

The 3-Step Secret to a Good Life

by Jerry Ratch

Warren Jeffries left this girlfriend of his named Karen, who was also a poet, and overnight she announced she'd gone back to being a lesbian, she'd so had it with MEN! She did a reading of her new series of Sappho poems at Cody's Bookstore, and it was at the party afterwards, stuck in my usual corner of the kitchen, where I met Regina, who would go on to become the publisher of my first book, Puppet X. Regina was as fond of the corner of the kitchen at these parties as I was, because at heart, I guess, we were both basically shy people. Or at least shy at first blush. Regina actually stood up abruptly and suddenly stripped off every piece of clothing she had on. Apparently she was trying to impress a famous surrealist poet from New Orleans by the name of Andre, who happened to be standing in the crowded kitchen swucking down a beer. Andre seemed disinterested, while Regina stood buck naked with her hands at her sides, glaring at him, waiting for him to acknowledge her or say something, anything. He turned away instead and began chatting with a poet from Istanbul, both of them with their thick accents. Andre himself was from Transylvania and just had a book of poems out where he was holding a revolver in his hand, which for some reason made him enormously famous. No one in our crowd could quite figure out why.

Almost as quickly Regina put her clothes back on and promptly sat down at the kitchen table where I was sitting.

"He wasn't impressed," she said. "What the hell's wrong with him? Probably gay. I should have known. I used to be a lesbian myself." She stuck out her hand. "Hi, I'm Regina, publisher of Bust Loose Press. I heard you read at the Soup Kitchen and I was very impressed, by the way. You managed to get Von Meckel moaning, and slashing himself with a pen knife yet. Very impressive. You really

put yourself on the map around here. You're not married or gay or anything, are you? It's getting so I can't tell anymore. Apparently. I got kicked out of my women's circle because I started sleeping with men again. They don't like that. Apparently."

Regina was very quick to laugh, and loudly too. And that was exactly what she did.

"I'd like to hear more of your stuff," she said. "When can we get together? Are you available after the party?"

"Well, I'm in the middle of this long sequence of poems I've been working on. It's not quite finished yet."

"When can I come over to your place and see what you've got? I won't bite."

"The woman I'm living with gets very jealous. Apparently."

"I can see why, I would too, honey. Just let me take a peek at it. The poetry. You're really very good, you know. I'll bring along my man, Angel, so your lady-friend won't be jealous."

"I don't know about that."

"C'mon. What can happen? She'd leave you? Get serious."

I didn't answer right away.

"Are you too pussy-whipped to make your own decisions? I've gotta tell you, I find that pretty appealing." Again she stood and stripped off all of her clothing, right in the crowded kitchen. I don't even know whose apartment we were at. Nobody asked in those days.

"What's the matter, honey, never seen stretch marks before? That's from two kids with two husbands. It's what happens to real women. Our tits drop down to our waist, our bellies and thighs get thunderous. They're the real thing. Take a good look."

Then she quietly put her clothes back on. It was disturbing. But oddly, there wasn't much of a commotion at the party. Nothing seemed to be able to stop its chaos and momentum, chaos mostly. And nudity didn't seem to be such a big deal around Berkeley. It was kind of refreshing.

But if it had been Penny, now, that would be a whole other proposition. I would've had Penny pinned to the floor in less than a

New York minute. Or a Chicago minute anyway. A Chicago minute takes slightly longer. You could forget about the whole idea in San Francisco. They didn't even understand the concept of a minute out here, probably because of all the dope in the air.

Regina left to get her man, Angel, and after the party they followed me up the hill to my little house on Fairlawn. They sat down in the living room and with all the kids right there, all their chaos, I read them everything I had written of Puppet X. It was 42 pages so far. They made me an offer to publish it when it was done, right then and there. I could barely believe my ears. But Mary Jo was sitting in the corner of the room, throwing hateful looks toward Regina. By the time they left, she was absolutely fuming. She hadn't said more than two words the whole evening. I knew she was a bit unsocial, but this was strange, and unnerving.

"Are you fucking her?" she asked, loudly. Even the kids looked at her in disbelief.

"Mom!" they cried. And they fled the living room, holding their ears as if they'd just heard the sirens of Homer.

