Leaping Through Flames

by Jerry Ratch

When we were on the road coming back out to California, along the Lewis and Clark trail somewhere near Cardwell, Montana, I remember thinking life was like leaping through flames while reading poetry and drinking rotgut red wine. This was what life was, and should always be. And indeed, life was once again becoming a leaping through flames, but while drinking good whiskey.

I had written my long tome of poetry. I wasn't even 28 years old yet. Life couldn't be over now, could it? Was this all there was, as the song by Peggy Lee goes? Was it all over now? Already, this was it? A bad marriage before I'd even begun? A 60 page poem to my name, and Von Meckel for a mortal enemy?

The next thing I knew, Mary Jo received a chunk of money from her father's estate, and she grew determined to go out and buy a house. And it had to be with me on title, because women weren't allowed to get a mortgage without a man in those days. But since I myself was making close to nothing, stocking shelves and selling wallpaper now at a discount paint store called Standard Brands in El Cerrito on San Pablo Avenue, we had to get my brother to lie for me and co-sign the loan. He said I was working for his company down in Los Angeles, Janov Management — as a Senior Mobile Home Park Analyst no less! I wasn't a senior anything, as far as I could tell. This was absolutely ridiculous, but the bank fell for it, because all they did in those days was make a call to my brother's office in L.A., asking if I worked for him, and of course his secretary answered yes. And we were in, and approved for a mortgage for $35,000. I'd never heard of such large sums in conjunction with my name before. Thirty-five thousand smackers! It conjured up a number like one million in my mini money-less mind. How were we ever going to pay off $35,000? I began almost immediately having nightmares over this tremendous sum. Tall stacks of money kept falling over on me as I passed down narrow aisles over-lit by bluish, buzzing fluorescent lighting. I was being suffocated by money, and the smell of it. In my

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dreams yet! Some people would love having dreams about tall stacks of money, I am sure. But to my mind, the horror, the horror!

And then one day I got the shock of my young-but-old life when an insurance agent called and asked for me while I was at work selling paint and wallpaper to the housewives of El Cerrito at Standard Brands. When I heard the store manager tell me who was on the phone, and that it concerned our new house on Walnut Street in Berkeley, I thought I was going to crap right on the brightly-lit fluorescent aisles. No one involved in this bogus purchase deal was supposed to know where I was actually working, in reality. I was supposed to be a damned Senior Mobile Home Park Analyst, for Chrissake! I was floored. I felt like I should flee from the store like a criminal from the scene of some enormous crime. Like I had slit someone's throat and had blood all over my hands and shoes.

I told the insurance agent I would call him right back. I ran out of the paint store to a nearby phone booth. I composed myself and put on my other hat in life, that of a mild-mannered professional Senior Mobile Home Park Analyst. I lowered my voice considerably, to what I thought was a calm even business tone, even though I was shaking uncontrollably inside.

“Hello,” I said, “Yes, hello, this is Mr. Janov calling back. You caught me at my local paint store where I was placing a rather substantial order for one of our mobile home parks up in Sacramento. So, where were we now? I have a few moments. Go ahead.”

One of Mary Jo's kids had apparently given the man my damned work number when he called at the house. All he wanted was to go over the terms of our insurance policy on the house we were buying. In essence, he was my agent, working on my behalf. And here I was on the verge of suicide in a phone booth like Clark Kent ready to strip off my necktie and fly around the earth like a damned satellite. It was really disturbing.

I should have never gotten involved in such a huge lie. I was a poet, for God's sake, not a novelist. I wasn't used to lying. We had learned about this whole process of lying to get a house from a

group of Berkeley Rep actors we'd met at a bar on College Avenue when we were bemoaning our plight because our landlord had given Mary Jo notice and we were going to have to move and nobody wanted to rent to a houseful of kids and a poet and an artist, both of whom were enormous drunkards and otherwise pretty obviously useless in the financial world. “Don't worry,” said the actors, “lie. That's what we did, and we've all got houses. It's easy. Nothing to it.”

