

I Know You, Ladies and Gentlemen

by Jerry Ratch

On my way home that first night, I stopped off at a liquor store on San Pablo Avenue and bought a semi-expensive (\$2.98) bottle of zinfandel, a real luxury for us. But I figured I would have a paycheck coming and wanted to celebrate my getting a real job in the big world.

When I got home, I was dead tired. All I wanted to do was have a drink and fall asleep. To hell with poetry. My bones were tired. But Mary Jo said we had to hire a baby-sitter and go out somewhere to a restaurant and celebrate, now that we were making some money. And she had an interview for a technical typist job at the university in the math department too, so we were going to be flush with dough.

But when she called Bananas, a baby-sitting service, they were completely booked and no one could come up the hill at a moment's notice. Anyway everybody drove VW's in those days, and half of them couldn't make it all the way up to Grizzly Peak. Our rental house was more or less at the top of the Berkeley hills, on a street called Fairlawn, though there wasn't a lawn in sight, to be frank. Or a fair either.

Then I remembered Penny saying she could baby-sit. I gave her a call and she said to come get her and she would do it. Her voice sounded so appealing over the phone, and she was saving our lives. I rushed down the hill and drove her back up to the house. When she walked in and saw our little crowd of snot-nosed devils, I thought she was going to back right out the door. But Penny was brave. She stayed the course, and off we flew. Both of Mary Jo and myself drank way too much wine that night.

By the time we got back up to the house, the kids had Penny cornered and sobbing with her legs tucked up under her arms on a chair at the kitchen table. There were streaks running down her cheeks. She had bare arms. They were so muscular, but the boys had her backed into a corner, and you could tell she was a little frightened by them. I took her by the arm and led her out the door, saying I had to drive her home.

We said almost nothing going down the hill and across town. I pulled up in front of the rooming house and shut off the ignition. We turned to look at each other. Her eyes were so dark and appealing. I pulled her toward me across the seat. She nuzzled under my arm.

"It was that bad?" I asked.

"What have you gotten yourself into, with them?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Oh, Philip, you poor, poor man. You're really in for it, you know that?"

She kissed me lightly on my neck, and I felt something starting to rise up inside my pants. She had such a faint perfume to her skin. I don't know what it was that was so appealing about her. Automatically my hand slid beneath her loose shirt and over her tits. I fondled those large life-giving nipples. Her skin was moist and warm, and her hand ventured up my leg to the most important intersection. She felt my hard-on and kept on feeling it for the longest time.

"We should either do this or not do this," she stated.

I nodded. I didn't know what to do. I know what my heart told me to do. Never in my past would I have hesitated like this. Never.

Then suddenly Von Meckel was at the car window like an apparition.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Penny, get out of that car. Come here! You're not allowed to go near him again!"

He yanked the door open and waited.

"I can explain," I said. I leaned over her.

"Penny!"

Quietly she got out. She looked back at me and he slammed the car door. I heard him saying, "He's a damned surrealist, that's all. He is the enemy and you're not allowed to go near him. You understand? We cannot be weak. These are dangerous times. The enemy is to be wiped out. Didn't you see me cutting my own leg over his so-called poems? He's so retro! I could not bear it. Do you understand? Do you understand me perfectly?"

So that *was him* immolating himself at my reading on Telegraph Avenue! It was Von Meckel himself. Penny had neglected to tell me it was him. He was such a nervous and precise fellow that he probably didn't want word of that kind of emotion getting out to the world, and had forbid her telling me.

When I got back up the hill, Mary Jo took one look at me and pulled me by the collar like Tom Sawyer's mother. She sniffed all along my collar.

"Were you fucking her? Tell me now! Tell me! I can smell her on you. Were you fucking the babysitter — *just like Mitchell?* I'm telling you right now, that better be the last time I see that woman around here. Just because I've slept with Randy a few times doesn't mean you can go sneaking around fucking the babysitter. The one thing you can't do is fuck the babysitter, you hear?" She was pulling my ear now. "You're no better than my fucking husband with his secretaries! *His secretaries! Oh!*"

She took all my shirts and pants out of the closet and threw them in a heap on the mattress.

