

3-Crying for Burgess

From the outside the house looked almost like nothing, but behind the high walls and the high fence was a house that was unique. It was built like a string of freight cars, and the inside was almost all glass. It was the first house I had ever seen that was a “His” and “Hers” house. In the living room were two built-in desks; in the bathroom, two built-in medicine closets. In fact, there was a “His” and “Hers” of everything in that house. John was in the process of cleaning it up, although he was not a domestic man, not by any means. He was intrigued with the house. He told me he had found all kinds of weird wiring and things for lighting, and concluded that the former owners, the Johansens must have held seances. Besides, he had found yards and yards of black velvet gauze in a closet.

He showed me around and begged me to stay with him and help him fix it up “I am very lonesome, and I am upset. I must work and I need you,” he told me. John had chosen the house because of its seclusion. He always liked a secluded atmosphere. He did not like people looking in windows.

The dining room, immediately off the living room, was solid glass. It made you feel as if you were in a garden because the fern breaks were as high as five and six feet.

A door led to several steps and a fish pond. Directly to the right of the dining room was a kitchen, then a small hallway and another door leading to the first bathroom. Then came a large room with narrow windows, very high up windows. John turned that room into his library. As well as being almost fanatical, he was an avid reader. From the library there was another passageway, again solid glass, with window seats. It was a quick passageway and this, too, led into the garden. It led into another bedroom, a pleasant room, again with high windows and a big bay window facing onto the garden. John wanted to turn this room into the master bedroom, which he did. Next to that room was another, with a small kitchen. It was solid cement and only had one window, again facing onto the garden. The kitchen did, however, have its own exit door which led to an area where there were once rabbit hutches. Apparently, the people slaughtered their own rabbits because there were hanging hooks and butchering tables. Everything had been left in a state of disrepair. Mother called this room “Little Siberia”. Outside of this area was a huge gate that led into a vacant lot, a lot so overgrown with mattress vine that we could barely open it. John left it that way.

We started work. We painted and we scrubbed. We burned weeds and tore out things. John and I did most of the painting ourselves. Mother visited and she helped a little. Then we began the task of furnishing. I handled that while John worked in the garden in the mornings. He seemed at peace with himself during this time, although I know he was very restless. He knew I loved roses so he went down to the Cannery and ordered a whole truck load of fish guts and had them turned into soil, spread everywhere. You do that and you don’t have to fertilise for another seven years. And he built me a rose garden outside the guest house, directly opposite the room he turned into his “nest.” He hired a Japanese gardener named Frank. John had been brought up around Japanese, and he felt they were good people to have work for you, which they are. On the gate, John installed a big Mexican bell. The only way he would let anyone in was if they pulled the cord and rang the bell. It made a big noise.

We had a great sense of accomplishment cleaning up the house and painting it. It looked stunning in yellow and white. We bought furniture from Holman’s store, and the house began to turn from an old brown shack into a very attractive, warm home. As you might imagine, we were extremely proud of what we had done. We were together -but not alone.

We found out that the house was haunted!

Why do I say that? Because simply many things happened in that house at 425 Eardley Street; strange and weird things.

John was a mystic, as I said earlier, and he was interested in the unknown and at the same time he liked to scare people. He would get enjoyment out of sitting in the living room with guests and suddenly the door knob would turn and the door would open. Everyone would get up and pour another drink. Furthermore, you could not keep that house locked up.

John did not believe in reincarnation, but he did believe in ghosts and we certainly had them on Eardley Street. At night the place groaned and creaked, and nobody wanted to stay alone in that house. John would not stay alone there either. Toby Street, John's lawyer, later tried to live in that house and said it drove him absolutely crazy. Lewis Milestone, the director who did the movie *Of Mice and Men*, and who had come up to work on the script of *The Red Pony*, awoke in the middle of the night and said afterwards, "John, I hate to say this and I know you won't believe it, but when I got up and looked out of the windows that garden was filled with people!" John laughed and said, "I believe you."