The only problem being, I didn't believe in lying in those days. Not like I do now. But we took a big gulp and lied our asses off, and now we were about to move into a damned $45,000 house with two rentals downstairs to help defray the payments on our mortgage, so it was actually a pretty good deal, when you came right down to the numbers. You could do things like that in those days, provided you created a big enough lie. And were willing to. And was I! Oh, yes! But still, forty-five thousand damned dollars, I mean, come on now. My hand was literally trembling when I sat down at the title company to write out a check for TEN THOUSAND BUCKS! Who ever even thinks in those kinds of terms?

When we closed the deal on our house, O'Toole lent us his pick-up truck and his hulking body to help us move down the hill, everything stacked in one towering pile in one trip, with me riding on top holding things down, and we moved into our house on Walnut Street, right up the street from the first Peet's Coffee where Mr. Peet himself would wait on you, not to mention the guy who started Starbucks, who was working for Mr. Peet to learn the coffee business first hand. And we were right around the block from the infamous Chez Panisse as well, though to us it was just the local wine bar where we would go every other night for a glass of this rasty deep red wine they had, Santa Cruz Cellars Zinfandel, and we would scramble our brains as much and as often as we could afford to, until we began to argue bitterly for no reason because of these horrendous deep red wine hangovers. Those were the days, oh, yes, those were the days, my friend, as we used to sing.

That was when Warren came over to help us set up the beds and everything.

“Did you hear what happened to Eugene Forcer? He's in the hospital.”

My insides sank into my shoes.

“What? No! You're kidding. What happened, did you hear?”

“That O'Toole guy that married you two cornered him and brained him a good one. Smashed his eyeglasses into one of his eyes.”

“Holy shit!” I said. I felt instantly guilty. I started to say something, but stopped.

“What's wrong,” Warren asked. “You sick?”

“No, it's just…”

“What? Janov, what is it?”

“O'Toole ought to go to jail,” said Mary Jo. “He's dangerous. He's going to kill somebody someday.”

Warren looked at Mary Jo, and he smiled. “Close,” he said, looking at me. “But no cigar. Eh, Philip?” He had the weirdest look about him when he said this. People can be strange. No, people can be really strange.

Shortly after that my publisher's boyfriend, Angel, got me a job working in this gas station out in San Leandro where he was the assistant manager. That was when the first gas crisis struck America. It happened almost overnight. There were long lines of cars at every filling station. There was anger, open hostility. Cars were backing into one another in line, trying to jockey for position. I don't think anyone could believe this was really happening to us. It was the fall of 1973. The very first gas crisis had hit the United States, and things had changed. Big Time.

I remember the look on one man's face when he finally pulled up to the pumps at my gas station. He'd been waiting in line for nearly a full hour in his car, and he was absolutely fuming by now. It was like seeing one of those classic black-and-white photos

out of a back issue of Life Magazine, except that his face and neck were beet red and bulging with animosity.

"How much is that gas — **50 cents!"** He fixed his eyes on me. He swelled up, bigger than Life. *"I'll never pay 50 cents a gallon!"* he shouted. He leapt out of his car and swung around toward the impatient sea of cars behind him. "I will NEVER," he repeated, **"NEVER,** pay 50 cents a gallon for gas! I've got four kids!"

With that he jumped back in his car, put it in gear, and roared off burning rubber like a teenager, in a cloud of blue smoke. I always wondered where that man went, because our gas station had the cheapest gas prices in the entire Bay Area at the time. We'd even won a contest on a radio station.

I'd drive home late at night from that job, weary to the bone. On the highway home one night I saw a small deer lying on the side the road. I saw a pregnant raccoon's babies spewed out at the side of the road. I saw a lot of things you don't want to see. And then all of a sudden I saw a car sideswipe a parked car on Durant Avenue near the campus where I used to stop to shoot a few games of pool with Warren and swuck down some beers before heading home. It was all I could do to get myself to go back to Mary Jo and those four kids of hers who were nearly always out of control and loud and I could not write anymore when I was around them. It just wasn't working, and all I wanted was to go suck on Penny's breasts instead and fall in love with her all over again and to hell with the working life, the normal life, the wasted life of mankind, I was a damned poet, I couldn't go on living this double life, even if Mary Jo didn't give a damn. I did. I wanted to experience the freedom of being in love with the woman I was really in love with, and to be only with her, and fall asleep with my face nuzzled in those warm nipples. That was life to me. That was all I needed. But Von Meckel didn't see it that way. Not at all. And I came to realize I was going to have to do something about it.

