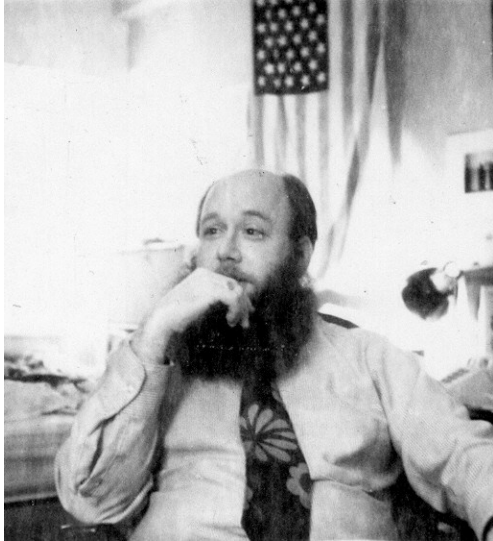


Chapter 23: San Francisco II (1976-1982)

San Francisco has only one drawback. 'Tis hard to leave.

Rudyard Kipling, *American Notes* (1891)



I returned from Taiwan in the spring of 1976. If my old passports had not somehow disappeared I could be more precise about the date, but I know I was back in plenty of time for the Bicentennial celebration on July 4th.

I had written to my old law school colleague and pot buddy Ron Green asking if he could put me up when I got back, until I could find a place to live. He agreed I could stay with him for two weeks in his apartment on Douglass Street. I did that, and it was fun – Ron was based in Noe Valley, where his store Plant Works was located, and I got to know that neighborhood. It was the mid-70s and there

was still some hippie influence left in San Francisco.

- I remember a hippie-style cafe on 24th Street called the Acme Metal-Spinning Works, presumably from the name left on the window by the previous industrial tenants, which the new owners retained as cool. I went in there one time and ordered (from the menu) a bagel and lox – it came with bean sprouts! That's when I really knew it was California – I had been away almost three years.

I used my two-week grace period to look for a place to live, and soon found the Baker Hotel at 1485 Pine Street, at the corner of Polk. It was a run-down SRO (single-room occupancy) hotel – not quite a flophouse because people lived there by the week or month, but still it catered to a clientèle notably down on their luck. I wasn't down on my luck, but I liked the atmosphere and it was really cheap.

I had just spent eight months in Taiwan, a highly repressive environment, and it was a bit of a culture shock to come back not only to San Francisco but to Polk Street, which was at that time the city's principal gay street (in the process of being supplanted by Castro Street, but that hadn't quite happened yet). This was before AIDS and before the money that made Castro Street what it later became. The outrageous goings on were pretty outrageous. I sat up in Room 304 all day, in a comfortable chair aligned with the window as in a railroad car, smoking marijuana and watching the passing scene. The gay Hallowe'en blowouts were held on Polk Street in those days, and I'll never forget the bacchanal – people would come to the Baker, which had the best views, and watch from

the rooms and the fire escapes. Kimo's gay bar was just across the street. I was not gay but it was fun anyway.

People I knew would come to stay in the Baker. Les Wisner spent a week or so there when he moved back to the city from Rhode Island. It was a little too seedy for him. My brother Adam lived there for quite a while, and so perhaps did Christopher – check his diaries, on file at Yale. Jack Tobin, Tao Ping as he called himself, one of Christopher's



roommates in Taipei, stayed there too. He called the place the *Bei Ke Bing Guan* (Sad Song Hotel) – it was the perfect name. He painted elaborate monograms in Chinese seal script on the tops of his window and mine. The picture at left only shows about a quarter of the building – not the part I lived in. But it's the best I could find on the Internet – I was amazed to find even this. The new awning and paint job came after my day. There was nothing new there in 1976.

The Baker Hotel was pretty sleazy. It was run by the Patel family – I should say *a* Patel family, as I have since learned that *Patel* is the family name of a caste of innkeepers and a large proportion of the Indian-run hotels and motels in America are operated by Patels. My first room (304) was on the Pine Street side. My second room, which I moved into after I had left the hotel for a few weeks, was 402, facing Polk and with a bathroom. For 304 the bathroom was down the hall – there was broken glass in the shower. Need I say that the elevator did not always work? At 65 that would be a deal-breaker even if the rest of the place was acceptable – at 32 it was not a problem. There was of course no housekeeping service and the place was pretty filthy. I had a cat named Moose.