"What are you talking about? They want to publish my book, didn't you hear?"

"I know what I heard. You're fucking her, aren't you? Do you like her body? She certainly threw herself around the couch all night."

"Chrissake, Mary Jo, not every woman wants to go around fucking every poet."

"Really!"

"Yeah."

"You didn't at least imagine her undressed?"

I hesitated, because I had the hardest time in those days not telling the absolute and total truth. I had seen Regina naked, but come on.

"I thought so!" she yelled. "I just knew it! I could *smell it* on you. You're so transparent! Oh! Oh! Get out of my house!"

"What? Not again," I groaned.

"Get out, get out, GET OUT!"

That was the night I slept with Penny. We threw Steve out of my old room, just in case Von Meckel came over, which he in fact did. In the middle of the night we heard him through the wall, fuming. Absolutely fuming! Slamming around her room, turning things over. We could hear his high nasal voice drilling right through the plaster like the whine of a thirsty mosquito.

But, I have to say, Penny was delicious. Just delicious. The nipples on that girl were so dark and pointy. I got hard every time I went to suck on those things. We must have had deep sex three or four times that night. Something for which I would come to pay.

But who cares, I told myself. She liked to do it doggie style. And she was good at it too. So good! I would not easily forget how good.

Now the stage was really set for the San Francisco Poetry Wars as we have come to know them. There was no more turning back from there. It was like the sack of Troy, the rape of Helen, and it was unavoidable and delicious. So delicious.

Not at all like a nasturtium.

I understood completely how upset the Foul Language Poets were with the surrealists and the traditional academic poets of the time. I have to admit, some of the current trends in poetry in those days bored me silly too.

I remember how everyone was suddenly into this Persian poet named Kabir. How boring it was to constantly hear him being quoted.

They kept saying: "As Kabir says..." Blah, blah, blah. I got so annoyed that I decided to just invent a rival ancient poet. So I invented a poet named Kaboom. "As Kaboom says," I said at readings, pretending to quote this ancient poet I had recently unearthed to everyone's great surprise. Yes, and Kaboom used to say some salty things too, that really got under the skin of some of the academics. Here's an example:

Kaboom's Universal Theory #1:

The 3-step Secret to a Good Life

1. Think up problems that don't exist
2. Realize, suddenly, that they don't exist
3. Elation

I claimed, in addition, that Kaboom had smoked hashish all the time, and that he was raised by two lesbian mothers and had an unclear sexual history. “We make love like an old Indian prayer rug,” was a quote I attributed to him, during one of his hashish episodes. I muddied the waters further by claiming it was unclear from the translation of the ancient words if the poet was saying, “We make love like two old Indian prayer rugs,” thereby asserting that his partner was just as old and ratty as he was.

But before I knew it, Mary Jo tracked me down and drove me back up to the house again, because her lawyer told her that if she didn't have someone around making money, the courts weren't going to allow her to keep custody of her children. Then what's more, to my complete and utter astonishment, I was informed that we had to get married — otherwise, no kids. You couldn't just be sleeping with someone in those days. You had to get married.

Then to top everything off, Mary Jo was pregnant. Truth is, I had no idea if this was even my child in her. I mean, she was sleeping around a bit with her new-found freedoms. Let's see, there was Randy from back at Whitebread College, of course, with his missing fingertip, as well as another Berkeley long-haired greasy hippie who'd been sniffing around after her, some dark quiet guy who was into photography and had done a number of nude sessions with her. How in the hell was I supposed to know who the father of this baby was. She was so fertile that babies kept spilling out of her like water flowing over a dam in winter.

She arranged to have an abortion at a doctor Greene's office, who practiced out of a converted house on Solano Avenue on the north side of Berkeley. I took her there the day of the procedure.

You couldn't go to a regular hospital to have this kind of thing done then. It was still illegal, even though it was a generally accepted practice around there and didn't have that much stigma attached to it anymore. The thing that surprised me the most, to tell you the whole truth, was that I had naturally assumed she'd been taking birth control pills and I'd never even thought about it. Every girl I knew was taking birth control pills then, so I was shocked that she'd become pregnant, and I didn't know what the hell to do.