And that was when I hatched the mother of all plans: The San Francisco Poetry Wars. Let the games begin, once and for all.

But first I gave chase to the car that side-swiped these two other cars on Durant Avenue. Don't ask me why. It was something inside that told me he shouldn't just get away with that. Stuff was lying all over the street that he had torn off the sides of those cars. Somebody should have to pay for it, I decided. What if that had been my car? To hell with it, I decided, and I tore off after him.

Now the only problem was that I was driving an older VW square-back, not the fastest car in the world. And this guy took off and floored it to get the hell out of there. Still, I managed to stay on his tail, and he must have realized it, because when we got out on the freeway heading south along Highway 13, the same damned way I had just driven in from my gas station shift out in San damned Leandro, all the while knowing how pissed off Mary Jo would be that I would even consider doing such a lame-brained thing — nevertheless, I couldn't let up, and I put the accelerator to the floor, even though his smashed up car was way the hell out in front of me. But I kept to it anyway. Over the rise through Montclair and downhill all the way to the border of San Leandro. Then a miracle happened, the guy took an off-ramp and turned into a cul-de-sac somewhere out in that Godforsaken burb. It seemed to my mind like I'd been glued to the image of his taillights for a good part of eternity.

I barely knew where I was, but I saw a phone booth and ran to it and called the cops. Then I stayed where I was until they arrived. I pointed out the car to them and explained what I had witnessed. They took down my name and phone and patted me on the back like a good damned dog, then said I was free to go home.

“You must be pretty tired,” the one officer said. “That's a pretty crazy thing you did, in that car. You could have been killed.”

“Frankly, I never thought about it.”

“Still, son. Next time leave the chasing to us.”

“But he was getting away. He would have gotten off Scott-free.”

“Actually, you were kind of breaking the law yourself, doing that.”

“What? Damn!”

“Go home to the little wifey, son.”

“But…”

“Go home. Now!”

“All right.” He started prodding me with his night stick. “Okay, okay! Sheez.”

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We went to readings of the Foul Language Poets and started slashing our own legs with penknives, moaning. We would gab at the back of the readings about all manner of surrealism, or read in the best mumbling voices we could muster the latest academic tome, the work of some lame-ass poet laureate, real junk work cut out of the cardboard of academic life, poems about lazy daisies, odes upon some sad-ass clover leaf, every manner of poems on nature, things of that sort. I chose the works of the Middle English poet Geoffrey Chaucer myself, since I had never really read him in my classes in undergraduate or graduate school. (He was actually a real find!)

We would get drunk before these readings and cause havoc, and it would drive Von Meckel nuts not to have complete and utter rapt attention from the audience. This was a man who wanted CONTROL! Control at all costs, while the rest of the world should remain silent. Or should bend over so he could whip them into behaving. Into submission. Into believing in him and him alone. He was a man on a mission, and he would not be deterred.

If you dared cross him, it was WAR. All out WAR.

And I and Warren and Greg Penn took on that challenge. I figured: What did I have to lose?

Well, plenty, as it turned out. And here was what happened.

One night at Cody's Bookstore one of Von Meckel's minions was reading when suddenly Greg shouted out, “Hey, pink-ass!”

A fist fight erupted almost immediately. Another cohort of Von Meckel leapt out of his chair and together with two others from the back of the room, they mobbed Greg. Now Greg was tall and skinny, but strong. He was the son of a coal miner, and he had learned how to handle himself. He carried two of them on his back as their arms and fists clubbed and flailed away at his head. Greg kept laughing because he was so drunk and thought this was funny as hell and he continued carrying the two that were on his back all the way down the flight of stairs and out the door into the street, while the third one kept punching away at the side of his head. That's when Warren landed on the entire pack, which brought them down to the sidewalk, and the battle over poetry and supremacy raged on. Von Meckel stood to one side. He kept eying me. Finally he could no longer hold it inside.

