Famous Female Artist

by Jerry Ratch

I remember being sent a picture once from one of my old roommates, Louise, back in Chicago where I came from. The photo was taken when she'd come out for a visit to California. In the picture I am sitting on the front stairs of my house in the Rockridge area of Oakland with my arm around my dog Alfie, a beautiful, sleek gray Weimaraner who was as big as I was, and we're sitting on the porch in the bright sunlight. I look full of life, and am hopeful. I'm grinning into the camera, in a pink short-sleeve shirt and blue jeans. My hair was all curls, the way I liked to wear it then. I was beaming, and looked utterly happy.

And *I was happy,* pretty much at that time, except for one major thing.

My art career had been going fairly well. But I remember one time in particular when it struck me that something pretty substantial was missing from my life. I had driven a piece of my artwork across the Bay to deliver it to the fancy house of a collector who lived on the Peninsula. This should have been one of those moments of great satisfaction. It was the type of thing every artist is aiming for, their entire career. I delivered the piece, and they loved it. They were very gracious and lavished me with praise. But something was distinctly missing from the event too.

Just before getting on the San Mateo Bridge to drive back home to Oakland, I pulled into the parking lot of a fast food burger joint and went inside. I sat in a booth by myself. The waitress was staring at the "Famous Female Artist" T-shirt that I had on, but didn't say anything and took my order instead. As I sat there waiting for the food to arrive, I felt strangely empty. I looked out the window. It was one of those luminous late fall days Northern California was capable of, with that notorious clear Mediterranean light.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/jerry-ratch/famous-female-artist»*
Copyright © 2010 Jerry Ratch. All rights reserved.

This was the heaven of my dreams, all right, which I had always sought after. That was right. But why then, and how and where, did I go wrong? I was living where I wanted to be. I had a check for $1,000 in my hand after selling a piece of my artwork. Everything I had planned and worked for, everything I had hoped for, it was all working out — except for one thing. *Why,* I had to ask, *didn't I have someone to share this with?*

Alfie and I would get in my van and go out at midnight for a doughnut. Or an eclair. A French cruller, to be exact. Sometimes we would get Blondie's Pizza on Telegraph Avenue near the Berkeley campus, if it got to be too lonely and restless at night. One of my artist girlfriends once told me that I wouldn't meet a man until Alfie died. Boy, was she ever blunt — although she was right. But my relationship to my dog was something that was very special to me, because in truth Alfie meant more to me than any man ever could. I still have dreams about that dog.

But then it turned out that poor Alfie had this problem where his balls had never dropped. And when I was told it could shorten his lifespan, I grew determined to do something about it. They had an enormous facility at the veterinary school up in Davis for working on problems like this. I had no choice but to make an appointment for him. And did he ever create a scene there!

Here's what happened. On the day of his appointment I got in the van with him at six o'clock in the morning. I hate getting up at an hour like that. I was very grumpy, and I drove him all the way there from Oakland on Highway 80, which is the Interstate to Davis, non-stop. It took two hours. I just made it for the appointment at 8:00 a.m.

Alfie didn't like it much there and made a terrible stink, apparently, when I left. We had never spent one day apart since I got him, and I don't think he understood what was happening to him.

I remember saying to him when I left him there: "Alfie, give me your paw." And I gave him a big kiss. It was very sad to see him in that cold place. I heard him let out a yelp when they closed the door. I couldn't eat. I wasn't hungry, so I climbed back in the van

and drove all the way back along Highway 80 non-stop to Oakland. I didn't want to stop anywhere and think about maybe turning back. It was an operation they had to do, or he was going to die early.

When I got to my house in Oakland, there was a call waiting for me as soon as I opened the door. It was from the vets in Davis. They said: "Will you come right away please and get your Weimaraner? He's impossible to handle." They didn't leave a name of who called, or a number to return the call or anything. The message sounded urgent. They were very firm. They said, "Please come at once! Things are very bad here."

