the field of icebergs. Life was moving fast. Actual killers were among us, stalking us; so this essay is about murder; it is not presented here as some revisionist prescience of HIV. (There were, however, so many STDs that I began the "Dr. Dick" column in *Drummer* 21.) A bit of caution, then, seemed the editor's duty. I was, before all, groomed to be a priest tending to his flock, and a professor of popular culture, so it was easy to be an analyst of gay culture as it happened. I was also a bit more sexually experienced than some of the liberated lads, because I was already a 37-year-old grownup when I became editor in chief of *Drummer*.

Somebody had to play daddy.

I believed Tennessee Williams who wrote of the necessity of shouting "fire" in the straw house of the world. I played my part *in medias res*, and I have no regrets. Nor have I ever heard a word of regret from any man, dying or living, who experienced the decade when freedom and sex bonded.

We all knew nothing that good could last.

Actually, the self-conscious knowledge that the 70s would end, as sure as the Roaring 20s, made us enjoy each moment more.

We all knew about Scott and Zelda.

Walking up the stairs at the baths, we stepped over bodies of the zoned-out.

Listening to the fuck-music at the baths, we heard the Eagles singing each to each: "Life in the Fast Lane."

Back in the groovy day, we "grooved" on the romance of Byron and Keats and Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin and James Dean. "I wanna live fast, die young, and leave a beautiful corpse."

Carpe diem. Increase the intensity of youth and worry about tomorrow later, "because tomorrow is another day."

Put a grin on my own great big yellow Smiley Face.

The soundtrack behind this essay includes three hugely popular songs of the 1970s: the

no-regrets “What I Did for Love (Kiss Today Goodbye and Point Me toward Tomorrow)” from *A Chorus Line*; the gay anthem, “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina”; and the disco determination of Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.”

The Violent 1970s Sub-text to Gay Liberation

The violence of the Vietnam War propelled the 1970s, particularly stressing newly liberated gay men who were threatened both with the draft, and then with being gay in a straight military culture. Six weeks after the Draft Lottery called a man’s number, he could be fighting in the jungle. The Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975 when North Vietnamese tanks smashed into Saigon and the last American soldiers were helicoptered off the roof of the American embassy. The war, though over, drove the rest of the punk, disco, sexual decade. Just as Virginia Woolf wrote that during the years just after World War I every one changed, this is one analysis of the five years, 1978-1983, during which every thing in gay life changed.

SEX, VIOLENCE, AND DEATH TIME-LINE IN SAN FRANCISCO: 1978-1983

24 April 1978: Zodiac Killer’s 21st letter to the media warned San Francisco he was back to serious random serial killing; he was never caught

18 November 1978: Jim Jones’ Jonestown Massacre, Mass Suicide of nearly 1000 people in Guyana—many were San Francisco residents

27 November 1978: Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone assassinated in San Francisco City Hall by Dan White; the shocking assassination of Milk and Moscone happened a few days before *Drummer*’s “Saturnalia Ball 1978,” so we canceled the Ball which was never revived.

Autumn 1978: Bartender David Likens charged with mutilation murder of three men (including my friend, Tom Gloster, member of our Pacific Drill Patrol) whose bodies were discovered along roadsides in Northern California. See *Drummer* sibling publication, *Alternate* 8, January 1979. In *Some Dance to Remember*, see Reel 4, Chapter 2, in which the main character, Ryan O’Hara, describes eros and death in specific relation to Tom Gloster who was a member of the Pacific Drill Patrol, San Francisco’s first uniform club.

With “high irony” this editorial, my analytical warning, became even more true; two weeks after this *Drummer* issue hit the streets in May 1979, the violence and murder escalated.

21 May 1979: The White Night Riot at City Hall; thousands of homosexuals march to City Hall, charge the building and set fires burning of several SFPD squad cars; they protest the absurdist “Twinkie Defense” which gave assassin Dan White a light sentence for killing Supervisor Milk and Mayor Moscone; in retaliation, San Francisco cops invade the Castro, beat up patrons at the Elephant Walk Bar

22 May 1979: The evening after the White Riot, amidst the high emotion of Harvey, crowds of thousands attend Milk's "memorial birthday party" held outside on Castro Street as a "rally to bring peace to the City." Mark Henry and I saw each other for the first time, cruising and meeting under the marquee of the Castro Theater leading to Civil Union in Vermont, July 12, 2000, and legal marriage in Vancouver, Canada, August 19, 2003

8 July 1979: the murder of *Drummer* artist Robert Opel in his Fey Way Gallery, five years after Opel famously streaks the Oscars

10 July 1981: Barracks Baths burns: *THIS IS THE DATE THE TITANIC 70S OFFICIALLY ENDS*

14 July 1981: Tony Tavarosi, my longtime play-pal and star of Folsom Street, died—wasted away—in ICU, San Francisco General, of unknown causes; the doctor told me, "We've never seen a patient so distressed." See *Some Dance to Remember*, Reel 4, Chapter 4, and "Rear-View Mirror" in *Drummer* 131, July 1989.