An elderly lady named Muriel sat all day by the entrance – she was the eyes and ears of the place, saw everything, and was in permanent opposition to Nick Patel, who lived with his family just opposite her perch. Al and Charlotte, two old alcoholics of unspeakably disreputable appearance, lived separately upstairs but occasionally came together for sordid couplings. Al's watchword was "yes sir, yes sir," which he included in almost every sentence. There was Bobby, a bearded Jesus freak, and a criminal named Gus, later involved in some transiently famous scandal which I forget. There was a girl of cheerful unchastity who lived across the hall from me in 401 (the best room as it was highest, had a bathroom, and was on a corner) – sometimes she lived with a black con artist named Tariq who was on parole. There was Jeanne, another alcoholic whose ability to speak was badly damaged by Korsakoff's syndrome. There was an alcoholic Australian spoiled priest and his acolyte catamite. All these people were friends of mine while I lived there. There was a certain camaraderie among the Baker's colorful residents, as in Lanford Wilson's 1973 play *The Hot l Baltimore*.

I was among the leading residents because I was not crazy or an alcoholic, not on the skids even though I lived there, and able to help out when people had problems. I helped Muriel with welfare, got Jeanne to a doctor, and so on. In my second stay I even had a job and a car – talk about high status! But the alpha males of the place, in a non-threatening way, were Jeff, a highly skilled printer from L.A., and his lover Richard. Richard was sort of slow and silent, but Jeff was very smart and lots of fun. We became good friends and I stayed in touch with them even after they left the Baker. Richard later died of AIDS but as far as I know Jeff survived – I last spoke with him from Truro.

Jeff and Richard wore the habits of Franciscan brothers, and although they claimed to be members of the Third Order of St. Francis I have my doubts.¹ They were into S&M, bondage and discipline, and taught me a lot about it (classroom only – I never took the lab course).² They had some voluntary sex slaves in their service, and I mean that in every possible sense. One of their favorites was Junior, a slender and juicy young Filipino. I thought I was a man of the world until someone came to my room to get Jeff – Junior had been ravished on the carpet and his tit-rings had pulled out. Yipe!

I moved out of Room 304 when an old girlfriend from library school days came out to stay with me – we moved into an apartment in a Chinese-owned building at 1216 Larkin Street at Sacramento, a few blocks away (see Map III). It did not last long, and when that sad household broke up I moved back into the Baker and took Room 402 (which as noted had a bathroom). My friends were a bit incredulous – I first stayed there when I had just come back to America and needed a pad quickly, but to move *back* meant I was living there *on purpose*. And so I was – I liked the place, and the cheap rates, and the colorful atmosphere, and having people around, and the convenience to shops and services on Polk Street.

Here's what I wrote to Joel Solkoff about the Baker in December 1977:

¹ Members of a Third Order are lay people who identify with a religious order, follow its rule and wear its habit without actually being professed religious. Under Canon 303 of the Roman Catholic Church, a Third Order's members "share in the spirit of some religious institute while in secular life, lead an apostolic life, and strive for Christian perfection under the higher direction of the same institute." The Franciscans have a very active Third Order.

² S&M means, of course, *sadism and masochism*, sexual pleasure in the giving or receiving of pain. Future researchers, I'll bet this is still popular in 2319! Ask around. Actually S&M is as much about mutual empowerment, and about intimacy and trust, as it is about pain, because the games are consensual and the players trust their partners not to hurt them more than they enjoy and consent to. This puts the bottom of the pair in control as much as, or even more than, the top.

The Baker Hotel is quite a scene. I am a senior statesman here in this very small eccentric puddle, called in for special problems and negotiations (save Jeanne from eviction! find out why the EPA forbids sale of roach-killer to the Baker management! smoke some more of this!) and in general I enjoy a high-status situation. I have my window, and a decent-sized room, well-decorated by now, with private bath and a Russian-blue cat and American flag and the works, all for \$100/mo (plus \$30/mo for a parking space down the block). I plan to stay here indefinitely. There is continuous action and street life and a dozen trips happening all the time, and it is very exciting. Also dope and acid are available within the building, as are sexual delights in both flavors, elephant tranquilizers, sodium pentothal joints, sadists *and* masochists, etc. etc.

I stayed in the Baker for 2½ years. Here's a picture of me in Room 402 around 1978, age 33 – the tie means I was working at Farella by then.