I remember the time when a friend of John's, Ellwood Graham, had painted a very modern painting of boats in the Monterey Harbour. John loved it and bought it and decided to hang it above the living room fireplace.

"Old Johansen won't like that," I said.

"Oh yes he will," he answered. We were having our morning coffee. John hung a big bulldog hook over the fireplace. I watched him as I sat on the hearth stone below. He hung the painting and stepped back to admire it. "It looks very nice there, don't you think?" he said. With that there was a loud noise and the bulldog hook was torn out of the wall. The painting crashed down and missed my head by the umpteenth of an inch. John laughed.

"I'll fix that old sonofabitch," he said. He went to the garage and came back with a long spike a good four inches long, and drove it into the wall. "He won't pull that out!" he said, and rehung the painting. We admired it again and left the room. Moments later, as we were in the kitchen, there was a terrible screeching noise. We rushed back into the living room. The nail had been pulled out of the wall and the painting was on the floor, its frame smashed.

Needless to say, John moved that painting to another part of the room. I simply believe the former owner did not want anything modern around.

There was another time, when Mother was helping to clean up the lawn in the yard, because it was so overgrown with weeds. She had gotten mud on her shoes and took them off and tapped them against the wall.

The wall tapped right back at her.

That's the way the house was: if you touched anything and rapped – it rapped right back!

Despite the ghosts, the noises, there was contentment in this house. The reason for that was mainly because John was able to write again. His energy peak was usually from daylight onwards. When he worked he worked damn hard. John was a man of great discipline and he let nothing, absolutely nothing interrupt him. His power of concentration was phenomenal.

Sometimes, after a morning's hard work, perhaps he would come in from his "nest", and decide that we would have a love scene, a little matinee. There is nothing unhealthy in that, I assure you. However, when we began to make love we often ran into a funny situation because of the folks next door. They were migrants from Texas who worked in the Cannery. No sooner would we start making love when they would put on a record, full force, and we would be lying in bed

naked, listening to *Roll Out The Barrel*. We invariably broke up, and even if we were in bed at night, there it would go again, rolling out that damned barrel! All we could do would be to roll on our backs and kill ourselves laughing! But there were of course, quiet loving times when we shared each other's body, like any couple in love, as we were.

While we were living in the haunted house we found our famous rat – Burgess.

One day John came home with a baby white rat. "I thought you might like this, darling, and at least save it from the guillotine and the snake pen for twenty-four hours," he said. "A boy came running into the lab and yelled to Ed that his mother told him to sell it because it bites everyone."

It was a beautiful little rat, three months old. I took it in my hands. "Why it's darling," I said, "and looks like Burgess." I meant Burgess Meredith, that very fine actor. So we named him Burgess. I don't think Burgess ever forgave me for that.

The weekend we acquired the rat Eli and Mollie Kazan visited us. They, too, decided the rat looked like Burgess. Loving animals is a part of me, a very big part, and it was something that John loved about me, too. Animals are very precious to me, as all life is precious. John had a special feeling for animals, too, especially dogs, as the world really found out later in his *Travels with Charley In Search of America*.

He took a great delight in Burgess; that rat really loved him, and he really loved the rat. Whenever we took a drive Burgess would perch on John's shoulder. In the evening we would go down to the sea and see the sun down, and little Burgess would be with us. He would scramble out of the car and run down to the sea. John would say, "Come here, Burgess." Burgess would come. It was not, as some people might think weird having a rat as a pet. It was fascinating.

But then sometimes John would do peculiar, sadistic things with Burgess. John was a sadistic man, of many emotions, but being sadistic was one of his private qualities. He would let people in and let Burgess loose. He gained a great sense of enjoyment watching women scream and pull up their legs. Once, he wanted to amputate Burgess's tail because he felt that the reason people disliked rats, was because of their raw tails. But I would not allow him to experiment. That was one time he let me have my own way. When we drove down to Los Angeles to visit mother and my stepfather, Burgess would ride all the way in the "funny box" as John called the glove compartment. We checked into a hotel and John would do some kookie things like deliberately returning to our room and let Burgess out of his cage and then go down the hall and wait for the maid to go into the room and listen to her scream. I, I might add, would run and hide!