10 April 1983: murder of my friend, Hank Diethelm, another star of Folsom Street and owner of the Brig bar, who had fled the Hitler Youth when he was 14; he was murdered by strangulation in his playroom; he was dead before his house was set on fire.

In *Some Dance to Remember: A Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*, the main character, Ryan O'Hara, describes *eros* and *thanatos* in terms of the murdered Tom Gloster who was a member of the Pacific Drill Patrol, San Francisco's first uniform club.

I wrote *Some Dance to Remember* as a daily journal to keep track of the immense amount of all that was happening during the 1970s. The memoir, rewritten and disguised as a novel, was completed in 1984 and published in 1990. *Drummer* printed a pre-publication excerpt in *Drummer* 124.

The following selection, relating to this *Drummer* 29 editorial, comes from *Some Dance to Remember*, Reel 4, Chapter 2. They were written at the same time in 1979; the magazine and the novel were developed hand in hand.

"No one thought the party would ever stop. No one was prepared for trouble in paradise. Signs and omens were everywhere.

A string of serial murders began South of Market. The streets were dangerous. For the first time, they began to suspect that the murders were not committed by straight marauders. They began to suspect each other. The bars were themselves no longer safe haven. Murderers cruised through the customers. Young men began disappearing at closing time only to reappear dead in dumpsters in alleys behind Folsom and Harrison streets.

"The danger itself," Solly said, "is a hardon."

A half block behind Folsom Street, leathermen stealthily cruised Ringold Alley. Men lounging in the dark doorways stuck their stiff pricks out from the shadows into the light of the full moon. Beery from the bars. Fucking after closing time. The dirty back street: more dangerous, more sexy than the baths. Faceless sex, anonymous black leather bodies, naked butts, faces fucked hard, slap of leather glove on tender flesh, clamp and twist of bleeding nipples, hot red glow of cigar tip in the dark, the night cries of pain and pleasure and cuming, the hiding, the running from the police car cruising slowly down the Alley past men flattened against walls, men crouching behind dumpsters, men lying flat behind a car, behind a wall. One man, the Next One, the next Chosen One, lying between the huge boots of a man fully masked by a leather hood, drinking his piss, licking his ass, following him to his van, to his ropes and gag, to the gun hidden under his seat.

A young gayman could go out cruising and end up with his “MISSING” picture on a milk carton. More than once Ryan had joined search parties dragnetting the City’s baths, playrooms, and dungeons for one of the disappeared. Most often the missing playboy turned up with a big smile on his face after forgetting to call his lover while spending a wild weekend of drugged sex tied up in some leatherman’s basement orgy room.

Ryan’s second brush with violent Death made bigger headlines than Opel. “BOUND, NUDE BODIES DISCOVERED AFTER SOUTH OF MARKET PICKUPS.”

“Have you seen this morning’s *Chronicle*,” Solly Blue telephoned. “Kids, women, and gaymen are every killer’s favorite victims. At least the article’s not written by Maitland Zane.”

Ryan was already upset. “I’ll call you back.” Thirty minutes earlier, tears in his coffee, he had clipped the news article with the smiling photo of his friend Tom Gloster. Murder gave Ryan the visions of an empath. Reading the newspaper’s cold facts, he shivered with feeling. He could see the ABC-TV movie between the lines. Gloster, a school comptroller, and a guy visiting from Burbank, Richard Niemeier, had both disappeared within a two-week period. Their nude bodies had been dumped in counties, one near, and one far north of Bar Nada [Ryan’s ranch north of the Golden Gate Bridge]. Both had been shot muzzle to the body. Both had been bound hand and foot. The only difference was that Gloster was wearing a black teeshirt when found thirty-three miles west of Red Bluff in Tehama County, a hundred miles from the Oregon border on Highway 36-West. Niemeier was left naked in Napa County with only a turquoise earring.