I saw red. They were going to not only *not help* Alfie, I thought, they were going to hurt him if I didn't get back there right away. It was bad enough leaving him in their hands. It was bad enough that I was going to have to spend the night without him sleeping on my bed. I could tell by the way that woman said it, that they intended to do him some great harm, and I flipped out. I jumped right back in that van and drove straight back out on the Interstate non-stop to Davis. That made it a total of three hundred miles so far in one day. And my van was a piece of trash.

When I got to the vets, they had one of those huge clear plastic scoops around Alfie's neck so he couldn't chew on his stitches, but there was one big problem that I could see right off. He had gotten some of his own poop caught up in the scoop, and in the effort to get rid of it, he started tossing it all around the office. People were jumping out of the way. He wouldn't stop doing it, since they had gotten him pretty excited. He was flinging turds everywhere that I could see. They had brown spots all over the walls, and they had the windows wide open with people fanning the air and leaning out trying to breathe, while at the same time trying to run a business, or a school, or whatever it was there.

I loved that dog too much, probably. I desperately wanted only the best for him. And yet, there was something missing from the very center of my life at the same time, and I think I knew it too.

So one of my artist girlfriends, who goes by the name Loofah Mitt, just came right out one day and said to me, “You know

something, Parker? I think you're not going to meet a man until Alfie's gone.”

2

I've heard it said that it's impossible, strictly speaking, to have the tables turned and find a woman stalking a man. Well, that may be so, strictly speaking, but in my life there have been circumstances where it has crossed over that border somewhat.

This artist, Loofah Mitt, gave up waiting for Mr. Right to just happen her way, when she realized one day that all the good ones were already taken. They were already in someone else's arms, in other words, and she grew determined to do something extraordinary about it. So she befriended the man of her choice, when she thought there was a chance that things were not completely okay in his marriage. Then she simply waited. She would be the one who was there when things began falling apart.

When she revealed her strategy to me, I thought back with a start about someone with whom I'd been crossing paths maybe too frequently. It turned out that it was this man named Philip Janov, though I did not know what his name was from a hole in the proverbial wall. I just kept noticing this man wherever I seemed to land in life, around Berkeley and Oakland, practically from the moment I first set foot in the Bay Area.

One time, for instance, the first time I ever came to Berkeley, happened before I even permanently moved here from Chico where I was teaching. Boy, was that place ever a pit! I was truly unhappy up there. After two sweltering one-hundred-ten to one-hundred-fifteen degree summers, I came down to Berkeley for the summer of 1985, and realized the Bay Area was where I really belonged.

One day I spotted a man writing furiously in his notebook from a stack of books at the French Hotel Café on the North side of town. I kept going back in there, and nearly every time, there he

was, writing, writing and drinking one of those famous latte's they make. What in the world did this guy do for a living, I couldn't help but wonder, that he was nearly always in there? I tried getting a glance at some of the books he was working from, but they were way beyond me. I think it had something to do with a lexicon for Finnegan's Wake. Something like that.

Then one day a really pretty, petite, but considerably younger dark-haired girl showed up, who seemed to know him quite well. He became agitated and flustered when she sat down at his table. He put everything away, and he began staring at her while she talked. Twice he wiped the sweat from his forehead. I surmised she might have been a student of his, maybe a graduate student. Then she got up and left him there. The first thing he did was run to the bathroom. He even asked me if I would watch his books while he did. Sure, I said. That was how I saw what he'd been working on.

While he was in the bathroom, the thought crossed my mind: maybe I had to become more aggressive and be more like Loofah Mitt. Maybe I was missing the man meant for me, and he was really right there under my nose and I simply wasn't seeing it. Was that possible? I remember it being said to us once in art school: *Trees will know the names of women.* It was in a commencement speech by a really famous woman artist. It was becoming our time in the world, wasn't it? Maybe we had to take more chances, just like men, if we were going to get anywhere.