"You can pack your bags and get out. Right now. Get out, get out, *get out!*"

She could really scream. Her kids pushed open the door to our bedroom and stood looking at me with the ugliest sneers they could muster. I mean butt ugly!

"Wait a minute now," I said. "I wasn't fucking no babysitter or anybody else. I can't go moving out now. It's the middle of the night, for Chrissakes. C'mon."

"Call up your buddies to come get you. I don't care. I don't care! Just get out of my house!"

She opened the front door and began chucking all of my clothing out into the ivy. My shirts, my trousers were strewn over bushes with the spiders, the skunk that lived in the neighborhood, which you could smell now and then. Raccoons. Mice! I mean, it was a damned jungle out there. I was not a backwoodsman. And now a fog had rolled in, to boot.

And suddenly an image flashed through my mind. I had seen this old, old lady sitting in a chair at her window one day when I was coming up the hill. And suddenly it all began to fit into my new sequence of poems, Puppet X:

I know you
ladies and gentlemen

We see the near future
through you

Your factual face
as you sit indoors

Youthless
In your ordinary chair

"Mice run through their vision
Mice run through the plot
O la la
and memory
is a lot..."

I, also
have memories

One afternoon

I was myself.

I saw it all, in a flash. Holy shit! I thought. This is good. I have to sit down and begin writing. This is serious. Dead serious!

I would rather be doing this than eating, or fucking, or anything. It was exhilarating. If I could only keep this up, who knows what could happen!

That's how dedicated we were in those days. Words actually meant something to us. We believed in their ultimate power. That's how free we were.

I spent the night at Greg's room, which was in a flophouse hotel on Telegraph Avenue. What a flea-bitten joint that was! Alcoholics raging up and down the stairs and in the hallways all night long. People shooting up drugs and nodding out right on the front stoop. Greg felt right at home there.

I needed time to write. This long poem that had been brewing for some time now was definitely working its way into the light. I had the feeling that I was pregnant with something huge and was about to give birth. I needed a field to lie down in. I needed a mattress on the floor of the world. I needed someone to just give me a little space, that's all, a little room and I would bring something big and beautiful and delicious into the world, so help me God! I wasn't asking for much.

The world really did need our words. Really.

There it was. We were so cocksure of ourselves then. And the whole food revolution with Chez Panisse hadn't even begun yet. That was about to become a whole other story. Maybe even bigger than ours, who knows? Let's see, food, words. Words, food. Hard to weigh the difference. All I knew was, there were definitely times we were willing to skip a meal for words. I'm not so sure it worked the other way around for the foodies. Pretty sure it didn't, if you want to know the truth.

The next day Mary Jo came by White Front to pick me up after work. She was sober and wanted to make up, and she took me back up the hill and we balled our brains out.

Then it happened. Our first lay-off at White Front Stores. I wasn't used to this. It was a total and complete shocker. I needed stability. I needed order. I needed to see my way through things. I liked organizing and creating a system, a strategy. Anyone who builds a longer book is that way by nature, I think.

We were out of work while they re-tooled. Sales were way off. They didn't know when we'd be called back to work. It scared the crap out of all of us. I could see it in their eyes — people depended on that job to feed their kids.

But I did get my first taste of Unemployment, though the size of the check I received was miniscule. That was when I wrote the whole first third of my long sequence of poems, Puppet X, because I felt so jerked around, like a puppet. And with Richard Nixon still in office, manipulating things like milk prices and the war in Vietnam, well, weren't we all just puppets? I wrote the first third of that book in that two week lay-off. In order to get any work done with all those kids swarming around up at the house, I kept drinking Jack Daniels Black Label straight or on the rocks much of the time. I would create a kind of shield around me while I worked. Things were really not that different from the raving drunkards at Greg's flophouse hotel. Then the next thing I knew we were called back to work, and we all settled right back into our routines, dumb and happy, as if nothing had happened. They understood us all so well. Yes, they did!

We decided to take a break, and piled the kids and camping gear into the VW square-back, and drove all the way up to Clear Lake four hours north for a weekend vacation in the woods. Oh, man, what a mistake that was!