Jim Morrison echoed in Ryan’s head singing “Killer on the Road.” Ryan envisioned the long rides in bondage, the terror when each man separately realized the game was real. He ached for Tommy Gloster. He imagined all the human details the cold news article left out, all the panic and suffering before Gloster was shot five times in the head. His body was discovered twenty-four hours after he was killed, but he was slabbed away, an unidentifiable John Doe, for six days in a coroner’s cold cabinet, the ultimate closet, until Niemeier was discovered by a jogger. Niemeier had been shot once in the back, once in the back of his head, and twice in the face. The counties’ sheriffs put the similarities together, and came up with nothing more than the victims’ identities. Both men had been last seen at the Brig Bar, South of Market. The killer, Ryan intuited, was one of their own. Solly agreed. “It’s no straight fag-killer. That’s one more reason why I never go out. You gayboys are getting way too serious.

Ryan wrote an enraged eulogy in *Maneuvers* [a coded version of *Drummer*] titled “Bring Out Your Dead.” Harvey Milk had achieved romantic stardom in Death, as if he were the first faggot ever to die, well, fashionably. Gay Death, before him, kept to a whisper, had always been considered, for no reason anyone could articulate, bad taste. CUAV, the Community United Against Violence, might have said that any subgroup, surviving constantly against threat of bashing and Death, conspires itself into a dangerous sense of denial. With the serial gay Death toll rising, the fragile hush rose to a nervous rash of “dead” quips. Whenever some man in the burgeoning gay population died unexpectedly, naturally, or from an overdose, or from murder, someone somewhere sometime always said, with an oily laugh, “At least he didn’t have to grow old.” That, of course, in a City jammed with Dorians and Peter Pans, was a fate worse than Death. © 1984, 1990 Jack Fritscher

Some Dance is fiction.

Hank Diethelm’s 1983 murder that rocked Folsom Street was reality.

I can write old-school novels that shape human experience into traditional dramatic forms, or I can write the kind of gay *verite* that is potent and poignant in its documentary truth.

In the end, Hank Diethelm’s great big heart weighed 250 gm in autopsy.

The *Coroner’s Register* gave barely a glimpse of the *Gemutlichkeit* cheer of the rosy-cheeked German who was the host of Folsom Street.

(Hank Diethelm: March 18, 1928-April 10, 1983)

In 1970, the S&M priest, Jim Kane, introduced David Sparrow and me to Hank with whom we lived during May and June in his house on Steiner Street. Hank’s stories of escaping from the Hitler Youth were chilling. “We were told to march east, to fight the Russians. I looked at my close friend. We were 14. We took off our uniforms, found some old clothes, and then we

walked west. And here I am owning a house in San Francisco....and a BMW motorcycle.”

In the same way that Tom of Finland had told me that for him the Nazis of his boyhood held an erotic fascination, so also confessed Hank, who loved to play erotic war games. He told me he had a fantasy he hoped someone could fulfill. I told him that with a camera almost anything was possible.

On the tenth day of our knowing each other, Hank, in his basement, was hanging upside down from the beams by his booted feet, naked, and gagged, ready to double-fuck his teenaged fears, waiting for the cold Elastrator castrating device. Before he was hoisted up, I directed him to watch in close-up the arming of the metal-prong teeth of the Elastrator as it was loaded with a red rubber ring the size and shape of a Lifesaver candy. I put my 8mm camera on my tripod and filmed Hank hanging, hard, while shooting two minutes of the 4-minute reel of film.

I stopped to rewind the camera.

Onscreen, the scene Hank had been eroticizing in his imagination since he lived in the Hitler Youth barracks, came true. The camera sees the nude male body hanging like a bull. The Elastrator enters the valley between the thighs and slips slowly over the testicles.

The camera is rolling, but for a moment it seems as if the universe stops.

The body is tense with anticipation.

The hand on the Elastrator releases the rubber-band Lifesaver that slams down on the seminal vesicles at 100mph.

The pink German body reacts, jolts, rises.

The Elastrator moves out of the frame.

Projected in slow motion, the body hangs rocking, swinging, looking absolutely perfect.

Even in the silence of 8mm, the shout reverberates, the groan is felt, and the endless inverted suspension continues forever as the rubber-band castrator begins to build its intense pressure.

Hank said it was his favorite movie. He was always very droll. Actually, in the film, at the end, with the human flesh hanging as carcass, with the cry visible in the silence, it is as if we were shooting a very personal re-make of Antonin Artaud's film, *The Butcher's Revolt*.

Was 60s and 70s S&M part of the revival of interest in the Theatre of Cruelty?

Or was it just a gay Dada afternoon?