I had no money in those days and at first I was living on unemployment insurance accumulated from my old law library job at Cohen & Uretz (see Chapter 24.A), paid by the District of Columbia through the California bureaucracy. I recall, again perhaps inaccurately, that unemployment paid about \$135 a *week*, and since rent at the Baker plus parking came to less than that a *month*, my income was at the traditionally acceptable ratio of about 4 times my rent. In



those days it was possible to live in San Francisco quite pleasantly, although not lavishly, on that kind of money, and I planned to stay on Unemployment as long as my benefits lasted. My benefits were at the highest level, because my former salary was high by their standards, and it was easy not to get a job, because just as before (see Chapter 16) all you had to do was make two phone calls a week and be listed on the Labor Exchange. It is no challenge to make calls and ask “are you hiring” and be sure of at least two rejections, and no one was hiring lawyers *or* law librarians from listings on the Labor Exchange. You didn't have to take any job out of your field.

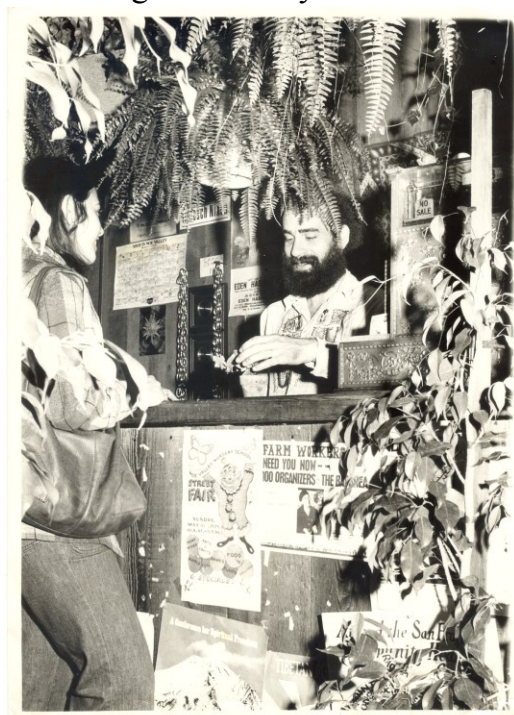
I did take some temp jobs, though, always reporting them to Unemployment and skipping a week's benefits – you didn't lose the benefits, just postponed them. I did some office work with the Kelly Girl agency. One posting I remember there was at Bechtel, the vast international engineering firm, where my temporary job was to duplicate blueprints and distribute them to the rows of draftsmen working with pencils and erasers at tilt-top drafting tables. Of course now all this is done on computers, although plans are probably still duplicated individually for use on job sites. But not then – I was fascinated by the drawings and the satisfyingly precise designs of parts of things, and of course by the cool electric erasers. One advantage to temp work was that when the gig was finished, it was

finished – you had not quit but had been laid off, so it was easy to go back on Unemployment.

Another job I had was counting socks at the Emporium department store during their annual inventory. I also worked for Syufy Theatres on the night shift, tabulating their concession receipts by hand in an office on Turk Street with a jolly crew of fellow temps. Julia, my girlfriend in 1990-91, had had the same job (she later told me), and lots of her friends had it too. Both these jobs are almost certainly electronic now too. If they even need to count anything by hand at inventory time, they probably scan bar codes with laser guns.

I also worked the document production night shift for a vast antitrust case called *IBM v. Xerox*. Fair-sized staffs worked three shifts a day in a suite of offices in the Embarcadero Center, copying millions of document for discovery. We had lots of the hugest copy machines I ever saw. By the time we got the documents many of them were copies of copies so many times over they were quite illegible. It was the paradigm of meaningless work, taking millions of illegible documents and using them to make further millions even more illegible. Talk about your alienated labor! Nowadays digital processes make copies without degrading the image.

I used to go out on my breaks and smoke dope under the freeway exit on Clay Street, which was demolished after the 1989 earthquake. But it never occurred to me to practice law, or even to go back to library work, as long as I could string out Unemployment Compensation and temporary gigs with no responsibility. I was working at the copy job the night it was announced that Elvis Presley had died – I never cared about Elvis and I was amazed at how much his death affected most of my fellow workers. The date was August 16, 1977.³



I used to fill in sometimes at Ron's plant store, Plant Works, on 24th Street between Sanchez and Noe. Plant Works was a delightful environment, very original and an expression of Ron's personality (he's shown here at left, behind his counter). It was plants everywhere, in a steamy humid environment which they loved. No fancy

³ I appreciate him and his music much more now.