The kids' father had bought the oldest boy a rod and reel for his birthday on the 4th of July, and all of a sudden fishing took on the dimension of the holy with this kid. It became his life. We just had to go fishing or he was going to die. Mitchell Parkman knew exactly how to throw a monkey wrench into our lives. He knew exactly how to keep his hand in and keep an outsider like me from having any influence or say whatsoever in their lives. All it took was

something as simple as a fishing rod. He could buy off those kids any day he pleased. That right there was a master puppeteer if I'd ever seen one. Richard Nixon, beware!

Once we got out on Clear Lake to go fishing in our little rented boat, the motor stalled the minute it began to get dark out. Brent, the oldest boy, insisted on going out where the biggest fish would most certainly be biting. However, none of us knew much about cranky outboard engines and after it stalled, it flooded, never to start up again. Worse, there were no oars, for some reason, in order to row the boat to shore. The stars came out. We sat there not knowing what to do. So it was either start yelling and wait for help to arrive, or else get out and swim. And Mary Jo didn't swim. Though she could certainly yell!

That was when a wind came up and began blowing us further away from shore, which by now we could barely see. Suddenly there was panic in the boat. There was only one way to get the family back to safety since the entire crew was now in unison wailing from the cold, intensifying wind. I stripped off my pants and slid into the black water. With the mean spirit of determination, I began kicking and thrashing the water like a huge fish, nudging that boat of chattering creatures back toward shore against the wind.

In other words: it was *chaos*!

Still, it's possible that all of this folderol would have been okay. But it was the voyage home from that unhappy camping trip that was the crowning blow. 100° heat. The car packed nearly to the roof with camping gear, on top of which rode four howling kids oozing with sores from poison oak. The expensive fishing reel swallowed up by the lake. An attack of wild hives and nerves on the part of the girl, Karen. And finally a flat tire, and no jack with which to change it. Mary Jo said she couldn't remember what it was she had used that thing for. She didn't know what the jack was and figured it was just taking up room.

By the time we got back to the house on Fairlawn high up in the Berkeley hills, no one was speaking to anyone else.

But the biggest challenge of my working career at White Front Stores was indeed Xmas, just as Maurice the teamster had foretold. Everybody had taken to calling me X around the store, after the Toy Department manager had started it. Xmas was the biggest time of the year in the life of a retail store like that. And since the store was located basically between two separate ghettos, where people had to scrimp and count their pennies to get anything for their kids on Xmas, White Front catered to the population with a liberal lay-away policy. I was told to organize basically half the warehouse shelving for putting gifts away on hold for people, who would come get them in one huge push on Xmas Eve.

The shelving back in that part of the warehouse went all the way to the roof, and that was fifty or seventy-five feet high. You didn't really have room, much less the time, to get a ladder in the narrow aisles between shelving units. So I had to climb those shelves like a rhesus monkey to pick off the packages when the people came to claim their Xmas prize. The shelves were close enough that I could spread-eagle across the aisle as I went up and down, retrieving or putting away the packages.

I figured out pretty fast, the best way to organize those packages was by the date on the tag. Then I marked the buyer's initials on the bag with a black Magic Marker, so you could see it from a distance. Otherwise, I knew there would be chaos on Xmas Eve. Well, there would certainly be chaos on Xmas Eve, don't get me wrong, but at least this would be semi-organized chaos. It was more like mere pandemonium.

I had the whole operation humming along smoothly back there, putting the packages away. About the only really bad part of the Xmas season around that store was the continual Xmas carols, the tinny music piped in over the speaker system. It was pretty much unrelenting sappy holiday music, morning, noon and night. They had me working overtime to satisfy the Xmas rush. Now let me say, that kind of music has the ability to seep into your brain behind the scenes. It would crawl into your nightmares and overwhelm your worst fears. You'd begin to have bad dreams. If that kind of thing

kept going all year, I am certain it would lead to an aggravated mental condition. It could break down any man of any size and stature, I am sure of it. They should pipe that stuff in on a 24-hour basis to cell blocks to break down prisoners. If you wanted to wring confessions out of terrorists, I couldn't recommend Xmas carols highly enough. Forget water-boarding!

Two days before Xmas, I got a day off, and Warren Jeffries and I drove up to Sonoma to look for a Xmas tree. I wanted to surprise the kids and Mary Jo, because I knew she had a fondness for the season, since she'd been raised Catholic. That meant she couldn't help herself. She grew weak around the subject of Xmas trees and gifts and sleigh bells. Though I don't think she ever heard a real sleigh bell in her entire life.