But this man never came out of the bathroom. Or if he did, it was well after dinner. I waited for another hour and gave up on him ever returning. I left his books with the Spanish guys behind the counter and went out to get something to eat. Also, Alfie would be waiting for me to come back home. He would be restless to go out for his dinnertime walk. I didn't want that dog, as much as I loved him, leaving one of his piles around my summer sublet. The people I had rented from would have been furious.

The next day, and for numerous days after that, I kept going back to that café, hoping to find this intriguing man again and maybe talk to him, but he never returned. That was when I grew

obsessed with finding him again. That girl was definitely too young for him, I believed, but I — I was just right. I had to find that man because I had an inkling that he could just be the man for me.

I needed help, and that was when I broke down and called my old boyfriend, Alex, from back in my Chicago days. If anyone knew anything at all about obsession, it was Alex. He wouldn't leave me alone. But he was also a pretty good detective at the same time. The truth was, he knew everything, or could find it out, about anyone.

❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊

Right about that time I started a painting of this man, sitting by a small round green metal table at this café. It turned out to be Philip Janov, though I could not know that then. He was wearing a chamois-colored jacket, and was sitting looking off seriously into the distance — not at me, like Philip actually did when he kept staring and leering at me, making me so uncomfortable that I finally reported him to the man watching cars in the parking lot at Oliveira's. (This was in the future.)

I put streaks of gray in the beard on the man's chin, and in his sideburns. It made Philip, or the man in the painting, look distinguished. Gray can look that way on men, but not on us.

It was the exact same gray as on Alfie. I realized with a start one day after making this painting, how exact that color was. I made Alfie come over and stand next to the painting when I saw what I'd put in the man's moustache and sideburns and beard. Alfie was so nervous, I had to calm him, trying to make him stand still for a moment.

It was a man, not a dog, make no mistake. But that color was exactly like the gray on Alfie. For God's sake, I loved even the smell of that dog. The men who'd come over hated it and turned up their noses, but there it was. I loved that dog so.

❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊

Alex got on a jet and flew right out from Chicago. But I think he'd gotten the wrong idea completely from my message. He showed up knocking on the screen door without so much as a phone call. When I opened the door, he just wandered in like he'd never been out of my life, and immediately went for the TV set and switched it on. Then my pink radio, sitting on the telephone desk. He began switching the channels all around, trying to pick up some sports.

"What are you doing?" I asked, flabbergasted. "You just got here and already you're into the sports again?"

"Yeah? So?" he said. "I'm just trying to get a few scores."

"I can see that," I said. "What is it with you? Nothing ever changes, does it?"

"It's the Chicago in me." He went for the refrigerator, pawed through everything in there, and let out a yowl. "Parker, there's no beer in here!"

Alex had really put on weight. He'd always been a big man, everything about him was oversized. Well, almost everything. But he'd grown positively immense now and bought his clothes only from Eddie Bauer's Fashions For Big And Tall Men. He had a real belly going and didn't even bother trying to hide it anymore.

He bent over and kept switching to all the channels. He was so big, the way huge people are, that when he bent over like that, his shirt rode up and you could see that his pants were riding too low, and as if in a time-warp photograph out of the past it exposed the top part of the crack in his ass. It made me gag. He'd always worn a bushy brown beard when I was still with him back in Chicago in the old days. Now, the only hair left on his face was a moustache, and a hint of gray had started creeping into that. It made him look distinctly like a used car salesman.

"What makes you think you can just march right back into my life as if nothing had ever happened to make things any different?" I asked.

"Well, what's changed?" he shot back.

"Plenty for me," I said. "Maybe nothing ever changes in your world, but that's not the case for me."

"Oh?" he said. "Are you married?"

"No," I said.

"Well, I'm here to change that," he said. "You'll never do any better than me, Parker."

"I beg your pardon?" I was flabbergasted at the rooted Chicago nature that was still there inside the man. Nothing really had changed for him, and it was fifteen years already that we'd been apart.