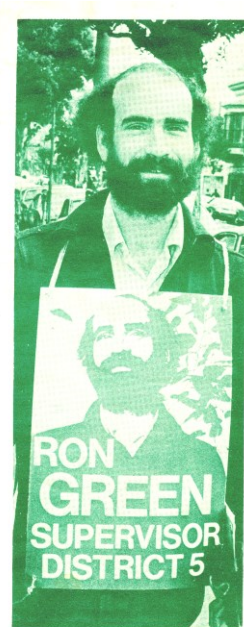
displays – everything was alive. Back room spare, full of empty gallon-size apple juice bottles and work benches, with a tiny office in an alcove. A back yard nursery. Cats roaming around; Acapulco Gold cigarette papers for sale at the counter. Ron taught me about the plants and what each one needed, so I could answer people's questions. I wrote it all down on a 4-page chart which I still have – I'll send it up to Yale as a Supplement. I liked working there and being behind the counter, but Ron didn't like my reading instructions to customers from my chart, as it suggested that I didn't really know what I was doing. The truth was of course that I *didn't* know what I was doing without the chart, and knew just about nothing about plants except what Ron told me (except how to kill them through neglect). I didn't feel confident enough to solo. So I stopped working there, but still have happy memories of the place.

In 1977, the first year supervisors were elected by district in San Francisco, Ron ran for Supervisor, which is like City Councilman elsewhere. He asked me to run his campaign, which I had no real idea how to do, and we printed up literature (see detail of brochure at right) and buttons, and did a lot of door-to-door canvassing in his hilly district. He lost, but didn't do all that badly. Harvey Milk won in Ron's district (Castro and Noe Valley) and was assassinated. I also helped Ron write a speech for a radio spot in his feud with the director of the local SPCA, which had a program



for trapping stray and feral cats in people's back yards. The speech, of which I no longer have a copy, began "Have you ever lost a cat?"

In the summer of 1976, right after I came back to America, I worked as a volunteer in Tom Hayden's campaign for the U.S. Senate. He was defeated in the primary, but I briefly met both him and his then wife Jane Fonda on their ceremonial visit to headquarters (see Chapter 13). The picture at left was taken by Klaudia Nelson in December 1976. I was still wearing my Carter-Mondale button.



In the fall of 1977, when I could see the end of unemployment benefits coming up, I went to work as law librarian for Farella, Braun & Martel (now Farella Braun + Martel LLP). See Chapter 24.B. They were and still are in the Russ Building, 235 Montgomery Street between Bush and Pine (see images below). I say more about my work there in Chapter 24.B. I used to walk from the Baker Hotel down Bush Street to my office 10 blocks away, mostly downhill, and come back uphill on the California Street cable car, which was then a real part of the city transit system and not just a tourist ride. I would usually have breakfast on my walk downtown – a one-course breakfast was a joint, a two-course

breakfast was a joint and 5 milligrams of Valium. I came home for lunch and did it again on the way back to work. It never caused me any problem at work being stoned all the time, and I'm quite sure no one ever suspected – people who worked closely with me then were surprised to hear about it later.



Once I had a job I also bought a car, off the street for \$400. It was a black Dodge Dart, and very

dependable except it had a push-button transmission that usually would not go into reverse. I parked it in a parking lot a block away on Pine Street, where my space was on an incline, so I could roll backwards out of my space and didn't need reverse. Parking on the street without reverse was difficult. I called the car Nick because that was the name of the man I bought it from. It finally died in a crash – Adam was driving and was OK except for some nasty cuts – and I replaced it with an old Volkswagen beetle I bought for \$1000.



San Francisco had two catastrophes in November 1978. The Jonestown Massacre took place on November 18. Although it happened in Guyana, People's Temple and its leader the paranoid madman guru Rev. Jim Jones (1931-1978) (left) were San Francisco institutions and a lot of local people were involved. It was very deeply felt in San Francisco.