Warren and I were eating lunch in a diner up in Sonoma, our Xmas tree tied to the roof of the Volkswagen, when all of a sudden he put down the newspaper he was reading.

"Oh, oh. You'd better look at this," he said. He shoved the newspaper at me.

There was a headline, as big as could be: WHITE FRONT STORES FILE FOR BANKRUPTCY.

A huge jolt of fear shot through my gut. I grabbed the paper, gawking at the headline. My insides dropped into my shoes. It felt like I'd been riddled with bullets.

"Holy shit! What the hell is going to happen to us?"

"Your ass is grass," Warren said.

"Mary Jo's going to crap. We were just starting to get a life here. Now what?"

Mary Jo was pretty upset when I got home with the news. The next day at work, everybody was oddly silent while they went about the mad continuous rush of customers. You could see the workers trying to put up a brave front, while at the edges of their smiles, you could see pain.

When I was on my lunch break, two older women who'd been at the store since the day it opened were talking. One had taken her ancient mother out for lunch, and she was telling the

other about the conversation she'd had with her mother, whose memory wasn't doing so well anymore.

"And she said: *'Aren't we having fun?'*"

The woman touched her friend's arm.

"I told her: *'Yes, we are!'*"

The manager of pets came over to our table and sat down. Everybody was reciting their history at the store. It was like at a wake. Who knew the deceased, and how they'd first met, etc.

"I started part-time when I was still in high school," he said. "They taught me you always keep plenty of goldfish here. Some think it's to sell someone a goldfish, but that's not it at all. It's what the lizards eat. You start out at a place like this, and somehow they never let go of you. One minute you're squeezing the brains out of goldfish, the next minute you're running the show. That's what happened to me when the old manager quit. One day I was the boss. I was right out of high school, for Chrissakes. What did I know?"

Xmas came and went. The store closed. We all got unemployment for two weeks, while I sat holed up in our bedroom at home drinking Jack Daniels and writing the second third of Puppet X. I was really on a roll now. Then I got a call from an outfit called The Liquidators. I was hired for another two weeks at \$2.02 an hour. Oh, boy! What a thrill! And did I know anybody who needed work? They were going to sell every last tube of toothpaste in two weeks time and they needed bodies to get the merchandize out the doors. Then they'd sell off the store fixtures too.

This was an outfit that specialized in store closures of this sort. Apparently the economy was taking a nosedive into a pretty deep recession, and companies like this were doing a booming business. They bought everything from bankrupt companies for a dime on the dollar. Their specialty was creating a whirlwind bargain-hunter's mentality. They knew how to get a frenzy whipped up, that bargain-crazy look in the eyes of people, that fixed-point mad glare behind the eyes of a shopper with a shopping cart. Sometimes two or three shopping carts lined up in a row. Look out, America, there

are bargains galore at these events! Y'all come down! I even got a job for Greg there. If you could breathe, they took you on.

Now, the first thing the Liquidator did was have us strip all the old price labels off every single item in that store. Then we red-tagged everything at 20% more. We would see the reasoning when these huge full-page ads came out in all the newspapers the next day.

"HUGE LIQUIDATION SALE! EVERYTHING SLASHED 40%!!! TWO DAYS ONLY! WHITE FRONT STORES. OPEN 7 A.M."

By 7:00 a.m. the first day of the sale, there were over four hundred people pressing their faces against the glass windows out in front of the store. It was one of the most disgusting wild-eyed shopping sprees I've ever witnessed in my life. It took your breath away. It wasn't pretty.

First off let me say that in the final days at White Front Stores, we'd already had a sale at 20% off. These Liquidator fellows were marking down 40% off on prices they had just raised 20%, so the net effect was exactly the same as when White Front themselves were open. *There was no real discount whatsoever!*

But, hey, far be it for me to go blowing the whistle. I was employed for two whole weeks, full time, plus overtime, at \$2.02 an hour! Hey hey hey! This was the American way! What do we say?

Thank you. Thank you very much, that's what. Elvis has left the store.

