

Graduation gown or SF party (Complete version)

by J.D. Rogers

With that, I give you the San Francisco Academy of Arts University graduation, class of 2012.

I was outside the Cow Palace in Daly City, California, where I had ventured down from the Applegate for the graduation of my good friend and number one B-movie sidekick, Eric Rissler. Let's start this tale at the beginning.

Day one. At the ungodly hour of 4:30 am, I was getting ready to head to the airport. By 6:30 am, I was standing in the ticket line at Medford International (that word always cracks me up) Airport. I don't know about you, but "international" conjures up images of Los Angeles International, J.F.K. International or Schiphol International airports—airports where hundreds of eardrum-destroying, contrail-spewing, aluminum cans rocket to the heavens. Not an airport that's one step above a crop duster's landing strip. Don't get me wrong—I prefer the crop duster feel at my airport.

I love Medford "International" Airport's acronym, MIA. To most people, MIA means "Missing In Action," usually associated with soldiers on the battlefield. In *that* context, it does not give me a secure feeling as I maneuver through a dozen TSA agents who are making sure that the 50-plus passengers on the flight are...oh dear, I'm immediately cut out of the herd. Mr. TSA asks if he can swab my fingertips. Didn't I just walk through your body scanner where nothing showed up concealed in unspeakable parts on my body? I feel like telling him to stick it up...when I see Geoff Becker, who had hitched a ride with me and Paula Rissler to the airport, being escorted over by the small windowless, soundproof cubicle where I presume TSA agents perform their multiple cavity searches or whatever else might go on in that little room of doom.

Geoff was heading down to Mexico on a fishing trip. Did he leave something as deadly dangerous as a treble hook in his pocket that the body scanner picked up?

As my personal TSA agent swabbed my fingertips looking for explosive residue, I wondered how long such evil might stay on one's body. After all, I once worked in the uranium mines in southeast Utah, a land of criminally insane, sand flea-infested red rock canyons of death where I met the outlaw known as Chris "Madman" Allen.

Chris and I (along with all the Navajos who worked there) used to smuggle dynamite out of the Rim Mine. Off the sage and piñon flats, we went to places like the abandoned Profit Mine and blow stuff up for cheap thrills and entertainment.

Punk rocker Ricky Lee Costanza—surely you've heard of him by now—taught us the art of fishing with a quarter stick of dynamite, also known as a DuPont spinner. (I wonder if Becker

knows about the DuPont spinner?) Legend has it that Ricky Lee had the best wrist action with his pole and his scoutmaster at one time wanted to get him a merit badge for his very special skill, even though one didn't exist.

My how times have changed. Back in the day, even if Grand County, Utah, Sheriff Heck Bowman (we were on a first-name basis) had caught us with such toys, he might have said something like, "Boys, that dynamite is a little dangerous. I'll have to have it." Back then old Heck might have let us blow up one more thing like an old dead piñon pine for a cord of winter firewood. It would all be split, and all we had to do was load it into our pickup truck.

And then there was the time Heck showed up at a moonless, windy and cold winter-night beer-keg party down on the Colorado River outside of Moab, Utah, where everyone was warming themselves around a huge bonfire that consisted of one huge, gnarly old dead cedar tree. As the tree popped and threw sparks to the heavens and singed the hair of the brain-dead standing too close to the fire, old Heck appeared out of the shadows and announced that the party was over. He then let everyone fill their clear 16-ounce plastic cups one last time before dumping all the beer on the ground.

Do you think that would happen today? Blowing up things and underage keg parties might land one in jail in our current world of zero tolerance.

The TSA agent told me I could proceed to the loading chute for my flight connection. His scanner had cleared me.

Becker, on the other hand, was standing at attention with his arms held out from his side while he received the most thorough pat down I've ever witnessed.

Paula had breezed through security and obviously didn't fit a profile like some of us. We watched Geoff, adding our own comedy narrative.

Upon Becker's release, he informed us, "Don't wear cargo pants or shirts with lots of pockets." These appear to be red flags. Wouldn't the highly trained terrorist spotters operating the body scanner notice if there was a rocket or box cutter or fishing hooks in one of Becker's 200 pockets?

We landed at Oakland International Airport (also not up to my image of "international") without anymore visible agents keeping an eye on us.