Hank and I knew each other socially and intimately, and in groups, for the entire decade of the 70s, and to the day he died. We lived in a grand convergence of people like George Benedict and Peter Fiske.

As my father finally lay dying in 1976 after a horribly complicated twelve-year illness, I told Hank how my father had wished to die, and how I could understand the temptation to help him. Hank quieted me then, as he had before, saying, “No. No suicide. Life is too valuable, too precious. Life is all there is. Hang on to it no matter what.”

In 1983, Hank's life, valuable and precious, not surrendered, and always heading west on a BMW, was ended. His death was not the result of being gay or having an S&M playroom. Straight people as well as gay people are cornered in their houses, killed, robbed, and set on fire.

The San Francisco *Coroner's Report* is headlined: “Harry Diethelm,” the “History of the Case (with Supposed Facts to Be Verified).”

The type-written text reads:

“The deceased, aged 55, resided alone at 226 Bemis Street. According to information received from Arson Inspector Murray, Fireman Paul Vega, and Lawrence Glover, a friend and employee. At about 1100 hours on 4/10/83 Mr. Glover arrived at the deceased's residence with breakfast as the deceased had been upset over an altercation that occurred at the “Brig,” the deceased's bar, the evening before. As Mr. Glover arrived at the deceased's residence, he saw a suspect fleeing the scene in the deceased's 1982 Honda Accord which was loaded with effects from the house. The fire department had been notified through an alarm box at 1104 hours, and was on their way to the residence. Mr. Glover entered the premises in an attempt to save the deceased, but was unable to locate him. The San Francisco Police Department and Emergency Service were called with Steward Ackerman responding. This office was notified at 1150 hours, 4/10/83. Investigation at the scene revealed the deceased to be lying in a supine position on a

Naugahyde pad, with his torso resting on the garage floor about 12 inches below, in the rear of the garage, in an area equipped for sado-masochistic activities. The deceased's hands were handcuffed behind his back. The lower extremities were charred. There was an ecchymoses of the lip. There was blood about the nose and mouth along with dried blood about the face. There were books of matches on the deceased's chest. The deceased was nude except for socks. When the deceased was found by fireman Vega, he had a styrofoam ice chest over his head, which was removed. The handcuffs were removed by Dr. Boyd Stevens at the scene to facilitate moving the deceased. The deceased's residence had about four different areas in which fires were started....Cause of death: Asphyxia due to strangulation. Toxicology report: No alcohol and no drugs. Apparent mode of death: homicide."

Hank was cremated by the Neptune Society, and his remains were given to his brother, Bruno Diethelm, who had flown in from Switzerland.

Naugahyde? A Naugahyde pad?

That has to be a mistake in the report.

Hank Diethelm, dedicated to leather, always said, "Lips that touch Naugahyde will never touch mine." – © Jack Fritscher, April 23, 1998

The editorial as published in *Drummer* 29, May 1979

THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD, 1979

by Jack Fritscher

The body count is rising. So is *Drummer's* gorge. "The Good Die Young" is not much salve when men you know die before their time. Gay men generally say *fuck* to longevity of life. We prefer quality of the moment to quantity of old age. Shades of Byron, Shelley, Keats, Joplin, Hendrix, and Morrison. The litany is endless of the really good who kicked off really young.

"Why do the young die?" Zorba asked. ' Why does anyone die?'"

Alan Bates, holding a stack of leather-bound texts, said, "I don't know."

"Then what's the good of all your damned books? If they don't tell you that, what the hell do they tell you?"

"They tell me," Bates said, "of the agony of men who cannot answer questions like yours."

HOW TO GET DEAD

Whoever knows what really happens? To anyone at any given time? We all head out for a fevered Saturday night, live. Then some jerk says, "Have a snort." We're all gay buddies, right? We smile. A toot among friends. Ah...

Feelin' good. Lookin' good. Livin' good.

Sometimes playing Big Boys' Games means taking Big Boys' Chances. Sometimes that means a clappy sexual cold. Sometimes, it means worse.

THE CLONE MURDERS

The Jonestown Body count maugres the Clonestown Body count, as gay man after gay man heads untimely to the Big Glory Hole-le-lu-jah in the Sky. San Francisco, just finished with two clearly gay-related assassinations as well as with a dozen so-called "Clone Murders," has suffered three more back-to-back killings. Then bad dope led to the accidental tongue-swallowing suffocation of one of the most archetypically handsome men in town.

SUICIDE INTO PRIDE

Before Gay Lib, literature and life were filled with homosexuals who liberated themselves through suicide. Gay suicide has decreased in inverse ratio to the rise of Gay Pride.