The story of our pet rat Burgess does not end there. Months later, after we had been to New York, we returned to California. My mother and stepfather had taken care of Burgess while we were gone. One day they went fishing in Malibu to get John some fresh herring for breakfast. That day it rained, and Burgess was left on the porch in his cage. He was about four years old then, which is old for a rat, yet he was healthy as hell. But he caught pneumonia and the next day he began coughing blood, so Mother called a vet.

"Lady," the vet said, "you've gotta be drunk. Your rat has pneumonia?"

"But it's John Steinbeck's rat," she persisted.

"Yeah, yeah, goodbye lady."

Mother called us at two in the morning and informed us, "I think Burgess is dying and it's our fault. We can't get a vet."

We got up and went to look at Burgess. John looked at our pet and said, "You poor little shit, I loved you so." He took Burgess and put it in mother's oven and put it to sleep. Then he sat by the oven and cried. "There goes the last pure thing I ever loved," he said.

That was the only time in my life I ever saw John Steinbeck cry. He never cried for me. He never cried for his sons. He never cried for anybody.

But he cried for a rat called Burgess.

He came home and he wept and he wept and he said again, "that poor little shit, that poor little shit."

He was a brilliant man, but a strange man.

Then there was the incident of the bird which happened while we were living in the haunted house. We had cleaned the house up, and the birds were coming into the garden to nest. One day, out of the blue, a mangy old cat appeared—a huge black cat with an ulcer on the side of its face. It began to kill the birds (animal instinct), and John became really angry. He decided to trap the cat and give it to Ed Ricketts for the laboratory. I found him in the garden whittling away on several sticks of wood.

"What are you doing?"

"Haven't you ever seen a figure four trap, you old nature lover?" he snapped back.

"Yes I have."

"Well, that's how I'm going to catch that damned cat."

"What will you use for bait?"

"I'm going to the Cannery for a big fish head." He did. He came back with a fish head a good eight inches or more and solid meat, too. He laid the trap on the lawn. It held up a galvanised tub. When he had it fixed, he tried it; it was a like a hair trigger. It was tough balancing the fish head, but he did it. Just before daylight I awoke with John shaking me.

"Call Ed and tell him to get here fast with the burlap sack." I did. Ed staggered out of bed and came to the house. The three of us stood by the galvanised tub listening to a hellofa lot of noise and scratching.

"Now Ed, you know how to catch him," said John. "You hold the sack and I'll lift from this side. Gwyn, you stand on the other side." It was quite a major production, an MGM job. **Next** step, John raised the tub and nothing happened. He raised it a little further. Ed stood ready with the gunny sack open and I crouched on the other side. One of us had to get him. Then, from out under the rise of about two and a half inches off the ground, popped a baby robin, all of two and a half inches, not even a fledgling. "Cheep! Cheep!" it went, madder than hell. Ed and I began to laugh. Ed fell over on the lawn with the empty sack and he and I were convulsed in laughter. John was different.

"I don't think it's very funny," he said, and stomped into the house. He was very angry, and when John was angry he was angry. He did not speak to either Ed or me for a few days. Still, he did catch the cat. It was a battle, and in the process he was thoroughly scratched up. At the

height of his successful cat catching escapade he pointed a finger at me in one of his rages and said, "I told you! I told you I would catch that cat! I did!"

That was the way it always was with John. If something funny happened to him or perhaps he had been the cause of it, or it was against him, he did not like it. Yet if I or his friends fell down he became hysterical.

Life with John was never dull.