Paula had convinced her good friends Bob and Jean Goldberg that I didn't have too many disgusting, appalling or unspeakable habits that might leave them mentally impaired if I spent the night at their house.

Under the threat of death, I was on stellar behavior that night, and the hosts didn't need to torch the bedroom and all its contents. Highly unusual.

Day 2. The Goldbergs had loaned Paula one of their cars, a 2002 BMW, to use while she was in town.

After Eric's graduation ceremony at the Academy of Arts University, I'd gotten bumped from the car to make room for Eric and other new graduates. So I went searching with Bob and Jean Goldberg and their son Michael, another recent college graduate, to find a taxi. We needed to head from the Cow Palace in Daly City to the Rogue Ales Public House, a bar in San Francisco that was the starting point for the epic evening that was to follow.

Standing out by the roadway, all three Goldbergs were on their cell phones trying to find a cab that would come out to where we were. They weren't having much luck. Were we in the wrong part of town? I had been watching what I was sure were illegal activities across the four lanes of traffic in front of us.

"Here comes a cab," Bob said, and he flagged it down for us.

The Goldbergs climbed into the back seat while I tried to get into the front seat. Our very large cabbie with a five-o'clock shadow and soprano-type voice said, "Here, let me move the bag," the one that filled the seat. I said, "Thank you, sir." Later the Goldbergs pointed out that our cabbie was female.

When the cabbie lifted the brown-paper shopping bag and placed it on the floor between my legs, I could see all the contents: Cheetos, potato chips, quart of whole milk, some candy bars—Mounds, Baby Ruths, Paydays, etc. The candy bars had fallen out of the bottom of the very wet sack and onto my seat. "Lunch," she said.

Bob told the cabbie to go to San Francisco to the Rogue Ales Public House, which serves Oregon's Rogue beer. As we headed toward the freeway, the cabbie asked what was going on at the Cow Palace. We told her that the San Francisco Academy of Arts had just held their graduation ceremony there. Then she asked if we were teachers. "Oh, yes," I said, "I teach rock 'n roll." "That's cool," said the cabbie. Then she asked what everybody else taught. Bob said "I teach business," and Jean said "I teach filmmaking with an emphasis on leather-clad bikers," and Michael was quiet.

As we dropped onto the freeway, our cabbie said, "I've always wanted to go to the Academy." I wasn't sure if this was just to make conversation, but I told her, "Just use my name when you apply: Professor Unknown Rock Star. My name will open doors." I didn't tell her that the doors might lead to the county jail.

About that time, I felt a dampness seeping through the "bottom" of my pants. My nostrils, even with their diminishing sensory capacity, were picking up a very strong scent not unlike curdled milk having spent a month past its expiration date in the refrigerator, then placed in the sun on the dashboard for, say, a week. I'm thinking someone's been sick in this cab. I hoped the dampness I felt on my gluteus maximus was from our cab's saggy lunch sack.

Running down the freeway, a series of SUV taxicabs zoomed by our rickety four-door sedan. Every time our cab approached 60 miles per hour, the front end would start to shake unbearably. Thank god I don't wear dentures—they would have been on the dashboard or, worse, on the floor with the soggy lunch bag.

I was amazed at how fast the cab's meter clicked off the third mortgage one would need to take out to pay for this ride that caught every stoplight once we left the freeway. Thank you, Bob, for picking up the tab!

We were the first to arrive at the Rogue—our group would soon number around 20.

When Eric arrived he was still wearing his graduation gown and, as luck would show itself soon, he kept it on all night.

Fellow Applegaters Rocket and Sheila Racataian were down for this big to-do and offered a toast to the recent graduates, as was everyone else. After a couple hours, the party moved to the Slanted Door restaurant for dinner and more folks—as Ricky Lee says "Party"—we were warming up for the night's events. Everywhere folks were congratulating the guy in the gown; people in cars, walkways, and other tables were giving him the thumbs up.

Coming from the Applegate, the shared co-ed restrooms at the Slanted Door was a new experience for me, which included a man dressed in black and white offering to clean a stall for you, if you so desired. Well, I had to check this out several times. Not because I have a bladder the size of a hummingbird, but there was a cologne dispenser and I was sure the stench from the cab was trailing me. I patted the seat of my black Levis with it. I must say the food and drink were splendid at the Slanted Door.