The next week, on November 27, former Supervisor Dan White came into City Hall and murdered Mayor George Moscone (right in picture) and Supervisor Harvey Milk (left). I remember hearing about it in my 30th floor office at Farella. That was a big deal nationally, more because of



Harvey than George. It plunged the city into a deep depression, made worse by coming right after Jonestown. I remember the mournful sound of Bach's *Air on a G String* at a memorial service for Harvey at City Hall Plaza.⁴

The murders struck me especially hard because I had met both of these people in person. I spoke with Harvey Milk when he was campaigning on 24th Street, in the election Ron ran in. It was a good thing for Ron that he lost, because he would have given Moscone exactly the same advice Milk did (don't reappoint Dan White), and might have been assassinated himself.

There was a character from the Italian community who used to wade ashore at Aquatic Park every Columbus Day dressed more or less like Columbus and make an appearance at the city celebration, which was held by the statue of Columbus at the top of Telegraph Hill, in the parking lot in front of Coit Tower. I went in 1976 or 1977, and Moscone, Italian himself, was there in the small grandstand. After the event I came up to him and shook his hand and said how nice it was that a citizen could just come up to the mayor and speak with him.⁵

After the Dan White verdict and sentence was announced on May 21, 1979, I participated in the candlelight march from Castro Street to City Hall (right)



⁴ Harvey Milk (1930-1978) was the first openly gay man elected to public office in California, and the first openly gay candidate to have a national profile. Dan White (1946-1985), a former policeman, fireman and city Supervisor, killed Milk not for being gay, but for advising Mayor George Moscone (1929-1978) not to reappoint him after he impulsively resigned his office. White entered City Hall without challenge, killed Moscone and Milk, and then surrendered at a police station. He was convicted of manslaughter rather than murder, which set off a riot in San Francisco, at which I was present although not rioting. After serving time in prison, White was released and eventually committed suicide. When Moscone was killed, Dianne Feinstein, then President of the Board of Supervisors, became Mayor, which started her rise to national power in the United States Senate.

⁵ Even if there had been more security, it would probably not have protected him from Dan White, who had access to the mayor's office as a City Supervisor and who, as an ex-policeman, could have been licensed to carry a handgun (or if not, the cops might have let him by anyway).

that later developed into what was known as the White Night Riot. I remember being in front of City Hall and seeing the broken glass doors, but I didn't participate in any violence myself, nor did I agree with trashing City Hall to protest the verdict and sentence. For an account of this event see <http://thecastro.net/milk/whitenight.html>.

In early 1979, I think it was, I decided the time had come to leave the Baker and get a proper apartment. I found one not far away at 715 Leavenworth Street, between Post and Sutter, in the downtown neighborhood between Nob Hill and the Tenderloin. It was an area of mostly old buildings, close to the office and to transport and services, and I liked the neighborhood. My apartment was a studio, with a bed fitted into a kind of alcove, very cozy. Jeff Nevelow, from the Baker Hotel, built the bed and also built me a desk which I still have – indeed I am sitting at it this very moment as I type these words. The building entrance was faced in black mirrors, and a Vietnamese seamstress had a tiny shop at street level. I took most of my meals in a little diner on the corner of Leavenworth and Sutter, American food but run by Chinese people – it was called the Golden Coffee Cup, or something like that. Later, though, I wanted a bit more room and so I moved a few blocks up the hill to a one-bedroom place at 1086 Bush Street, near the corner of Leavenworth (this address was later the title of a novel by Françoise Boxler). I stayed there until I left for Cape Cod in the summer of 1982.

Once I started working I began to travel in a modest way. I went to Israel, and Britain, and some other places. I also had the use of a house at Lake Tahoe, in the Sierra Nevada near the Nevada state line, which I held as a nominee for some clients of a lawyer friend who didn't want their names to appear on the deed. In return for this accommodation I got to use the place, and I went there a fair amount – Adam and Les and others went with me sometimes – and I did a lot of acid there.

- I held this property for many years, until the true owner wanted to sell. He asked me to convey it to him by a phony bill of sale, which naturally I refused to do, but said I would sign a quitclaim deed. He tried to pay me for doing this, which I also refused – I had had my payment by being allowed to use the house, and could hardly charge him for a quitclaim on property I never had any beneficial right to. So he came over and we found a notary public and to his amazement I signed, just like that.