We lived in the haunted house four months, and then John's usual restlessness came back to life. He wanted me to go back east, to New York. He did not tell me, but he had found out, unbeknown to me; that his old friends, with the exception of Ed Ricketts, were not his friends anymore; they resented his success. They should have welcomed it, been happy for him. Such is jealousy. I did not know this until many years later. He also found out that Carol was moving back to the west coast, so we packed up and went to New York. John directed my mother and stepfather to sell the haunted house in Pacific Grove. Mother did, although John's lawyers said it couldn't be done because it was too haunted. My mother did not care. She finally swelled enough courage and, standing in the house alone, said out loud, "now listen here, Johansen, if you don't behave I am going to burn your house down!" From that time on there was no trouble, and the house was sold in seventy two hours to an army captain.

John and I flew to New York, and we moved into a double suite at the Bedford Hotel. It faced the river. John liked that because he could stare at the river and it reminded him of the ocean at Monterey. Mother did not exactly approve of my going to New York with John, but she knew how much I was in love. And I was. She loved me, and whatever I wanted, she wanted.

We had not been in New York long when, one morning over breakfast, the news came over the radio: Pearl Harbour had been attacked. John shot out of his chair. He was in complete horror. He wanted to go to war right then. "I told you we would have to get in it sometime. I told you!" he blurted.

By this time, John had finished *Sea of Cortez* with Ed. Ed was a great influence on John until World War II ended. As I said earlier, they had this unique bond of friendship and respect between each other. And before Pearl Harbour, John had been living out the war in Europe. He ate, slept and dreamed it. The radio was never turned off. The idea of *The Moon is Down* had been forming in his mind all during this period. So life at the Bedford went on as we were at war with Japan. But there were moments when the war did not exist. One of those involved our dear, dear friend Burgess Meredith, the actor. Burgess was a lieutenant, a liaison officer, and had a terrible crush on a young, beautiful singer at the St. Regis, where he was billeted.

John and Burgess decided they would have a night on the town, which was alright with me because I never stopped John from having his night out with the boys before and after we were married. Men had to do that at times, even though they loved their wife, girlfriend or mistress madly. No woman should stop her man from having a night out with the boys. I never knew about John's nights out with the girls. And he had them. But what I didn't know, I didn't have to worry about. Burgess wanted to see his friend when she finished work, about one in the morning. He took John to her dressing room, and they invited her out to Reuben's Restaurant for a sandwich. John, of course, was taking a back seat. After they had eaten, she said, "Let's go to my apartment," which they did. She made them drinks, and Burgess naturally tried to make points with the Junoesque girl, who was somewhat on the tall side. She obviously enjoyed the attention Burgess gave her, and, besides, she was damned good looking.

Suddenly, the key turned in the lock and in walked a portly gentleman. As John explained to me later, it was obvious that the singer was being kept. Burgess' mouth fell. After all, any man who has a crush on a girl thinks he's the only one - and he is not.

"I think we should leave," John said.

"No, no, don't go, finish your drink," implored the man.

They told me they had another Scotch and soda, which the man made while they sat looking on, saying nothing. They finished their drink and thanked the man. John said he was pleasant, but his face was cold, like ice. John and Burgess left, but began to feel ill. They brushed it off as having too much to drink, so they started walking back to the Bedford.

Just before daylight I was aroused by two of the sickest looking men you have ever seen. The "gentleman" had given each a Mickey Finn!

All I could think of was Mutt and Jeff. John- six foot tall and Burgess a foot smaller, looking smaller than ever.

In they came and it was a fight to get to the bathroom. Of course, I had to mop up after them. I ran out to a nearby drug store to get baking soda. Now how do you go into a drug store first thing in the morning and say, "I'd like something to counteract a Mickey Finn?" A Mickey makes you vomit, and you have diarrhoea. The only thing I could also think of was to get a hen and boil it, and I made some good chicken broth. Burgess was laid out on the couch, and John lay groaning in bed. Burgess had ruined the front of his uniform. I sponged it down, and even washed their underwear. It was quite a scene.

John admired Burgess for he had a great sense of humor, and held his liquor well, which John also admired and the two of them raised great hell together.

Life with John Steinbeck was quite a combination of heaven and hell - I never knew where one started and the other left off.

I was never, ever bored with John, angry, yes, but how could you be bored with a man who always, always had something exciting to say, even if he made it up with his tremendous imagination, and often he did.