After Eric and I checked in at the Palace Hotel (we weren't leaving the City that night), we met up with Eric's roommate Brandon, who also just graduated, and his beautiful girlfriend Cinnamon in the lounge at the Palace Hotel. We all went across the street to my new favorite spot called The House of Shields, where Eric received more hugs, kisses and drinks from three women at the bar. I did get to share in the free drinks, but I started thinking I needed to rent me a graduation gown.

When I was a single person I sure wished I would have known that the graduation gown was a chick magnet. Who would have guessed? Eric apparently did.

We all drifted upstairs to the balcony area where we were plotting our next stop when we suddenly lost Brandon and Cinnamon, who was feeling poorly. Got to pace yourself. Hey, I know, I was a slow learner in that department myself.

"Yo man, did you just graduate?" a guy asked from one of the overstuffed chairs he was sitting in. "Yeah, I did." He gets up, shakes Eric's hand, and buys us both a drink. Then he starts talking away.

After a while, our new best friend looks at me and says, "I know I know you."

"I don't think so."

"Yeah, I do. You're in some really big band, right?"

"Shh, not so loud, I'm trying to keep a low profile tonight."

"Which band is it?"

I told him I played with Manic and 3-Fifty-7.

"I knew it," he said. "This is so cool," he added and buys another round. Of course, I knew that he's never heard of either of these bands I had been in because they weren't famous and he wasn't even born when they were around. It's fun playing the part of the Unknown Rock Star.

While we were talking art, music, etc., I watched our new best friend's girlfriend climb into another overstuffed chair that was occupied by a couple. This show is getting good when the three of them get up and leave unbeknownst to our drink-supplier friend. Eric and I tell him it's time for us to rock out of here and head down the stairs. We hear him say, "Where in the @\$% did everybody go?"

We worked our way to a piano bar.

Right after we took a seat at the bar, a guy who looks like a logger from Oregon comes over and gives his congrats to Eric and buys us a round.

The three bartenders (this is one packed place) didn't seem too happy, but then who could blame them.

The piano player was performing a song by Barry (I can never remember his last name) Bandalow—or is it Manilow, or was the song by the Crappenters—or is it Carpenters? Whoever... Like the three bartenders, I hated the song. But the dozen and a half people who were gathered around the piano player loved the song. They were singing loudly, drunkenly, with some unable to find the eardrum numbing melody.

Singing along were several older (which means older than me) men dressed in dark suits with loosened ties with very young blonde girls hanging on their arms. There was one shaved-headed guy who suffered from the same affliction I have as he danced around: He had the dreaded "white boy syndrome" or, as some call it, no rhythm.

I noticed two women sitting at the end of the bar, both dressed to the hilt. Something didn't look right with them. What was it? Ah, they both had very large Adam's apples. You know what that means, right?

As I checked out some of the other clientele, one of the unhappy bartenders asked me, “Who do you play with?”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“You know, what band are you with?”

“Oh, that kind of play. Let’s see, I played in Roadside Table and Suburban 9 to 5.”

“I knew it,” he said. “This drink’s on me, last call.”

On down the road Eric and I went. We were raring to go, and even though the temperature had dropped into the damp, cool 50s, we felt warm.

I could hear the music pulsating out of a club named Ruby Sky as we approached it. The line to get in must have been over a block long, not to mention all the people just hanging out front. I couldn’t believe some of the girls there weren’t frozen stiff—whoever said the micro-miniskirt would never return. Thank god they were wrong on that prediction.

As we walked past the wall of people waiting to get into the club, Eric was collecting kisses, high fives and “right-ons”—apparently, his graduation gown was quite the draw.

An armload of girls went gaga over Eric and his gown, practically climbing into his arms. One girl is giving him her phone number by programming it into his cell phone, only to find out that high tech was down (dead battery) and no one had a low-tech pencil.

Two of the girls walked over to me. One said, “Hey, I know you, you’re that guy, right?”

“Which guy’s that?” I said.

“You know, that guy. Come on, what’s your band called?”

“Well, there was Papier Maché, Shaliko...”

“See, we knew it. You are famous, yes?”

I just responded with, “Maybe ten feet either side of my mailbox.”

With that, the girls giggled and said, “Oh, and he’s funny, too.”

The girls tried to drag us (you bet, drag us) into the club through the exit door. The bouncer, whose wrists were bigger than my thighs, said, “I don’t think so.”