"I'm the best thing you've got going," he said. "And you're not going to do any better either, and you know it."

I grew furious. I heard my jaw actually pop when my mouth fell open. I heard a click inside of me.

"Did you bring your things?" I asked.

"They're out in the car," he replied. He looked hopeful.

"You can put them in this room here," I said, pointing at my study. "Roll out your sleeping bag. You're sleeping on the floor." I noticed his mouth fall open, and I frankly enjoyed seeing it.

"You've got exactly two days to find yourself a room or an apartment," I said. "Here's the key. I'm going down to my art studio to do some work. I'm on a tight deadline on a project I have to get finished."

"Don't I get a kiss, Parker?" Alex asked.

I looked right at him and didn't even smile. "One more thing," I said. "My Weimaraner's name is Alfie. He sleeps on my bed at night. Alfie loves me and will do anything I say. He's a little on the nervous side. Don't touch my bedroom door or he'll take off your hand.

"Well, guess that's about it," I told him. "Welcome to California. It's great out here. It's like living in paradise, but it can take some getting used to. Remember, you're not in Chicago anymore. Things are different here."

But Alex just didn't know how to keep his big Chicago mouth shut. Not two days later he told me, "Nobody but me is

willing to put up with a woman who's got an old smelly dog." Again he repeated, "I'm the best thing you've got going."

That did it. That was the last day Alex spent on my couch. I sent the big lummox packing, off to find himself an apartment that very night.

But I really needed Alex, and he knew it.

3

That was when they started building Oliveira's Café in the heart of the Rockridge area of Oakland. They began building on an empty triangular lot right across the street from where the BART train let out.

I began walking Alfie past the construction site for Oliveira's the minute they broke ground on it, because I had an immediate sensation that this place was going to mean something special in my life. Something big, I mean, unusual. I didn't say anything to anyone, because my girlfriends would have probably, maybe rightfully, thought I was losing it and had gone right over the edge. But after that sensation came over me so powerfully one morning when it was misting out, well, after that I couldn't stay away and kept walking Alfie past the place every day watching them make progress. Sometimes I would return in the afternoons, just to make sure they were still working.

I think all my artist girlfriends got their hopes up as soon as the workmen got started on that place. I got this certain, distinct feeling this new upscale spot with its Italian Bistro flavor — exactly like a corner café I'd been in once in Padua, Italy, before boarding an early morning train into Venice — was going to hold something special for me. I don't know where an idea like that comes from, though I'm certain all of us understood that we might meet a better class of men there.

Alfie would stop and sniff along the bottom of the fencing material that kept people out of the area. Alfie was an unusually big Weimaraner, with one of those short docked tails that retrievers have. Though what he was bred to retrieve exactly was under suspicion, since all I ever saw him going after was banana peels, whole oranges off my table (he loved those), and nearly every piece of paper or plastic bag that moved and lifted with the wind. Then too, embarrassingly, he would pack his muzzle deep into the crotch or butt of just about any living creature, and this included men, women and children.

Some of the guys on the construction job would hoot and holler and make comments about my Weimaraner, among other things. But that was not what I was interested in when I walked Alfie past the spot every morning. Not at all. The sort of men I was thinking about were the ones who would frequent the café itself when it was finished. With each day that passed, I couldn't help wondering inside if something really important was coming into my life out of the atmosphere they were creating. Finally they sent in the plasterers for the finishing touches on the interior. Then along came the painters. Once the painters arrived with their black or red, white and blue American flag lunch buckets, thermoses of coffee, cigarettes hanging off their lips — you knew that things were about to happen.

One day one of the painters who were working on Oliveira's Café stopped me and asked about my dog. It was around noontime, when they were on their lunch break. He was a short thin guy with greasy black hair and a thick black moustache. He wore a red bandana around his head and, oddly, an old dirty ascot. I think he was a frustrated artist, who'd turned to applying paint to walls instead of to canvas.