After the Mickey Finn episode with Burgess, John once again began to grow restless and moody, but I was used to that by now. I did not mind his moods; our lovemaking was passionate, morning, afternoon or night; John was a man of much strength, not only in his mind but in his body.

He decided we ought to rent a house at Snedens' Landing overlooking the Hudson River. It was an upscale area, and one of our neighbors was Burl Ives. It was twelve miles from Manhattan and "the action," as he said. We moved into our retreat, as John liked to think of it. With us was our Willie, our sheepdog, who was just a puppy. Once more he had moved, and like everywhere else we lived, John had to have his personal "nest", and it had to be away from the house and the telephone. He did not like his nest to have a beautiful view, either. Many times he wrote in articles that he hated a room with a view, because he found himself staring out of the window and not concentrating on his work. He found his nest at Snedens' Landing - a woodshed.

"I'm going to clean it out and move in," he said. He got a chair and a writing board, a place for his coffee cups, his pipes and his ashtrays. John always used an outsized writing board as his desk. He also liked directors' chairs, camp chairs. He brought one from the Army and Navy store, and then he was ready to go to work. Usually, he had six or eight pipes, which he took

good care of; he preferred a pipe as a change from cigarettes. Whenever he bought anything it was always the finest. He also bought a new record player and beautiful records. He loved classical music. His favorite composers were Beethoven, Bach, Monteverdi, some Ravel and quite a lot of Debussy and Stravinsky. Oddly enough, he also liked Prokofiev and Schoenberg. Sometimes, during a work week, he would listen to a symphony, stretch out, close his eyes and that would refresh him.

There is a special story attached to the nest at Snedens' Landing – skunks. A family of skunks moved in on John. One morning he came flying out of his nest yelling “MY GOD! WHERE IS THE SKUNK?” His face was absolutely blue.

Our house was then more or less in the woods. I didn't know where the hell the skunk was until one morning when I was up at dawn. I looked out of the kitchen window and there they were, Momma and Poppa Skunk with five little baby skunks out for an early morning walk. When they finished, they went right back under the woodshed. I called John but he didn't believe me. “Alright, let's set the alarm for five thirty tomorrow, you'll see.” We did. Out trotted the skunk family. He killed himself laughing.

John thought he had an answer to that problem. He built a feed pen hoping the skunks would stay out while he worked. They did not. When the baby skunks were old enough they left, but by that time the heat and humidity rising from the Hudson River was too much, and John moved his nest into the guest room. He wasn't mad about that situation; he wouldn't have harmed the skunks for anything, neither would I.

That period of my life with John was a pleasant one, the only way to describe it. During the shad season we would take an afternoon walk and watch the fishermen on the shad run. John would wave at them with a handkerchief, and they would stop and he would get his shad, so he could have his shad roe, which he adored. John's friends then became my friends. There were some wonderful people living nearby, Maxwell Anderson, the playwright, and his very beautiful wife, Marg, and Burgess, who by then was wooing Paulette Goddard, the actress, and Henry Varnum Poor, the ceramicist and painter, and Kurt Weill, the songwriter and his wife, Lenya. Other neighbors we had then were Sally Lorenz, Pare's wife, and Jack Radcliffe, who wrote for Readers Digest. **Living** next door to the Weill's was another great actress, Helen Hayes.

There were plenty of dinner parties and barbeques, and show business and literary talk, and talk of the war in Europe and the Pacific. But John became restless and discontented as the summer progressed, and the humidity increased. John felt that the war would end before he had a chance to get in it. After dinner together, when we figured it was digested, we used to walk down the stone steps into our octagon-shaped pool, and we would sit there until we were chilled to the bone and then run like hell for bed before we started to sweat again. John never thrived well on humidity. Does anyone?

Every evening he sat and removed the mildew from his beautiful handmade Mexican boots, cursing the summer weather. By August he had become angry at Snedens' Landing. “I want to go back to California,” he said one day, completely without warning. When John made up his mind, that was it, believe me. It was packing time again.

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