But she did. She asked a lady-friend and was recommended to this doctor Greene who operated on a long string of pregnant women, performing abortions on a regular basis. He had a booming business going in this shady practice. All you had to come up with was the requisite five hundred bucks.

"What!" I gasped. "Where are we going to get five hundred bucks?"

"Do you want another child screaming around underfoot?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"Well, no."

"Then you'd better find the money," she said. "Just get it."

"But I'm only making fifty bucks a week. And ... how do I know this is even mine?" I pointed at her belly, which looked about the same as it always had to me, no different. She'd always had some left-over baby fat.

"Do you know where your own dick has been lately?" she grumbled. "Did you even consider using a condom? Or getting a vasectomy? Mitchell got one, so it's not him, I know that much."

"You mean you've been fucking him too?" I asked. I couldn't believe my ears.

"Women have needs, you know."

"You've been cheating with your own husband?"

"You've been fucking the babysitter, for Chrissakes. Just find the money, I don't care how. Also, my lawyer says we have to get married or else the court will take away my children. And I can't live without them."

Jesus, I thought. I had to go talk to Warren and Greg and Steve about all this. I was feeling like I was in a trap that was way over my head. What was I supposed to do here?

But before I could do that, she announced that a mysterious donor had come up with the cash, and demanded I go with her to the abortionist on Solano Avenue. The day was bright and cheery and growing hotter and hotter. We drove down the hill and over to Solano Avenue in the green VW square-back. She looked queasy and kept holding her belly and feeling all around. She made a face like she was about to sink under water.

"Pull over," she said suddenly. I swerved over to the curbside and stopped the car. She opened the door and threw up in a pile of leaves in the gutter. Then just as quickly she shut the door and adjusted the glasses on her nose.

"Okay, drive the car. Let's get this over with before I change my mind. This is too much fun."

The fee at the clinic was a standard, flat \$500, cash. No checks. No plastic. No records were kept of these transactions. They performed the service with a kind of medical vacuum cleaner. When we got there, a young receptionist was sitting at a desk. Cheap, dark-stained wood paneling covered the walls. Coolly she sat filing her long, bright fingernails, filling the appointment calendar in front of her as calls kept coming in.

Positioned along the walls were old sofas from which the stuffing had begun to emerge. I took a seat where I could find one next to a woman in a flowered granny dress, with streaks of gray in her hair, who was intently doing macramé with jute. Mary Jo found a place across from me in an old stuffed armchair beside a standing lamp. That old lamp offered about zero help in adjusting to the darkness of the place, emitting this weak, pink light through a brocaded lampshade with a fringe of tassel. Both of us kept gawking around the room. We'd peer down at our laps, then look up and all around the room at the faces of the women who'd come to the clinic for help. Some of them looked just tired and dislocated. They looked

like dried flowers that had curled up, collecting dust in an old cut-glass vase without water.

The receptionist wore thick black eye makeup and long eyelashes and bright pink lipstick — while the group of women who were waiting for their appointment couldn't have been more opposite from her. Long straight hair hanging well below the waist, most of them considerably older than me. One minute they were biting at their upper lip, the next their lower lip, then they'd catch themselves and try to look calm.

Everybody sat waiting mutely, when all of a sudden from one of the back rooms behind the receptionist's desk there came a woman's shrill, terrifying scream. The girl at the desk quit filing her fingernails and slipped through a door that lead to the back. There came another piercing scream. It was blood-curdling and sent a chill up my spine. The next thing we saw was two women dressed to the neck in black, their faces rigid, drained of color. They kept running back and forth between rooms with piles of white towels. Things had gone from calm, even boring, to hysterical in under two minutes.

All three telephones were ringing at the abandoned receptionist desk. The screams went on and got unbearably louder and more frequent. They grew repetitive. Somebody yelled: "Shut up!" It was a man's voice. Then the screaming intensified, turning into the repeated word: "No! No! Noo! Noooo!"

There was a loud dull thud of some kind. Next, the two nurses dressed in black ran back into the receptionist area, grabbing more white towels and a stack of sheets out of a cheap gray metal cabinet. The telephones wouldn't stop ringing and ringing.