“You're responsible for this!” he cried. “I challenge you to a stand-off on Telegraph Avenue. We will debate, right here in the street. You and me, head to head. I challenge you, Mr. Janov! Von Meckel issues this challenge!” He actually referred to himself in the third person. Like Vladimir Lenin, for Chrissake. I mean, this guy had an ego!

“Big deal!” said Greg, wiping blood away from his lip. He had his boot on the neck of one of the minions, who kept squirming underneath it on the sidewalk, letting out something like the squeal of a piglet.

“What are the stakes?” I asked Von Meckel. I was a little lit from drinking some whiskey earlier, before the reading.

“Penny,” he said, a little too coolly. “If I win, you keep your, your whatever, off her. Agreed?”

“You don't own her.”

“You're married!” he guffawed. “What right do you even have? You, sir, are a bigamist. You need to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.”

“What law?” I retorted. This guy could really get under your skin if you let him. He was so anal it hurt.

“This is a showdown!” Von Meckel exclaimed. “Right here on Telegraph Avenue. Shall we make it Sunday afternoon? Two o'clock?”

“Shall we!” I said. I had to laugh. “Okay, you're on.”

“Bring the best you can muster,” he said, and with that he laughed, turning to his henchmen. “This will be a cinch,” he told them. “C'mon.” he turned on his heel and walked into the shadows with his scraped and bleeding, limping minions.

“So long, pink-ass!” Greg yelled after them. You could hear the echoes off the tall buildings filled with students. “Fucking pink ass!” Greg shouted.

I thought I could feel the shadows bristle. Poets! What are you going to do? You can't live with them, you can't live without them.

“Greg, I think the guy's name was Pinkus,” I said.

“I know that.”

“Oh.”

“Damn, Janov, you need to learn something about street-fighting.”

When Sunday afternoon came I rolled out of bed with Penny, but not before sucking on those magnificent breasts of hers that were just made for sucking. By me! Not by Von Meckel or anyone else, for that matter. Maybe for our baby, if we ever had one. But that was it. They were made for me and my baby.

“You'd better not go losing me in your stupid showdown. I don't want to go back to Von Meckel. I won't!”

“Don't worry. He's just another word for academic. Did you see my Norton Anthology anywhere?”

She reached above the bed and pulled down this yellow Norton Anthology of Poetry I had found sitting on a fence we walked past one night. It was just sitting there, waiting for me to pick it up for some reason unknown to me, until this moment.

“What do you want with that?” Penny asked.

“Don't ask.”

“I'm asking you.”

“Well, I had never read Chaucer until I found this anthology, see. And there's something about this string of gutter language running down the sides of his poems. See here,” I pointed, “right here in the margins.”

“Yeah?” she asked, nodding. “I see the words. Yeah.”

“Just read down this list, vertically. I'm thinking of calling this stuff Chaucer Marginalia. It's so easy I can't believe it!”

Penny looked up at me with her breasts hanging out and the tips of her tits shining in the early morning light. They were magnificent. Magnificent! I nudged them with the back of my wrist as I trailed down the string of translated words in the column alongside Chaucer's verses.

“You're turning me on, Mr. Janov.”

“I know that.”

We spent the next hour balling our brains out. But my plan with this highly charged string of words beside Chaucer's poems was, well, how should I put it — inspired! I was going to make found poems out of this stuff. It was easy. It was just sitting there waiting to be discovered by someone, and that someone was me. Now I was veering over into uncharted territory for me, into Foul Language territory. It was like finding a weapon in the enemy camp. It was like finding the Trojan Horse in somebody's backyard, just waiting for me to crawl into and invade enemy turf. It was foolproof. I knew Greg would be impressed, at the very least.

I just was not prepared for being embraced by the enemy as well. We were fighting for the rights to our mutual Helen. For the rights to suck on her nipples. They were like the nipples of Venus to me. So blind was I. We are all, all of us, fools for love.