I saw his head turning as he followed my ass, which was right about at his eye level, because they were sitting on the ground against the wall with their legs splayed out halfway across the sidewalk.

“Say, honey,” he said, “could you tell me something?”

When I hear the word “Honey,” something happens inside.

“Yeah, I could tell you something,” I said. I let Alfie finish marking his territory.

At one point I could swear Alfie had become superstitious about that place, as though he were growing jealous. Of course, I know intellectually there was no way for a dog to achieve such human traits, not to that degree anyway. But Alfie had no cause to be alarmed, because the truth was that I loved him more than anything.

“Sorry, lady,” the painter said. “Just interested in knowing what kind of dog you got there. Isn't she a Weimaraner?”

“It's a he.”

“That thing is a he? I didn't see any balls.”

“They never dropped. He's got one ball now.”

“You got a one-ball dog?” He grinned from ear to ear, looking back around at his buddies. “That there is a one-ball Weimaraner. Ain't she got something?”

When this man smiled, gold teeth shown at the front of his mouth. He let me have the full show. He was pretty sure he was getting somewhere now.

“Sandwich?” he said, holding his out toward Alfie and me. That was a big mistake. It already had a full bite taken out of it, for one thing. And it was on balloon white bread and had that awful, bright yellow mustard, which I hate. Undoubtedly it was full of baloney, but Alfie would eat just about anything on the planet that passed for food.

“I don't accept candy from strangers,” I said. I turned away.

“Hey! Don't get all stuck up with me. I am a real painter, you know. I'm a famous artist. They reviewed a show of mine once.”

He made the error of extending his hand even further, waving the floppy sandwich at me. And that was when Alfie lunged for it, nearly taking off his hand, though Alfie was a professional at removing food from sources like that. He definitely had the man's hand in his jaws, then he let loose just long enough for the man to

drop the sandwich. Alfie scarfed it up before I could say: “Alfie — No! No! Bad dog!”

I apologized profusely, pulling Alfie down the street as he kept on wolfing the thing down.

“Jesus Christ, Lady!”

When I looked back, I saw the painter turning his hand over, back and forth, back and forth, examining every side of it for damage. But Alfie was no slouch in these matters. He was definitely a professional when it came to getting what he wanted. I knew there would be no damage to the man's hand. Not unless someone was trying to harm me. That would have been a different matter entirely. I pity the man who wanted to try something when Alfie was around. It would not have been a pretty site.

“Hey, you can't just run away from this!” the guy yelled. He jumped up, pointing. “That dog is dangerous. He's a damned cur!”

That stopped me. I tugged on Alfie's leash and started dragging him back to where this little twerp was grinning from ear to ear, holding out his wrist toward me like a wimp. Alfie weighed close to 90 lbs. It was no easy task getting him to head in a direction he didn't want to go. Myself, I was only about 110 lbs., when I was wet. But Alfie was still wolfing down the last remnants of the guy's sandwich, and wasn't paying attention to the future.

I stopped short of where the faux painter stood in the middle of his open lunch bucket, torn-up sandwich wrappers, and cans of Budweiser. The two other painters sat there watching us closely. One of them was enormously red in the face, and had two tall Buds open between his legs.

“Listen,” I said. “This is an intelligent pedigreed dog. You want me to let him off the leash? He can develop a real temper if he thinks I'm being threatened.”

The painter glanced at his buddies.

“You wouldn't dare. That thing's a lethal weapon.”

“He'd retrieve your balls, wherever they are,” I said, “if I asked him to.”

“Shit, lady,” he said. The painter looked around at his friends. “Just keep dragging that damned horse down the road, will you?”

He went and sat back down with his back against the wall. He pulled his knees up in front of him and popped open a can of Budweiser.

“C'mon, Johnny,” he said to one of the painters. “Give me half your sandwich before I have to go get tough with the little bitch. We got to get back to work in ten minutes. I don't have time for this kind of crap.”

But this was exactly the spot where I was destined to meet Philip Janov.