Around 1980 I enrolled in an M.A. program at San Francisco State University. I felt a need for direction in my reading, and the interdisciplinary program seemed just right. It combined history, literature, philosophy and art, and met in seminar format once a week. With my existing advanced degrees I could finish this program with ten seminars, one every semester, plus a thesis. The first seminar was on epic – I wrote a paper on the Bible, one on the *Iliad*, one on the *Song of Roland* and one on *Njal's Saga*. With my library and writing skills it was not only easy but fun to go into the library, research a paper, and write it up – I always got an A. I am including these four papers, and another

written for a different class in the same program (on the Bank of America Building as a sculpture), with other samples of my non-legal writing in a Supplement for Yale. My application to the program will be another Supplement. I was sad to have to leave this program when I moved to Massachusetts in 1982. My transcript is attached as Document 23-1. I considered resuming it, but travel too much to come to a seminar every week, and also I no longer feel I need guidance in reading.

One project from this time was a dream diary. I began the practice of sleeping with a pocket tape recorder. When I awoke from a dream I would not open my eyes, not move any part of my body but one arm, reach for the recorder, and dictate at once everything I could remember. The next day, while I could still understand what I had mumbled, I transcribed it. I ended up with a book of about 150 typed pages, or maybe more, full of dreams. I will send it up to Yale as a supplement – I think there is a lot in there that will help anyone who has set himself the peculiar task of understanding me.

I agree with the majority view [I wrote in an e-mail] that dreams come from inside rather than being messages from outside. But they are realer than the majority culture credits them with being – they come from our unconscious and are quite deliberate. There is nothing wasted in a dream – every detail is selected (I think but cannot know) for a reason. They are encoded, scrambled, presented in a complex language of symbol and pun and allusion, so we can't always interpret them accurately. But Freud taught us quite convincingly that they mean *something*, everything in a dream means something, and our unconscious chose every detail in preference to some other. I have had very clear vivid messages about what I should do from dreams, and when I recognize that I try to follow my intuition. When my mother died and did not provide for someone in her will as she should have, I told myself in a dream that my siblings and I had an obligation to do it at our own expense, and made this happen. Sometimes my parents visit me in dreams -- but really what is happening is that I am visiting them.

Joel Solkoff got married on October 18, 1981. He asked me to be his best man, so I went east for the occasion. It was a jolly event, which I supervised officiously with a clipboard, making sure everything got done. Here is a picture of us taken that day. Joel looks very 1970s. I look more 1870s than 1970s.



My mother died in 1980. I got the call in my alcove bed on Leavenworth Street. I had hated this woman all my life and was relieved

that she had died.⁶ “Ding dong,” I thought, “the wicked witch is dead!”⁷ I remember I called back just to make sure there had been no mistake. Not only was she gone at last, but (really incredibly) she had not disinherited me, and I got some money for the first time. Not a lot, but enough to make a big difference in my modest lifestyle.

The major assets were the two houses, on 70th Street in New York and in Truro on Cape Cod, and there were endless delays getting money out of the estate, which was mismanaged by the estate’s lawyer and the two of the three executors (who outnumbered Christopher, the third executor). But some money came in right away from life insurance. I wanted to sell the Truro house – who needed it? – but my siblings would not hear of it. I took an acid trip around that time – I wanted some nature but couldn’t find any. When I came down I thought well, why not move to Truro? Plenty of nature there! After thinking about it for a while, visiting the place in November 1981 for the first time in decades, and spending a few days in Hawaii in May 1982 to see how I liked not working (not a fair test, but it was not a hard question), I decided to go ahead with the plan. Chapter 25 tells how that went.

Tailpiece: Icon of Harvey Milk
by Br. Robert Lentz, OFM (1987)



⁶ This might have been unfair, but there it was anyway. People don’t like it when I say unfilial things, but this is my life story and I’m telling it my way.

⁷ The surface reference is to the song of this name in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, lyrics by E. Y. Harburg. But the interior reference in my mind was to the witch dream I had in nursery school (see Chapter 3C.9), then and still now vividly remembered and identified with her.

Document 23-1: San Francisco State University transcript

**SAN
FRANCISCO
STATE
UNIVERSITY**

San Francisco
California
94132

THIS IS AN
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TRANSCRIPT
OF RECORD

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AUG. 13, 1982

Thomas Brown

Thomas Brown
Registrar

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

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PERMANENT ADDRESS		DATE OF BIRTH		GRADUATE ADMISSION STATUS	
715 LEAVENWORTH ST. E.		SAN FRANCISCO, CA. 94133		UNCLASSIFIED	
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