

THE ACCOUNTANT

BOB VOLPERT

THE ACCOUNTANT LOOKED TO WEIGH a rotund 240 plus and wore a flowery unbuttoned shirt that showcased his exposed belly. A prominent gold chain and pendant dangled from his neck. He was leering at every woman who entered Perry's, the popular San Francisco watering hole on Union Street. Just a smarmy, creepy guy trying to look irresistible on a Sunday afternoon.

Our office was located in the Cow Hollow district, just a few blocks away. I'd made contact with the guy by some odd referral and he had invited me to join him for a beer to see if he could straighten out our taxes. A professional consultation on a Sunday and at a bar should have been a clue that things might not work out, but that hadn't occurred to me at the time.

We'd never met before, yet the first thing out of his mouth was "You pay too much in taxes." I hadn't filed taxes in about 5 years. His spiel presented the possibility of taking care of a lingering problem that was likely to deteriorate unless something was received by the IRS soon. He offered to trade the tax work for a Middle Fork trip.

On the bus back from the Middle Fork take-out, the accountant tells me the trip has been great and that he'd have my tax

returns ready next time I got to San Francisco. And, by the way, “I’m going to stay in Salmon for a few extra days.”

The extra days started out at the Stagecoach Inn, a motel just down the hill from our house. When our crew headed out for another trip, the accountant said staying at the guide house would be preferable to the Stagecoach and he moved in with us. So living at our two-bedroom house at 306 Broadway was Mary and me, our three young kids, guides between trips, and an accountant who showed no inclination to leave. He slept most of the day, got up and adorned his magnificent body with the gold chain thing, and went out around 9 pm every night, returning after the bars had closed.

Conversations that ensued:

Mary: “What’s he doing?”

Bob: “I don’t know.”

Mary: “Get him out of here. Now.”

Bob: “I’ll try.”

Bob to Accountant: “Probably time to head home.”

Accountant: “I’m waiting for a phone call.”

A few days later he got up early and announces that he is leaving. We rush to the Salmon airport but just miss the morning commuter flight to Boise. The next day, we got there in plenty of time, drop him off and celebrate when we hear the engine of the plane as it flew above our house.

We never saw the guy again. He simply skipped town. When I called my office to check if he’d dropped off my tax returns, I learned that no one had heard or seen him. The accountant was somewhat of a neighborhood fixture and his disappearance had sparked local gossip. Someone in our office had overheard a cryptic conversation about his being in the witness protection program.

As soon as I heard that, I made a beeline to San Francisco to retrieve my accounting records.

Steve Cutright worked with me back then. He was a former river guide and had joined our company to help straighten out our accounting and financial chaos. Steve was a big, strong guy and I asked him to accompany me to the accountant's office, located on the second floor of a nearby old Victorian building. He was to guard the stairway and block entry to anyone heading upstairs. I tried the doorknob to his office. It was locked so I kicked in the wooden panel of the door. I entered the office and slid open the top drawer of the guy's desk where stacks of pornographic photos greeted me. Then to the filing cabinet where miraculously I found my records and those of a friend I'd referred to the accountant. I grabbed the files. A full dose of adrenalin propelled us back to our office.

I'd gotten my records and knew someone who could complete the unfinished tax returns. I still wasn't sure what was going on but I was relieved to have recovered all my stuff. I had no idea what had happened to the accountant. At the end of that day, my bodyguard and I stopped at a nearby neighborhood bar to rehash events. It was a place where the accountant used to hang out. It was crowded and very noisy. We were seated on stools at the bar and I heard snippets of conversation from nearby patrons.

Pick-up lines, jokes, and sexual innuendos filtered to us. I caught words but not whole sentences: Dinner, Office, Idaho, Protection, Tequila, Screw, Steak, Friend, Dog, Pitale, Gun, Hide, Chardonnay, Dice, Trunk, Belvedere, Missing, Belly, River, Feds, Hiding, Salmon, Witness. Others too. I'd heard enough to know that we would never, ever see or hear from the accountant again.

Eventually taxes were filed, I got a story out of the deal, Steve went on to a professional career as Fire Chief at a couple of Bay Area fire departments, my wife forgave me for housing a criminal, no one in Salmon ever mentioned him, and I was left with one regret.

I just wish I had been privy to that phone call he got in Salmon.