When he checked everyone’s hand for a re-entry stamp, secret tattoo, handshake, whatever it was, Eric and I didn’t have it.

The girls, each hanging on Eric’s arms, pleaded: “Please, he just graduated.”

The bouncer said, “I can see his gown—good job, bro. I still can’t let them in. Besides it’s closing time in there.”

As we walked on past Ruby Sky, we ran into a homeless man wearing a haggard A’s baseball cap, a couple of frayed plaid shirts, and newer pants that were a little too long in the legs, with duct tape to hold the sole onto one of his shoes. Our new best friend was happy about Eric’s graduation and wondered if we might help a guy out and drop a few coins into the 16-ounce Coke cup he held up.

“You know we’d love to be able to help you out, but if old Eric here doesn’t have a job by, say, tomorrow, he’ll be living down here with you.”

Our new friend said, “That’s a tough one. I look for work all the time—there ain’t no jobs.”

He told Eric if he wound up down here on the streets to look him up and he’d teach him the ropes. Adding, “Yeah, baby, even if you wind up here, you got that piece of paper.”

That got me to wondering how many of these homeless people we’ve been stepping over and around have college pedigrees. Every month when the newscaster announces unemployment figures, I’d like to hear the homeless numbers, too. I’m thinking it might be growing faster than that “no inflation” they’re always telling us about.

After several blocks of traveling with our new best friend, during which we talked life on the streets, jobs all going to China, and the best malt liquors, he bids us farewell when a cutie pie walked past us and asked if we wanted to spend a hundred dollars for a good time.

All along the way there were homeless people sleeping in doorways, lined up along the grimy, stained, trash-strewn sidewalks in their unwashed bedrolls. I've never seen so many homeless people and empty storefronts. You can tell a lot of these homeless folks have mental problems when you hear them talking to imaginary people. Wasn't there some California governor—who looked like he belonged in a wax museum and later became our president—who helped balance the California state budget by emptying mental hospitals? It appears that that is still going on.

I wonder how many other homeless people are there because of the new Great Depression we're in. I don't believe for a second that it ended a few years ago like the talking heads (that was a great band) like to tell us. Are we becoming a third-world country? Because that's what it feels like with so many beggars standing on street corners. It seems to me that all of these homeless souls add up to an army's worth of people, of which many are war veterans from Vietnam, Desert Storm, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Is Iran next?

There are lots of unemployed folks going back to school in hopes of not becoming one of the homeless. Since we have become a country where outsourcing our jobs overseas is the preferred business model, maybe even a college degree won't keep one from living on the streets.

On we soldiered to the Sugar Club. It's way after hours when we arrive, but there's a mob of happy people out front.

One guy grabs Eric's graduation cap and throws it up in the air saying, "I never got to do that." A beautiful angel caught the cap and placed it back on Eric's head with a nice kiss. Then everyone congratulated him with hugs and, of course, more kisses.

As we were leaving the scene in front of the Sugar Club, two of the most exquisite-looking girls, who must have modeled for *Ebony* magazine, came up to Eric and asked him, "Do you want an all-night party with both of us? \$200."

I pointed out that the night's long gone; the sun will be up soon. Ignoring me, one of the girls said to Eric, "We must be more than you can handle."

Without skipping a beat, Eric said, "Are you saying that because I'm white?"

"No, no," she said.

Eric's response: "You are, you *are* saying that because I'm white." The crowd, many of whom could have been in the famous *Star Wars: Episode 1* spaceport cantina scene, was standing around us listening to the whole conversation; quite a few of them were laughing or sporting big grins.

"I didn't mean anything by that. Really. Congratulations on your graduation."

Then they both vanished into the crowd of club-hoppers.

Day 3. I feel like I just climbed into bed as I'm getting up and longing for a shot of quadruple espresso. Eric is still sacked out. I could call room service, but by the time they got here, I could have been down at the restaurant. I ride the elevator five floors down to the main lobby. When the doors open, I'm thinking, did I walk into the Hotel California? You know, the Eagle's song. There's a line something like "There's no leavin'." Maybe someone slipped something in my drink last night and it's just hitting me. I close my eyes and open them. No, what I've seen is real. There were seven dwarfs in wheelchairs staring at me. Wasn't there a

movie called “Snow White and...” No, they weren’t in wheelchairs. Did one of them really say to me, “You look like you need a ‘hair of the dog.’ Care to join us in the lounge?”

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