I saw Mary Jo clawing at her own forearm with her nails. The other women kept gaping at each other, then at the door where the screaming came from. Whoever it was hemorrhaging back there let out with one more tremendous yell, and we heard a man's voice shouting, "Shut the fuck up, will you!"

That's when Mary Jo leaped to her feet and bolted for the door, and I followed right after her, and we burst into the brightness

outside. We ran down the sidewalk, only stopping at the corner where there was a storefront with a display of maternity clothing. A tall woman dressed in a brilliant yellow outfit walked past us on the sidewalk with a little red-haired girl dressed in a brilliant green coat.

Mary Jo lurched to the curbside and hung onto the fender of this yellow car. Sweat burst out from her forehead, drenching the hair at the back of her neck. It began dripping like a soft rain at her feet, then she threw up in the gutter.

“Damn it, Mary Jo, how far along are you anyway?”

“Oh, I don't know. It could be months, I guess. Who's keeping track?”

I drove her back up the hill. Neither of us said a word the whole way. I put her to bed and tucked a blanket around her neck. She fell asleep the minute she laid down, and I found myself taking a good long look. She was eight years older than me, for God's sake. I saw my life splayed out in front of me. I had to admit, it didn't look pretty. I panicked and fled the house.

I flew down the hill on foot. That was a long distance. I stopped off at Warren's tiny room near the campus. He wasn't there. A note taped to his door said he was at work at Jake's Ice Cream parlor on College Avenue in the Elmwood area of town, which was where I headed.

Warren had started working at Jake's Ice Cream, where a flock of teenage girls kept mooning around after him. It was the best ice cream in town, very rich and fattening. They wouldn't leave him alone. I think they were vying with one another to see who could get him in bed first. Their mid-drifts showing, their bare skinny arms. Words written across their tank-tops, rippling where their tits bulged out, or didn't. No one wore bras anymore, and their nipples would stick right out under their shirts. They would have incited a riot if they had shown up at a prison yard dressed like that. Young girls were bold, and getting bolder. I don't think they even suspected what power they had there. And that was just in their shirts alone.

When I walked into the ice cream parlor, there sat Penny at the counter, licking an ice cream cone. It was lime sherbet. Her bare arms showing, she looked like any teenager there. She'd come in to ask Warren what had happened to me. I slid onto a stool beside her.

"I just left home," I said.

She turned fully, to look me in the eye.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"For good?"

I nodded.

"Why?" she asked.

"Mary Jo's pregnant. I have no idea whose baby it is, and her lawyer's saying I have to marry her if she wants to keep her kids."

"No way!" Warren exclaimed. "That's screwed."

"I don't want you going back up there anymore," Penny said. "You come stay with me."

"What about Von Meckel?"

"What about him? I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"No, I meant what about me?"

"Are you afraid of him?"

"A little."

"I'll take care of Von Meckel," Warren said. "I know his kind."

We both looked at Warren. "What do you mean?" Penny asked.

"Just leave him to me," Warren repeated. He smiled a strange smile. "I know someone who will be a great help in this matter."

"Who?" I asked.

"Someone I just met by the name of John."

"Yeah," I said. "Would that be you?"

"His name happens to be John O'Toole. He's a bouncer about the size of an ordinary ox. You won't believe it when you see it. Just leave this to me. You'll see."

Penny told me, "You know something I've seen Von Meckel do? He'll pick the weakest poem out of a bunch and praise it highly. He'll purposely try to mislead you."

"That's evil," I said.

"That's Von Meckel. But that's about as far as it goes with him. Physically, I wouldn't worry too much if I were you. Don't worry, I'll look after you."

She put her arm around my waist and I could feel the life force of her body, the heat, attracting mine at the hip, and I could feel myself beginning to grow hard.

"Let's go home," I said. "I think I'm falling in love."

Penny looked up at me and smiled warmly. We walked out the door of Jake's Ice Cream, waving at Warren.

"Is your friend Warren a little strange?"

"How do you mean, strange?"

"Gay?"

"Oh."

"You don't know oh? Or something else?"

"I'm not entirely sure. He did have a girlfriend recently, but she went back to being a lesbian after he dumped her, so I honestly don't know for sure. Maybe."