Even self-destructive behavior among gays ain't what it used to be. So why are the mortuary wagons in the sexual Bermuda Triangle of NYC/LA/SFO trundling slowly by the baths, bars, backrooms, and discos, shouting, "Bring out your dead?"

JAMES DEAN: FAST LANE

Balance Jimmy Dean versus Jimmy Webb. Actor James Dean, the bisexual human ashtray, his torso covered with cigarette burns, finally flamed out in his speeding Porsche southeast of San Francisco. Dean died in the Fast Lane: live fast, die young, and be a beautiful corpse. Jimmy Webb, if you can get past the worst cake/rain image in American lyrics, retorts best in "MacArthur Park": "I will take my life into my hands and I will use it."

MALE IMPERSONATORS

Gay lib, like manhood, is the assuming of responsibility for what will happen to us. But other stuff operates. Perhaps misplaced guilt gets us tied up with real ropes by a really psychopathic really handsome stranger. Perhaps careless attitude makes us posture like the bad little boys we never were. Face it; most gay men as children were the best little boys in the whole wide world. Embarrassed by that innocent memory, we costume ourselves as blue-collar male impersonators to go out and do the baaad Macho Stomp.

PARADE REST

So why rain on a parade that works?

Because we're in a jungle. Because, once having been the best little boys in the polite middle-class world, we're not really streetwise enough to be any more than innocent prey in the jungle. Because listening to Old Reliable's cautionary turn-on tapes hardly equips us to cope with the punk/ex-con dangers that Old Reliable can barely handle with years of nightly practice.

Because a man will tell you in a bar that he likes your uniform. Because you will believe him. Because he will tie you up and blow your face away.

Drummer gives a rain prediction because the parade doesn't always work.

SUCKER²

Gays have always been their own best creation. Now we are evidence that we are our own best destruction. From the macho-deep words exchanged around a pool table when the tough-guy with the cue stick gets bumped once too often to the late night domestic bitch-fight where lovers are breaking all their pretties from Bloomies all over each other's heads. Actions speak. The evidence is in the way we are.

The greatest falsehood in Gaydom today is: "If he's gay, he's my brother." That's a set-up just this side of P.T. Barnum. A gay man, believing that is just a sucker-to-the-second-power. SUCKER². Pass out at a bath and five-will-get-you-ten that your gay "brothers" will step over your body. Try and find a sense of real neighborhood on Castro, Folsom, Melrose, or Christopher. Does your dealer really care? How about the gay businesses that jack up prices the way any business in any ghetto squeezes every dime it can out of the locals who rarely leave the ghetto?

Just because a man is gay, doesn't certify him as much at all. What is he after that? What can he do besides fuck and suck? His skin-deep beauty may be an appearance covering a darker reality. Plenty these days that starts in bed ends in a tongue-swallowing convulsion or a bullet-riddled face in the Tehama County woods.

ASK FOR IT TILL YOU GET IT

Drugs. Bondage. A ride in a stranger's car. Exciting, of course. But compromising. Too bad: our sexuality is also our vulnerability. In cities we know only as tourists as well as in cities we call home, there are killers in the night. Some guys, as in Carson McCullers' "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," will kill you for less than a fistful of dollars—just for the meanness of it. Often, the enemy is one of us.

I WILL SURVIVE!

So we disco away the paranoia with Gloria Gaynor's wish fulfilment, "I Will Survive."

Yeah. And clap your hands to make Tinker Bell live.

Buy that bill of goods and kiss your ass goodbye.

S&M: SENSUALITY AND MUTUALITY

Drummer is not negative or paranoid. We want our readers aware that our wild S&M

tastes can lead to an encounter that may be highly sexual, supremely sensual, not at all mutual, and very terminal. These dark days, past Jonestown and Harrisburg, even what you thought could never happen to you, could.

STREET TRUTH

As Old Reliable was told by an 18-year-old piece of genuine street trash who hit the nail right on: "Punk mother-fuckin' faggot. You don't know what you fuckin' do. I'll kill you dead. You're playin' probably the most dangerous game in the world. You come too close. I kill you quick. There's a lot of people out there just like me who'll kill you quicker. You don't know what you do. Bringin' 'em into your fuckin' house, givin' 'em money. You don't even know me! Next time you fuck with me, remember I could kill you in a minute. That's the way I want to leave it. That's the way I want it to stay."

You may think you're careful. Chances are, you're not. ©1979, 2003 Jack Fritscher